

A conversation with Matthew Lavoie and Bassirou Kagone, October 14, 2014

Participants

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Note: These notes were compiled by GiveWell and give an overview of the major points made by Matthew Lavoie and Bassirou Kagone.

Summary

GiveWell spoke with Matthew Lavoie and Bassirou Kagone of Development Media International (DMI) as part of its investigation into DMI as a potential 2014 top charity. Conversation topics included how DMI chooses its radio station partners and how DMI's intervention could be more cost-effective in the future.

Broadcast schedule

After DMI's midline survey of its randomized controlled trial (RCT), DMI's London research team reevaluated its broadcast schedule. It chose to change the frequency at which some spots were broadcast, based on the following factors:

- The predicted impact of the spot's targeted behavior change on mortality.
- The behavior changes reportedly achieved at the midline survey.
- The number of times the spot had been broadcast in previous months.
- How much broadcasting time was available in the following months.

DMI received the results from the midline survey of its RCT in March 2014, so it will have had less than one year during which it can use an adjusted broadcast schedule before the trial ends in January 2015.

The Qualitative Research Team

Predictions

DMI's Qualitative Research Team (QRT) successfully anticipated many of the behaviors that saw the most and least behavior change in the midline results. For example, based on its interviews, the QRT believed that the frequency of breastfeeding was not improving and that the frequency of treatments for diarrhea was improving; both of these expectations were borne out by the RCT results. DMI had asked the QRT to report on these expectations because it was trying to revise its broadcast schedule to maximize the lives saved. Those predictions were reported in the feedback research summary of September 2013. [*Editor's note:* That document is

available here:

<http://files.givewell.org/files/DWDA%202009/DMI/DMI%20Feedback%20Research%20Summary%20September%202013.pdf> (French)]

QRT surveys vs. RCT surveys

The QRT surveys two villages per zone, which is similar to what the midline researchers surveyed. However, the QRT's questions are less structured than the RCT researchers' questions. The QRT researchers use a guide and follow up on their questions in order to thoroughly understand what their interlocutors are saying. The researchers for the RCT have a more tightly formatted script. Furthermore, the QRT can return to a village to ask more questions if it does not reach its target in one day, whereas the RCT researchers must move quickly enough to reach their daily targets.

Choosing radio station partners

How DMI assesses potential radio station partners

DMI considers several factors when choosing its radio station partners:

- The technical capacity of the radio station
- The credibility and integrity of the radio station's promoter and manager
- The quality and capacity of the radio station staff
- The quality of the programming and activities of the radio station (e.g. does the radio station have a schedule?)
- The size of the station's audience

Using intuition in choosing stations

DMI has never encountered a radio station that was not interested in working with it. However, DMI has had to be wary of stations that were only interested in the benefits DMI offered (e.g., better equipment or a monthly stipend) but that did not actually plan on playing DMI's spots. Many radio stations do not broadcast the material that their partners send them, even if they are receiving payments from the partners to do the broadcasts. This is because:

- The material that partners send is typically inappropriate for the station. For example, a show's story may be written by Parisian scriptwriters who have never been to Burkina Faso and who have no sense of life there. Broadcasting such material would likely cause the radio station to lose listeners.
- Partners do not monitor radio stations' broadcasts, so radio stations can easily get away with playing whatever they want.
- Some radio station owners do not care about producing radio shows. They do not invest much time or effort into broadcasting anything, let alone partners' materials, and they will use the funds that partners pay them for personal projects.

DMI mostly used its staff's extensive experience to intuitively judge whether or not DMI would be able to overcome these hurdles and build a productive partnership with a radio station. Mr. Kagone has over ten years of experience in assessing radio stations for the Burkinabe equivalent of the Federal Communications Commission. Mr. Lavoie worked with many African radio stations during his previous job at the Voice of America.

Technical capacity

DMI assesses the technical capacity of radio stations before choosing to partner with them. This includes assessing:

- The quality of the station's transmitter
- Whether or not the station's equipment is cooled by air conditioning
- The height of the station's tower
- The number of antennas the station has
- Whether or not the station has a studio

This assessment allows DMI to estimate the radio station's risk of future technical issues. DMI notes that technical capacity is not necessarily its first priority. DMI encountered several well-equipped radio stations that it decided not to partner with because it felt that the radio station promoters would not be able to build a mutual partnership with DMI. For example, in Koupéla (which ended up being in one of the control zones), DMI decided it would not partner with a radio station, even though this is perhaps the most technically impressive station in Burkina Faso. This is because DMI did not believe that the station would broadcast DMI's spots during its primetime hours.

Radio station leadership

It is important to DMI to find radio stations with leaders who care about their station. If the leaders are invested, DMI feels it can work with the station by offering good programs and technical support. If the leaders do not care about the station, there is nothing that DMI can offer to build a strong mutual partnership.

Some of what Mr. Kagone and Mr. Lavoie look for when assessing the radio station's producer and manager include:

- **The ability of each to talk intelligently about the radio station**—this indicates that they are engaged in the station's activities.
- **The investments in the station**—this indicates that the manager cares about the success and quality of the station. Investments also indicate that the manager will pay his or her radio staff, which helps eliminate turnover and maintains staff capacity.

One example of how DMI's preference for dedicated leadership paid off can be seen in its choice in Solenzo. In Solenzo, there were two radio stations with similar audiences. One was owned by a cotton growers' association. The other was owned by a man who had loved radios as a child and had decided to pursue his passion by

building his own station. DMI chose to work with the station owned by this man. Later, the cotton growers' association radio station ended up being off-air for a year.

Radio station staff

DMI assesses the skills and background of the radio staff. This allows DMI to have an idea of what the radio station is capable of and what DMI would need to help with. It also helps DMI craft its proposal for the radio station—the proposal needs to meet the staff's needs.

The quality of the staff is a very significant factor in deciding which radio station to partner with. If a radio station has a committed, talented staff, then DMI's task becomes simple: DMI merely needs to provide the station with shows that it wants to broadcast. The capable staff will then successfully broadcast the show. (DMI would still monitor these broadcasts to make sure they happen as planned.)

The size of a radio station's audience

DMI sometimes chooses radio stations that do not have the largest audience in the area. For example, in a town in northern Burkina Faso, DMI went with a radio station with a smaller listenership, because the radio station with the larger audience was poorly managed. That said, the expected reach of broadcasts is ultimately the most important factor in choosing a station.

Choosing stations for the RCT

DMI initially visited approximately 50 radio stations in 16 different zones. When DMI was informed that the RCT was only going to be in 14 zones, it excluded the 2 zones with the worst radio station partner options:

- In one of the excluded zones, DMI could have partnered with a religious radio station with a very small audience (the station was attempting to broadcast to a population that devoutly practiced a minority religion) or it could have worked with a radio station that had been looted (all that was left of the station was an antenna in the yard).
- In the other excluded zone, DMI was warned that it should not work with the one promising-seeming radio station. DMI was told that the owner of this radio station was deceptive; he was redirecting all of the resources intended for the radio station to a television station instead. This was in an attempt to support the local gubernatorial candidate through television.

Because the differences between radio stations are often dramatic, DMI had a good sense of which radio station it would attempt to work with in each of the 14 zones even before randomization. After randomization, DMI confirmed its contracts with its preferred radio stations in the 7 chosen intervention zones.

For most zones, all potential radio station partners were in roughly the same area (within blocks of each other). There were two control zones where this was not the case. For example, one of the zones (Koudougou) covered two large villages, and

there were several radio stations in each village. Another control zone (Pouytenga) covered four different villages, each with a radio station.

DMI's interaction with radio stations

Every radio station has one designated producer. In 2 of the 7 intervention zones, that producer is a DMI employee because the radio stations needed DMI's assistance to consistently play DMI's spots. All seven radio stations send DMI reports on a daily or weekly basis.

One of DMI's two radio producers (Cheick Tall and Salim Salam) visits each radio station approximately once a month. A scriptwriter accompanies the producer. They speak with the radio producers, who usually speak French.

Mr. Kagone visits all 7 stations, but at a slightly slower pace. He visits the management team at the radio station. Generally, two DMI teams visit each radio station within every six-week period.

Building radio staff capacity

DMI builds the capacity of radio staffs in a number of ways. For example, Mr. Kagone hired two retired master engineers to visit radio stations for technical audits. While the two engineers were at the radio stations, they would also train the radio's technical staff, teaching them how to maintain transmitters, clean broadcasting boards, and do basic repairs.

DMI has tried to organize training programs in Ouagadougou. For example, it paid for a 2-day training in Ouagadougou for the finance staffs of the radio stations. However, there have been negative reactions to these trainings because DMI only pays for basic food, lodging, and transportation. In Burkina Faso's, trainings, conferences, and business trips are seen as a way for people to receive significant extra income through per-diems that are largely saved rather than used, so people were upset that DMI did not pay more for them to come to the training (despite covering transportation, housing, and food costs).

DMI has never done a management-training program because it would likely be considered to be rude. Managers generally take offense at the suggestion that they might need training. For example, DMI once suggested that a radio station should charge less for announcements because DMI noticed that other radio stations were making a larger profit by charging less. Several weeks later, the manager called DMI expressing his frustration at the presumption of this suggestion.

Issues with radio station partners

DMI has had particular trouble with one of its radio station partners. This station did not have a strong staff, and DMI has had to commit one of its own staff members to permanently work at the station. This is an investment that has cost DMI significant time and resources. Furthermore, this station faced permanent power outages during the RCT. In order to get the station back on air, DMI installed solar panels for the station.

Although it was necessary to partner with this station for the RCT, in the future, DMI does not believe that partnering with stations like this is sustainable. Were it not for the RCT, DMI would have stopped working with this station long ago. DMI searched for other radio station partners in the area, but there was no other viable option.

DMI's effect on radio stations

Some radio stations are worried about the upcoming end of the RCT because DMI's programs have become very popular. All of the stations that DMI works with have become somewhat dependent on its programming.

DMI did not tell its radio station partners that they were selected randomly because it was concerned that the stations might use this knowledge to threaten ruining the trial unless DMI paid them larger stipends. However, DMI also believes that radio stations are eager for its partnership—they do not have many funding opportunities, their capacity is built by working with DMI, and they want shows they can broadcast.

Potential differences in DMI's scaled up program

Improving cost-effectiveness

DMI does not believe that its RCT is representative of how cost-effective its media campaigns could be. For the duration of the RCT, DMI has been focused on having an impact, but has not focused on how to do that with the lowest costs.

Now that many spots are already created and DMI's team has experience, scaling up to 28 zones in Burkina Faso would not cost four times as much as operating in the 7 RCT zones has cost.

Additionally, DMI could possibly restructure the way it operates in Burkina Faso to reduce costs. Instead of having a central team in Ouagadougou, DMI may be able to have several regional teams. This would reduce the costs of travelling and keeping in touch with local stations. Mr. Lavoie's other cost reduction ideas include having the seven radio stations that DMI has already worked with help to train new radio stations. He also has considered allowing a longer negotiating and training period with radio stations before they begin broadcasting, in order to work out the most cost-effective partnership.

Long-format modules vs. spots

DMI would also like to experiment with doing fewer long-format modules. The modules are very time-intensive, and it is possible that they do not need to be done five nights per week, or that there could be one per night instead of two per night. Mr. Lavoie believes that spots are DMI's primary driver of behavior change (as opposed to long format modules, which drive listenership). He suspects that if people were not used to hearing spots three or more times per day, the long modules would not reinforce the health message. However, a multi-arm RCT would be needed to test the most cost-effective method of advertising.

DMI's QRT found that out of 497 people it surveyed, 493 were able to individually recite the tagline from one of the spots and the story behind the spot correctly. This was not the case with the long-format modules. However, it is possible that the long format modules have subconscious effects. Long modules aren't really about developing characters that people identify with, but they do provide a short emotional storyline, and it could be that the emotions that the long-format evokes really help drive the health messages home or get them ingrained subconsciously. At the same time, Mr. Lavoie believes it is unlikely that the long modules are more effective than hearing spots 30 times per week.

There have been four media surveys, including the RCT's midline survey. The first of DMI's surveys was taken 6 months after the beginning of the spots, so it does not reflect the impact of the long modules. The media surveys show that some of the radio stations have had dramatic increases in listenership. Additionally, the radio stations are telling DMI that this increase is due to the long modules. Villagers sometimes drop by the radio station or talk to the radio station staff about how much they enjoy the long format modules.

Solar panels proposal

Were DMI to scale up in Burkina Faso, Mr. Lavoie believes he could create a simpler, cleaner proposal to pitch to new partner stations. For example, he is interested in an agreement that would have DMI install solar panels for a radio station in return for that station broadcasting DMI's spots. DMI would own the solar panels for the three years the spots were playing and could remove the panels if the station reneged on its end of the agreement. After the three years, ownership of the solar panels would be transferred to the radio station. DMI would still pay subsidies to the radio stations, but these subsidies would be reduced. Mr. Lavoie notes that the cost of installing solar panels is cheaper than the cost of paying for airtime for three years.

This agreement would appeal to radio stations because:

1. Radio stations frequently have energy issues. Solar panels provide a consistent energy source.
2. A radio station's existence is threatened when it loses energy; if it cannot stay on air, it will go out of business as listeners stop tuning in.
3. Repairing broken generators is expensive. Solar panels would save the station money by avoiding these repairs.

There would be a guard for the solar panels (most radio stations already have a guard for their equipment). Mr. Lavoie believes a proposal like this could work in other countries as well. He also believes it would be more cost-effective than DMI's current model. An additional benefit of using solar panels is that there would be less need for the radio's financial office to send as many reports to DMI about repair expenses.

Discontinuing work with stations

In a scaled up, non-RCT campaign, DMI would have the ability to discontinue work with stations that it found were difficult to work with or that were too resource-intensive. However, DMI would not be able to discontinue work with too many stations, especially if it were doing a national campaign. Even were DMI to work with 28 radio stations (one for each zone in Burkina Faso), its model predicts that 20% of Burkina Faso's population would still not be reached by the broadcasts. Every station that DMI could not work with would increase that percentage.

Working in urban versus rural locations

Mr. Lavoie suspects that working with radio stations in large cities would be less cost-effective than working with the stations in rural towns and villages. While cities may have more people, they also have more radio stations competing with each other. For example, in Ouagadougou there is no station that more than 50% of the people listen to.

Mr. Lavoie believes that it would be difficult to build mutually beneficial partnerships with urban radio stations. For example, he is unsure how he could convince the stations not to run the DMI spots with other ads. If DMI's spots are broadcast with other ads, people are much less likely to listen to them. The rural radio stations, on the other hand, will broadcast DMI's spots before and after the local communiqué, which is a popular local news show where people call in with personal announcements (births, deaths, lost cows, etc.). The local communiqué occurs several times a day, at regular times.

Nonetheless, proposals to scale up DMI's program to 28 stations include stations in large cities to reach a larger portion of the country overall.

Working in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)

It is rare that radio stations in Burkina Faso are politically involved (e.g. a candidate has bought the station's support, or the owner of the radio station also has political ambitions). The government of Burkina Faso gives out licenses to radio stations, and it does not tend to give out licenses to stations with political affiliations. However, in the DRC political involvement is more common. There are more radio station owners there who simply use the radio as a political platform; it would probably be more difficult for DMI to work with these stations.

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