

Written evidence submitted to the Foreign Affairs Committee by Internews Europe (GHS0007)

Introduction

Internews is an international non-profit organisation with headquarters in London (Internews Europe) and Washington DC (Internews Network). As a media development organisation, Internews believes that trustworthy information is not just important – it can save lives. Internews has a long history of training and supporting journalists worldwide to provide critical information during humanitarian crises, including the tsunami in Indonesia and Sri Lanka in 2004/5¹, and after the Haiti earthquake in 2010². It has extensive experience supporting local trusted journalism around HIV/AIDS and Ebola.

As part of its COVID-19 response, Internews has supported 1,378 organisations to produce COVID-related information in 57 countries in 110 languages³. Internews helps local journalists to work with scientific information through training and mentoring⁴, and provides small grants⁵, to enable the creation of accurate and trustworthy journalism. Internews Europe currently receives FCDO funding for health programming, work to expand civic space, and conflict-resolution work in Democratic Republic of Congo¹. These have all shifted focus to provide accurate information about COVID-19 in 2020. Internews is part of a USAID-funded Coalition to Accelerate & Support Prevention Research to support HIV Vaccines and Biomedical Research.

Internews Europe has focused its response on vaccine hesitancy and vital role local journalists play in vaccine uptake, limiting our responses to questions 7 and 9.

How can the FCDO ensure that COVAX is successful? What are likely to be the main challenges associated with worldwide distribution of a vaccine?

In 2019, the World Health Organisation labelled vaccine hesitancy a top 10 global health risk, and it is clear from the work that Heidi Larson has carried out at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine that this will be a major hurdle in terms of the worldwide distribution of COVID-19 vaccines. According to The Lancet: “Alongside persisting issues of access to health services, waning vaccine confidence has taken a toll on immunisation programmes across the globe, contributing to stagnating or decreasing immunisation rates and consequent surges in vaccine-preventable diseases such as measles.” Dr Larson, one of the world’s leading experts on vaccine hesitancy, said recently: “We’ve been taking for granted the social contract around vaccines for a very long time, frankly without investing a lot in bringing the public along with us.”

It is evident that vaccine hesitancy will be a major obstacle to making the roll out and acceptance of vaccines a success, and in establishing herd immunity.

Within this subject, challenges include:

- distribution of reliable science-based information
- tackling the public’s worries and questions
- rebutting dangerous rumours and speculation

¹ Internews receives FCDO funding for health programming in Uganda and Lebanon (ACCESS), work to expand civic space in Myanmar, Malawi and Kenya (PROTECT) and conflict-resolution work in Democratic Republic of Congo (Jo Cox Foundation).

Despite public health leaders highlighting its importance, there are few development efforts focused on countering this growing vaccine hesitancy among large segments of the global population. Internews has worked with independent media across the world for decades, and has research and experience, outlined below, to show that the role of the independent media in delivering accurate health information and rebutting rumours is vital. It not only helps enhance knowledge, but this knowledge also translates into positive action.

In preparing for the roll out of COVID vaccines, we can draw on Internews' experience in various countries on helping distribute accurate science-based health information, including our work in tackling misinformation regarding Ebola transmission and prevention.

The Democratic Republic of Congo faced an Ebola outbreak starting in August 2018. Musa Sangarie, the director of Internews' Information Saves Lives project based in Goma, says there are three lessons learnt from Internews' work there. These are: invest in local media, develop a localised approach, and listen to community concerns.

He says: "In a climate of insecurity, media is the best option to reach audiences in remote communities." He also points out that in some rural areas radio can be the best media to work with as many in the population are illiterate.

In tackling information about, and attitudes to, Ebola, Internews organised more than 200 community events including public debates, roundtables, listening clubs and individual interviews to understand community concerns. These community discussions were reflected in the Internews radio programme, Koma Ebola (loosely translated from Swahili as Stop Ebola), produced in French, Swahili and Kinande, the main local languages in the affected area.

Internews produced over 1,000 editions of Koma Ebola, which have been broadcast over 100,000 times on 46 partner radio stations in North Kivu and Ituri Province.

Research shows the radio programmes had a significant impact on attitudes to preventative health and Ebola⁹. An October 2020 survey conducted in Goma, Beni and Butembo showed 68.8% of respondents reported to have heard about or listened to Koma Ebola.

Of those who listened to the programme:

- 93.9% found it useful and 90.5 per cent reported that the radio programme improved their knowledge about Ebola
- 91% credited the program for helping them change "certain practices or behaviours about Ebola", indicative of the impact of the programme in improving knowledge and influencing behaviour change and practices in the fight against Ebola.

Training local journalists

Internews' work during the Ebola epidemic established that in a fast-evolving healthcare situation where the science might initially be unclear, traditional public service messaging initiatives are poorly suited to encouraging behavioural change. Social and Behavioural

Change Communications (such as those used to discourage people from smoking) typically take months of work on research and refinement – and are not suited for deployment in fast-updating situations. Similarly, if journalists are not knowledgeable about the relevant subjects – such as the latest scientific or healthcare information – information provided by local media may not work either.

Local media can be poorly trained on healthcare and science reporting or lack the resources to report on subjects in sufficient depth or breadth. During an evolving humanitarian crisis, increasing local media training and expertise is often ignored, yet it is local media who have the existing relationship of trust with affected communities.

Our experience has shown intensive mentoring and technical support for media has proven impact in emergency situations, along with other on-the-ground training and activities such as: sending local staff to sit in a radio studio to answer questions from listeners in their local language, inviting local media to meetings, and having them ask questions that help their audiences more fully understand the messages they are receiving¹⁰.

A welter of health messaging handed down without local dialogue can be ineffective and do little to disperse rumours and speculation or impact on decision-making and behaviour. As Dr Larson ¹¹has said: “We have to be more responsive to public, we have to not reject questions.” According to a report in the New York Times¹² “Dr Larson spoke with a group of Nigerian mothers who were upset that they were being called ‘ignorant’ on the radio for not simply taking the vaccine. They told her, ‘We wouldn’t be asking questions if we were ignorant.’ She became convinced that more had to be done to engage people with doubts, and not merely dismiss them. ‘I saw how much of the communication strategies were very much driven by what the public health community and immunisation people thought the public needed to know,’ Dr. Larson said. ‘But they weren’t responding to what people’s concerns were, or issues, or questions.’”

This echoes Internews’ decades of experience in healthcare emergency situations globally.

Providing local journalists with access to scientific and practical information is only the first step in addressing this. To develop trained journalists able to apply skills learned during workshops, Internews has found it useful to take training into the local media’s newsrooms. But training should not just end on the training day, it must continue to support those journalists with on-going mentoring, as well as engaging with story development to help build on journalistic and technical skills. It should also include support to ensure media organisations have the financial and business resilience to weather economic challenges, with small emergency grants available at the start of a crisis as well as longer term advice on areas such as business planning and digital security.

What role should the FCDO play in bringing about a resolution to the COVID-19 pandemic and preventing future pandemics?

The FCDO could take world leadership in promoting a local media-led approach across low- and middle-income countries to tackle public willingness to take the vaccine, as a method of addressing hesitancy. A significant number of public health experts underscore the importance of providing

vaccine information through two-way communication channels involving trusted local sources, including local media, as opposed to top-down messaging from governments or global institutions. A recent study by NYU School of Global Public Health¹³ quotes Shahmir Ali, a doctoral student at the school and the study's lead author, as saying: "As public health professionals, it's important that we consider targeting information sources that are used and trusted by certain population groups in order to make sure that COVID-19 information is reaching a diverse audience."

The importance of trusted messengers

Addressing the challenges of distributing the vaccine and getting public buy in, Melinda Mills, director of Leverhulme Centre for Demographic Science, University of Oxford & Nuffield College and author of the British Academy and Royal Society report on vaccine deployment, said¹⁴: "The COVID-19 vaccine deployment faces an unprecedented degree of uncertainty and complexity that will be exceedingly difficult to communicate... Whether the public will accept a vaccine is driven by who is best able to get the message across. Governments and public health authorities are prone to information-heavy, one-directional communications such as the gov.uk sites that would not necessarily be classified as engaging material. Uptake of the vaccine will mean engaging in dialogue not only online but also locally with people on the ground who understand their own communities. Messages need to match everyday experience and be appealing and adaptive."

Both these expert views echo the findings of Internews on communication during crises¹⁵, and the importance of trust. In countries where there is significant distrust of the national government, it is particularly necessary to look for other ways of delivering information to local populations.

Earlier this year Internews, in conjunction with Harvard University and Kubatana, a local human rights and civic information NGO, looked at alternative ways to deliver and gain acceptance of public health information about COVID-19 in Zimbabwe. Internews assessed whether information delivered through WhatsApp messages from a trusted local organisation could change beliefs and behaviours given the abundance of COVID-related misinformation circulating through social media. Low levels of trust in the government were threatening to undermine its messages on social distancing and hand washing. To address this Kubatana sent out messages in English, Shona and Ndebele (the three main languages in Zimbabwe), with infographics, through its WhatsApp broadcast lists. Messages went out to 27,000 people. Only 7% of those who received a message on social distancing or debunking misinformation about unproven cures indicated they visited friends or family in the following days, while 37% of the control group indicated they did. This research suggested that information delivered by a trusted local organisation could make a significant impact when asking local populations to take action in a health crisis.

Internews has also hosted online media science cafés and webinars, with a focus on understanding the science of COVID-19 and the development of vaccines, to equip journalists to tackle misinformation. This approach supports local media in holding conversations within their communities, and in acting as watchdogs for the way health services are being provided.

Addressing misinformation

In addition to the radio programmes and community discussions on Ebola in the DRC described above, Internews introduced a rumour-tracking bulletin in December 2019 as another way to

address community concerns, responding to an apparent gap in the information and communication chain in the Ebola response. Following the launch of Internews bulletin, UNICEF and WHO requested further copies of the local language version for use by their field staff.

The rumour-tracking model is now being used in Afghanistan, Philippines, Lebanon, Colombia, Mali, Sudan, and the Central Africa Republic to build trust around COVID-19 vaccines to ensure greater access and uptake. It has started to address the flow of misleading, inaccurate or malign information for vulnerable populations affected by humanitarian crises during COVID-19. To do this, Internews audits and collates rumours that pose the greatest risk to the community and produces fact-checked rumour-tracking bulletins that provide information from, and contacts for, experts and other reliable sources. These are widely disseminated through local media as well as directly to community members.

The danger of a fast-spreading rumour can be illustrated by a case in rural northern Liberia when a child was diagnosed with a high fever. Following protocol in a region where Ebola cases remained a concern, the school called an ambulance to take the child for treatment. But when the ambulance arrived, students began to panic and flee the campus. Parents began to frantically connect by phone and a rumour quickly spread that people were vaccinating children in schools and that the vaccinated children were then taken by ambulance and hospitalised. Within the hour, parents throughout the region were rushing to local schools and removing their children.

Information about the panic was quickly communicated to local radio stations who set the record straight, calming the anxious population. The broadcasts were followed up by local health teams who made school visits.

After the above incident, in partnership with the Liberian National Red Cross Society, UNICEF and Project Concern International, Internews developed ¹⁷DeySay SMS, to detect and manage rumours in as close to real time as possible. When anyone connected to the system became aware of a rumour, they would text it via a short code to a central coordination hub in Monrovia. The information was then collected, analysed for trends, and disseminated to local media partners in the field with details about the rumour so they can stop its spread.

It is easy to imagine rumours like the case above spreading about COVID vaccines, prompting people to start boycotting them. Work on the ground with local partners and local media will be essential to prevent rumours from taking hold, and to deliver up-to-date health information that explains what is happening.

Working in local languages and local contexts

Internews' has achieved significant success working with local journalists in low- and middle-income countries on expanding factual coverage of health-related information, in local languages.

Local beliefs and attitudes are often a serious impediment to people acting on health information. For example, Internews found that some communities in West Africa believed that the bleach sprayed by health workers to sanitise the environment was the government spraying the virus and

spreading disease. In another case, people believed that a disease was the result of black magic. In this context, misinformation can spread quickly and along with it, infection and death.

Evidence shows that local media are a trusted local messenger when delivering health updates, or rebutting rumours. Nic Newman's 2020 report for the Reuters Institute of Journalism¹⁸, for example, found that trust in the media was significantly higher than in social media, "networks, video platforms, or messaging services when it came to information about COVID-19". He also reported that: "local newspapers and their websites remain the top source of news about a particular town or region, reaching four in ten (44%) weekly".

Local media struggling in the pandemic

As several reports from the ¹⁹Reuters Institute in Journalism at Oxford University have shown, audiences for local journalism has grown significantly around the world during the pandemic, but financial support has declined. Small independent local media have been particularly hard hit by the pandemic, which has meant up to an 85% drop in advertising revenue, leaving many struggling to survive.²⁰ During the pandemic, some local media have also come under attack from their governments for not supporting government lines. Support for local independent media is vital so they can properly report on the COVID-19 situation and to ensure media freedom worldwide.

Providing emergency financial support can help institutions weather the initial shocks of a pandemic, enabling them to provide everything from personal safety equipment to increased power generation. Additional advice on areas such as business planning and financial sustainability helps these organisations to be sustainable longer term.

Recommendations:

1. As part of its new global approach to health security, the FCDO should take a worldwide lead in advocating for the critical role of locally relevant information in driving vaccine uptake. This can be delivered by funding the training of journalists, information providers, fact-checkers and rumour trackers operating at local level and targeting support to locations with the highest levels of vaccine hesitancy, vaccine misinformation and disinformation and information vulnerability.
2. The FCDO should recognise that the media cannot play this role unless the FCDO steps up its commitment to media freedom globally, enabling the media to operate without undue political or financial pressure. This can be delivered by providing financial support to help build sustainable local and community media institutions and by funding advisory and capacity-building support for media businesses, as well as support to build better regulatory and legislative environments internationally. Functioning independent media systems are also central to inclusive and sustainable post-pandemic recovery.
3. The FCDO should ensure that lessons from the Ebola response are taken on board and that locally relevant media and information are prioritised as part of any future

pandemic preparation, including support to local journalists in low- and middle-income countries to ensure that people in their areas receive science-based COVID information, in a local context, from trusted local sources, and are equipped to hold community discussions to answer worries and queries, as well as rebut rumours.

Verbal evidence: Our CEO, Jodie Ginsberg, would be happy to give oral evidence to the committee. Ms. Ginsberg is a former journalist and member of the Media Freedom Coalition Advisory Network providing advice to the coalition, established by the UK and Canada to support media freedom globally.

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