

Category: Media, Advocacy

**PROMISING PRACTICE: Training journalists to report accurately and fairly on VMMC (Internews, Kenya)**

**Key Promising Practices:**

- Training media outlets about the science behind VMMC and working with them to encourage accurate and responsible coverage.

**Introduction**

Internews is a media development organisation that is funded to do VMMC work in Kenya by USAID, as part of a project to engage the news media in creating awareness of public health issues, including HIV. As HIV prevention is a core theme of the project, the VMMC component was introduced in 2008 when this intervention was rolled out in Kenya. This is a stand-alone project with no institutional links to other VMMC partners.

**Target groups**

Journalists and editors are the direct target population for Internews' work while the indirect target population are the readers, viewers and listeners of the reports and stories that these journalists write or produce. The indirect target populations are determined by the target audiences of the respective media outlets. Internews provides guidance on how journalists approach their coverage but leaves final editorial decision making to the editors of news outlets.

**Scale and scope**

Internews works with journalists and media outlets from across Kenya but notes that most media are concentrated in Nairobi. Over 50 journalists have received VMMC-specific training since 2008.

**Organizations involved**

**Lead**

- Internews

**Funding**

- USAID

### **Other partners**

- Media organisations

### **Who is carrying out demand generation activities?**

- Internews does not engage in demand generation activities directly but rather trains journalists to cover VMMC accurately and fairly. In turn, journalists are in a better position to educate the public about the benefits of VMMC and are much less likely to write negative stories that could suppress demand for VMMC.

### **Management of demand creation**

- Internews staff and consultants provide training to journalists and the editors of the media outlets are responsible for approving any stories that are written about VMMC.

### **VMMC activities**

Internews neither works on the demand or supply side for VMMC. The organisation trains journalists to report accurately and with impartiality on VMMC.

### **The approach to Demand Creation:**

#### **Key message**

Participating journalists are not expected to adopt a particular message or stance on VMMC. Rather the training encourages the development of a strong understanding of and ability to communicate the scientific evidence base, as well as both side of the VMMC debate.

#### **Type of intervention**

Internews' Kenya project focuses exclusively on training Kenyan journalists, from print, radio and TV, about circumcision related issues with the aim of ensuring accurate, sensitive and engaging coverage. Internews does not engage in advocacy or behaviour change communications; it works to educate journalists about VMMC and to enable them to cover related stories more effectively and professionally. Internews organises 5 – 6 day workshops with journalists from across the country and from different ethnic groups, focusing on various technical skills, such as how

to tell human interest stories, how to communicate specialized health information, etc. It also provides travel grants to enable VMMC stories to be covered and provides post-training mentoring to journalists. It also organises one-on-one meetings with editors and does some training of health professionals and scientists to communicate more effectively with the media (this represents about 20% of their work). More broadly, Internews' health projects seek to build bridges between the medical and health community and the media. Over 50 journalists have received VMMC-specific training since 2008. Internews feels that it is important to embed VMMC work within a wider health journalism project to better develop contact with journalists, avoid VMMC story fatigue and to be cost effective.

## **Rationale**

Internews is keen to maintain its position as an impartial media training organisation and hence does not take a proscriptive approach or issue instructions to journalists to cover certain things or focus on certain demographics. Their main concern is to ensure that the coverage of VMMC is accurate and that journalists understand the science behind it and rationale for it. Internews feels that it is important to balance journalistic coverage of VMMC along with behaviour change communications and overt demand creation activities. This approach, Internews believes, will ensure sustainable impact: trainee journalists and their editors will be self-motivated and skilled to continue to write and publish stories on the subject of VMMC - based on news value, and irrespective of the availability of funding being available for paid-for media.

Internews believes that the impact of positive media coverage, or at the very least, the absence of negative coverage, complements and reinforces traditional demand creation and behaviour change communications (BCC) approaches.

## **Evidence base**

N/A

## **Demand Creation**

### **Media training**

The internews project has provided intensive training on VMMC to over 50 journalists and editors as well as training representatives from the scientific and

NGO communities on how to engage with the media. Internews estimates that approximately 100 news stories on VMMC appeared in the electronic and print media as a result of this training. Just as important is the fact that there were no negative stories that appeared – according to the 2013 AVAC survey, Kenya was the only country out of seven surveyed which did not have any negative or inaccurate stories on VMMC. This is a notable accomplishment given that a single alarmist or inaccurate news story could have a substantial, negative impact on VMMC demand, as has been happened in other countries.

The production of one or two stories was set as a condition for attending the training but Internews emphasizes that it did not interfere in the editorial decisions of the editors at the participants' media outlets. The journalists were free to write any type of story and to adopt any position on VMMC; Internews did not dictate the trainees' approach. Instead, journalists were presented with all of the relevant facts around VMMC and HIV prevention more broadly and were educated about the science and challenges involved with VMMC. Internews notes that the instinct of many journalists is to balance the "pro-VMMC" perspective with the "anti-VMMC" perspective. To address this professional inclination, Internews focuses on the science side, examining anti-VMMC views as well, such that journalists feel that they have learned about all sides of the issue and have the whole story. As a result of this process, while some journalists adopted a human-interest approach and others focused on science-based coverage, the resulting stories were universally pro-VMMC in tone.

### **Evaluation of demand creation activities**

Internews estimates that approximately 100 stories on VMMC have appeared in the Kenyan media since 2008 that can be traced to their project. There has been no formal project evaluation but Internews points out that Kenya was the only country out of seven countries in Africa surveyed that did not have any negative or inaccurate stories on VMMC (survey conducted by AVAC in early 2013).

### **Successes / Challenges**

#### **Successes**

Internews points to the approximately 100 news stories that have been published or broadcast as a result of its training. The fact that no negative news stories have appeared about VMMC in Kenya during the course of its project is also notable. As an example of the value of its engagement with the Kenyan media, Internews relates an occasion when a critical article was published in Uganda about VMMC

quoting a (very poor-quality) study which attacked the credibility of the initial three country VMMC study. Rather than wait for the Kenyan media to pick up this story, Internews was proactive and convened a round-table with journalists and VMMC experts from NASCOP (National AIDS and STI Control Programme) and other organisations to unpack the story and examine its scientific arguments. As in their regular training programme, Internews explored “what-if” scenarios about what could happen if the Uganda story were published in Kenya. As a result, not a single media outlet in Kenya chose to pick up or run the story.

### **Challenges & their mitigations**

Internews notes that it took time to build relationships and trust with the media, and that editors did not always release journalists for training at first. Over time, the value of the training that Internews provided was demonstrated to editors and it became much easier for Internews to recruit participants for the training courses.

### **Scale up opportunities**

Internews is currently funded through the end of 2016 to continue VMMC and health journalism training in Kenya. Kenya was the only country out of the seven visited as part of this project that featured a health journalism project and hence there is significant potential to scale up this sort of intervention in the region.

### **Lessons learned:**

- Internews feels that the most important factor in working with journalists is focusing on storytelling and not public relations. Central to this is providing journalists with the building blocks of a good story, ensuring that there is solid understanding of the scientific facts and of the human dimension of the issue. In practice, this might involve writing a story about a real person who has perhaps resisted or struggled a bit with the decision because of fears of pain or some other barrier, but has ultimately gone through with the procedure. Internews emphasizes that is important not to avoid discussing concerns or negative perceptions of VMMC, and notes that this helps to build trust with journalists and ultimately leads to more credible coverage.
- Internews notes that its training also explores the damage that inaccurate stories can do to public understanding of health issues. During the training,

scientific findings were shared with participants demonstrating that even when a health topic is mentioned critically by the media, the very fact of mentioning it can lead to public misunderstanding. As an example, Internews pointed out to participants that even negative coverage of the inaccurate claims in South Africa that garlic and other herbal supplements could cure HIV is thought to have contributed to an increase in demand for those supplements.

- A small but important part of Internews' work involves working with implementing partners and scientists to train them to engage more effectively the media. Internews indicated that this has sometimes been challenging, particularly if the health professionals are sceptical of journalists and focus too much on protecting privacy or other concerns. Internews stresses the importance of understanding the needs of journalists and points out that speaking to journalists can back-fire unless there is a willingness to be open.
- Internews feels that a great deal of its success in working in journalists is based on building trust and a reputation for promoting accuracy in reporting. In order to help build this trust, Internews notes that it would be important for any other organisation seeking to engage in a similar media outreach and training programme to be regarded as "neutral" by the media and not to be playing a direct role in VMMC service delivery or marketing or BCC communications. Internews also notes the importance of its remit to focus on health journalism broadly, taking in a range of issues other than VMMC. It feels that a narrow, single issue focus on VMMC training would be perceived by the media as just another interest group issue vying for their attention and may struggle to attract interest from journalists. In addition, Internews notes that a narrow focus that is not nuanced may lead journalists to seek to "balance" the pro-VMMC discourse with more critical views. As a result, Internews recommends as broad a health focus as possible, preferably with training delivered by former journalists.
- Internews recommends that media be engaged by acting as a resource for information and focusing on the basics of the science and on scientific methods, including how research is conducted. In addition, it recommends mapping out the emotive arguments against VMMC and reasons people might oppose VMMC. Internews notes that exploring the counter arguments to VMMC nearly always results in those arguments being dismissed as being based on poor science.
- Internews notes that journalists are often very busy and editors do not always want to release them for an extended period of training. Over time, Internews has built up a reputation and a relationship with editors such that they recognize the value of the training and the contribution that it can make

to their coverage. As a result, they no longer have difficulties with attendance. Internews cautions that it takes time to build those relationships and to scale up a training programme.