Reporting health research
Connecting journalists and TB researchers in Zambia

Promoting dialogue, debate and change
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Introduction

This report shares some of the outcomes and lessons learned from a joint venture between the Relay programme, which brings researchers and journalists together to improve media coverage of critical development issues,¹ and TARGETS, a research programme consortium (RPC), both funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID).

In 2008 and 2009, Relay and TARGETS joined forces to link their expertise in media capacity building, communication and health research. The collaboration produced a media toolkit on tuberculosis (TB) in 2008.² And in 2009, the partners ran a two-day workshop, followed by a three-month fellowship programme delivered by Zambia-based Panos Southern Africa (a member of the Relay team) and the Zambia AIDS Related TB (ZAMBART) project, a public health research organisation and TARGETS consortium member. These activities aimed to improve relationships between health journalists and researchers and to increase the accuracy and quality of health reporting in Zambia, with a particular focus on TB.

This report focuses on the impact of this partnership on the Zambian media, and on reporting about TB in particular. It also aims to contribute to wider knowledge and debate about improving evidence-based reporting on health issues. To that end, the report is intended for communication and policy staff in RPCs and other research organisations and networks, who wish to engage with the media and communicate their research to wider audiences. It should also be of interest to donors considering how to maximise their investment in research projects and to media institutes seeking to build the capacity of journalists to report on health issues in developing countries.

Key lessons learned are summarised below.

- Building relationships between journalists and researchers fosters trust and encourages collaboration. Long-term investment in improving the communication skills of both journalists and researchers can produce a lasting impact on the quality of health reporting.

- Investing in improving journalists’ skills to link research findings with ordinary people’s experience can result in health coverage with a human interest angle which appeals to audiences.

- Research organisations play a crucial role in, and can benefit from, bringing researchers and journalists together to influence public and policy debate. A communications manager in a research organisation has a pivotal position in building this relationship.

- Greater access to accurate information helps to tackle prejudice around health issues. Journalists need support to persuade their editors of the value of health reporting.

¹ Find more information about the Relay programme at www.panos.org.uk/relay
² ‘Sorting fact from fiction: Improving media reporting on TB’, Panos London media briefing, 2008. This publication is available at www.panos.org.uk/resources
**TB and the media in Zambia**

### TB in Zambia

According to the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Zambia has the 10th highest TB incidence rate in the world. The sputum positive case notification rate in Zambia is 193 cases per 100,000 members of the population, more than three times the global average of 61 cases per 100,000.\(^3\) Zambia also has one of the highest rates of HIV infection in Africa, at 15 per cent.\(^4\) HIV prevalence among TB patients in sub-Saharan Africa is estimated to be between 50 and 70 per cent.\(^5\) Despite support from the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, the Zambian healthcare system is straining under this dual epidemic, and suffers from shortages of trained personnel, testing capacity and drugs.\(^6\)

In addition to these challenges, there is limited access to accurate information and knowledge about TB in Zambia. There are many misconceptions about the disease and its transmission, and information about TB that circulates in the country tends to reinforce these misconceptions. The link between TB and HIV infection has fuelled social stigma associated with TB, in particular because of local associations between HIV and ‘immoral’ sexual behaviour.\(^7\) This social stigma contributes to people’s reluctance to disclose their status to close family, which means they are less likely to seek diagnosis and treatment.\(^8\)

According to a recent survey, the majority of Zambians get their health information from the media.\(^9\) Accurate and informed media reporting can provide missing knowledge and additional debate on health issues. It can also have a significant impact on reducing stigma and influencing health behaviours. Preliminary research from Malawi on HIV, for example, has shown that mass media interventions which aim to break down misunderstandings about the disease can reduce stigma and taboos.\(^10\)

In Zambia, health educators have harnessed the power of the print media, radio and television to conduct health campaigns around issues such as family planning and HIV.\(^11\)

### Health reporting in the Zambian media

Among the ‘traditional’ media platforms of radio, TV and print, radio is the most important source of information on health issues in Zambia, followed by TV and then newspapers. This is undoubtedly due to the broad reach of radio in Zambia compared to TV and newspapers.\(^12\)

Many Zambian radio stations carry stories on health, among them Radio Phoenix, Joy FM Radio, Radio Christian Voice and the Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation (ZNBC). In terms of print media, *Times of Zambia* has a dedicated health desk, as does *Zambia Daily Mail*. The Health Magazine, a monthly journal, is distributed for free in Lusaka. It was set up in 2008 by two journalists, with their own money, who felt that health reporting was being sidelined in the mainstream news.\(^13\)
Barriers to health reporting in Zambia

Twenty journalists and eight researchers took part in the two-day ‘Reporting TB Research’ workshop organised by Relay and TARGETS in 2009. The group identified four major obstacles to better-quality health reporting in Zambia, as outlined below.

Lack of access to reliable information

Journalists said they did not know where to get the reliable and useful information they needed. They also found it difficult to access researchers and research organisations, who are often wary of talking to journalists and developing relationships with them. Where research is available, they said it was not usually published in an easy-to-understand, jargon-free form.

Lack of skills to interpret health research

In a focus group session carried out during the workshop with seven of the journalist participants, those who had journalism degrees said their courses involved no coursework assignments or modules on specialist issues except for business and politics. Without specific research-interpretation skills, there is a danger that journalists will misreport scientific findings.

Limited support from editors for health stories

Journalists said that editors were focused on politics and business, and that there was little support to report on health issues. Scandal is often favoured over more serious, fact-based reporting. As one ZNBC journalist commented, ‘There are... journalists who are very interested in health and working on development topics but political content is top. Media owners, advertisers – all these have influence on the kind of products coming out in the media.’

Persistent stigma

During the workshop it became clear that journalists themselves believed many of the common misconceptions about TB transmission. As the findings below show, discrimination is not easy to shift.
Relationships between journalists and researchers

An additional barrier to health reporting that journalists do not always mention, and are usually unaware of, is the limited capacity of research organisations to promote their research findings. Many public policy researchers and research organisations recognise their responsibility to get their findings into the public domain, to inform policymaking and the public at large. However, research organisations rarely see the media as a natural collaborator. There can be a number of reasons for this, but it is largely due to the lack of professional engagement between the two professional groups.

The relationship between researchers and journalists in many countries around the world is not an easy one. Researchers often do not trust journalists to report accurately on their research. They also do not know how to communicate research findings in a simple, jargon-free way. And journalists often say that they find researchers unapproachable and suspicious.

Relay has found that professional mistrust between the two groups is one of the major obstacles to communicating research effectively through media channels. A lack of understanding about the demands and priorities of each other’s professions is another obstacle. For example, researchers are often unwilling to give away much information before their results are published in a peer-reviewed journal, which can take months or even years, whereas journalists have daily deadlines to meet.

Relationships between researchers, journalists and their respective organisations need to be continually developed and nurtured, through collaboration and professional engagement. Intermediaries such as Relay can help to initiate these partnerships and provide skills development to increase levels of trust and engagement between the two groups.
Addressing barriers to reporting TB in Zambia

Relay worked with TARGETS staff to develop a series of interventions to address the main barriers to TB reporting in Zambia. The partnership, which lasted for more than a year, brought together four institutes: Panos London and Panos Southern Africa (from Relay) and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and ZAMBART (from the TARGETS consortium). The key activities, which the partners match-funded with support from DFID, are listed below.

- **Resources** – developing materials to provide accurate and easy-to-use information on TB to journalists
- **A workshop** – to bring together professional journalists and researchers with an interest in improving health reporting, with the following objectives:
  - breaking down barriers to communication between journalists and researchers
  - tackling discrimination that inhibits accurate reporting of TB
  - building journalists’ skills to interpret and report on TB research
  - building researchers’ knowledge and skills to communicate to non-specialist audiences (the media)
  - providing advice to journalists on how to pitch health reporting ideas to editors
- **Fellowships** – to consolidate new professional relationships and skills over a three-month period, with support from research, editorial and communication staff at Panos Southern Africa and ZAMBART.

**The Relay programme approach**

Relay brings researchers and journalists together to improve media coverage of critical development issues. It is coordinated by Panos London, which has worked for 25 years to promote the participation of poor and marginalised people in international development debates, and implemented in partnership with Panos Network offices in developing countries. Relay provides information, builds the skills of researchers and journalists, and brokers relationships between them.

The broad aim of Relay is to use Panos’s expertise in communication methods and processes to bridge the gaps that prevent important research findings from reaching wider audiences and influencing policy decisions. The programme focuses particularly on creating dialogue between the media and research communities, and strengthening the capacity of the media to report on research.

Relay works to build partnerships with research organisations or networks on particular research themes. It supports partners, including DFID-funded RPCs, to build skills, knowledge and relationships with the media to improve and increase media coverage of research. Sustainable partnership development is a core part of the programme’s work.
The partnership between Relay and TARGETS

Underpinning all Relay and TARGETS’ interventions was the development of a strong partnership between the two organisations. In 2008, Relay and TARGETS worked together to develop a literature review, media briefing and series of print and radio features on TB and stigma, as resources for the media. In 2009, TARGETS asked Panos’s Relay programme to collaborate on building the capacity of Zambian journalists to report on health issues and to work with their consortium member, ZAMBART, in the process.

The partnership resulted in the two-day ‘Reporting TB Research’ workshop for Zambian journalists and researchers selected by ZAMBART. The specific purpose of the workshop was to facilitate greater collaboration between researchers and journalists, to share new skills and new knowledge about TB. All partners contributed to shaping the sessions of the workshop. Afterwards, Lusaka-based Panos Southern Africa coordinated fellowships for up to 10 interested journalists over a period of three months, of which five were awarded.

Resource materials

Relay had worked with TARGETS to produce a media briefing on TB. This included plain language summaries of key lines of argument and recent research findings relating to TB, as well as story ideas and research contacts. The materials were used at the workshop and journalist participants said they found them very helpful. One journalist suggested that similar resources could be used in journalism schools so journalists could undertake specialist assignments and develop their interests and skills at an earlier stage of their career.

One result of the workshop was a ‘Key TB terms and definitions’ sheet, for journalists’ future reference. Journalists and researchers worked together to produce clear, accessible definitions for journalists to use.

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15 This section draws on Relay monitoring reports, January 2011 interviews with journalist participants in the programme and an interview with ZAMBART. It also includes data from two unpublished reports: ‘Reporting TB Research workshop: Raising debate around TB’, Lusaka, 24–25 June 2009; and Relay donor report May–October 2009, Panos Southern Africa
16 ZAMBART is a Zambian NGO formed in 2004 from a collaboration between the University of Zambia’s School of Medicine and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine
18 Few of them had used the briefing before the workshop, despite its previous dissemination
**Relationship building**

At the outset of the ‘Reporting TB Research’ workshop, journalists described researchers as having: ‘intellectual arrogance’ and being ‘rude’ and ‘inaccessible’. They also described researchers as being ‘too secretive’, indulging in ‘selective sharing of information’, using ‘complex language’ and ‘jargon which is difficult to understand’. Journalists also felt their relationship with researchers was characterised by ‘mistrust’.

Researchers’ frustrations mirrored those of the journalists. They complained of journalists ‘misrepresenting’ facts with ‘few science journalists reporting on health issues with any expertise’. They also charged journalists with being ‘pushy’ and ‘unprofessional’, and ‘chasing news stories’ with ‘their own agenda’ rather than wanting to dig deeper to add value to media coverage.

Despite the mutual lack of trust, however, by the end of the workshop, both groups acknowledged the significant potential of working together and did in fact value one another’s professions (see box, below).

All the researcher participants shared the goal of contributing to social change and enabling information in the media to educate people and increase demand for health services.

Equally, journalists perceived researchers’ work as a valuable source of accurate information. This credibility was believed to contribute to audiences being more interested in media coverage.

Although this does not mean the attitudes of journalists and researchers had changed, they were no longer fixed. During the workshop participants became less rigid and more open to working together to increase their effectiveness.

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**Perceived professional value**

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<th>What journalists valued about researchers</th>
<th>What researchers valued about journalists</th>
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<tr>
<td>Reliable information and data</td>
<td>Help disseminate research findings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factual</td>
<td>Help to explain science to a wider audience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevant</td>
<td>Various modes of communication available – TV, radio, print</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credible</td>
<td>Translate scientific jargon into simple language people can understand</td>
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<tr>
<td>Useful information on development</td>
<td>Help communicate key messages to change particular health policies</td>
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<td>Insightful</td>
<td>Good advocates</td>
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<td>Unexpected information</td>
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<td>Source of news</td>
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<td>Source of facts for detailed stories</td>
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Dispelling myths and misconceptions about TB

The issue of accuracy and ethics in reporting was an important theme in the workshop, particularly because the media often reports and reproduces many misconceptions that lead to discrimination against people with TB.

‘A few times I have read health-related features in the media and thought: “Come on, this has got to be wrong. This person completely got the wrong end of the stick!” That scares me.’

Dr Monde Muyoyeta
ZAMBART researcher

For some journalists, the workshop was the first time they had directly engaged with an expert in TB and had their questions on the issue answered by a reliable source. For all the journalists, it was a unique opportunity to have researchers’ undivided attention for two full days and to work together to discuss public health issues in more depth. By the end of the session, journalists also acknowledged their responsibility to educate themselves about TB.

‘I think the job for us journalists is to educate the public about what TB is, how it’s transmitted and how it’s prevented.’

Arnold Tutu
workshop participant and journalist

By bringing community workers to the workshop, journalists also had the chance to interact with grassroots experts who could outline the stigma faced by the people they worked with. Both the journalists and the researchers felt that seeing this side of the story was of great value in promoting media coverage that could tackle prejudice.
‘I think we made really good choices in selecting journalists. In almost every case ZAMBART’s relationship with the journalists resulted in broadcasts and articles that have improved in quality and accuracy over time.’

Justin O’Brien
Policy, Advocacy and Communications Manager, ZAMBART

Developing journalists’ health reporting skills

The capacity building of journalists to report on research began in the workshop but needed to be strengthened through ongoing mentoring, editorial support and relationships with researchers.

Panos offered 10 fellowships to journalists who attended the workshop. However, only five were taken up, perhaps reflecting the general low interest in and status afforded to health reporting in Zambia, and the related lack of motivation to take on additional work for modest fellowship stipends.

The journalists who did take up fellowships received mentoring support from Panos and ZAMBART. The policy, advocacy and communications manager at ZAMBART and the media programme officer and editors at Panos Southern Africa worked closely with the journalist fellows and were impressed by their commitment.

One-on-one mentoring of journalists involved in the fellowships took place over a period of three to six months. This process involved helping journalists to ask the right questions, and supporting them to interpret research. It also involved supporting researchers to work effectively with the journalists. Journalists participating in the scheme shared draft media coverage and made suggestions for improving each other’s work. Researchers learned how to identify the key messages relating to their findings, to use plain language and to be patient with the demands of journalists. Support for the researchers was facilitated by ZAMBART’s policy, advocacy and communications manager.

Both journalists and researchers emphasised the benefits of the new relationships they developed during the workshop and fellowships. For example, two radio journalists welcomed the opportunity to conduct interviews with people affected by TB in health centres and villages. They noted that this significantly improved their programmes and contributed to a huge response from their audience.

ZAMBART was impressed with the reporting of these journalists, and noted that the interviewing skills of one of them developed significantly during the fellowship.

Outcomes from the partnership

Below are some outcomes from the Relay and TARGETS initiative.

- Four articles and five radio programmes reached more than 500,000 people combined.

- Journalist Evans Zyuulu received ‘overwhelming’ feedback on his Radio Christian Voice programme on TB and nutrition in rural areas, including many solutions suggested by listeners.

- Some journalists gained new motivation and confidence; for example one stated an intention to work with his manager to overcome public ignorance about TB transmission.

- Two journalist fellows worked with ZAMBART researchers to produce a 45-minute programme on TB with participant questions and answers. The programme was aired on the main radio station ZNBC and was syndicated to community radio stations recommended by the journalist fellows.

- Community radio stations recognised the value of having a product that can be used with very little preparation; they continue to broadcast the programmes.
Longer-term outcomes from the partnership include the commissioning of a video by TARGETS to share some of the project’s findings more widely. The video was shown at the 2009 World Conference for Science Journalists in London. This led to a lively discussion about how far journalists and researchers should each be expected to go to improve research reporting.

Staff at Panos Southern Africa and ZAMBART continue to support relationships between researchers working on TB in Zambia, and Zambian journalists specialising in health reporting.

### Media coverage resulting from the fellowship programme

**Times of Zambia**
- Two print features by Sylvester Mwale looked at:
  - Misconceptions about TB and HIV and AIDS (30 July 2009)

**The Post and The Health Journal**
- Two print features by Arnold Tutu looked at:
  - TB-related deaths among people living with HIV (2009).

**Joy FM radio station and Healthcare Publications Ltd**
- Three live radio phone-in programmes presented by Paxina Phiri and Emmanuel Mulenga focused on:
  - TB co-infection (9 September 2009)
  - TB and nutrition (16 September 2009)
  - Impact of TB on children (30 September 2009).

**Radio Christian Voice**
- Two recorded radio programmes, broadcast by Evans Zyuulu in Tonga, the local language of Zambia’s southern province, looked at:
  - The relationship between TB and nutrition in rural areas (8 August 2009)
  - TB and housing in rural areas (17 August 2009).

**ZNBC, Sky FM, Zambezi FM and Radio Ichengelo**
- A radio programme on TB was produced by journalist fellows in collaboration with ZAMBART. The programme was originally aired on ZNBC and syndicated to local stations and community stations in areas where ZAMBART works.

[The video is available at http://tinyurl.com/3k33odk]
Conclusion

This section offers insights into which aspects of the collaboration between Relay and TARGETS worked. It also looks at the barriers to supporting journalists and researchers to improve coverage, raise awareness and promote debate of TB, public health issues in general and other development issues.

The overall findings outlined in this report show that long-term investment in improving the communication skills of both journalists and researchers is needed to produce lasting change in the quality of public health reporting in Zambia. This also applies to other developing countries. The development of relationships between journalists and researchers is essential to this, and intermediaries such as Relay can facilitate the early stages of this process. Research organisations can also act as intermediaries and if they are serious about getting key research findings and policy messages into the public domain, they may need to make greater investments in developing this function.

Sustaining relationships

The findings from the ‘Reporting TB Research’ workshop reveal that when brought together, journalists and researchers quickly identify value in each other’s expertise and realise it can be mutually beneficial for them to work together. The mistrust that exists between the two groups is real, but can be broken down by demonstrating the benefits of collaboration and the skills and knowledge that each party can contribute to joint initiatives.

The long-term results of the project outlined in this case study will depend on what happens as the new relationships between journalists and researchers develop and mature. Sustained commitment and confidence between partners is built through the ups and downs of working together over a longer period of time, and learning more about each other’s professional needs.

The relationships between the journalists and researchers in this project may not have been entirely smooth, but that is to be expected. Relationships between media and research practitioners will always have a healthy tension because the professions are very different, with different needs and incentive structures. Relay and ZAMBART’s roles as relationship brokers were significant in this case because they provided the tools and techniques, and created the conditions, for sustained partnership building.
Importance of intermediaries

Relay acts as an intermediary between researchers and journalists, but research organisations themselves can do much to improve relationships. If the goal of an RPC is to influence public and policy debate and it recognises the role the media can play in this, it needs to commit time and resources to building the necessary skills within its own organisation, as well as developing sustained relationships with the media.

This report highlights the important role that the programme, advocacy and communications officer at ZAMBART played in linking the worlds of journalism and research and bringing issues to the attention of wider audiences and policymakers. A skilled communications professional based in an RPC can act as a relationship and information broker, as well as functioning as a mentor and guide. This is particularly true if the role is based in the country where the research is being carried out. The findings from this project suggest that research organisations need to select individuals who are skilled in these different dimensions as well as having an understanding of the research field in question. Further investment in developing individuals for these roles could be crucial for RPCs who want to influence public policy and debate.

Making the case for health reporting

While Zambian media consumers say the media is an important source of health information, Zambian journalists say that media owners and editors are sometimes unaware of the benefits of good-quality health reporting, and of its appeal for their readers, listeners and viewers.

It is clear that gaining the support of editors and owners remains a major challenge for Zambian journalists. Journalists attending the workshop suggested that improving their own confidence and skills was one way in which they could win the support of their editors.

However, more work remains to be done in convincing media editors and owners of the benefits of health reporting. Audience research and opinion surveys could be a valuable component of future efforts by RPCs and their partners to persuade media owners of the value of reporting health research, in Zambia and elsewhere.
Recommendations

Relay would make the following recommendations for any future models or investments to support skills and relationship building between the media and researchers:

- **Use a relationship broker** – skilled intermediaries such as Relay and communications staff in research organisations are invaluable in designing interventions that are relevant to the needs and perspectives of journalists and researchers, and to facilitating ongoing interaction between them.

- **Focus journalists on what they do best** – enabling them to tell stories based on complex data simply, rather than trying to give them a degree-level course in research in two days.

- **Give journalists access to researchers** – to enable them to connect with holders of valuable information for reporting on specialist issues.

- **Provide journalists with access to people who experience the issue in question** – eg patients or health workers. This allows journalists to conduct interviews, put a human face on the issue, and find research stories that are compelling to wider audiences.

- **Provide journalists with reference material** – to allow them to check facts and tackle common misconceptions or ignorance about key issues.

- **Provide researchers with support** – they need assistance to package and communicate their key messages and engage with journalists. Research organisations should invest in skilled staff to perform this function if they are interested in improving the media’s capacity to report research effectively to wider audiences.

- **Provide journalists and researchers with ongoing support (three months minimum)** – to facilitate lasting relationships and improved skills among both groups.

- **Expect bumps along the way** – the mutual frustrations journalists and researchers experience often reflect structural and professional differences in ways of working that require patience and understanding to overcome.

- **Invest more in audience research** – to show editors that media consumers want more reliable health information. This will also support motivated journalists to develop skills and interest in reporting on the issue in question, and to recognise their valuable contribution to media debate.
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The Relay programme brings researchers and journalists together to improve media coverage of critical development issues. It is coordinated by Panos London and implemented in partnership with Panos Network offices around the world.

To find out more about the Relay programme go to www.panos.org.uk/relay

This material has been funded by UKaid from the Department for International Development (DFID); however the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the department’s official policies.

This publication was written by Ingrid Yngstrom and edited by Panos London. Panos London would like to thank TARGETS, ZAMBART and Panos Southern Africa for making this partnership a success, particularly organisers Alexandra Hyde, Justin O’Brien, Gillies Kasongo, Caesar Jere and Steve Belemu. We are most grateful to Justin O’Brien, Paxina Phiri, Emmanuel Mulenga, Evans Zyuulu, Musonda Simwinga, Arnold Tutu and Monde Muyoyeta for their input into this report. Thanks also go to Tim Williams and Beryl Leach at Panos London for their timely contributions.