Recipient Perceptions of Media Development Assistance: A GFMD Study

January 2019

Introduction

Founded in 2005, the Global Forum for Media Development (GFMD) is an international network of journalism support and media development organisations which aims to foster viable and independent journalism and sustainable and pluralistic media environments. With more than 190 members, GFMD strives to promote cooperation within the sector, strengthen the quality of the sector's work, and enhance the impact of its efforts. This includes advocacy towards prioritising media development as an essential component of official development assistance.

In November 2018, the GFMD embarked on a study of how members of its community perceive donor policies and procedures, with the goal of helping to shape discussions on how the planning and management of funding could be improved. The two-month study was informed by a literature review of related research, an analysis of survey responses from GFMD members, one-on-one interviews with selected members, and additional conversations with stakeholders in the field.

This resulting report will be circulated among donors and practitioners and used as a basis for further advocacy on aid effectiveness and responsiveness. The study does not intend to be an academic exercise nor can it lay claim to a full representative picture. Rather, it strives to capture a diversity of perspectives among GFMD members and to encourage honest reflection both within the community as well as with donor counterparts.

The following sections include a discussion of the context in which this study takes place, the presentation of findings from the survey and interviews, a synthesis of the findings within the current context, and a series of recommendations for moving forward.

Background

The study took place against the backdrop of long-standing debates regarding the status of journalism support and media development within the overall structure of official development assistance (ODA). This has included a sense among the GFMD community that donors sometimes underestimate the importance of media as a sector in and of itself, akin to sectors such as health or education, which requires its own dedicated strategies and commensurate budgets. This misunderstanding can be complicated by a tendency of some donors to align their ODA with the priorities of recipient governments (which rarely rank media freedom and independence among their own top political concerns), though at times it may also be balanced by the efforts of media and journalism stakeholders to articulate their own demands.

This conversation has continued to evolve, represented in part by the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015. Out of the 17 goals, Goal 16: Peace, Justice and Public Institutions[1] marked a milestone by including an explicit target to "Ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms" (Goal 16.10). This includes a specific indicator on the "killing, kidnapping, enforced disappearance, arbitrary detention and torture of journalists [and] associated media personnel" (16.10.1), as well as an indicator on the number of countries adopting and implementing guarantees for public access to information (16.10.2).[2]

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[1] "Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels."
[2] https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg16

This milestone builds on a number of previous openings that have helped raise the profile of media development and journalism support. This includes the 2008 endorsement of the UNESCO media development indicators, which aim to "define a framework within which the media can best contribute to, and benefit from, good governance and democratic development." This framework has sought to ensure the pluralism and diversity of media via key criteria such as conducive regulation, a fair market environment, opportunities for capacity building, and supportive institutions.[3]

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has also played a role in elevating the importance of media development, including a 2011 commitment by the OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC) and its Network on Governance (GOVNET) "to support the media, alongside with parliaments and political parties, as part of its broader promotion of domestic accountability." As a paper from the accountability cluster of the 2011 Working Party on Aid Effectiveness acknowledged: an "effective media calls for editorial independence, financial sustainability, professional capacity and a lively civil society." It further recommended that "Donor support is most effective when it is oriented towards the long-term goals of financial sustainability, inclusive and holistic."[4]

In 2013, the DAC issued its *Strategic Principles for Media Assistance, Accountability and Democratic Governance*.[5] Among 10 key points, the principles included recommendations for:

- Incorporating media assistance into the framework of development aid.
- Utilising media indicators as part of governance audits and needs assessments.
- Cooperating with media development organisations to determine the objectives of assistance while enabling implementers to suggest how to achieve them.
- Supporting independent and sustainable local media.
- Fostering ownership, including strengthening trust.
- Promoting citizen access to media and technology, including media literacy.
- Encouraging relationships between the media sector and wider civil society.
- Supporting research on the impact of media and its role in accountability.

These principles were reinforced in the 2014 DAC publication *Accountability and Democratic Governance: Orientations and Principles for Development*, which argued that while "Historically, media development has focused on journalism training … donors increasingly understand that the media are part of a country's political economy and therefore require broader, more substantial, and longer-term support." At the same time, the publication lamented the dearth of efforts within donor organisations dedicated to understanding media's role, the low level of priority often given to media issues within development agencies, and the lack of mechanisms that institutionalise media support into policy structures.[6]

A growing body of research conducted by the Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA) at the National Endowment for Democracy in the United States has shed further light into how

[3] https://en.unesco.org/programme/ipdc/initiatives/mdis
[4] *Strengthening Ownership and Accountability: A Synthesis of Key Findings and Messages produced for the Busan High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness* (HLF-4), The Cluster A – Ownership and Accountability – of the Working Party on Aid Effectiveness (WP-FF), available at: https://europa.eu/capacity4dev/file/8312/download?token=buHj22LZ.
[5] OECD DAC, *Strategic Principles for Media Assistance, Accountability and Democratic Governance: Orientations and Principles for Development*, OECD DAC Guidelines and References Series, OECD 2013, as referenced in a January 2014 paper, *Domestic Accountability and Support to Media: From the Why to the How in Effective Cooperation*, available at: https://www.oecd.org/dac/conflict-fragility-resilience/governance/docs/Domestic%20Accountability_media.pdf
[6] https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/9789264183636-12-en.pdf?expires=1544711361&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=C18EB83AD36DB456ABD14A4CD32C2E67

donor support for media development does – or does not – translate into funding levels, starting with the 2015 report *Official Development Assistance for Media: Figures and Findings*.[7] Building on this data, the most recent of these efforts, *Defending Independent Media: A Comprehensive Analysis of Aid Flows*,[8] highlights that in the period between 2010 and 2015, support for media development comprised an approximate average of 0.3% of all official development assistance. The roughly $2.7 billion in media development support over this period has averaged approximately $454 million per year. The report finds that these figures remain consistent over time, and may even be rising, though they emphasise just how small a portion of overall assistance they represent when compared to other sectors.

These figures could also be misleading for a variety of reasons. Differences in definitions and coding systems among donors, for example, mean that some elements of media support may not be included in these sums (such as those that are incorporated into programs in other sectors), while other elements often are, such as support for international broadcasting (e.g., German financing of Deutsche Welle) or aid to public-sector institutions of recipient governments (e.g., for digital switchover). When adjusted with the support for international broadcasting, the study estimates that the portion of media assistance funding implemented through non-governmental or civil society organisations, such as GFMD members and other independent actors, is estimated to be 37% of the already small share of 0.3%.

According to the 2018 CIMA study, a vast majority of media assistance funds (92.5%) come from bilateral donors, with multilateral donors (such as the World Bank and the UN) accounting for only 6.5% of assistance. Looking at figures adjusted with the allocations for international broadcasting, the United States emerges as the largest donor (far outpacing others at $440 million), followed by Germany, Japan, Sweden, the United Kingdom, France, the European Union, Norway, Switzerland, and Denmark.

Funding figures, however, only tell part of the story. They do not, for example, indicate the impact of journalism support and media assistance or the efficiency and effectiveness of how funding is allocated and administered. Nor do they address concerns that the level of support may pale when compared to the gravity and diversity of challenges facing the media community, the rapidity with which they shift, and the necessity of scale required to address them. These findings thus raise questions as to whether the sums themselves pose the main barrier in advancing the sector, or whether there are other challenges to be addressed as well.

While these previous research endeavours have targeted the donor side of the discussion, this GFMD study has sought to capture the perspectives of the journalism support and media development community itself. In doing so, it aims to demonstrate the practical implications of donor policies and practices for their partners and to elicit recommendations for how the planning and management of this support could be improved.

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[7] Eduardo González Cauhapé-Cazaux and Shanthi Kalathil, *Official Development Assistance for Media: Figures and Findings*, CIMA and the OECD, March 2015.
[8] Mary Myers and Linet Angaya Juma, *Defending Independent Media: A Comprehensive Analysis of Aid Flows*, CIMA, 19 June 2018.

Key Findings

At the heart of this study lies the direct input of GFMD members, solicited through an online survey and gathered through one-on-one, long-distance interviews. The survey was sent to more than 170 GFMD members and promoted to the wider community via social media. Initial interviews with targeted GFMD members helped to shape the survey's questionnaire, with later interviews adding further nuance and insight into survey responses.

The 38 organisations that responded to the survey reflected the size and geographic diversity of GFMD membership. Organisations operating at the international level represented 24% of respondents, followed by respondents from Asia (18%), Eastern Europe/Southeastern Europe/Caucasus (18%), Sub-Saharan Africa (16%), the Middle East/North Africa (11%), and Latin America/the Caribbean (8%).
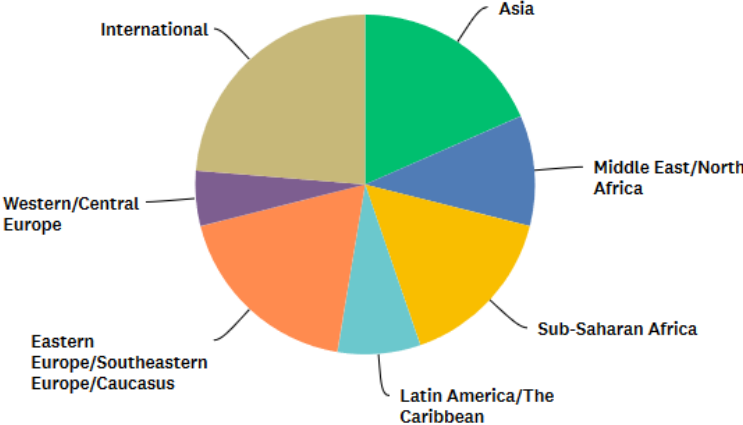
The largest number of respondents represented small organisations, with **45% operating with a budget under $500,000 a year** and an additional 16% operating with an annual budget between $500,000 and $1million. A smaller percentage of respondents represented larger organisations, with 11% operating with a budget between $5 to $10 million, and 13% with a budget of more than $10 million.
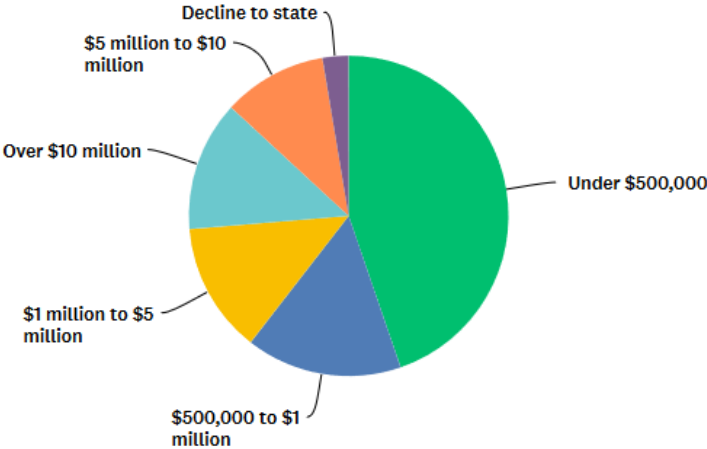
The number of donors per respondent varied widely, from zero to as many as 50. Fifty-seven per cent had five donors or less, 23% had between six and ten donors, 14% had between 11 and 25 donors, and 6% had more than 25 donors. Respondents' primary sources of funding were fairly evenly distributed across a number of categories, including European bilateral donors, the European Commission, U.S. government donors, multilateral donors, and private funding organisations. European bilateral donors were the most common donors, noted by 52% of respondents, followed by the European Commission (43%), private funding organisations (37%), and U.S. government sources (34%).[9]
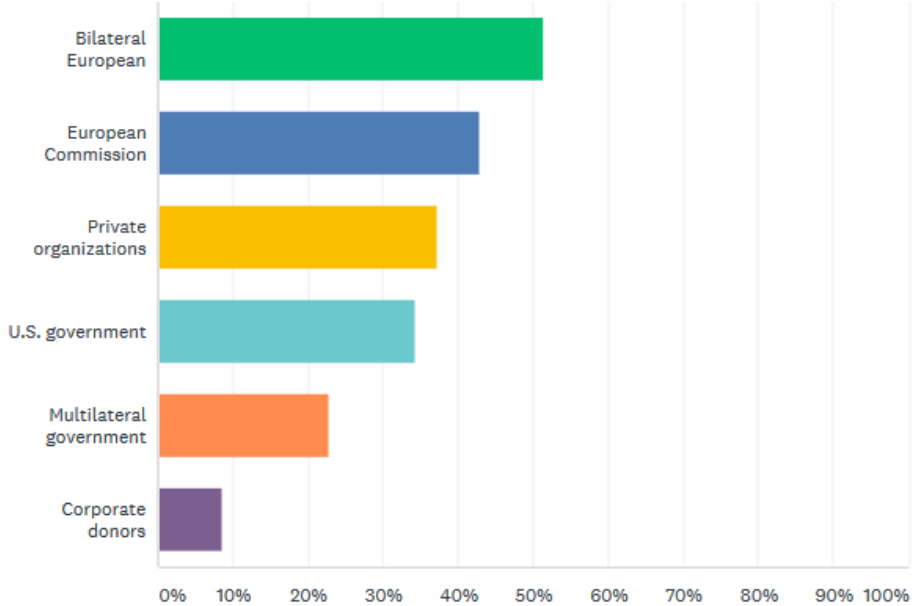

A handful of respondents noted other sources, such as national or local governments, individual donors, or other media development organisations (i.e., intermediaries).

Most respondents (79%) operate on short funding cycles, with 57% receiving funding for periods from one to two years, and additional 22% operating on even shorter cycles. A further 19% operate with a funding cycle of two to five years, while only 3% reported operating on a cycle of more than five years.

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[9] For this and other questions, respondents were able to select more than one option. Thus, totals may not add up to 100%
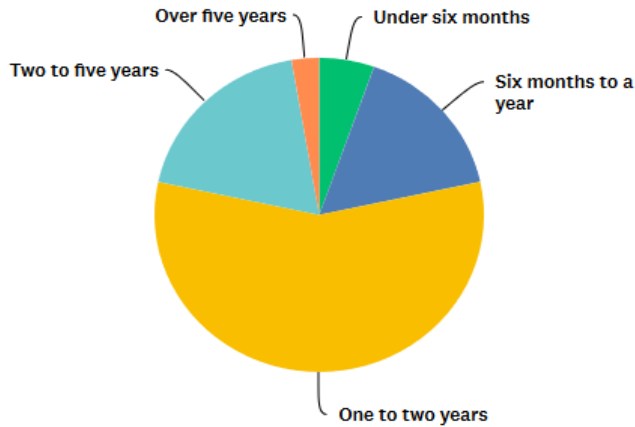
Respondents reported difficulties in covering a wide variety of organisational needs through donor support, particularly fundraising (51%), human resources (43%), unplanned emergency needs (38%), and outreach/communications (32%).
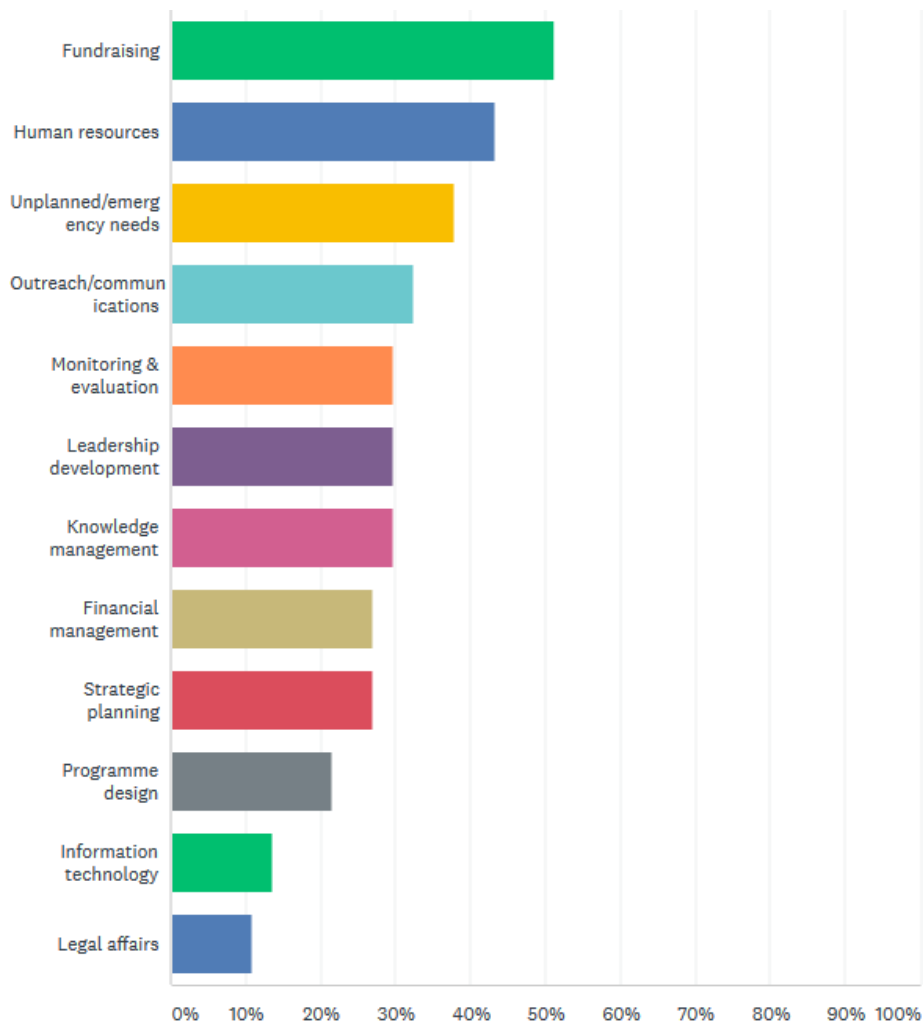
To provide additional depth, survey respondents were asked a series of questions on the key challenges they face in the provision of funding and the kinds of changes they would like to see that might help to alleviate such challenges. These responses were further supplemented by input gathered through interviews with GFMD members.

Among a list of procedural challenges, 42% of respondents ranked competition between international and domestic organisations, the length of funding cycles, and the inability to continue projects after the end of funding as their three top concerns, followed by bureaucratic requirements and the difficulty of demonstrating impact (both at 39%).

Competition between international and domestic organizations	42.11%
Length of funding cycles	42.11%
Inability to continue projects following the end of funding	42.11%
Bureaucratic requirements (co-financing, audits, etc.)	39.47%
Difficulty of demonstrating impact	39.47%
Staff time required to manage donor grants	31.58%
Complicated proposal processes	28.95%
Delays between planning of programmes and allocation of funding	23.68%
Lack of transparency in donor decision-making	23.68%
Reporting requirements	18.42%
Lack of direct access to donors	18.42%
Inappropriate results frameworks	15.79%

Interviewees linked short funding cycles to the difficulty of demonstrating impact. This includes for example, what they perceive as expectations from donors to show quick results, which may not be possible when addressing entrenched cultural or social norms amidst fast-changing political, economic, and technological dynamics within the short time period of a few-year grant.

In addition, interviewees frequently mentioned the challenges they face in dealing with bureaucratic requirements, noting issues such as co-financing requirements, the burden of double audits (internal and external), the difficulty of producing receipts under certain circumstances (such as working with refugees), and the risks of having costs disallowed. Some interviewees noted what they see as a trend towards contracts rather than grants, including control measures such as scrutiny and approval of subgrantee budget line items. These interviewees lament how such practices can compromise the independence of media partners and can discourage innovation if the consequences of failure are not tolerated.

Though only 18% of survey respondents cited reporting requirements, the subject was raised a number of times in the interviews. Smaller organisations, particularly those which need to rely on a large number of small grants, spoke of the difficulties of having to produce multiple reports simultaneously, with an intensive level of effort required for each one regardless of the funding amount. These organisations cite the human resources constraints involved in such efforts, noting that focusing on data collection and reporting can take time and focus away from other key needs. Some interviewees questioned whether donor staff read in detail the extensive

documentation that they produce; others raised concerns about how to balance requests for transparency with the importance of data protection, especially around the protection of partners when activities and their context are particularly sensitive.

When asked what kind of operational improvements they would like to see in the provision of assistance, **94% expressed the desire for more institutional/core funding** and **92% for longer-term funding**. Fifty-eight percent would like to see more support for organisational development/capacity building, while 56% would like to see greater flexibly in funding.

These responses reinforce other findings in the survey – such as the short length of most respondents' funding cycles – as well as reflect input from the interviews, including a common sense of frustration that donor funding practices, which often do not cover operational costs, demonstrate a lack of understanding of, or support for, the administrative needs to run and grow an organisation, at either the international or the domestic level.

More institutional/core funding	94.44%
Longer-term funding	91.67%
More support for organizational development/capacity building	58.33%
Greater flexibility in funding	55.56%
Quicker decision-making	36.11%
Tailored requirements for smaller organizations	30.56%
Simpler proposal processes	25.00%
Greater interaction with donors	19.44%
Standardization of reporting requirements across donors	13.89%

Though less reflected in the survey results, other recommendations from interviewees addressed issues around reporting, including suggestions for a common M&E framework across donors and/or programs; adapting the scale of reporting to the size of the grant, to mitigate the burden on organisations with multiple grants; and increasing the time that donors spend in the field to provide more meaningful feedback on activities and their success. Others expressed interest in transforming the focus on logframes, theories of change, outputs and outcomes, and M&E data to more effectively tell the story of results and impact over time, including the suggestion to offer post-grant funding to measure impact after the initial funding ends.

In replying to a question on the greatest challenges respondents face in the provision of funding from a policy (rather than procedural) standpoint, the majority of survey answers (58%) ranked a lack of donor strategies as the leading concern, followed by low donor understanding of journalism support and media development (53%), poor alignment between the sector's needs and donor priorities (50%), and the amount of funding available (45%).

Absence of donor strategies for journalism support and media development	57.89%
Low donor understanding of journalism support and media development	52.63%
Poor alignment between needs and donor priorities	50.00%
Amount of funding available	44.74%
Frequent shifting of donor trends	39.47%
Failure of donors to incorporate input from media and journalism stakeholders in country	31.58%
Lack of donor consultation with the journalism support and media development community	28.95%
Politicized donor agendas	26.32%
Lack of donor coordination	26.32%
Donor preference for certain organizations (nationality, size, etc.)	26.32%
Donor fear of alienating recipient country governments	13.16%

The survey responses reflect interviewee input in expressing long-held concerns that many donors still have limited understanding of what media development is and why it is important. While some interviewees believe understanding has improved in recent years – including a shift away from the instrumentalisation of media to achieve other development goals – many note that frequent staff turnover, the rarity of specialised staff, and a lack of dedicated strategies can complicate the prioritisation of journalism support and media assistance, particularly in the face of rapid changes in market dynamics, technological advances, and political uncertainties.

When asked the top five improvements they would like to see from a planning perspective, the majority of responses mirrored many of these concerns, expressing a desire for higher funding levels (66%), greater consultation with media and journalism stakeholders in country (55%), stronger coordination between donors and the journalism support and media development community (55%), and quicker responsiveness to changing needs (47%).

Higher funding levels	65.79%
Greater consultation with media and journalism stakeholders in country	55.26%
Stronger coordination between donors and the journalism support and media development community	55.26%
Quicker responsiveness to changing needs	47.37%
Additional focus on research and learning	36.84%
More specialized donor staff	26.32%
More opportunities for innovation	26.32%
Stronger coordination between donors	26.32%
Increased diplomatic/political support	21.05%
More opportunities for collaborative design	15.79%
Pooling of donor funding	5.26%

Thirty-seven percent of survey respondents recommended additional focus on research and learning, which was cited by a number of interviewees as well. This included the importance of

building an evidence base – to help promote understanding of the sector and demonstrate the impact of support – as well as further insight into what works, what doesn't, and what shows promise. These interviewees would like to see not only stronger articulation of success stories and lessons learned, but also other opportunities to honestly examine failure and to creatively explore new approaches, strategies, and solutions. Significantly, these issues were primarily raised by international organisations; one national-level interviewee noted that at times research efforts can be difficult to decipher at the local level.

In the final question of the survey, respondents were offered the chance to include additional feedback on challenges, best practices, or other recommendations. Those that did so reinforced concerns about operational costs, suggested a need for specific geographic targeting (e.g., from underrepresented countries), and reminded that journalism and media rarely receive support from recipient governments. As one respondent commented: "I think we need to stand together in these fields and make a unified stand. The information infrastructure has never been more important nor complex in the history of mankind and never has it been so neglected."

Conclusions

These findings, and additional input gathered through interviews, shed further light on the background for this study: discussions around the SDGs and how to make the inclusion of Goal 16.10 meaningful for journalism support and media development. The study concludes that the GFMD community remains ambivalent as to what this opportunity represents, how best to take advantage of it, and whether there are shortcomings to focusing on an SDG approach. This includes the advantages and disadvantages of leveraging the SDG framework – as well as other discussions around good governance – to advocate for a higher prioritisation of media development and a corresponding increase in budget allocations.

On the whole, GFMD members welcome the international recognition of media and journalism issues within the overall international development agenda, noting the common language it provides and the accountability tool it may offer towards encouraging governments (including donor countries) to live up to their commitments. Some members caution, however, that there are risks in viewing 16.10, and the SDGs in general, both too broadly and too narrowly. This includes, for example, the wider parameters of access to information – which applies not only to journalists, but to civil society organisations, citizens, and others – as well as a danger that access to information might overshadow attention to violence against journalists. Others suggest that 16.10 should be seen in the overall context of Goal 16 – that is: peace, justice, and public institutions – to ensure that media-related assistance continues to look at the fuller enabling environment of laws, policies, and actors that ensure plurality, safety, and viability.

Furthermore, some GFMD members caution against getting stuck in the "silo" of 16.10. These members remind of the need to demonstrate that media and information are not just rights in and unto themselves, but they can also be enabling rights for others – such as gender equality and the environment – and thus important and relevant for the whole SDG agenda. This does not suggest instrumentalising media for the sake of contributing to other SDGs, but rather strengthening the role of media in serving as a watchdog, holding governments accountable, informing the public, providing a voice for the voiceless, and offering a platform for debate.[10]

The leading concern about an SDG approach, however, is that it is ill-suited for authoritarian governments that not only reject the international development agenda, but also international standards on human rights. Indeed, a common theme running through this study's interviews is that governance is not the key issue of the day, but rather concerns about the state of democracy. In this sense, the challenges are wider than just the media landscape and instead encompass what some stakeholders call the "information ecosystem," and its place in worldwide trends towards the closing of the civic space. This connects not only to additional threats to freedoms of association and assembly – at times under the guise of "transparency" – but also to concerns about fragility and instability.

In this context, the question of funding is even more important when amplified by the scale of the challenges: media capture by political and economic interests, the collapse of traditional business models, increasing attacks on journalists and media outlets, the rise and potential fall of social media, cyber threats and the misuse of data, commercialism and sensationalism, hate speech and extremism, polarisation and misinformation. This includes not only an often market-driven and state-sponsored industry for producing manipulative and misleading content, but the use of the "fake news" moniker by those in power to discredit legitimate coverage or criticism of

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[10] For example, see: http://www.unesco.org/new/en/harare/about-this-office/single-view/news/medias_role_in_sustainable_development_undeniable/

their actions, and efforts to pass anti-fake news legislation that can instead be used to target dissent.

That the scourge of disinformation and misinformation affect not only countries that are traditionally the recipients of official development assistance but also donor countries themselves has helped (a bit ironically) to galvanise discussion and improve understanding around the core of issues of journalism: independence, professionalism, quality, balance, and fairness. For some GFMD members, this has meant a conceptual shift from media development to journalism support, including efforts to ensure the existence and health of counter-narratives; encourage new, alternative, and minority voices; and advocate for the regulation of technology, social media, and media markets. Others, however, do not see misinformation as a media issue, *per se*, and fear that an obsession with 'fake news' can complicate the ability to penetrate other key needs and issues, such as the importance of strengthening local news media, connecting media to their communities, exploring sustainability models, and addressing inequities in advertising.

Furthermore, many believe that current responses remain far too reactive to specific egregious instances, rather than offering a comprehensive or systematic approach. There is a sense among some that the challenges reflect larger and deeper political – and geopolitical – concerns that include the weaponisation of information, tolerance for dictatorships, and the disruption of societies. Common interventions such as support for journalism protection, fact checking, and media literacy may address some of the symptoms, these stakeholders argue, but they do not tackle root causes or change the overall dynamic. Investigative journalism efforts, for example, remain limited if they do not also address the immediate needs of citizens, empower civil society to follow-up findings, or ensure an effective judicial response.

Because so many of the challenges are political, the commitment of the donor community is perhaps more important than ever. This includes the role of donors in thinking strategically and holistically, pursuing innovation, taking risks, and empowering their partners – both international and domestic – to do the same. And yet there are concerns that donors themselves face rising populism and other threats that complicate their ability to fulfil this role. This includes uncertainty in the United Kingdom as it prepares for Brexit and increasing isolationism (and policy incoherence) in the United States. Though there is strong appreciation for the increasing support by Nordic countries, there are also concerns that this group may be shouldering the burden somewhat on their own, along with fears about what may happen should these donors also change their course. This is all the more acute given the rising influence of Russia, China, Turkey, and the Gulf States, which in some places have been investing larger resources and filling leadership voids.

Recommendations

In seeking to provide a foundation for moving forward, this study prioritises the following recommendations:

Strengthen communication, coordination, cooperation, and collaboration <u>at all levels</u> (international, regional, and national/local):

- Between donors and the media development and journalism support community.
- Among donors, including donors and their own colleagues in other departments, agencies, ministries, or branches of government.
- Within the media development and journalism support community.

Suggested approaches include:

- Holding annual meetings for donors and implementers at the international, regional, and sub-regional levels.
- Conducting joint needs and impact assessments in recipient countries.
- Encouraging opportunities for co-design between and among donors and implementers.
- Creating dedicated pathways for local organisations to access decision-makers.
- Building networks with allies in civil society, academia, and the private sector.

Explore creative options for restructuring the administration of funding, with a focus on advocating to and within donor agencies to:

- Provide longer-term funding.
- Support organisational operational costs.
- Reduce the burden and expense of bureaucratic and reporting requirements.
- Mitigate the negative consequences of large funding mechanisms.
- Invest in building the capacity of local partners.
- Offer incentives for stakeholders to work together.

Promote an informed and responsive vision for the sector by:

- Institutionalising knowledge within donor agencies.
- Developing explicit strategies for media development and journalism support.
- Supporting research and learning, including space for experimentation and constructive failure.
- Anticipating future challenges in law and policy, technology, market trends, and politics.
- Bridging gaps between higher-level conceptual conversations and realities as they are experienced on the ground.
- Ensuring that audiences – communities and citizens – remain at the heart of of assistance efforts.

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