

## **A conversation with Development Media International (DMI), May 13, 2015**

### **Participants**

- Roy Head – CEO, Development Media International
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**Note:** These notes were compiled by GiveWell and give an overview of the major points made by DMI.

### **Summary**

GiveWell spoke with Development Media International (DMI) to stay updated on its progress as part of our 2015 recommendation cycle. Conversation topics included DMI's for-profit arm, DMI's attitude towards transparency and document sharing, DMI's staff capacity, and how DMI thinks about the balance between research and scale-up campaigns.

### **DMI's for-profit arm**

DMI has a for-profit arm (titled DMI, Ltd.). This for-profit organization functions as an alternate funding channel. For some funders, it is easier to give money to a for-profit organization. For example, there are types of USAID funding that can be more easily directed to for-profit organizations.

DMI is also exploring using the for-profit arm to generate commercial earned income to cover DMI core costs. The for-profit arm has not been used for earned income activities very frequently; in late 2014, an early childhood development campaign was run through the arm, on behalf of the University of the West Indies.

Generating income could include creating standard DMI campaigns for governments, or producing training or educational films on contract. The income-generating activities would not necessarily have to align with DMI's social mission, as long as they do not conflict with its ethical principles.

Earned-income activities would have to generate a significant profit to justify the capacity they require.

Roy is interested in pursuing earned-income activities. DMI has recruited a team of six MBA students from the London Business School to do scoping work on possible earned-income activities.

DMI feels that its core activities have been picking up momentum. Its first priority is to maintain this momentum.

## **Transparency**

DMI wants to share as much content as it can with GiveWell and GiveWell's audience. DMI's default position is that content should be published unless there is a pressing reason not to do so.

Because DMI's work includes a substantial, resource-intensive research component, DMI needs to think carefully about when its research is made public. DMI wants to avoid becoming an "idea factory" that only produces research that other organizations use when implementing their interventions.

For example, the Lancet approached DMI about publishing a piece about its randomized controlled trial (RCT) in Burkina Faso, before the RCT had been funded. DMI knew that the Burkina Faso RCT was going to attract a lot of attention in the development communications industry. If another organization became sufficiently interested in the concept, it plausibly could have implemented the RCT before DMI had completed fundraising. Because of this, DMI decided to hold off on publicizing the RCT until after fundraising was complete and implementation had begun.

DMI is small relative to other organizations in the development communications sector. If it released its intellectual property too early, it could be out-competed.

### *DMI financials*

DMI would not want to publicly disclose salary information about its employees. For this reason, DMI keeps its line-item budgets private. DMI is open to publishing a higher-level categorization of its budget.

### *Funder proposals*

Substantial time and analysis goes into DMI's funder proposals. Generating an analysis of a country's media environment requires considerable resources. For example, DMI has employed an analyst in Mozambique for the last three months to do pre-campaign analysis. The analyst's salary cost over this time has been about £15,000. All costs considered, the pre-campaign work in Mozambique has probably cost around £35,000.

DMI operates in a competitive funding environment – if DMI's proposals were public prior to funding decisions being made, it is possible that a competitor could take advantage of the information. For this reason, DMI is sensitive about publishing its funder proposals before funding decisions are reached.

Publishing longer, detailed documents is more concerning to DMI than publishing its two-page concept notes. The media environment analysis and campaign design are some of the sections of the funder proposals that DMI is most concerned about keeping private. Publishing redacted versions of project concept notes that have not yet been funded is also a possibility.

## **Transparency in the development communications sector**

The development communications sector is torn on the question of transparency. Most people in the sector agree that organizations should be cooperating and sharing best practices.

However, the sector operates in a competitive funding environment. Organizations must compete against each other for unrestricted funding. In addition, organizations often compete via tenders (a funding mechanism similar to a request-for-proposals). DMI does not often seek out tender opportunities, but it does engage in them when they align with its mission.

### *How DMI thinks about funding*

If DMI had entirely unrestricted funding, it would launch campaigns in areas with little or no competition. However, given that much of development funding is focused on certain countries, DMI must seek some of its work in more competitive environments.

DMI prides itself on the intellectual rigor of its work. However, creating rigorous research is costly and time-intensive. Publishing this research in the public domain before it can be applied feels self-defeating to DMI, because there is a risk that it might be taken up by organizations that will use it in a sub-optimal way.

## **Balancing future research with future scale-up campaigns**

DMI wants to continue to do both research and scale-up campaigns. DMI's strategy is to carry out research projects to figure out which interventions are effective, then to scale-up the interventions that work.

If DMI receives a large amount of unrestricted funding, it will use the funding to begin a campaign in another country, e.g. in Cameroon. DMI is using the current, smaller amount of unrestricted funding it receives to augment its ongoing campaigns. For example, DMI plans to allocate approximately \$100,000 of its unrestricted funding to perform time-series evaluation of its scaled-up campaign in Burkina Faso. The main funders of this campaign did not provide funding for evaluation.

At any given time, the allocation of resources between research and scale-up will depend on what stage projects are in, as well as on the amount of funding DMI receives for each. However, DMI's first priority is to scale up proven interventions.

At DMI's central office, there is not a division between "research project" staff and "scale-up project" staff. All staff work across the full range of projects.

## **Research campaigns**

Burkina Faso has a fragmented mass media landscape that makes it an excellent setting for mass media RCTs; DMI wants to continue to take advantage of this landscape to generate RCTs studying the effect of media mass on various behaviors.

The development communications literature is not very robust; there is little RCT evidence about the effect of mass media on behaviors in developing contexts. In Burkina Faso, DMI has an opportunity to add substantially to this literature.

Burkina Faso's media landscape is probably going to remain fragmented for about the next decade. DMI views this timeframe as a window in which to conduct mass media RCTs.

#### *Layered RCTs in Burkina Faso*

DMI is planning to run multiple RCTs in tandem with scaled-up campaigns (subject to discussions with the government of Burkina Faso). Using this "layered" methodology, DMI could evaluate the effect of mass media on a set of behaviors while simultaneously scaling up its proven messages. By running multiple RCTs simultaneously, this methodology would reduce the cost per RCTs.

Logistically, this would entail broadcasting scaled-up, proven messages on all 28 radio stations in Burkina Faso, while continuing to use 14 or 16 radio stations for the RCTs. The 14 or 16 stations are selected for RCTs because their broadcast zones do not overlap (some of the broadcast zones of the 28 stations selected for scaled-up campaigns do overlap). These 14 or 16 stations would be re-randomized for each behavior studied. Therefore, under this methodology a station could be simultaneously functioning as a control zone for one RCT while functioning as an intervention zone for another.

DMI has a very strong staffing structure in Burkina Faso – it is able to continuously produce and broadcast radio spots. Radio spots are produced at the DMI office in Ouagadougou, then packages of spots are sent out to the partner stations. To conduct simultaneous RCTs, each partner station would receive a different set of spots in its package (e.g. stations that are intervention zones for a road safety RCT would receive road safety spots to broadcast, but stations that are control zones for this RCT would not receive road safety spots, though would receive spots for the campaigns it was broadcasting on). This distribution structure is easy to manage.

DMI would not measure mortalities for RCTs conducted in this methodology. The RCTs would measure behavior change.

Potential RCT topics include testing the effect of mass media on road safety, the effect of mass media on early childhood development, and which formats of mass media produce the biggest effect.

Funding for RCTs will come from specialized funders, i.e. not the same funders that support scale-up campaigns.

#### *Studies outside of Burkina Faso*

DMI is planning to conduct a study of mass media's effect on tuberculosis (TB) treatment uptake in Mozambique. This study could not be conducted in Burkina Faso, where the TB incidence is low.

This study will use time-series analysis to evaluate outcomes. DMI does not believe that it is feasible to run an RCT in Mozambique, because of the structure of the media (radio and TV networks).

There are several years of historical data for tuberculosis case rates at the health post level. DMI considers a time-series study design to be a good "second-best" approach given that an RCT is not feasible. The time-series design was suggested last year at a meeting between DMI and the heads of several departments of the World Health Organization (WHO). The tuberculosis department of the WHO identified this area as a significant gap in the evidence base.

The Mozambique TB study contributes to both of DMI's priorities – research and scale-up. Because the study design does not include a control group, the intervention will reach a large number of people considering the study's allocated resources. However, the time-series analysis will still allow DMI to evaluate the causal effect of the campaign on tuberculosis case detection rates. Instead of spending roughly 10% of its campaign budget on evaluation (the norm for a scale-up campaign), DMI expects to spend 15-20% of the campaign budget on evaluation for this study. This is a substantially lower cost per person reached than in an RCT design.

The Mozambique study is a one-time initiative that DMI is pursuing because there is no TB in Burkina Faso. DMI expects most of its research work to occur in Burkina Faso.

### **Campaigns to scale up proven interventions**

In parallel with its research initiatives, DMI is planning to scale up proven interventions. Media Million Lives, DMI's campaign to save a million lives through media-based interventions, remains the organization's biggest focus for scaling up public health campaigns.

### **Staff capacity**

Building senior, in-country staff capacity (e.g. country directors and international producers) is a high priority for DMI. DMI needs to build up its network of staff who can deploy at short notice; starting a fresh round of hiring for each new campaign is not sustainable. DMI is trying to line up potential hires for its projects, before the projects are funded. Towards this goal, DMI has recently hosted several webinars and two seminars to begin attracting interest for these positions.

Building the staff capacity to effectively run multiple campaigns simultaneously is one of DMI's biggest challenges. DMI is aware of people who are capable of running its campaigns, but it needs to build this staffing base.

If DMI lines up excellent potential staff to lead its campaigns, it should be able to easily run campaigns in five countries simultaneously. To run campaigns in ten countries, DMI would likely need to double its central office from 10 staffers to 20.

DMI believes it can run several simultaneous campaigns within Burkina Faso without creating a strain on its central office capacity.

DMI is aware of the need to build in enough time to train up staff when planning new campaigns.

DMI believes it will stay ahead of its capacity needs with its current hiring strategy. Within a couple of months, DMI plans to have a list of good potential hires who have been pre-interviewed and determined fit for campaign work.

*Risk of funders driving DMI's direction*

If funders provided funding to conduct campaigns in countries where DMI was not currently working, undertaking these campaigns would put an additional load on DMI's central office capacity. If a funder requested that DMI conduct a campaign in a country outside its priority areas, DMI would have to reflect on whether this was a good use of its capacity. However, additional studies in Burkina Faso (where DMI is already heavily involved) would not substantially tax its capacity, where its staffing structure is strong.

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