

ACTIVITY 3.3.3: MEDIA CAPACITY BUILDING IN SIERRA LEONE

A Report from STOP Spillover
September 2023



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STOP SPILLOVER

Strategies to Prevent Spillover (or “STOP Spillover”) enhances global understanding of the complex causes of the spread of a selected group of zoonotic viruses from animals to humans. The project builds government and stakeholder capacity in priority Asian and African countries to identify, assess, and monitor risks associated with these viruses and develop and introduce proven and novel risk reduction measures. “Spillover” refers to an event in which an emerging zoonotic virus is transferred from a non-human animal host species (livestock or wildlife) to another, or to humans.

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ACTIVITY SUMMARY

More than six out of every 10 known infectious diseases are zoonotic – transmitted from animals to humans through direct contact or through food, water, or the environment. One estimate suggests that 75% of emerging pathogens are zoonotic in origin. The COVID-19 pandemic highlights the devastating global consequences of zoonotic diseases. Despite this, we do not yet understand everything we need to know to prevent the next pandemic.

More than two years after COVID-19 became the biggest global news story, zoonotic diseases continue to be a source of debate, conflict, and misinformation worldwide, contributing to limited public awareness of the risks they pose. To act, governments, policymakers and communities need reliable, evidence-based, and robust information to inform decisions and push for change.

Journalists and media organizations are well-positioned to provide this information, but the presence of mis- and disinformation, lack of publicly available data and other barriers pose challenges to producing high-quality journalistic work about zoonotic disease spillover and pandemic preparedness. More training and resources are needed to bring journalists up to speed quickly, so they can disseminate information to the communities most at risk.

To fill this gap, Internews' [Earth Journalism Network](#) – a partner of the STOP Spillover consortium led by Tufts University and USAID, announced grants to three organizations with prior media publishing and media development experience to support reporting and media development activities for increased public information and journalist capacity around this topic. The grantees were selected following a rigorous judging process where several factors ranging from the organization's experience of media training to impacts created were assessed. In addition, an interview was conducted to verify the information provided in the application and to assess the organization's capacity-building abilities through specially crafted questions.

One of the three selected grant recipients is the Free Media Group (FMG) – the publisher of Politico SL, Sierra Leone's leading media outlet.

Under the leadership of Mabinty Magdalene Kamara – editor of Politico, FMG conducted a three-day training for journalists representing various national and regional media outlets of Sierra Leone, from August 28-30. Sixty journalists were trained during the workshop, which was organized in close collaboration with STOP Spillover Sierra Leone team and under the mentorship of Internews. The workshop saw participation by senior scientists, academics and government officials from the public health and One Health sector. In addition, there were senior health journalists and gender rights experts. The cohort of trainees included working journalists from Freetown, Kenema and Pajehun, along with a group of final-year student journalists from Freetown University.

SECTION I: GENERAL INTRODUCTION TO AWARDING OF MEDIA GRANTS AND GRANTEE PROFILE

In Y3Q1, Internews' Earth Journalism Network [called for applications](#) seeking proposals from media and media development organizations from six countries including Sierra Leone with the goal of training journalists on a wide variety of topics related to high-priority zoonotic viral spillover risks and disease mitigation. “We are particularly interested in projects that help journalists find and use data and the latest scientific research in their reporting; explore ways to better explain the drivers of viral spillover and their intersections with other global issues; and elevate the voices of women and other marginalized communities most at risk,” the call read. It also listed out the following diseases that were the focus of STOP Spillover:

- Ebola
- Marburg
- Animal-origin zoonotic influenza viruses
- Animal-origin coronaviruses (SARS-CoV, SARS-CoV-2, MERS-CoV)
- Nipah virus
- Lassa virus

The call asked all applicants to note that submitted proposals must take a nuanced approach to the role of gender in spillover risk and the differences in risk between men, women, and other marginalized gender identities.

The application was closed by the end of February and the selection process of the proposals began the following week of March 2023. Although the application from the Free Media Group was the only entry from Sierra Leone, the judging panel found them to be one of the strongest, especially on the following criteria: relevant experience, network, credibility, impact potential, financial viability, and overall ability to deliver.

Following two rounds of judging by a 5-member judging panel and two rounds of virtual interviews by an individual judge, the application from the Free Media Group was finally selected for a grant. This decision, along with the profile of the finalist and their plan to conduct the training for local journalists in zoonotic diseases and One Health reporting, was then sent to STOP Spillover project leader Deborah Kochevar and project manager Paul Monaghan for their comments and approval. A meeting soon took place between Internews, and a group of STOP Spillover global team members led by Dr Kochevar where we received the approval to proceed with awarding a grant to the Free Media Group.

Media Capacity Building in Sierra Leone

The [Free Media Group](#) was established in 2010 by a group of Sierra Leonean media experts to provide media, communication, and training services and to help resuscitate the country's collapsing media coverage.

Since then, the media group has facilitated and led training on health issues, safety of journalists, women's rights online, and media and journalism training for government information attaches. This is in addition to their daily contribution to the development of policies and laws for the development of Sierra Leone through news articles, feature articles, opinion pieces, editorial and other visual news content such as cartoons etc. Politico – their main publication – has a woman editor, and it is the only media organization in Sierra Leone to have a woman at the helm. The editor Mabinty Magdalene Kamara was also assigned by the media group to lead the capacity-building activity under the Internews' STOP Spillover grant.

SECTION 2: CAPACITY BUILDING WORKSHOP

Zoonotic diseases are infections that are spread between people and animals. They are responsible for most infectious diseases according to the US Center for Disease Control. The Ebola, Lassa fever and COVID-19 outbreaks in Sierra Leone are clear indications of the dreadful nature of zoonotic diseases and why they should be given utmost care and attention in a bid to curtail their spread and by extension prevent the emergence of new pathogens in the country and the world at large.

Journalists and media organizations are well positioned to make this possible. However, they are often limited by factors such as the lack of information and accurate data, and the lack of expertise to interpret it, resulting in reports that are not informative enough and at times, also lack accuracy. Politico, as the recipient of Internews' media grant under the STOP Spillover project, organized a three-day capacity-building workshop for local journalists to change this situation. This training was aimed at building the capacity of journalists to report on zoonotic diseases and the threat of their spillover and used a One Health approach. During the three days of the training, journalists learned from professionals and experts about the existing threats of zoonotic disease, such as Lassa Fever, in Sierra Leone, the ongoing efforts to minimize these threats and minimize their impacts, and the ways to report about these effectively and responsibly.

2.1: OBJECTIVE:

The media workshops sought to strengthen and maintain the usefulness of the media in promoting community awareness around zoonotic disease in Sierra Leone. It also aimed to solidify journalists' reporting accuracy to harness community action groups -- which include but are not limited to women and other marginalized groups that bear the brunt of such diseases -- and to take informed local decisions to stop spillover and break the chain of transmission.

2.2: PARTICIPANTS/PRESENTERS:

- Prof. Aiah Gbakima, Medical Research Scientist
- Dr. Edward Magbity, Team Lead, STOP Spillover Sierra Leone
- Paul Ngeba, District Livestock officer/ Animal Production Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security, Kenema
- Harold Thomas, Public Health Risk Communications, Ministry of health
- Thierrieh Neneh- Koroma, Founder and Team Leader Feminist United Sierra Leone
- Kemo Chan, Senior Health Editor, Manoreporters, West Africa
- Dr. Isaac Massaquoi, Media Trainer at the School of Information and Communication

Media Capacity Building in Sierra Leone

- Stella Paul, Project Manager, STOP Spillover, Internews
- 25 professional journalists from all leading media outlets, including: Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC), Radio Democracy 98.1FM, Freetown Television Network FTN, Expo Media, Sierra Leone Telegraph, Sierra Express Media, Politico, Concord Times, and Nightwatch.
- 35 student journalists from the department of Mass Communications at Freetown University



2.3: DAY I:

The first day of the training had over 60 trainees, including both students and professional journalists. Held at the Council of Churches in Sierra Leone (CCSL) Conference Hall in Freetown, the training had veteran medical scientist Prof. Aiah Gbakima as the keynote speaker. Professor Aiah Gbakima noted that viral diseases are national security issues that should be treated with utmost seriousness and urgency. He called on journalists to be culturally sensitive in reporting the spillover of zoonotic diseases so that people would not be panicked and encouraged them to investigate and analyze zoonotic disease stories.

In his presentation on Communication in Public Health Emergencies and Risk Factors, Harold Thomas, the Risk Communication and Public Health Emergency Lead in the Ministry of Health, noted that a public health emergency could be caused by diseases, disasters, accidents, or intentional acts. He said such emergencies require prompt and coordinated actions from public health authorities and various organizations to protect people's health and safety.

Other presenters on the day included Edward Magbity – the leader of the STOP Spillover team in Sierra Leone. Magbity’s presentation was focused on the activities of the project, the consortium, and the partner institutions working together to ensure that they prevent the Lassa fever and Ebola virus in Sierra Leone. He explained that the goal of the consortium is to enhance understanding of reduced risks of zoonotic viral spillover and its implications and spread. He then described the ongoing research conducted by the STOP Spillover team in communities such as the Gola Forest area, because they are a potential frontline in Zoonotic spillover.

Other activities of the day included a panel discussion with experts on how to report on zoonotic diseases and One Health in a culturally sensitive and gender-inclusive manner.

2.4: DAY 2:



Journalist participants and trainers visited the Tacugama Chimpanzee sanctuary on the outskirts of Freetown. Located in the Western Area Peninsula National Park, Tacugama Chimpanzee Sanctuary was founded in 1995 by conservationist Bala Amarasekaran and his wife Sharmila. Initially established to enforce wildlife laws and rescue and rehabilitate critically endangered orphaned Western chimpanzees, Tacugama has grown into a diverse conservation organization.

During their visit to the sanctuary, journalists were given a special briefing on the various conservation activities of the sanctuary and the threats faced by the chimpanzee population across Sierra Leone, including hunting and capture for sale, all of which are illegal under state law. Sanctuary officials presented to the journalists the risks of zoonotic viral spillover due to continued hunting and illegal trade of Chimpanzees. The presentations also focused on the One Health approach to reduce these spillover risks by conserving the wild habitat of animals, stricter implementation of wildlife trade laws and advocating among local communities for alternative foods instead of game meats, including chimpanzees.

2.5: DAY 3:



On the third and final day of the workshop, facilitators and trainers Dr Issac Massaquoi and Kemo Cham, presented health reporting techniques and tips to journalists whilst writing on or investigating Zoonotic diseases. They also led group exercise sessions where journalists worked together to develop specific story ideas. These story ideas were pitched to a panel of senior journalists who gave input and advice on how to sharpen the story ideas to make them more gender-inclusive, culturally sensitive, and science-focused.

SECTION 3: FEEDBACK

On the 3rd and final day of the capacity-building workshop, journalist participants were asked to share their thoughts and reflections on the training, including the field trip. Only two journalists said that they had previously visited Tacugama sanctuary while the rest said this was their first opportunity to visit the conservation facility. They also overwhelmingly lauded the presentation on One Health and the detailed information that they gathered on the interconnectivity of animal health, human health and planetary health and its importance in preventing a zoonotic disease outbreak.

“After three days intensive training as a participant, the lessons learnt are very impactful and helpful, especially for health journalists or journalists that will be willing to report on health and health related issues,” said Sulaiman Jalloh, a journalist representing Expo Media

“Although I have been reporting on health and environment for several years, it was the very first time I had the opportunity to attend a training that combined both the issues as it focused on One Health. I have reported on zoonotic diseases before, but now I have more clarity, especially of the issues that are not reported about. For example – the connection between biodiversity loss and threats of more zoonotic diseases. Also, visit to the chimpanzee sanctuary was a win-win for me,” said Emma Kamara – a journalist from Nightwatch media.

SECTION 4: CHALLENGES

The biggest challenge encountered by Internews for implementing Activity 3.3.3 has been insufficient time. The time required for the selection of grantees, including obtaining consortium approval for them, signing contracts and onboarding of grantees requires 2-3 months. On the grantees' part, preparing for the capacity building workshop also requires considerable time, including outreach to various experts, government institutions and media outlets. Journalists willing to participate in the training also require time to obtain permission from their respective newsrooms.

However, as the activity had to be completed before September 30, we needed to ask our grantees to expedite their activities. It created additional pressure on our Sierra Leone grantee – a media publishing company with limited workforce – to compromise on their other regular commitments and tasks to comply with the new timeline, especially for the submission of reports as they were initially expected to submit the reports only during the first quarter of Y4.

In a similar vein, the Internews team was not aware that it was being cut from the STOP Spillover team after Year 3 until the end of August 2023 which left insufficient time to prepare our activity reports, as they are dependent on the submission of activity reports by our grantee organizations.

SECTION 5: LESSONS LEARNED

From the Y3 activities, Internews has learned the following lessons:

1. There is very strong interest among local media to learn about how to report on zoonotic diseases and One Health. While the interest is a positive sign, it also resulted in a much higher number of participants attending the workshop, causing logistical challenges. It is, therefore, wise to be prepared to accommodate additional participants.
2. Timely feedback from consortium partners is important to ensure timely completion of an activity.
3. Feedback can be more constructive and realistic if the reviewers are well-briefed on the specific partner activity.
4. Timely communication among consortium partners -- and in the case of an unexpected discontinuation of engagement, giving timely notice to the concerned partner -- is imperative to allow sufficient time for completing remaining tasks.
5. We need to be considerate and flexible to move the timeline of activities through intense mentorship and relationship-building with a grantee. In Sierra Leone, our grantee has publicly acknowledged that the mentorship provided by Internews was their key motivator.

SECTION 6: REMAINING ACTIVITIES

All activities have been completed in Y3 and there are no more activities remaining to be held.

SECTION 7: PUBLICATIONS

To date, the following stories and posts have been published by journalist-participants in the capacity building workshop, while more are underway:

In a powerful speech, centered on combating the scourge of human trafficking, Mrs. Bio called for a concerted global effort to stem the menace.

Speaking before a distinguished audience of political leaders, legislators, security experts, advocates for human rights, legal practitioners and other esteemed participants, Dr. Fatima Maada Bio conveyed Sierra Leone's unwavering commitment to safeguarding women and children from the horrors of human trafficking.

In her speech, she expressed gratitude to the organizers of the summit for providing a platform to address the critical issue of Victim Identification which, she observed, remains alarmingly low, despite global efforts against what has been rightly described as Modern-Day Slavery.

Dr. Fatima Maada Bio acknowledged the growing international movement against "this grave violation of human dignity" while highlighting the ongoing challenges faced in identifying and rescuing victims.

The First Lady made reference to the "devastating consequences of human trafficking" even as she lauded Sierra Leone's proactive stance on this front, particularly in the area of child protection. "Every child deserves a safe and nurturing environment in which to grow", she stated, going on to emphasise the belief that society's strength is measured by "our commitment to safeguarding the most vulnerable among us".

Mrs. Bio, a world-renowned champion for children and women's rights, detailed Sierra Leone's successful campaigns for two significant UN resolutions in 2022: World Day for the Prevention of and Healing from Child Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Violence, and International Cooperation on Access to Justice and Remedies for Survivors of Sexual Violence.

Dr. Fatima Maada Bio went on to shed light on the nation's comprehensive strategy to address Victim Identification. This approach involves collaboration between government agencies, Civil Society Organizations, and survivor leaders. Training programs have been developed for frontline responders, law enforcement personnel, and healthcare

providers, with a focus on exploring survivors' insights and tapping into their experiences to shape interventions and policy-

key global calculations. She pointed out the hurdles faced by the African continent during the Covid-19

era of the at least 100 million Human Trafficking around the world, 9 million are children.

"Land encroachers are taking over" - Tacugama Sanctuary founder calls on Govt

By Sulaiman Jallah

The founder and director of the Tacugama Chimpanzee Sanctuary, Bala

Amarasekaran has expressed great concern over the status of the sanctuary, noting that the sanctuary is owned by the government. He said the chimpanzee sanctuary should be protected and that people running the place should come from the line ministries that have been established to protect the forest and wildlife.

The founder disclosed that, Tacugama is not only a sanctuary but also a water catchment, noting that even the Ministry of Water Resources and Guma Valley Water Company should be concerned about protecting the area. He said the sanctuary is not only about keeping Chimps, but also a form of generating water for the many citizens and residents of Freetown.

Expressing his dissatisfaction, Bala said, over the years, successive governments and the Lands Ministry have been trying to have the right status of the site so that it can be protected.

The director of the Tacugama Chimpanzee Sanctuary said land encroachment has affected the environment, while calling on the government to educate citizens that the site is a no-go zone. He disclosed that over three hundred to four hundred acres of land have been encroached, pointing out that the Guma Valley area is experiencing the same problem.

Addressing journalists, Mr. Amarasekaran pointed out that Tacugama is the number-one area of tourist attraction because any tourist that visit Sierra Leone visit Tacugama, saying that Sierra Leoneans need to be proud of that,



while adding that it is a destination that any foreigner wants to see and should therefore be protected.

He called on all government ministries and agencies responsible to protect the land and the forests to come forward and take ownership of the Tacugama Chimpanzee Sanctuary site for the benefit of the country, complaining that land encroachers are about to take over the place. He however disclosed that they are establishing a botanical garden that will cover a minimum of two hundred acres that will serve as an innovation center project that will be sponsored and funded by World Bank and the Ministry of Finance through the Ministry of Tourism under the Sierra Leone Diversification Project. He gave example of the road construction that has begun and an innovation center that will empower

youths of the country, adding that it will also add good exposure for the country's tourism destination. "But all of these will not be useful if the land is destroyed by encroachers," he emphasized.

He also encouraged journalists to talk about such issues without fear, because, according to him, it is a national concern and the media has a great role to play in information sharing. Bala Amarasekaran also reminded participants about the 2007 mudslide that occurred at Motomeh which claimed many lives and left hundreds homeless.

He made these statements when a cross section of journalists visited the site on August 29th, 2023, on a tour organized by Free Media Group to train journalists on how to report on zoonotic diseases and health related matters.

www.expotimesonline.com

- <https://politicosl.com/articles/politico-hosts-media-training-today>
- [Free Media Group Ends... - Sierra Leone News Agency - SLENA | Facebook](#)
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