

# **Rooted in Trust – Philippines**

*An exploration of the program impacts of Internews' Rooted in Trust project*

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Alongside the myriad physical, mental and economic impacts wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic – close to three million lives lost, tens of millions more ill, and national economies in tatters – the misinformation and disinformation in public discourse about the disease has caused inestimable damage in the past year.

Despite global and local efforts to debunk the rampant myths and conspiracy theories of what WHO has called the “infodemic” running alongside the COVID-19 pandemic, misinformation and disinformation continue to be propagated, falling on fertile ground especially in parts of the world with little access to accurate public health information.

To counter the rampant spread of misinformation about COVID-19 and its consequences, particularly in ‘fragile’ or conflict-ridden countries where reliable sources of information are scarce, Internews established ‘Rooted in Trust.’ Since mid-2020, this pandemic information-response program has worked to understand the role of rumors and misinformation in the pandemic and to support humanitarian and media communicators to listen, engage and respond to community information needs.

Rooted in Trust spans seven countries facing complex and often protracted humanitarian crises that began before the pandemic. The project built on lessons learnt from previous health and humanitarian emergencies, for example Ebola in DRC and West Africa, cholera in Haiti and South Sudan, and the refugee response in Greece. Misinformation and communities’ (lack of) trust in information was a defining challenge of the response to these emergencies.

## **‘Local’ means everything**

Rooted in Trust’s core premise is ‘local’: to work with trusted members of local communities, first to track rumors about COVID-19 that are circulating, and then to dispel them in ways that have local resonance, as well as combat misinformation about the pandemic.

This local focus means it acts as an accessible entry point for information, reaching often marginalized communities – wherever possible in local languages – much more effectively than traditional media or public messaging by national authorities. Accurate, life-saving information about COVID-19 is transmitted to communities using approaches and language that they understand and relate to, creating virtuous-circle feedback loops between communities, local media, and humanitarian and health-response agencies.

The program focuses on 7 countries that have already been dramatically impacted by other humanitarian crises: Philippines, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Mali, the Central African Republic, Colombia and Sudan. In these countries, the already precarious situations of vulnerable communities have been worsened by the challenges presented by COVID-19, often overlaid on environments where accurate reporting is hard to come by at the best of times.

## Focus on the Philippines

In the Philippines, Rooted in Trust addresses, first, the lack of reliable reporting on the pandemic overall. The news coverage “is just stats,” says Gian Libot, a Senior Program Officer for Internews in the Philippines, and a former Rooted in Trust project manager there. “There’s no in-depth reporting, no long-form piece to explain what COVID-19 really is. Most Journalists rely on virtual press releases being done by local governments – that’s what people read. Beyond the numbers, there’s nothing else.”

So, Rooted in Trust aims to create virtuous information-exchange loops between public health agencies, humanitarian organizations, and the local media and help them connect effectively with COVID-19-affected communities in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM).

Home to 3.8 million people, BARMM is a poor island region in the south of the country, which has for over five decades been riven by conflict caused by ethnic insurgencies. After a peace agreement was reached between rebels and government in 2016, ISIS-inspired rebels attacked Marawi (in the region of Lanao del Sul), leaving half the city in ruins and almost 280,000 people displaced. In 2018, government imposed a year of martial law.

“It’s a place of really complicated dynamics, even before COVID hit,” says the Mindanao-born Libot. Further complicating matters for the management of COVID-19 is the scarcity of public-health information in the region. “If you look at the national scope of risk communication you could say [government] has got its plan... but when you look at how it trickles down outside Manila, it unravels after that point, the moment it exits the epicenter of where the original hotspots were.”

The second main element of Rooted in Trust’s work, integrated with thorough reporting on the pandemic, is to track and counter rumors about COVID-19. This initiative was supported by two implementing partners, IDEALS [AS1] (‘Initiatives for Dialogue and Empowerment through Alternative Legal Services’) and the (Coalition of Moro Youth Movement), both Internews partners operating in the geographic areas of Lanao del Sul and Maguindanao.

Mikhaela Dimpas, IDEALS’ program manager for media and communications, says that though they’re a ‘legal services’ organization, “four years ago we realized that communication is an important part of telling people their rights during pandemics, crises, and conflicts, which are all very present in Mindanao”. Dimpas describes Maguindanao as a place of “constant conflict”, where many communities have no access to electricity or to the internet, and therefore no access to information.

“In those areas there is really an abundance of rumors, misinformation and disinformation,” Dimpas says, “and more often than not, the information needs they have [and the negative information trends] are not being addressed.” Dimpas describes how not only government authorities but even medical frontline workers do not address misinformation, because the communities concerned are so far flung – authorities’ messaging simply doesn’t reach them. “Government officials really don’t go to those communities,” Dimpas says. “They expect local government units to relay the information but often those local units do not. Right now the community in Mindanao has low trust in their government.”

IDEALS tracks rumors both online, via social media, and offline, through deeply embedded work within communities.

For the online tracking, through the Coalition of Moro Youth Movements, IDEALS gathers rumors from Facebook and Instagram posts, comments, and stories, and assesses their risk level. (IDEALS has dedicated social-media monitors, who pick up rumors and misinformation which usually, Dimpas says, are in the local languages. “Facebook and Twitter’s in-house filters for ‘fake news’ don’t work when the post is in local language – so we translate it into English so we can give it to the right government agency or the right credible people who can address [the rumor], and then we can translate those responses back to the local languages so communities can understand,” Dimpas explains. Then IDEALS creates a rumor bulletin published in three versions: community, humanitarian, and media, using the same content tailored for the different audiences.

Offline, IDEALS hosts social listening sessions every week in both Lanao del Sur and Maguindanao. Community Patrollers (CPs) are project officers from within the community – they are locals to begin with. Their initial job description was to collect stories on the ground, record them, and produce articles and reports that could then be included in a radio programs for both regions.

But now this community-based rumor gathering has itself become something of a tool to address misinformation. “The collective learning groups serve as some kind of feedback session,” Dimpas says. “We see that community members do not really talk to outsiders, but if the CP is already resident in the community they already have the trust, and people are more open about issues they want to raise.”

The listening sessions take place as informal gatherings about twice a week in each area, with 10 to 15 participants, focusing on different sets of people such as traditional leaders, or elders. At coordination meetings beforehand, the CPs explain to them why it is necessary to check rumors, and why their inputs on these issues are needed and important; the CPs explain the answers to the misinformation or disinformation.

“We produce the rumor bulletins where the rumors are being addressed,” Dimpas says. “We also air the radio programs in which we address those rumors – we bring all those materials back to the communities. It’s very helpful [for them] because they don’t have access to the same information platforms that we have access to, so they appreciate the explanations, and the corrections of any misinformation.”

## **Salig Bangsamoro**

The rumor bulletin, called ‘Salig Bangsamoro’ (‘Trust Bangsamoro’ in Maguindanao), is published every two weeks, in English, Tagalog, Marano, and Maguindanao. The diverse set of ethnicities in the region “has a complex effect on language,” Libot says – and without translation into local languages, the ability to reliably inform people about pandemic developments is sharply reduced.

The bulletin has tackled rumors about peoples’ mistrust of how hospitals report the numbers of COVID-19 cases, suspicions about the hiring criteria for contact tracers, overcrowding in government-funded public transport, and the infamous recent rumor that circulated globally

alleging Bill Gates's responsibility for creating COVID-19 vaccines that secretly delivered microchips into people's bodies.

Salig Bangsamoro assigns a "risk level" to each rumor, identifies the platform where it appeared, and proposes specific reporting tips (in the case of the media bulletin) or clearly explained 'answers' (for the community and humanitarian editions) designed to counter each one. Each bulletin also features useful contacts (e.g. Directories of hospitals and local health insurance providers in BARMM), useful readings ("Coronavirus or COVID? A Glossary to Help Navigate Pandemic Vocabulary"), reporting tips, links to other resources such as The New Humanitarian, and sometimes digs deeper into broader issues such as the BARMM public's declining trust in institutions.

"I really think that Rooted in Trust is addressing the most pressing issues – not just in Mindanao but in the Philippines," Dimpas says. "All our project staff and CPs are locals, and they keep expressing that this is really necessary, and that they want to do more for this project."