

“My words have the power to make families stronger.”



A mother feeds her child in the Dadaab camp in Kenya. Credit: Meridith Kohut/Internews

Health Voices Amplified

In 2017, the ongoing nurses’ strike in Kenya caused maternal deaths to double. The journalism training program – Health Voices Amplified (HVA) – demonstrated the **power of the media in influencing government policy**, when they encouraged media outlets to run stories on pregnancy and childbirth data trends.

Citizen TV’s story focused on Marsabit County, where pregnant mothers walked more than 100km to Ethiopia to give birth due to the county’s lack of an Intensive Care Unit and its high maternal mortality rate. The story also revealed that children were not getting immunised. This spurred an urgent call to action. The Ministry of Health launched the “Catch Up” campaign, to reach mothers and children in Kenya’s most vulnerable counties. The campaign targeted more than 300,000 women and children with critical health services. The nurses’ strike was called off two weeks later.

HVA, through the DFID-Options Consortium, works in collaboration with the Maternal and Neonatal Initiative and local partners which provide maternal, child and family health services in 35 of the 47 counties in Kenya. The journalists are trained on solutions-based health reporting - “what every mother should know” - about issues like prenatal and antenatal care, and child immunization. HVA also builds the capacity of health implementers and government officials (at the national and county level) to improve media relations. They learn to conduct more effective outreach to the media and to write editorials and impactful social media posts, amplifying health voices.

Overview

Internews programs in **South Sudan, Liberia and Kenya** started with intensive training for journalists, to help them learn about best practices from the specialized fields of Family Planning and Maternal and Child Health.

The journalists also learn to craft stories with impact and find real-life developments to which their readers and listeners can relate. They then weave information about safe practices into their stories that are featured on trusted channels of communication. They find fathers who embrace birth spacing and host them for a radio interview with call-ins. They locate families who are stronger, because mother and baby were taken care of in a health facility after a difficult birth. They travel to the hinterland to highlight challenges with infrastructure and hold service providers to account to find solutions that may save lives.

Obstetricians, pediatricians, health officials, trained midwives, community health extension workers are all partners in the training, sharing their knowledge and highlighting solutions. In turn, the specialists learn about the demands and needs of credible journalism. Through discussion forums, media cafés and ongoing mentoring, a **trusted relationship** is maintained to ensure an ongoing flow of stories that **change and shape norms over time** and **engage citizens in discussion**, piquing their interest and **creating buy-in for healthy practices**.

Focus: 3 Countries

Kenya: Responsive Rural Programming

In the far north of Kenya, maternal and child mortality rates are highest. Literacy rates are low.

Through the HVA program, Internews partners now use mobile apps to gather data and send health services messages.

Community radio stations are also looped in to ensure these vital messages reach those audiences who have been underserved.

The program conducts media roundtables and invites community representatives, health workers, and patients to highlight case studies and specific maternal and child health concerns.

Through this program, all partners are learning effective communications skills and their voices are amplified on radio talk shows, ensuring listeners hear critical information first-hand from trusted community partners.

Information Saves Lives in Liberia

Ebola put a spotlight on infrastructure weaknesses in Liberia, including flaws in the flow of information, and brought to the forefront other concerns, among them maternal and child health. Liberian authorities vowed to use lessons from Ebola to be proactive about building health infrastructure. For Internews, accurate, trusted and compelling health information is a vital part of health infrastructure. Well-informed health journalists, through their stories, are watchdogs of health services. To help journalists apply the lessons

learnt from Ebola, Internews launched *Information Saves Lives*, with support from USAID-Health Communication Capacity Collaborative, HC3.

“We’ve learned how to be specialists in health journalism. And that a specialist is not just someone who reports on disease. We report to prevent disease.”
– Alpha Senkpeni, Internews trainee

Ahead of Liberia’s general election, a community radio reporter, Moses Bailey, highlighted dismal conditions at a hospital, a warning to government that citizens would vote with their feet. Phebe Maternal Waiting Home in Bong County is a place where pregnant women wait for hours and go hungry, and where they are expected to deliver in a ramshackle room on beds that are falling apart.

The journalism fellows came to realize that health stories are not just about science or symptoms – they can also urge governments to deliver services.

In South Sudan – Health Information is Aid

“I want to educate people on life saving issues; motivate my audience...”

“I wanted to be a doctor, but I couldn’t. As a health journalist, I’ll operate with my microphone.”

South Sudanese journalists in a media fellowship program sponsored by the Dutch Royal Tropical Institute (KIT) indicate



Mothers in South Sudan listen to health programs on the radio.

the calling they have to make a difference in a country with the worst health indicators in the world for pregnant mothers and newborn babies. Their stories, broadcast across the country, create awareness of sexual and reproductive health services. A radio producer who regularly hosts radio programs on health says questions from listeners indicate a willingness to embrace safer practices. **“My words have the power to make families stronger,”** says Chan Amol, Internews trainee.

Internews in South Sudan, supported by USAID, also reaches citizens in remote areas in Protection of Civilian Camps through *Boda Boda Talk Talk*, radio by motorbike. This means messages about safe pregnancy and child issues reach young mothers who would otherwise have no access to information. A regular health radio show on Eye Radio in Juba features sensitive topics around birth practices in a compelling way. Producer Hellen Magindo is noticing a shift in attitudes. **“I am ready to go with my wife to a service provider for family planning,”** said a caller to Eye Radio.



Internews is an international non-profit media development organization whose mission is to empower local media worldwide to give people the news and information they need, the ability to connect and the means to make their voices heard.