

The sustainability and effectiveness of outdoor community radio broadcasts in Sierra Leone

Health Governance Strengthening Project (HGSP)

The USAID-funded 'Strengthening Post-Ebola Health Governance' project ran from 2017 to 2020 in Sierra Leone. UNICEF worked with the Ministry of Health and Sanitation (MoHS) to improve community confidence and utilization of public health services. This was done by improving public accountability of health service delivery and by engaging communities and civil society to demand strengthened governance in the health sector.

Outdoor community broadcasts bring together panelists, including stakeholders and decision-makers in a public place (such as a health center) to discuss a topic and meet with beneficiaries.

These broadcasts have helped to build trust between decision-makers and the community through direct participation and the creation of dialogue.

Radio is an essential channel for communicating health messages in Sierra Leone, with very high numbers of Sierra Leoneans having access to radios (81%) and listening to the radio daily (47%). Radio is also the platform that has the greatest potential to reach women and people living in rural areas in Sierra Leone. This is coupled with a high demand from Sierra Leoneans for information on health from the media (89%)¹.

MEDIA ENGAGEMENT

In recognition of the importance of radio, UNICEF and their partner, Initiatives for Media Development (IMDev), worked with community and district radio stations across Sierra Leone to deliver key health messages.

Together they provided a platform for media, civil society organizations (CSOs), community members and health officials to share information on health services and health sector reform. The aim was to raise awareness about health service users' rights and the benefits of health services, and to provide feedback on the quality of services.

As part of this strategy, from December 2019 to July 2020, IMDev conducted 25 outdoor community broadcasts in 13 districts across Sierra Leone in partnership with 18 local radio stations.

COMMUNITY OUTDOOR BROADCASTS

Outdoor broadcast audience members are beneficiaries of services who are informed about the broadcasts in advance by local civil society, local leaders and members of listener groups.

They are invited to ask questions and challenge decision-makers. Discussions are driven by audience questions and statements and audiences are able to speak in their local language.

The discussion is recorded and the recording is shared with local radio stations to be broadcast on the same day. Clips from these recordings can also be used in subsequent programming and inserted into national programs.

For this project, recording equipment was provided by UNICEF through IMDev to help with the broadcast production.

¹Hannides T. Bridging Theory and Practice Humanitarian Broadcasting in emergencies: A synthesis of evaluation findings. BBC Media Action. 2015

The outdoor community broadcasts aimed to:

- Provide a platform for members of communities to engage with stakeholders and ensure that accountable officials are aware of issues and challenges with Free Health Care (FHC)
- Support community members and health service users to amplify their voices
- Promote local ownership and participation in health issues
- Stimulate debates within communities

Participants included health workers, civil society, pregnant women, lactating mothers, paramount and section chiefs, religious leaders, mothers support groups, Village Development Committee members and young people’s groups.

The broadcasts discussed topics including access to FHC drugs, maternal and child mortality, ambulance services, and malaria prevention directly with the beneficiaries of health services.

Previously, listener engagement was limited to phone-in radio programs, which are unlike community outdoor broadcasts in that key topics discussed are usually guided by the radio stations, with limited opportunities for audience input.

The in-studio programs restricted audience participation, due to the fact that only listeners with access to phones could call or text into the program, thus limiting participation in the discussion.

“ People were feeling isolated, since we were only discussing topics that we picked. Now, because we take the radio to them to get their views, they have taken ownership of the program.”

Journalist
Kailahun

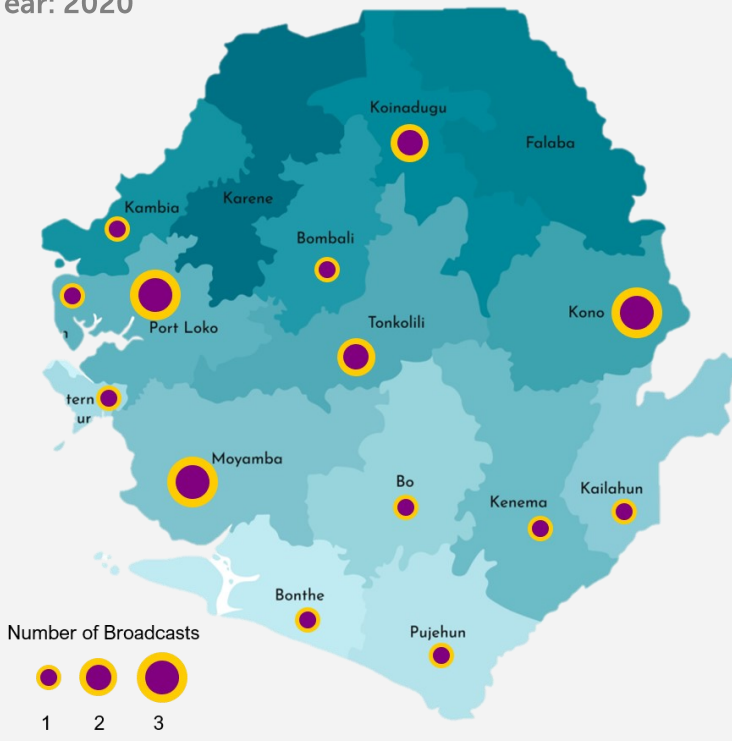
Thus limiting the impact of interactive radio programs on specific groups such as women, youth, and hard-to-reach communities.

“ Taking the radio to the grassroots has created impact. Instead of sitting in the studio where they don’t see us and they can’t ask us many questions as many don’t have phones.”

Alhaji Baba Kamara, Production Manager
Radio Bintumani, Koinadugu District

Outdoor Community Broadcasts

Year: 2020



CREATING RESULTS: THE IMPACT OF COMMUNITY OUTDOOR BROADCASTS

1) Increased participation of the most vulnerable and hard-to-reach. These groups were typically excluded or did not engage in interactive radio programs—use of local languages in broadcasts also contributed to their increased participation.

“On that day they were even encouraged to use their local dialect if they don’t know how to speak Krio, it gave them the chance to talk.”

Lamin Sillah
HFAC District Coordinator, Kailahun

2) Created a platform for dialogue between decision makers and beneficiaries

“Beneficiaries are empowered to communicate the issues that affect them”

Journalist
Kailahun

3) Enhanced recognition of radio as a relevant source of information on health issues and as a tool to help communities

“Going to communities has helped us to gain support from them, as many people are happy to see us in their communities”

Alhaji Baba Kamara, Production Manager
Radio Bintumani, Koinadugu District

THE SITUATION PRIOR TO THE OUTDOOR COMMUNITY BROADCASTS

Prior to the program, discussions on health governance were largely restricted to government actors, which contributed to low awareness about Free Health Care (FHC) services and limited opportunities for communities to be informed on healthcare issues and to discuss their concerns directly with decision makers.

“ We engaged with radio [producing programs] because of this project, before this, we did not engage except for interviews or to make clarifications on other programs”

Alhaji Ibrahim Kuriashy
H4AC District Coordinator, Kabala

4) **Built trust between decision-makers and the community** by demonstrating to listeners that they can hold their leaders to account

“Previously, whatever health workers said was taken as final and nobody could challenge them.

With the program, they are now being held accountable for their services to the community.

It created a space for checks and balances to the health workers.”

Foday J. Koroma
Listener Group Lead, Kailahun

SUSTAINABILITY OF COMMUNITY OUTDOOR BROADCASTS

In interviews, key stakeholders, including radio station managers and civil society groups expressed an interest in and support for continuing the outdoor community broadcasts, as well as more general health governance radio programming.

Efforts to train journalists in health programming were repeatedly mentioned as a reason that journalists were keen to continue to develop a range of programs on health and health governance.

In Tonkolili, outdoor community broadcasts have also continued past the end of the Health Governance program with the support of the national radio station, SLBC.

“When we have our monthly meeting, where we usually call all chiefdom monitors who are secretaries in the VDC, we tell them to come and do some health sensitization that will be aired on the radio.”

Ibrahim Sorie Kamara
H4AC District Coordinator, Tonkolili

When asked about sustainability, many stakeholders discussed the importance of joined up efforts from radio stations, civil society and local leaders to the success and sustainability of these programs.

“If you don’t involve community stakeholders, who are the entry points, it would not be sustainable.”

Mohamed Jalloh
District Social Mobilization Coordinator, Tonkolili

H4AC district coordinators, Listener Group Members, and VDC members were all mentioned as important actors and where they have been able to build good relationships the programs are likely to be more sustainable.

“The Listener Group members serve as community mobilizers during our community engagement, and this has been very successful.”

Journalist
Kailahun

However, all of these actors have so far been supported by the USAID Health Governance project, and therefore sustainability may be a challenge if these actors are not incentivized or supported financially to continue their work beyond the end of the project.

KEY STEPS TO SUSTAINABILITY OF COMMUNITY OUTDOOR BROADCASTS

Monetary / donor support for production costs

Ongoing and continual capacity building of journalists reporting on health

Community outreach support through VDCs, Listener Groups, and H4AC District Coordinators

Active networks for health communications linking media, NGOs, CBOs, government etc.

Case study written by Taysha as part of the Radio Content Assessment for the USAID / UNICEF Health Governance Project in Sierra Leone.
www.tayshaconsulting.com

The wider benefits of interactive health radio programs

Interviews with key stakeholders identified the following additional contribution of the radio programming:

- Increased numbers of patients attending health centers, and a counter-balance to negative rumors within communities around visiting health care centers during the Covid-19 pandemic.
- A greater understanding in communities on the roles and responsibilities of different actors, such as the Village Development Committees
- Better engagement between radio stations and communities

OPPORTUNITIES WITH RADIO FOR FUTURE HEALTH GOVERNANCE PROGRAMS

Training and the creation of the HANoj (Health Accountability Network of journalists) has formed a foundation of journalists and media houses motivated to continue producing and developing health governance programs and who understand the value of outdoor community broadcasts — both in terms of sustainable development outcomes and community engagement with radio.

“Most [in the community] don't have a phone to make calls, but when me and my team are there the people have the opportunity to talk to us.”

Alhaji Bab Kamara, Production Manager
Radio Bintumani, Koinadugu

A relationship of trust and cooperation has been established between radio stations and the local community through the inclusion of local leadership, civil society and the direct participation of listeners / beneficiaries. As a result local radio stations have built good relationships with local civil society needed to conduct effective community outdoor broadcasts.

Sensitization efforts during the Health Governance project have **improved relations between health care workers and radio stations**, with health care workers seeing the benefit of engaging with radio stations for accountability programming.

CHALLENGES

Challenges for the continued production of outdoor community broadcasts include:

The need for logistical support to travel to hard-to-reach communities to record and broadcast programs. Informants discussed a lack of motorcycles and recording equipment as challenges.

“The main barrier is transportation to facilitate movement to and from communities, so that we can reach hard-to-reach areas.”

Journalist, Kailahun

Financial barriers to producing outdoor community broadcasts are a particular challenge

when radio stations do not have good access or connections to local actors and have to rely on their own efforts to bring together panelists and stakeholders, who sometimes expect reimbursement for their involvement.

Limited radio coverage in some districts meaning that some communities cannot access the broadcasts.

“The topography of Koinadugu and Falaba districts is a challenge as the area is full of hills and mountains and the radio stations have limited coverage within the district.”

Alhaji Ibrahim Kuriashy
H4AC District Coordinator, Kabala

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1) Increase coverage and logistical support for radio stations in hard-to-reach communities; may include seeking out new opportunities around and / or the provision of funding, equipment, technical support
- 2) Assistance in establishing partnerships / connections amongst groups to help fill in funding gaps, such as cooperation between transportation outlets and journalists to increase program participation and reach
- 3) Continued efforts to empower civil society to work with radio stations on health issues
- 4) Continued engagement of community groups and listener groups in the planning of outdoor community broadcasts, especially for bringing together audiences and sensitizing communities to the format
- 5) Encouragement of female and youth participation in programs, including female panelists
- 6) Work with radio stations to develop follow-up programs with panelists to demonstrate the results of broadcasts and therefore the impact of community engagement on accountability and health service provision

“If you involve women, then you will get the cooperation of women listeners.”

Francis M. Bundu
DSMC, Kailahun