

# Radio as a source of public health information during COVID-19

It is essential that internally displaced persons (IDPs) in crisis-affected contexts receive rapid, relevant and reliable information. However, this was far from the reality during the COVID-19 pandemic, when rumours and misinformation were circulating, and little attention was paid to the information needs of IDPs and refugees.

This study, 'Using radio and social media to address misinformation about COVID-19 amongst internally displaced persons in Burkina Faso', was conducted by Sheffield University between 2020 and 2021. In collaboration with study partner Fondation Hirondelle, they used a community participatory approach to understand how radio, as a trusted source of information in crisis contexts, could be better used to disseminate accurate public health messages to IDPs and host communities in Burkina Faso.

Study findings resulted in 37 radio stations across Burkina Faso providing more accurate information that better met the needs of IDPs and host communities. They improved awareness of COVID-19 and knowledge of information sources among community stakeholders. Humanitarian responses to COVID-19 in Burkina Faso were also improved, and the study has been adapted for other countries including Mali, Niger and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

Title: Using Radio and Social Media to Address Misinformation about COVID-19 Amongst Internally Displaced Persons in Burkina Faso

Location: Burkina Faso

Study type: Mixed methods (content analysis, impact assessment)

## IMPACTS

- Radio stations across Burkina Faso adapted programming in response to IDP and host community needs during COVID-19 pandemic
- Informed humanitarian response to COVID-19 in Burkina Faso and strengthened relationships between researchers, the media and humanitarian actors
- Helped increase community trust in radio programming

## RESEARCH IMPACT LEARNING

- Participatory research can improve understanding of community needs
- Socialising research through existing humanitarian channels such as clusters and working groups enables fast application

# BACKGROUND



Burkina Faso is home to 1.9 million IDPs<sup>1</sup> facing humanitarian and health crises. It is crucial that they receive reliable information, and evidence shows that radio is the main trusted source. Radio broadcasting in national languages can reach marginalised communities, providing knowledge and enhancing people's understanding of emerging, complex situations.

The COVID-19 pandemic generated an 'infodemic'<sup>2</sup>, with a wealth of misinformation (accidentally false information) and disinformation (deliberately false information) being provided by multiple sources and via many channels. Public health providers and media platforms did not have a clear idea of the information needs of IDPs or how to tailor radio programming to support the public health response. A better understanding of how radio could best be used to disseminate public health messages specifically to IDP communities in Burkina Faso was urgently needed.

# THE STUDY



The study aimed to understand the sources and circulation of information and misinformation around COVID-19 among IDPs and host communities. It then used this information to determine how radio can best be used to disseminate public health messages to vulnerable, crisis-affected communities during an infectious disease outbreak.

The methodology comprised a content analysis of factual radio broadcasts targeted at IDPs, and qualitative and quantitative assessments of the COVID-19-related needs, opinions and beliefs of IDPs and host communities in Burkina Faso. WhatsApp surveys were used to gather data from IDPs in three regions of Burkina Faso (Kaya, Pissila and Kongoussi). Ongoing radio output was also analysed to identify improvements and good practices, and two rounds of remote listener feedback were collected using WhatsApp to assess the impact of the improved programming. Studio Yafa, based in the capital city of Ouagadougou and broadcasting independent information to crisis-affected communities via local partner networks, was able to adapt and test its outputs according to the emerging study findings. A robust feedback loop between studio staff and the study team enabled ongoing adjustments. Fondation Hironnelle, the Swiss-based media development NGO behind Studio Yafa was a key partner in the study and dissemination.

*"[The study enabled] IDPs and local host communities to be directly involved in co-production and actually lead the co-design process to a large extent"*

– Emma Heywood, Sheffield University

# FINDINGS



The study found that radio enabled a sharing of rapid and relevant information during COVID-19 and the deteriorating security situation. Reliable and swiftly deployed, it can be used by humanitarian actors as an urgent response tool in emergency contexts where misinformation and disinformation are rife. Providing valuable space for solidarity and unity between IDPs and host communities, it is more than simply a means of one-way communication. Due to extensive awareness campaigns, including by the radio station, general hygiene behaviours and habits were found to have improved. The study found that talk shows, news bulletins and interactive or entertainment programmes were preferred by IDPs during emergencies, and the use of fictional characters or celebrities increased listener retention. Repeat broadcasts or 'booster' campaigns were needed to reinforce understanding. Involving affected communities in programme production and delivery increased their awareness of, and commitment to, public health recommendations.

The study helped the radio stations to tailor public health information to respond to IDP needs and concerns, and to address misinformation that was circulating about COVID-19 among IDPs (for example, that it is a cold or seasonal illness). Misinformation may have resulted from a lack of access to verified information rather than through the deliberate sharing of disinformation. However, the study also showed that COVID-19 was not the main priority of IDPs questioned, with many being more concerned about economic precarity and the security situation in Burkina Faso. It is important that humanitarian actors consider the overall needs, priorities and concerns of IDPs when designing public health responses.



Outside broadcast of 'Let's Talk Coronavirus' recorded by Studio Yafa at an IDP camp in Kaya, Burkina Faso. Credit: Olympia de Maismont /Fondation Hirondelle

# COMMUNICATIONS AND ENGAGEMENT



The approach to communications and dissemination focused on promoting use of the research findings in the ongoing response for the study partners. Weekly online meetings provided a valuable feedback loop, which was particularly important for Studio Yafa to provide immediate comment to the study team on the impacts of any programme adaptations and to learn from the findings as they were generated.

The study team used diverse strategies to disseminate the study findings nationally, including close collaboration with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and the Community Engagement and Accountability Working Group (CEAWG) – the communication commission of the health cluster who were coordinating the humanitarian response to COVID-19 in Burkina Faso. A knowledge exchange workshop was also held in Ouagadougou in September 2021 and policy briefings were produced in French. Materials tailored to suit the diverse information needs of different stakeholders were used to explain the study and results to communities, including customised short plays and sketches, infographics and videos. The team produced Research Snapshots in both French and English.

The study team leveraged Studio Yafa's strong local reputation, wide coverage, and extensive networks for its engagement activities. Pre-existing relationships between Fondation Hironde and the UNHCR – which also works with many of Studio Yafa's radio partners to broadcast multi-sectoral humanitarian programmes – and members of the CEAWG were crucial to achieving study results. Similarly, the pre-existing networks of local data collectors recruited by the project brought together the study team and the local communities. Fondation Hironde produced a film, 'Radio: A key tool for humanitarian response' and organised a panel showcasing the research at the Africa Media Convention International Conference 'Journalism Under Siege' in Arusha in 2022, a high-level event opened by the President of Tanzania.

# UPTAKE AND IMPACT



Over 37 radio stations across Burkina Faso utilised the adapted programming produced by Studio Yafa based on the study findings during the COVID-19 pandemic. Staff at Studio Yafa learnt to identify information needs and rebut misinformation, when it occurred, in a quicker and more targeted manner. For Fondation Hirondelle, the study has helped to shape their participatory content creation strategies in nine other countries including Mali, Niger and DRC demonstrating widespread impact into different contexts.

*“The project [helped us] know the impact of our programs and to know what we had to modify to be more effective and impactful during that difficult time”*

– Denis Vincenti, Country Representative, Fondation Hirondelle, Burkina Faso.

The findings, which were regularly circulated, informed the work of other humanitarian actors in Burkina Faso delivering information on containing the coronavirus. The study also informed the programming approach of CEAWG and its members. Collaboration between researchers, the media and humanitarian actors in Burkina Faso was strengthened.

Accurate information meeting the needs of target IDPs and host communities, including understanding data sources and identifying and debunking rumours, reached radio audiences. This resulted in improved awareness, understanding and confidence in information regarding COVID-19 prevention and spread, and, ultimately, in behaviour change.

*“[...E]ach time we listened to the partner radios' productions, in particular the programmes about coronavirus, it really helped us to change our behaviour, especially in terms of hygiene and how to protect ourselves against the disease”.*

– Male IDP [interviewed during the study].

The study also supported target communities to have increased visibility and their voices heard. This enabled Studio Yafa to adapt programming according to their needs, and allowed for substantive engagement between Studio Yafa and IDP representatives about the sources of public health information, facilitating mutual learning.

*“We have much more confidence in the radio station. The information that is broadcast there is verified. But on Facebook, some of the posts are false.”*

– Ousseni Bagayan, IDP leader in Kaya [interviewed in ‘Radio: A key tool for humanitarian response’]

The evidence produced by the study contributed to preparation of briefings used by UNHCR to work with the Ministry of Health, informing a range of stakeholders involved in *“assessment [vetting], monitoring and even utilisation of the information that was produced from the study”* (Key Informant Interview, UNHCR). Findings also supported a UNHCR-funded humanitarian programme to inform vulnerable populations about COVID-19. Crucially, the study helped humanitarian actors to understand and prioritise IDP needs in Burkina Faso – which were not specific to COVID-19 but related to employment, skills building and gender-based violence, among others – encouraging humanitarian responders to recognise the holistic nature of needs.

# RESEARCH IMPACT LEARNING



## A DEEP UNDERSTANDING OF COMMUNITY AUDIENCE NEEDS

Meaningful, participatory engagement with IDPs throughout the study facilitated deep localised impact of research and enabled the study team to produce research outputs that were well tailored to community needs and interests.

## SOCIALISING RESEARCH THROUGH EXISTING HUMANITARIAN CHANNELS

Close engagement with existing humanitarian responsive mechanisms in Burkina Faso, and sharing results in brief, accessible formats such as short reports, enabled immediate application of study results to ongoing day-to-day decision-making, and programme design and development.

# PARTNERS

University of Sheffield; Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique et Technologique, Ouagadougou; Fondation Hironde; Studio Yafa

<sup>1</sup> As of 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Defined by the World Health Organization as “too much information including false or misleading information in digital and physical environments”

## ABOUT ELRHA

Elrha is a global organisation that finds solutions to complex humanitarian problems through research and innovation. This study was funded by Elrha's Research for Health in Humanitarian Crises (R2HC) Programme which aims to improve health outcomes by strengthening the evidence base for public health interventions in humanitarian crises.

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R2HC captures detailed case studies through a process that triangulates and validates evidence on uptake and impact. The case study methodology and full version of this summary case study including references are available on request.



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