



Getting your Story Told

Tuesday, May 18, 2010: 10:00 – 11:30 a.m.

Hotel InterContinental: Méditerranée-Bruxelles Room

Session Participants:

Allison Gamble Kelley, MLI Mali
Binta Keita, Ministry of Health, Mali
Luc Togo, Ministry of Health, Mali
Issa Berthe, Ministry of Health, Mali

Gabrielle Mallapaty, MLI Nepal
Yasho Vardan Pradhan, Ministry of Health and Population, Nepal

Ndack Wadji Ly, MLI Senegal
Mame Cor Ndour, Ministry of Health, Senegal
Bocar Mamadou Daff, Ministry of Health, Senegal

Hortenzia Beciu, MLI Sierra Leone
Rahel Gizaw, MLI Ethiopia

Glenn Thomas, WHO Karen van der Westhuizen, Eli Lilly and Company
Bruno Meessen, Royal Tropical Institute, Antwerp
Dessi Dimitrova, Ministry of Health, Bulgaria

Rosann Wisman, MLI DC (Realizing Rights/Aspen Institute)
Marty Makinen, MLI DC (Results for Development)
Amanda Folsom, MLI DC (Results for Development)
Stephanie Weber, MLI DC (Realizing Rights/Aspen Institute)
Aarthi Rao, MLI DC (Results for Development)
Alison Ion, MLI DC (Results for Development)
Jennifer Magalog, MLI DC (Realizing Rights/Aspen Institute)
Gwen Hopkins, MLI DC (Realizing Rights/Aspen Institute)
Patty Hill, MLI DC (Encompass)
Alina Dumitrasc, MLI DC (Council of Women World Leaders)

Session Overview

John Donnelly, Vice-President of Burness Communications and a former journalist for the Boston Globe, led a discussion with MLI Ministry of Health teams and members of the media community around the importance of communicating the work taking place in the ministry and the best way to “Get Your Story Told”. This session was designed to help people in Ministries think about their most important or interesting work and determine how to better communicate it to the media and to key stakeholders. Mr. Donnelly invited Glenn Thomas, Senior Communications Advisor for the WHO, to join him in talking

about a range of important media issues including how to write a good press release to how to get the attention of the international media.

Opening presentation

Mr. Donnelly began the session with a presentation on building successful relationships with the media and how to effectively communicate your 'story' from the Ministry of Health perspective. Key messages from this presentation were:

- The general population does not know about the work being done by people in health ministries.
- How do you begin communicating your story?
 - You need to first make sure that your bosses are aware that you are connecting with the media and that they are fully supportive as you work to build relationships with the media. You need to persuade your boss that this will be beneficial for the ministry.
- Identify your story
 - Before interacting with the media, it is important to decide what you would like to communicate first. The story should be one that you find interesting that reflects the most impactful aspect(s) of your work. The story will be more compelling if it involves real people making an impact.
 - Journalists respond well when you provide hard data ready that will underline the drama/impact of the story.
- Develop a Communications Strategy
 - When developing a communications strategy, find out if any of your colleagues have done interviews or press releases before. They may have insights about this process and about specific journalists.
 - You should begin developing relationships with key journalists. Try to find journalists who will have the most interest in running stories about health and the ministry.
 - If you decide to hold a press conference, first attend one to observe. Then you should ensure that you meet with your colleagues in advance to determine the flow of the press conference and the exact message to be conveyed.
- The story should be developed well on the local level. There are opportunities to take your story to the global level, but you must make sure that your first audience is the local audience.
- How do you get international coverage for your news?
 - Begin by making a list of foreign correspondents and inviting them to come to the Ministry and learn more about the work that is being done. They are more likely to cover your story after having a firsthand perspective.
- Why take the time to do this?
 - There are many benefits to developing an effective communication strategy, both personally and professionally. It can be personally gratifying to get your story out. The Ministry can benefit from the media exposure and it could potentially attract funding and have a political impact.

A Discussion with Glenn Thomas

Glenn Thomas, a Senior Communications Advisor for WHO and former BBC correspondent, participated in the session to provide a different perspective on communicating with the media. From his extensive experience as a journalist in developing countries, he found that:

- You should attempt to coordinate the needs of the journalist with your own coverage needs, creating a mutual, symbiotic relationship.
- Communication is important as a public service. As an employee of the Ministry of Health, you need to communicate to the public the context of the issue (health problem or challenge) in order to get as much information out to the population as possible.

A Firsthand Perspective

Binta Keita, the director of Reproductive Health for the Ministry of Health in Mali, recounted her personal experience with media coaching and how it made her a more successful communicator. Binta told the audience about the time she spent with Mr. Donnelly when he visited Mali in 2009. He provided some last minute coaching as she was about to give a press conference. She shared the following lessons learned from her coaching session with Mr. Donnelly:

- First identify, “What is the message I am trying to communicate?”
- I need to prepare exact data that is dynamic and dramatic to make my story human.
- Using numbers of people instead of rates or percentages are more dynamic to reporters.
- You need to find a way to show the impact that data can have and how important it is for reporters to have this data. Journalists will be more likely to run a story if they have dramatic data to support it.
- Before the press conference I identified key words and phrases to catch the interest of reporters.

Binta emphasized that effective ministerial communication can help to overcome rumors, stereotypes and cultural obstacles by educating the population through the media. She has requested that Mr. Donnelly return to Mali and train more staff from the Ministry.

Audience discussion

Following the presentations, participants were invited to share their own observations and experiences with health ministry communications challenges and lessons learned.

The internet

- The internet provides a useful tool to communicate with the population. There is an overwhelming amount of news coverage through the internet; however, you still need to use the traditional news to communicate messages more broadly.
- You have to use the internet to bring the story alive but people still also want to get news from TV and newspaper sources.

- Many people in developing countries do not have internet access. They rely on the radio and print media for their news.

Communicating in different languages

- Many developing countries have populations with a variety of local languages. It is important to find ways to communicate important messages in local languages.
- Some large companies are training staff on the ground to speak local languages. There are ways other than radio to communicate, but it is still necessary to understand the target audience. For instance, you can use TV messages during the World Cup when lots of people will be watching if that is your target audience.
- Radio is a key medium for many countries and it has maximum impact. WHO headquarters gives media releases to all the journalists in the field and journalists in the field also communicate back to the WHO headquarters.

Press conferences

- Preparation before a press conference is crucial because you are often asked tough questions on the spot. It is important to anticipate questions that you think journalists will ask. It is always useful if you anticipate the most worrisome questions they could ask and prepare an answer beforehand. It is useful to create bridges from difficult questions or issues to the message that you are seeking to emphasize.
- Be proactive with journalists. If you have a story that you think is important and newsworthy, contact a journalist who you think would be interested in it.
- Often, calling a press conference can be helpful when there are difficult decisions to make. If you get out ahead of a story and provide official commentary, there is less room for misinformation and rumors to start. When implementing difficult or potentially unpopular policies, it is best to craft a communications strategy simultaneously.

Next steps

The 'Getting Your Story Told' session concluded with the audience discussion. Many MLI country teams expressed an interest in having Mr. Donnelly work with them to become more effective communicators.