

Report

The State of *Media Development* 2026

Funding, local ownership and adaptation
in international media development

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Foreword



It came as a shock to us at DW Akademie: Our Program Director Uganda was forced to leave the country after the government instructed her to prepare for her departure. A few days later, the police arrived at her home to enforce the order. Within an hour, she had to pack her belongings and was escorted to the airport. The authorities stated that she was considered a national security risk but gave no explanation.

This is just the latest episode in an ongoing global decline in media freedom. The space for our work is shrinking. Previously, in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, we had to decide to close our office and reduce our engagement in the country. After the military coup in Myanmar, our team was forced to move across the border to Chiang Mai in Thailand, where many media workers formed a new exile community. And, at the time of writing, we are deeply concerned about our colleagues running our office in Beirut who suddenly find themselves in the midst of a new war in the Middle East.

Add to these new political realities the aftermath of the large-scale withdrawal of media development funding, notably by the US, and AI-driven disruptions of the information landscape, and we truly find ourselves in the eye of a perfect storm.

This year's State of Media Development Report shows what is at stake, focusing on three major challenges: funding, local ownership, and adaptation. Two numbers illustrate the alarming situation of the sector: Only 11 percent of organizations say they have sufficient funding, and merely 21 percent see donor agendas and local needs aligned.

Carsten von Nahmen
Managing Director, DW Akademie

In this situation, there is a clear need for re-orientation and re-alignment. While the OECD principles for effective media support were an important milestone in 2024, the landscape has radically changed since then. New rationales for continuing to strengthen the media and information environment globally have to be found. In his contribution to this report, media development scholar Martin Scott shares his assessment of the most pressing challenges: From coming to terms with the new security paradigm to seizing new funding opportunities and prioritizing risk mitigation and advocacy.

It is true that the tasks are daunting. But I am an optimist at heart, in keeping with the motto "never waste a good crisis". What gives me hope is that while some windows are closing, others are opening. The situation in Syria, for instance, has turned out to be better than expected. DW Akademie has now established a presence in Damascus and is restarting its engagement through a large EU-funded project. Examples of cooperation across the sector, such as the M20 initiative or the Media Viability Manifesto, show that we can stand together to make the case for free media. And, not least, this State of Media Development Report's data shows that 71 percent of organizations are convinced that they are successfully adapting to the new realities.

We should all take these hopeful signals as a departure point and focus on what we do best: upskill media practitioners, support media outlets, and bolster the ecosystem as a whole. After all, we aren't in this for our own sake. In these troublesome times, free expression and access to reliable information are more important than ever.

Navigating chaos. How to support independent journalism in a post-rules-based order



We are no longer living in a stable rules-based international order. The ongoing rupture in the global system demands that we re-think how media development is done.

Imperfect as it was, the rules-based order helped to constrain and stabilize states' behavior through multilateral institutions, legal commitments and shared norms. As these mechanisms weaken, states are increasingly free to pursue their interests through coercion and force with direct consequences for every sector, institution and community connected to the global system.

The field of media development is no exception. In fact, given its proximity to powerful actors and relatively weak institutional standing, this sector is more exposed than most.

In response, **media development needs a fundamental reset, one that reimagines relationships within the field, with the communities it serves, and with the increasingly powerful actors whom journalists aim to hold accountable.** In five years, the field will be — and should be — unrecognizable.

The recently developed OECD principles for media support provide some guidance for this new approach, including to “do no harm,” “strengthen local leadership” and “improve coordination.” In addition, the newly created International Media Freedom Support (IMFS) Index sets out the key areas where states can improve their work to promote media freedom globally. But how should states do this work when the multilateral foundations that once supported it can no longer be taken for granted?

While it is currently unclear what a post-rules-based order will look like, it is already evident that the field will face profound structural pressures.

Six challenges stand out.

First, in a post-rules-based order, cuts to official development assistance are likely to persist, not only for budgetary

reasons, but because states are less constrained by the collective expectations that underpin international aid. This is why most other government donors have not only failed to “step in” to “fill the gaps” in media development funding left by the closure of USAID, but in many cases have reduced their own support for media development specifically, and international aid in general.

This also means that the format of media assistance will change. It is unlikely to involve many big consortia of international organizations delivering multi-year, multi-country projects. There won't be enough money for that. Instead, **the sector will need to pivot from projects to policy** to address the multitude of “upstream” structural issues affecting independent journalism that are being exacerbated by an increasingly interest-driven, extractive and competitive global system. While policy advocacy may be unfamiliar to many media development organizations, supporting journalists in building collective bargaining power against artificial intelligence (AI) companies and platforms, for example, will be vital for sustaining independent journalism in a post-rules-based order.

Second, since governments will be operating in a more competitive and uncertain international environment, political agendas will increasingly be dominated by immediate strategic concerns. Given this, generating high-level political will to support independent media will be even harder as politicians are more likely to see media development as discretionary, or even politically risky.

But it won't be impossible.

My research shows that **some states and politicians will always find a comparative advantage in positioning themselves as global champions of independent media and the values this embodies. This is an opportunity media development actors can leverage.** For example, in October 2025, France hosted a high-level conference on information integrity and independent media at the Paris Peace Forum, where 29 states reaffirmed their commitment to strengthening multilateral action in this area.

At this event, the International Fund for Public Interest Media (IFPIM) received a contribution of 10 million euros from France for 2026–2028.

Third, in a world order driven increasingly by hard power politics rather than shared commitments to liberal-democratic norms, **governments will be more receptive to supporting media when it is framed as promoting national security**, rather than democracy or human rights. This explains recent efforts to re-frame media support as contributing to “epistemic security” or as part of society’s “critical infrastructure.”

But while efforts to re-frame media support through a national security lens could lead to stronger political support and more stable funding for media, they also carry serious risks. Without robust safeguards for editorial independence, security-focused media support could inadvertently promote self-censorship and erode public trust. Put simply, the securitization of media support could make us safer, and yet, less free.

Fourth, media development initiatives have often been implicitly anchored in liberal-democratic norms but framed as universally applicable. In a multipolar world, where there is greater acceptance of a plurality of worldviews, the relevance of such norms will be increasingly questioned and/or viewed with suspicion.

In some cases, such suspicions may be used by backsliding or authoritarian governments as a pretext to justify restrictions on independent journalism. In other cases, such concerns may be legitimate, for example, if newsrooms are being encouraged to adopt technologies that are ill-suited to their needs or which create new dependencies. In either case, **media development actors will need to double down on their compliance with the OECD DAC principles of “do no harm” and “strengthening local leadership and ownership.”** Supporting national or regional funds for journalism are one way to achieve this.

Fifth, without an international consensus on the importance of democracy and human rights, media development organizations face far higher reputational risks, as illustrated in early 2025 when Internews was falsely accused of functioning as a de facto arm of US government propaganda. The sector’s language will also be increasingly susceptible to reinterpretation and politicization, with anti-disinformation initiatives recast as censorship, for example. In this environment, **robust risk mitigation and monitoring must become a strategic priority.** Unfortunately, the State of Media Development report has found that for the

second year running, only 44 percent of organizations reported having “good” risk monitoring tools.

Finally, **the sector will need to become far more opportunistic and adaptable in the issues and actors it engages with.** In a world where multilateral norms are weakening, states will be freer to pursue their own agendas, which may lie beyond the traditional scope of media development. Therefore, when, for example, South Africa chooses to prioritize issues such as disaster resilience and debt relief during its 2025 presidency of the G20, the media development sector needs to explicitly connect journalism to these broader agendas to secure attention.

Similarly, in a competitive, multipolar world order, interstate alliances will likely be driven more by regional spheres of influence and ad hoc coalitions built around specific goals rather than by enduring ideological alignment or shared values. To navigate this more complex, fluid and transactional international system, practitioners will need to be more pragmatic in their partnerships, while remaining clear about their own values and “red lines.”

As well as being more flexible, the field will need to collaborate far more closely to avoid duplication of work, and to ensure policy makers don’t receive conflicting messages. At the same time, organizations will inevitably be drawn into greater competition over the same, shrinking sources of funding. The successful coordination of the M20 initiative — an international group of media and information ecosystem stakeholders engaging on G20-related issues — shows that such collaboration is possible.

Perhaps the most obvious feature of the world order, as it currently stands, is that it is chaotic, unpredictable and changing rapidly. As the German Chancellor Friedrich Merz recently wrote, “The global realignment that major powers are driving is happening faster than we can ready ourselves.” Indeed, at the 2026 Munich Security Conference, predictions of the future international order ranged from a resurgence of traditional great-power politics to a coherent multipolar system under new norms to no order at all.

Despite this uncertainty, we already know that whatever international order emerges — although there is likely to be less global consensus on the importance of supporting freedom of expression and media freedom — such support will remain critical and urgent.

Martin Scott

Professor of Media and Global Development,
University of East Anglia

Executive summary

Key findings

Funding

- The media development sector has taken a funding hit. On average, the media development organizations surveyed indicated that their **funding has reduced by 17 percent** in the past year (2025). **Only 11 percent** of media development organizations indicated they **have sufficient funding**—compared to 18 percent who said so in early 2025.
- Many media outlets are now operating in survival mode. Numerous organizations continue to function, often due to extraordinary personal commitment and creative ad-hoc solutions. But some have been forced to shut down entirely. **Most at risk** of shutting down appear to be **exile newsrooms**—especially those based in the United States—and **media in minority languages and/or rural areas** with limited administrative and fundraising capacity.
- The results suggest that several support areas run the risk of being neglected. **Investigative reporting**, as a resource heavy undertaking, becomes increasingly difficult to sustain once funding declines. **Media viability efforts**, which require a whole system perspective and room for experimentation, are likely to be deprioritized in favor of short term and issue-specific interventions. Work related to **diversity and inclusion** may also be reduced due to anticipatory self censorship.
- The conditions under which media outlets operate have shifted. Interviewees described a **domino effect triggered by the US cuts** on official development assistance. Private foundations are increasingly **re-focusing on domestic** rather than **international media support**. Public funders are observed to be **prioritizing security-related funding** despite pledges to strengthen information integrity. Efforts by European funders to “step up” have remained limited. All in all, a lack of international backing leaves public interest media more **vulnerable and exposed to pressures from authoritarian regimes**.
- **Focused core funding, flexible emergency funds, and media viability support** turned out to be the **most urgent funding needs** in light of the current financial situation in which short-term funding and inflexible fund management processes remain a persisting challenge.
- The funding cuts also **had significant consequences for media development organizations**. Several long-established, US-based institutions working in international media development were reportedly **dismantled or reduced** to a barely operational size.
- At the same time, international media development organizations based in other world regions faced similar constraints as both the US and other public funders introduced budget cuts. This forced many to take **adaptive measures** including **internal reorganizations and staff layoffs, shorter grant durations or narrowing their activities on specific geographic regions**.
- Among media development organizations, there were also notable **shifts** from traditional media development programming **toward advocacy**. A key **challenge** here is to **demonstrate the relevance of public interest media** to issues such as poverty, health and climate change, while a **solid evidence base** to support this argument is **still lacking**.

Local ownership

- Local, regional and international organizations have strikingly different perceptions about their **meaningful involvement in all parts of the project cycle**. While only **37 percent of local/national/regional organizations** agree that they are given a meaningful role in setting project priorities, **91 percent of international organizations**

- are of the opinion that they give local and regional organizations a meaningful role in project priority setting.
- **Calls for proposals from donors vary in contextual appropriateness**, with some being quite relevant and others quite removed from the reality of the context. In sensitive seasons such as elections, there is duplication of initiatives by funders.
 - **50 percent of local/national/regional organizations and 91 percent of international organizations see a mismatch** between local needs and donor agendas in the regions they work in.
 - **Funders** even within the same government sometimes **lack a unified approach**, which makes advocacy for priority setting more difficult for media development organizations.
 - **More international organizations than local/national/regional organizations are involved in international discussions and fora**, with only 44 percent of local/national/regional organizations and 75 percent of international media development organizations respectively involved.
 - An average amount of cross-sectoral learning is taking place, with **41 percent** of all media development organizations agreeing that they have **access to best practices and learnings** on media development approaches. This is, however, much lower than the 58 percent who said they had access in 2025.
 - Funding requirements sometimes lock out local/national/regional organizations. However, **about two thirds (69 percent) of local/national/regional organizations have experienced competition from international organizations** for funding they qualify for.
 - There is a **high degree of local and regional coordination**, with 71 percent of local/regional organizations agreeing that they are meaningfully involved in coordination efforts between media development stakeholders in their countries/regions. This is markedly higher than the 58 percent indicated in early 2025.
- Adaptation**
- Media development organizations feel that they are well-equipped to come to terms with the shifting media and information landscape. **71 percent reported that their organizations are adapting appropriately** to the changing environment.
 - One of the biggest challenges for media developers is posed by the **disruptions caused primarily by Big Tech**. Beyond the funding issues mentioned previously, Global Majority organizations report of neglect of their countries when it comes to the adverse treatment of public interest content, facilitation of the spread of disinformation and hate speech, as well as pushback against human rights-based regulation.
 - A particular focus is currently on **new AI-facilitated innovations**. Media assistance needs to revise its skill set to be able to respond to these demands, while at the same time avoiding the pitfalls that happened with social media. **Guidance is needed**, for instance, when it comes to efficiency gains while safeguarding (human-facilitated) journalism quality and avoiding buy-out of archives to the advantage of the new AI corporations.
 - On the political side, media development organizations are feeling the **pressure exerted by authoritarian governments** through foreign agent laws, strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPP) and other forms of intimidation. A new phenomenon is that democratically elected, often right-leaning populist **governments from the Global North are also exerting pressure** on organizations to deprioritize certain topics and even avoid certain language to make sure they are not targeted for budget cuts.
 - Media developers are adjusting to the new hostility towards public interest media by increasing support for media safety. **61 percent of media development organizations offer digital safety support and 29 percent engage in physical safety support**.
 - When it comes to their target groups, the vast majority of organizations are taking a more inclusive approach. **78 percent indicate supporting new kinds of actors** like influencers and start-ups, although several organizations have reservations due to a lack of professional ethics outside of journalism.
 - A recurring sentiment, especially amongst international **media developers, is that media development needs to move beyond mere capacity development** to facilitate an enabling media and information ecosystem. The **focus is on collaboration** rather than competition and increasing advocacy efforts is named as a key ingredient for ensuring the sector's survival. **56 percent of organizations indicate that they have recently increased their advocacy work**.



Funding

60%

average funding channeled directly to local/national/regional by international organizations (2025: 40%).

58%

have average funding cycles exceeding one year (2025: 54%).

36%

see efficient processes for managing funds (2025: 34%).

32%

funds are from sources outside official development aid.

11%

report of sufficient funding (2025: 18%).

-17%

funds compared to previous year.



Local ownership

71%

locals/nationals/regionals feel meaningfully involved in sector coordination (2025: 58%).

41%

have access to sector best practices and lessons learnt (2025: 58%).

37%

locals/nationals/regionals meaningfully involved in setting project priorities (2025: 50%).

36%

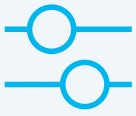
locals/nationals/regionals feel internationals take responsibilities towards them seriously (2025: 56%).

31%

locals/nationals/regionals have not experienced competition from internationals for same funding.

21%

see no mismatch between donor agendas and local needs.



Adaptation

78%

support new actors like influencers and start-ups (2025: 77%).

71%

think they are adapting well to the changing media and information ecosystem.

61%

offer digital safety support.

56%

increased advocacy/policy activities.

48%

increased fund acquisition activities.

44%

have good risk monitoring tools (2025: 44%).

29%

see swift sector coordination in crisis (2025: 30%) and

offer physical safety support.

“

Journalism is not exactly always beloved. Shall we put it mildly. And so you're seeing a little bit of a chilling effect of funders not wanting to walk into that space.

“

We don't talk about development, but we talk about survival.

“

Local actors should shape and influence global level discussions, not just be passive recipients and the amplifiers of certain positions.

“

I don't think necessarily all the donors have understood the importance of a systemic approach to media assistance.

Introduction and overview

Almost exactly one year ago, breaking news sent shockwaves through the global media development sector. At the end of January 2025, the new US administration unexpectedly froze billions of dollars in development aid. By now, it has become clear: this support will not return.

Yet, funding cuts are not the only thing that should concern us in the media development community. They factor into a broader media and information ecosystem in which news outlets must navigate changing audience habits, declining levels of trust, coordinated efforts to discredit journalism, increasingly sophisticated disinformation, and new technologies that hold both promise and peril. Public interest media around the world confront these challenges alongside rising authoritarianism, even in countries once considered stable democracies. Against this backdrop, there are a number of questions the media development sector must ask itself, including: Are the relationships between its various actors as empowering and equitable as they need to be? What interests shape these relationships and which guiding principles are indisputable, especially in politically volatile times where international development is increasingly under scrutiny? And eventually: Does it follow the right approaches? Or does it need to drastically rethink its work in a changing environment?

In the previous edition of the State of Media Development report in 2025, we had asked five international experts to reflect on the immediate aftermath of the US funding freeze. They emphasized that a united media development sector is more essential than ever and reminded us that every crisis also creates new opportunities. Furthermore, they underscored that the Development Co-operation Principles for Relevant and Effective Media Support by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, see Annex for the full list), which had served as the analytical reference point of the last report, remain particularly relevant today.

In this report, our aim is to offer food for thought to rethink media development in a shifting geopolitical context and

to spark an evidence-based conversation that helps the sector to move forward. We do so by focusing on **three themes that cut across the six OECD Principles: funding, local ownership and adaptation**. These themes reflect the most pressing issues repeatedly raised across all regions in the data for the previous State of Media Development report. They were selected by the report team due to their potential for generating concrete recommendations on where support is urgently needed and where the media development community is already employing exemplary approaches that deserve greater visibility. Their selection was also motivated by the aim to shed light on sector-wide reform debates that may otherwise remain behind closed doors. Despite its new focus on funding, local ownership and adaptation, this edition of the report also offers longitudinal data points that illustrate where the media development sector is progressing or regressing compared to last year's findings.

The state of media development vis-à-vis three focus topics: Funding, local ownership and adaptation

In its **first chapter**, the report explores where the media development sector stands financially and is guided by the research question:

How can the changes in the media development funding landscape and their impact be characterized (since 2021 and especially in 2025)?

This chapter first investigates how media development practitioners assess the **development of their budgets**. It then examines and outlines the **concrete consequences of the budget cuts for media outlets, media development organizations as well as topics and fields of action** within media development, both negatively and positively. Chapter 1 also investigates progress in terms of **diversification of funding sources, flexibility in the use of funds and funding length**. Finally, it summarizes the **most urgent funding needs** identified by the media development community.

The **second chapter** addresses the issue of local ownership in media development guided by the research question:

What are gaps and good practices in advancing equitable relationships between various actors in media development practice?

This chapter first examines if and how **local and regional organizations get to meaningfully participate in the project cycle**. Then it turns to whether **assistance is sufficiently contextualized and demand-driven**. Finally, it analyzes whether actors from the Global Majority get the chance to **participate in global stakeholder fora**, have **access to up-to-date information** and knowledge production, and what **roles they get to play in grant applications**.

Eventually, **chapter 3** analyzes how media development organizations are coming to terms with the changing media and information environment by asking:

What kind of adaptation is required of media development organizations in view of changes in the media and information ecosystem (e.g. in response to technological innovations, geopolitical shifts and evolving news production practices)?

The chapter begins by analyzing **adaptation needs vis-à-vis technology-related challenges** with a focus on the relationship between Big Tech companies and media development as well as specific challenges posed by AI. Chapter 3 then turns to **adaptation needs towards resilience and safety in the context of political backsliding**. This section assesses the sector's preparedness for the potential risks and harms associated with rising authoritarianism, for donors' stronger focus on defense and security, and for the growing need to work under crisis conditions. Lastly, it **reviews reform approaches within the media development community** and its **efforts towards engaging with new target groups** (such as social media influencers).

Each chapter begins with a summary of key findings, then explores the results in depth and concludes with concrete recommendations designed to inspire both media development organizations and donors. In each chapter, case studies illustrate good, poor or innovative practices related to the issues discussed. Finally, an overall conclusion highlights five important takeaways for media developers considering all findings.

Methodological approach and evidence base

For the purposes of this study, quantitative and qualitative methods were used. An online survey was sent to all 224 member organizations of the Global Forum for Media and Development (GFMD) and to additional partner organizations from 14 international media development organizations. In total, representatives from 77 organizations (16 international, 21 regional, 40 national/local) took part.

Additionally, 76 key informant interviews were conducted with individuals who work in the sector. Interviewees included representatives of organizations based in countries across the globe as well as non-affiliated consultants with a good overview of the sector (see Annex for more details on methodology). To minimize interviewer effects and increase validity, the interviews with organizations based in Asia, Pacific and Oceania; Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia; Latin America and the Caribbean; Middle East and North Africa; and Sub-Saharan Africa were conducted by external researchers. The interviews with non-affiliated consultants and organizations based in North America and Europe (Central, Northern, Southern, Western) were conducted DW Akademie's report team. The empirical base for this report was laid between November 2025 and February 2026.

The report team sincerely wishes to thank the researchers who conducted, transcribed and translated the interviews and boosted survey participation in various world regions: MJ Daoud, Bianca De Toni, Senakpon Gerard Guedegbe, Shafiq Ahmad Kamboh, Omar Meksassi, Waqas Naeem, Adnan Rehmat, Maryia Sadouskaya-Komlach, María Soledad Segura and others who prefer to remain anonymous. Their region-specific reports – allowing for nuanced insights – will be published shortly after this global report.

We also acknowledge the funding for this report by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). Finally, we would like to thank the many people who took part in the interviews and surveys and whose insights were essential to this report.



CHAPTER 1

Funding



Where the media development sector stands financially

This chapter analyzes changes in the media development funding landscape, their impact and resulting needs.

Key findings

- The media development sector has taken a funding hit. On average, the media development organizations surveyed indicated that their **funding has reduced by 17 percent** in the past year (2025). **Only 11 percent** of media development organizations indicated they **have sufficient funding** – compared to 18 percent who said so in early 2025.
- Many media outlets are now operating in survival mode. Numerous organizations continue to function, often due to extraordinary personal commitment and creative ad-hoc solutions. But some have been forced to shut down entirely. **Most at risk** of shutting down appear to be **exile newsrooms** – especially those based in the United States – and **media in minority languages and/or rural areas** with limited administrative and fundraising capacity.
- The results suggest that several support areas run the risk of being neglected. **Investigative reporting**, as a resource heavy undertaking, becomes increasingly difficult to sustain once funding declines. **Media viability efforts**, which require a whole system perspective and room for experimentation, are likely to be deprioritized in favor of short term and issue-specific interventions. Work related to **diversity and inclusion** may also be reduced due to anticipatory self censorship.
- The conditions under which media outlets operate have shifted. Interviewees described a **domino effect triggered by the US cuts** on official development assistance. Private foundations are increasingly **re-focusing on domestic** rather than **international media support**. Public funders are observed to be **prioritizing security-related funding** despite pledges to strengthen information integrity. Efforts by European funders to “step up” have remained limited. All in all, a lack of international backing leaves public interest media more **vulnerable and exposed to pressures from authoritarian regimes**.
- **Focused core funding, flexible emergency funds, and media viability support** turned out to be the **most urgent funding needs** in light of the current financial situation in which short-term funding and inflexible fund management processes remain a persisting challenge.
- The funding cuts also **had significant consequences for media development organizations**. Several long-established, US-based institutions working in international media development were reportedly **dismantled or reduced** to a barely operational size. At the same time, international media development organizations based in other world regions faced similar constraints as both the US and other public funders introduced budget cuts. This forced many to take **adaptive measures** including **internal reorganizations and staff layoffs, shorter grant durations or narrowing their activities on specific geographic regions**.
- Among media development organizations, there were also notable **shifts** from traditional media development programming **toward advocacy**. A key **challenge** here is to **demonstrate the relevance of public interest media** to issues such as poverty, health and climate change, while a **solid evidence base** to support this argument is **still lacking**.

Introduction

The media development sector is grappling with a funding crisis on a global scale. The US government's decision to cut the funding for the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in January 2025, including 268 million dollars for independent media and free information flows in more than 30 countries (RSF, 2025), had major repercussions for media development globally (Copeland, 2025; RSF, 2025; Kahn et al., 2025).

This study examines these developments from the perspectives of media development practitioners and explores how they assess the development of their budgets. Moreover, it examines and outlines what concrete consequences the budget cuts have had for media outlets, media development organizations as well as topics and fields of action within media development – both negatively and positively. The study also investigates progress in terms of diversification of funding sources, flexibility in the use of funds and funding length. Finally, it summarizes the most urgent funding needs identified by the media development community and outlines their suggestions for moving forward.

A changing funding landscape and its implications

How have budgets for media support developed, especially in 2025?

According to Reporters Without Borders (RSF, 2025), a USAID factsheet now taken offline stated that 6,200 journalists had been trained and 707 media outlets supported by the agency. USAID funding used to constitute half of government funding for independent media around the world (Kahn et al., 2025). As Boering (2025) comments, “No one can compensate for this.”

Next to the US, other major state donors, such as France, the United Kingdom and Germany, also reduced their Official Development Aid (ODA) budgets since 2024, including budgets for media development, driven by a new focus on security spendings, amongst other shifting priorities (OECD, 2025). In consequence, media outlets and media development organizations around the world are faced with the direct and indirect effects of the sudden cutbacks.

This study examines these developments from the perspectives of media development practitioners. It explores how they assess the development of their budgets and what concrete consequences the budget cuts have had. The study also investigates progress in terms of diversification of funding sources and flexibility in the use of funds. Finally, it summarizes the most urgent funding needs identified by the media development community and outlines their suggestions for moving forward.

How much funding was lost in media development in 2025? Researchers are currently investigating this pressing question using different research designs (e.g. Sabet & Abbott, 2026 forthcoming). This study turned to media development organizations directly to get an idea of the extent of last year's funding cuts while definite data on ODA spending for 2025 has not yet been released by the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC). In our survey, we asked respondents to indicate how much their overall funding has increased or decreased looking at the past year (2025).

17%

Percentage of funding reduction according to the media development organizations surveyed ($n = 74$)

While this gives an indication of the funding loss across the media development sector, it remains to be seen how the share of ODA allocated to media assistance and development compared to overall development budgets has changed. In the past, this share has repeatedly been found at extremely low levels of around 0.3 percent (Myers & Gilberts, 2024; GFMD, 2025). Most recently, Scott et al. (2025) investigated it as part of their Index on International Media Freedom Support. They found an average of just 0.16 percent of ODA allocated to media development in 2023 by the 30 countries who are members of both the OECD-DAC and the Media Freedom Coalition (MFC).

The survey results of this study revealed a notable difference between regional/national/local organizations, who said they've lost **16 percent** of their funding on average, and international organizations who reported an average loss of **20 percent**. An extreme case in the survey was an organization that stated a loss of **80 percent** of funds (the maximum value).

This uneven picture was also reflected in the interviews. Unsurprisingly, the “elimination of billions of dollars of international democracy support from the USAID and (US) State Department” resulted in budget reductions for most of the organizations interviewed, albeit to various degrees. Even organizations that were not directly affected by the USAID funding cuts reported repercussions, for instance relating to income-generation through their productions: “Usually it’s international NGOs or UN agencies buying air-time and they had their own budget cuts. All the UN agencies and the INGOS that were mainly funded by USAID, a health NGO or climate change NGO, were not having their communication budget covered anymore.” A few organizations reported that they were relatively unaffected, particularly those who have never received direct USAID support and those who fully rely on private funding.

When asked to reflect on the funding situation over the past five years, interviewees offered diverging views on whether 2025 constituted a “turning point.” A media development consultant in Eastern Europe, for example, described the sector as being “on a continual growth trajectory until the point at which the executive order came out” with “an inflexion point around COVID where there did seem to be this kind of widespread understanding of the importance of accurate, impartial information within an ecosystem in which we were seeing lots of misinformation flourishing.” This assessment was echoed by several representatives of international media development organizations who moreover pointed to an increase in media support in Eastern Europe after Russia launched the war on Ukraine.

Other interviewees emphasized that the downward trend in media development funding had already begun before the USAID funding cuts in 2025: “I guess the US funding cuts were the most visible ones. But it came at a time where there already were decreasing budgets.” Sharing this assessment, a media development consultant in Western Europe prefers to look at 2025 as “a clarifying episode in the sense that it has put everyone in the same boat.”

In its previous edition, this study had found that most organizations deemed the funding they receive not sufficient to meaningfully support public interest media and the information environment. This year, the results are even more sobering indeed: Only **11 percent** of media development organizations indicate they have sufficient funding, compared to **18 percent** who said so in early 2025. (See figure 1)

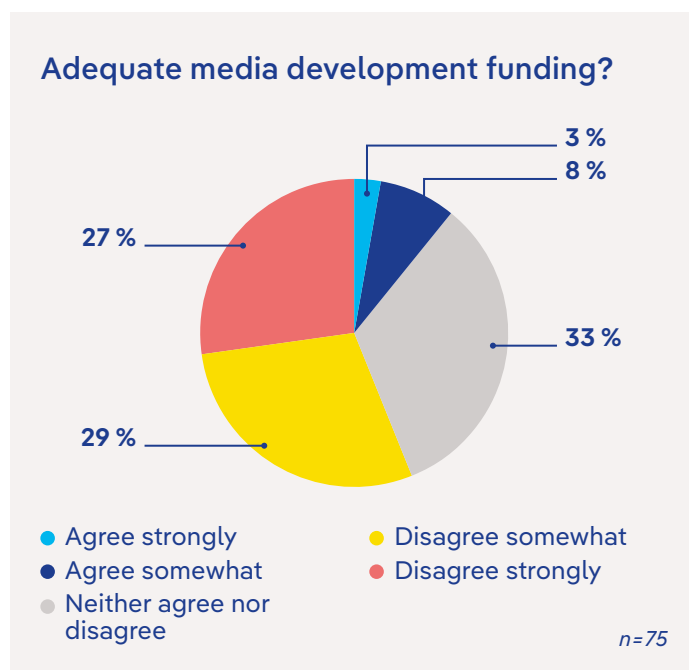


Figure 1: Item: Our organization receives enough funding to be able to meaningfully support public interest media and the information environment; scale: Likert scale (agreement) 1–5

In fact, the interviews illustrate that recent budget cuts cannot be attributed solely to the US government but also to other funders such as:

- major tech platforms
- philanthropic funders
- other major ODA donors

A representative of an international media development organization in North America links this to indirect pressures from the US government:

“**Journalism is not exactly always beloved, shall we put it mildly. And so you’re seeing a little bit of a chilling effect of funders not wanting to walk into that space, I think.**”

Tech platforms like Meta or Google used to make resources available for journalism-related projects, for example via the Google News Initiative (GNI) or the Meta Journalism Project. For some media development organizations, these funds had brought income growth. A representative of an international media development organization reported: “We did have a big spike through the platforms about four to five years ago.” Nowadays, the tech platforms seem to be cutting back or gradually withdrawing as part of

“dynamics mirroring US domestic politics.” One interviewee explained: “If you look at the budgets that come from Meta — or even from Google to a lesser extent — they’re nowhere where they used to be a few years ago.”

Philanthropic funders, too, were said to have shifted their priorities away from international media support. Open Society Foundations were brought up repeatedly in this respect. The foundations phased out their longstanding journalism grantmaking program as part of a major restructuring, which was said to have affected quite a few media development organizations. Several interviewees assumed that pressures from the Trump administration have prompted US American philanthropies to reinvest inside the country rather than in international development. As one US-based consultant remarked: “I think many of them have redoubled their support domestically. Including for the media. I mean, there’s been a growth of US philanthropy that’s focused domestically on local media support.” For exile newsrooms residing in the US this translates into a substantial lack of support in comparison to their Europe-based counterparts who experience relatively high levels of support. An expert on exile media stated: “I can honestly say that there is not a penny to fund exile newsrooms in the US.” The few examples of private philanthropies mentioned by the interviewees as having expanded their role in international media support were Europe-based, such as Porticus in the Netherlands.

As for state donors, many interviewees assumed a “trigger-on-effect of what happened on the side of the US” and largely observed a redirection of funds towards security and defense. One concrete example of a public donor reducing media support is Sweden and its International Development Cooperation Agency SIDA which was mentioned in particular by interviewees in Asia and Africa:

“We’ve seen SIDA close their Asia programming. So that is disappointing because SIDA have long been not only a supporter of independent media, but a really brilliant funder in terms of how they operate, in terms of the level of flexibility that they encourage and permit.”

A media consultant in Sub-Saharan Africa expressed concern about Sweden’s recent termination of bilateral strategies in the region: “In most cases we have limited ourselves to the challenges caused by the withdrawal of US government funding, but that is just one part of the many other developments that are taking place. For example, right now in Zimbabwe, the Swedish government recently announced that they are closing their embassy in Zimbabwe. One of the direct implications of that may be that some of the

support which was going to media development from Sweden is affected.” In Moldova, on the other hand, Sweden was cited as an example of stepping in rapidly to cover emergency needs (along with the Netherlands).

Besides Sweden, interviewees also mentioned the European Union (EU), United Kingdom (UK), Switzerland, Canada, Germany and France as public funders who have reduced their media support. In connection with France’s withdrawal from the Sahel region, it was noted with concern that Russia-backed organizations have partially filled the resulting gap.

Many Europe-based international media development organizations reported finding themselves in a state of limbo when it comes to their public funding streams. In France and Germany, for instance, delays in adopting the federal budgets have created uncertainty. Negotiations for the EU’s next Multiannual Financial Framework are still ongoing. A general frustration among the Europe-based organizations is well captured in the words of an interviewee who criticized “political leaders highlighting the importance of information integrity but doing the contrary:”

Direct impacts of budget cuts for media outlets

The US government’s decision to cut the funding for USAID at the beginning of 2025 has been met with international criticism. Reporters Without Borders (RSF, 2025) condemned the step and recounted that media organizations around the world reacted with “confusion, chaos, and uncertainty,” some having to halt their operations overnight. This sub-chapter traces the direct and vast impacts of this suspension for media outlets.

To get an overview, Internews Europe led a rapid assessment shortly after the funding cuts in collaboration with three consortia of media development organizations spanning the globe. The resulting report by Copeland (2025) was published in June 2025 and found that media outlets, especially those working in the most volatile contexts, and media support organizations, such as journalists’ associations, unions and advocacy organizations, had to lay off staff, reduce coverage, end specific programs or trainings, and sometimes close completely as a consequence of the USAID suspension (p. 2).

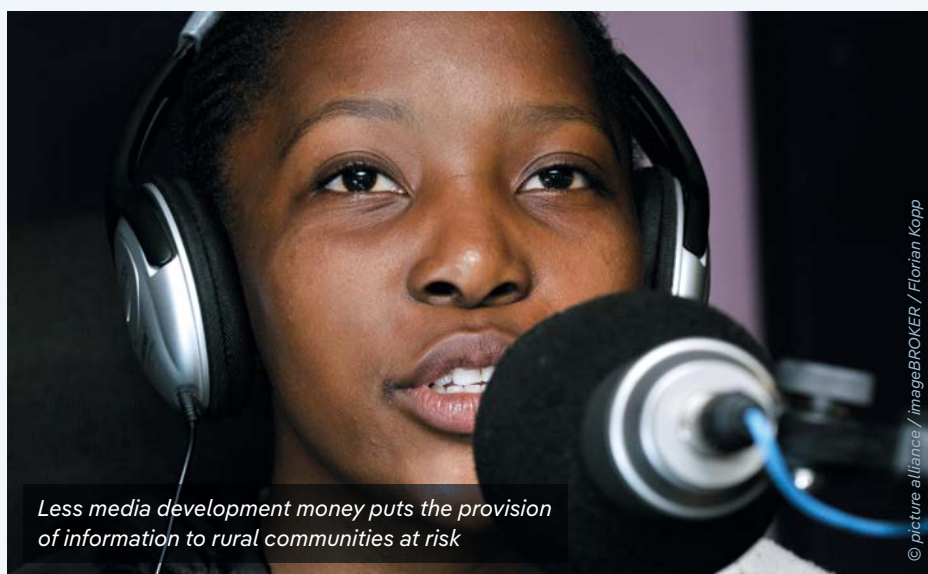
According to the report, media in Latin America and the Caribbean were especially dependent on US funding as it constituted 75 percent of the donor funding they received

(Copeland, 2025, p. 7). Minority language media and media in rural zones were affected disproportionately (p. 8). Safety and legal support for journalists were at risk, especially for those reporting on sensitive issues, such as corruption or organized crime (p. 7).

In some countries in Asia, the funding cuts led to a “loss of all or the majority of their operating budget” (p. 5) for independent media. In other countries, programs for fact checking and training programs had to be stopped (p. 5). A similar tendency was observed in Africa, where the resources for independent and especially for community media were reduced (pp. 3-4). Less support for journalists in conflict zones was another serious risk identified on the African continent (p. 4).

Samir Kassir Foundation (Jarbouh, 2025), too, was quick to launch a survey amongst 18 independent media outlets in Lebanon to assess the impacts of US funding cuts. 62,5 percent reported that many of their activities would suffer from the funding cuts (p. 5), especially their basic operating costs (p. 7). Half of the survey participants report that they are losing 25-50 percent of their funding (p. 6), resulting in reduced capacity for at least 38,5 percent (p. 6) and staff layoffs for half of the participating media outlets (p. 7).

Immediately after the US funding cuts, the Institute of Mass Information (IMI, 2025) surveyed media outlets in Ukraine. Here, nine out of ten independent media outlets depended on foreign subsidies, with the US having been the biggest donor. They found 59,2 percent of the media outlets project “catastrophic” effects on the media landscape. In a follow-up survey in May 2025, this number reduced to 38 percent, which IMI interprets as a switch from panic to “adaptation mode,” despite the situation remaining precarious. By May 2025, 45,3 percent of survey participants stated that their media outlets could be sustained for three to six months, should no additional funding be provided.



Less media development money puts the provision of information to rural communities at risk

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CASE STUDY

From shock to survival

The impact of the USAID funding collapse on MISA

From shock to survival: The impact of the USAID funding collapse on MISA

What happens when a donor cuts its support by 88 percent? In 2025, the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) experienced precisely that. MISA's experience offers a stark illustration of how rapidly shifting geopolitical dynamics can destabilize media development environments.

Established in 1992 in response to the Windhoek Declaration, MISA works in eight Southern African nations, promoting legal defense, media monitoring, media reform and freedom of expression through its Media Defence Fund. Its funding approach has primarily been dependent on foreign donors, especially US government assistance through USAID.

"We are at a more precarious situation, getting into 2026 is a big nightmare," explained MISA Regional Director Tabani Moyo.

At the start of 2025, USAID together with philanthropic and European funders had committed to a core grant totaling about 5 million dollars. However, MISA's financing dropped to less than 600,000 dollars — an approximately 88 percent decrease — when USAID funding was withdrawn.

The consequences for MISA were immediate and serious. Employee layoffs became unavoidable. A five-year strategy plan was disrupted in the middle of its cycle. Rather than pursuing a forward-thinking reform agenda, the organization went into existential crisis mode, adopting a minimalist operational stance to ensure institutional continuity. Dr. Moyo admitted: "We have to review and let go of some of our members of staff so that we can remain on a minimalist approach ... It is a survival mechanism."

This cutback is indicative of a larger continental trend in which media development organizations have been obligated to scale back their

ambitions, not because needs have diminished, but because their institutional lifelines have been withdrawn.

For MISA, this translated into significant constraints on its multidisciplinary programming which included lobbying for regulatory reform, media monitoring, digital rights, ICT development and capacity building.

The Media Defence Fund was the only one of its five strategic pillars that clearly remained a top priority. Due to the ongoing attacks and imprisonment of journalists in a number of nations, emergency response and legal defense became the most pressing and justifiable uses of scarce resources. "We tried to prioritize what are the immediate needs for our beneficiaries. We said, let's keep the center holding," Dr. Moyo explained.

Due to capacity limitations, proactive measures like challenging restrictive cyber legislation or consulting regulatory reform were reduced. According to Dr. Moyo, "There are laws clawing back freedoms that we secured, but we can't push back because of capacity constraints." Under better funding circumstances, MISA and affiliated actors would have reacted to these changes with organized coordinated advocacy. Reduced resources and staffing, however, have prevented this from happening.

The MISA case serves as an example of how the loss of USAID funding was a stress test that revealed structural dependency in Africa's media development paradigm, rather than just a budgetary cut. Future geopolitical shocks will continue to resonate through already fragile democratic ecosystems in the absence of structural reform in the financing of media development.

By Senakpon Gerard Guedegbe

One year after the shock: Media outlets' fight for survival

So how can the situation be described now about a year after the dismantling of USAID? According to the interviewees, the picture is quite consistent: Although media outlets around the world were severely affected by the funding cuts in 2025, most have continued operating, and only a few were forced to shut down entirely. Yet, the conditions under which they operate have changed. Examples of measures being taken by media outlets to stay operational range from laying off staff, cancelling beats that they had previously covered or doing more work pro bono or even sometimes unpaid. As a media development consultant in Sub-Saharan Africa sums up:



The scale and the quality of the work has significantly reduced.

Most at risk of shutting down appear to be exile newsrooms—especially those based in the United States—and media in minority languages and/or rural areas with limited administrative and fundraising capacity. Without funding available to sustain their work, many exile journalists were forced to leave journalism simply to make a living. According to an exile media expert, the majority of Afghani journalists who had found refuge in the US, for instance, “shifted their jobs from media to another area like doing Uber, doing Lyft, some service job or some childcare or education job.” For their former audiences who remained in the country of origin, the implications can be devastating as a representative of an international media development organization notes: “A number of exile media are considered a lifeline for people who are in the country, literally at some point saving lives.”

A key factor enabling many media outlets to maintain operations appeared to be an activist spirit and their ability to adapt quickly to shifting contexts. Many media outlets were already used to achieving a lot with very limited resources because, as one interviewee put it, “they had always operated on a shoestring anyway.” Several interviewees gave examples of media outlets coming up with creative short-term solutions involving online crowdfunding or fundraising events. While interviewees regarded this resilience as a strength, they also highlighted that it places considerable stress on organizations, individuals and their dependents. A media development expert in Eastern Europe described the situation as follows: “I think what happens is that at the core of this organization, there’s

always like a crazy person, and I mean this in a nice way, that is so convinced about the value of public interest journalism that even if there was zero money for it, he or she would still do some of it. But then if there is no money, then he or she needs to find a normal job to provide for themselves and for their families.”

Increased political exposure

Next to such immediate effects, the funding slump can also cause long-term damage to media landscapes. Cope-land (2025) points to secondary consequences including increasing repressions against media who had formerly been more safeguarded thanks to international funding. In addition, lack of funding makes media more vulnerable to pressures and influencing from authorities and other actors, e.g. in Afghanistan (p. 6), and journalists’ safety in conflict affected areas is even more at risk (p. 5).

Economic precarity is also known to be a main driver of media capture (Ferreira, 2023, p. 627), as this Financial Times headline illustrates: “Strongmen celebrate as Trump aid freeze hits media” (Weaver and Dunai, 2025). The authors warn that the lack of international backing for independent media signaled by the US funding withdrawal could make it easier for autocratic leaders such as Vladimir Putin or Victor Orbán to crack down on media freedom in their respective countries.

The effects described above were largely confirmed in the interviews for this report. One representative of an international media development organization reported instances of their partners being politically exposed. For example, when national governments requested lists of partners who had been funded using US government money. Similarly, a media development consultant in Latin America highlighted increasing pressures from more autocratic governments in the region, citing the example of indigenous radio stations in Argentina that lost funding “for political reasons.” In Afghanistan, an interviewee noted, the end of a cybersecurity project has left local reporters vulnerable while another one pointed out that Afghani audiences “are faced with a significant amount of disinformation and propaganda from the Taliban that is being systematically distributed while exile media continue to be silenced.”

Impacts of budget cuts for international media development organizations

Beyond the direct effects on media outlets, the funding cuts had significant consequences for media development organizations themselves. Several long-established US-based institutions working in international media development were reportedly dismantled and some reduced to a size that can hardly be considered operational. According to interviewees, some organizations lost the vast majority of their media development staff with “their programming essentially being all but eliminated in this area.”

While international media development organizations based in other world regions weren’t affected to the same extent, they also faced constraints as both the US and other public funders introduced budget cuts. This forced many to take adaptive measures including internal reorganizations and staff layoffs, shifts in emphasis from media development programming toward advocacy and reductions in communication and outreach activities.

Some international organizations were able to maintain their established partnerships with local media development organizations and media outlets, albeit with shorter grant durations at times. Others were required to focus their activities on specific geographic regions and fewer fields of action to align with new strategic priorities of their respective development ministries. A representative of an international media development organization in Western Europe, for instance, projected: “We will not be pursuing projects in Asia or in Latin America unless they are part of our [new] thematic priorities.”

This is said to have a negative impact on the trust relationship between international media development organizations and their local partners. The latter perceive the situation as unpredictable and point to European governments’ geopolitical responsibility. A representative of an international organization shared that their partners keep telling them:



If Europe collapses in terms of human rights, freedom of expression and access to information, we’re all dead. It’s the last lighthouse. The US is gone. Of course, China, Russia will not do it.

The funding cuts’ impact on topics and fields of action

What impact did the budget cuts have on the topics and fields of action within media development? Are some of them being neglected as a consequence?

Media development funding has always been concentrated on certain thematic areas. In Sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, GFMD (2026) found more than 60 percent of all media assistance and journalism support programs centered on “democracy, human rights and freedom of expression” and “capacity building and training.” Themes revolving around information ecosystem challenges such as “disinformation and media literacy,” “digital innovation & media sustainability” as well as “investigative journalism” each made up only 5 percent of all programs and thus remained “under-resourced compared to global trends,” (p. 5). The mapping identified “safety of journalists,” “digital rights” as well as “gender and media” as underfunded areas.

Yet, GFMD also projects emerging thematic gaps as a result of the USAID closure. In fact, USAID accounted for 26 percent of the funding commitment in the mapping data in Sub-Saharan Africa. Hence, significant gaps are deemed to show in USAID’s focus areas of democracy-linked media support and professional capacity-building, particularly in countries where USAID had been a primary bilateral funder. While other donors such as SIDA or the European Union remain active in these areas, they are not expected to fully close these gaps. “As a result, USAID’s closure and the current funding contraction risks accelerating a shift toward shorter term, election-driven or issue-specific interventions, while weakening sustained investment in professional media capacity and democratic accountability infrastructures,” (p. 17).

Let’s turn to the data of this study and consider what it tells us about emerging funding gaps. In our survey, we asked the respondents how funding in 2025 has developed for a number of topics in the countries they work in compared to 2024. The funding has roughly stayed the same in four fields, according to their assessment (see figure 2): combatting disinformation; gender-related projects; climate-related projects; digital safety and security projects. All other areas were considered to have somewhat decreased.

Funding trends in media development fields 2026 vs. 2025

- ↔ combatting disinformation
- ↔ gender-related projects
- ↔ climate-related projects
- ↔ digital safety and security projects
- ↓ legal and regulatory systems
- ↓ access to information
- ↓ journalists' physical safety measures
- ↓ media representative bodies
- ↓ media research
- ↓ media monitoring
- ↓ networking and coalitions
- ↓ media and information literacy
- ↓ media viability and sustainability
- ↓ health-related projects

n=59–77

Figure 2: Item: *From your experience, compared to 2024 how has the funding in 2025 developed for the following topics in the countries you work in; ordinal scale*

While respondents did not report a sharp decline in any of the listed fields, the broad range of topics perceived as having somewhat decreased can be interpreted as a cause for concern. This data appears to confirm a potential shift—as already identified in the GFMD mapping—towards issue-specific interventions (e.g. gender, climate) that is accompanied by reduced attention to areas that strengthen the broader information eco-system such as access to information, legal and regulatory systems, or media and information literacy. A similar pattern was observed in the interviews with media development organizations in Eastern Europe and the Baltic States, for instance, where programs that are harder to implement within short reporting cycles or that do not directly fit into a crisis narrative were said to be reduced first. Similarly, interviewees in Latin America pointed out that funding for democracy, journalism and freedom of expression is being neglected along with projects supporting institutional sustainability, for example, for professionalization, gender protocols or strategy development.

Across the interviews, three areas were repeatedly brought up when it came to fields running the risks of being neglected: (1) investigative reporting, (2) media viability, and (3) inclusion and diversity.

Investigative reporting—which was not listed as a category in the survey—was seen by many as a resource-heavy and expensive undertaking that, once funds are reduced, is generally difficult to maintain. Several experts noted that collaborative investigative networks, such as the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), have experienced substantial financial losses as a result of the USAID funding cuts. In Europe, in contrast, a consultant closely following the negotiations for the European Union's long-term budget pointed to signals for continued support for investigative reporting: "A large part of the institutional ecosystem is still committed to saying: 'Yes, local journalism, investigative journalism is important. There is no business case for it, so it's okay to give public sector resources.'"

Another area widely discussed in the interviews as running the risk of being neglected was media viability, which appeared in the survey as "somewhat decreasing." Here, interviewees pointed at the significant role that Internews US had long played in capacity development regarding "business models, advertising, the general economic and financial enabling environment for journalism around the world." This kind of support has now been lost. What was highlighted across interviews in relation to media viability was the shrinking space for experimentation resulting from increasingly issue-specific and shorter-term funding streams. These left little room for flexible funding of activities such as working on editorial lines, media viability strategies or newsroom transformation. As one interviewee explained:

“

It's just really, really tricky because this is not the type of project that you can do in six months. And you cannot do with 50,000 dollars. It's just not going to work.

Although the survey data indicates that gender-related topics were considered as "roughly staying the same," a recurring concern voiced in the interviews related to broader funding cuts in the fields of diversity and inclusion. There was a sense of this field being "under horrible attack." The interviews also revealed a noteworthy dynamic in this respect. On the one hand, some media development organizations appear to be operating under

the assumption that working with partners focused on areas of “diversity, equity and inclusion” may be risky in light of the US administration’s hostile positioning. This seems to have led, in some cases, to forms of anticipatory self-censorship, where organizations avoid or downplay work related to diversity and inclusion so as to not jeopardize future funding prospects. This kind of reasoning is well-captured in the following quote by a representative of a media development organization in the MENA region: “What if, because they see us fund these programs for organizations that in the past have advocated for things that have clearly today been rejected by the Trump administration, it would affect our ability to fund anyone else? It’s a horrible decision to make.”

On the other hand, the perception that “diversity, equity and inclusion” efforts are under attack has, in some cases, led to an increase in grants and opportunities for organizations that are exclusively women led or that maintain diverse newsrooms. As noted by a media development expert in Latin America, this reflects a “counter response to those cuts and to the discourse in the US right now, and of course, in many more autocratic governments in Latin America.”

Silver lining?

This chapter started off stating that the media development sector is grappling with a funding crisis on a global scale. Sometimes a crisis presents an opportunity. Did the media development community also find anything positive in the US funding cuts which were widely perceived as “abrupt,” “sudden” and “unprecedented?”

Several interviewees emphasized that in the acute situation of the cancellation of contracts, there were some funders — private ones like Civitates, but also public ones from Sweden or the Netherlands — who stepped in to mitigate the effects by providing “emergency money” for some media outlets. A number of media development consultants argued that the funding cuts prompted media development actors and news outlets to become more creative in tapping new income streams. Indeed, one interviewee from a media development organization in South-East Asia reported that they succeeded in increasing their budget by 30 percent after intensifying their fundraising activities in response to the funding cuts. Another expert argued that the funding cuts have “accelerated the urgency that news outlets around the world work cooperatively with other media outlets that may have been their competitors in the past” and “to think really creatively about their business

models and about raising local philanthropy to support their work.” Finally, one media development consultant noted positively that even actors with a strong non-profit mindset who, in his view, had been relying too heavily on institutional funding, were “forced to contemplate or reevaluate their positions, which I think is beneficial to them and to the scene in general.”

To what extent the funding cuts are regarded as an opportunity for fundamental reform within the media development sector — as called for in the introductory perspective article by Martin Scott — will be explored further in the chapter on “adaptation.”

Spotlight issues: Diversification, flexibility and funding length

Progress in terms of diversification of funding sources?

A key approach to reducing dependence on single donors is the diversification of funding sources. In the previous edition of the State of Media Development report, results suggested that local media development organizations have a diverse funding mix while international media development organizations rely mainly on public funding. The quantitative data gathered for this study confirmed this tendency. Asked to estimate what percent of their funding comes from sources other than official development assistance (e.g. philanthropic funding, investment capital, national funds), local/national/regional media development organizations indicated 33 percent and international organizations 27 percent on average.

32%

Percentage of media development organizations’ funding is from non-ODA sources (*n* = 74)

While ODA funding continues to constitute the largest share of income for media development organizations operating regionally or in a single country, it was usually described as coming from a range of public funders. This was in contrast to many international media development organizations that often seemed to rely on only two or three major public funders. In this regard, several

interviewees were openly “critical” of their own organizations’ dependence on such a narrow funding base. Examples of international organizations successfully broadening their donor portfolio suggest that they have a point. These organizations have deliberately expanded their outreach over the last five years to a diverse set of public funders such as agencies of different governments, UN bodies, the European Union and embassies. Particularly organizations for whom USAID had been a key donor emphasized the advantages of a “blended funding model,” where resources from multiple donors are combined and programs designed so that different funding streams are integrated and mutually reinforcing.

When it comes to funding from non-ODA sources, there seems to be quite some progress with local and regional media development organizations. In Africa, for example, organizations reported to have started looking for local financing options by contacting national or regional foundations, businesses or professional associations that had previously been beyond their reach. Star Ghana Foundation in Ghana was said to have become a trusted funder in helping expand the work of media development organizations in media and information literacy. Support did not always come in the form of funding. In many cases, it involved contributing time and expertise to help journalists address some of the most pressing challenges facing their profession. In Kenya, for example, a respondent reported to be partnering with a dedicated association of lawyers who provide legal assistance to journalists in need.

In Latin America, too, media development organizations, especially those working on specific thematic areas of journalism, have been observed to be approaching a wide range of donors in the private sector. According to a consultant from the region, these organizations have become increasingly selective about the individuals and organizations they collaborate with: “So you will find things like universities paying a media organization to help them translate important research findings into journalistic terms, and that’s money that is going to be useful for the media organizations and that is not compromising a lot of its values.”

Among international media development organizations, funds such as the Media Development Investment Fund (MDIF) and the International Fund for Public Interest Media (IFPIM) have comparatively diverse funding bases from the outset. MDIF operates primarily through an investment model for mostly private investors, while IFPIM is structured as a multilateral financing mechanism drawing support from governments, corporations, philanthropic actors and civil society. The interviews also revealed examples of

more traditional organizations having successfully broadened their funding sources, for instance, by engaging high-net-worth individuals, smaller foundations, or even the general public through direct donations.

However, the media development community also emphasized substantial challenges associated with mobilizing private funding. An interviewee in Southern Africa pointed out that private sector support is still at its infancy in the region, largely due to limited acceptance of the role that pluralistic viewpoints play in sustaining a democratic society. Consequently, private actors tend to be cautious about openly supporting media initiatives because they can attract punitive measures which could jeopardize their commercial interests. Many interviewees found it hard generally to build a strong case for media support when private funders can also go for less politically sensitive causes with more obvious effects like “supporting an orphanage.” As one interviewee reflected:

“

Perhaps that is also because the sector fails to showcase the importance of independent media and media development when it comes to all kind of things like poverty, health, climate change. We are working on it, but we are lacking the solid evidence.



Journalists interviewing Moldovan president Maia Sandu

© Imago/NURPhoto

CASE STUDY

Funding frenzy

Short-term election-related projects in Moldova lack sustainability

In Moldova, a well-funded local workshop on countering disinformation featuring national and international speakers drew almost no participants. The organizers attributed this to saturation: village communities had been targeted with near-daily “parachuted” events ahead of the 2025 vote. The incident illustrates a broader pattern: election-driven support can be fast and generous, yet fragmented and hard to sustain once the electoral moment passes.

Moldova’s September 2025 parliamentary elections were widely framed as a test of the country’s pro-European trajectory. Multiple sources pointed to pro-Kremlin influence operations, including vote-buying and coordinated disinformation. In response, public authorities, independent media and civil society attracted increased, largely European, support. However, the surge in activity was not consistently coordinated, and the flexibility seen during the election

period began to recede as donors returned to standard procedures.

The sudden reduction of US support in the election year was felt acutely across Moldova’s independent media sector. One leading investigative outlet reported losing up to 40 percent of its grant funding in early 2025. Several European embassies and actors such as the European Endowment for Democracy increased funding to mitigate the immediate shortfall. This rapid mobilization helped protect core reporting capacity at a critical time, but it also steered much of the response toward short-term, election-focused interventions.

Organizations on the receiving end of the funds noted that many activities concentrated on countering disinformation at the local level, often through stand-alone events delivered by external experts. In some areas, the number of similar workshops and awareness raising sessions created

fatigue and diminishing returns, including cases where community turnout collapsed.

The pattern suggests that the pursuit of speed and visibility can substitute for coordination when timelines are tight but at the cost of duplication and weaker local ownership. Stakeholders also highlighted that post-election, funding conditions typically revert to more rigid administrative requirements, which can disadvantage locally led initiatives with limited administrative capacity. This shift is especially consequential because many of the most resource-intensive functions, such as investigative reporting, audience trust-building and newsroom viability measures, must be sustained between election cycles.

The Moldova experience therefore points to a recurring tension: election windows create exceptional flexibility, while the “business-as-usual” phase often reduces room for adaptive, needs-based support. With further high-stakes elections expected in the region (for example, Armenia’s parliamentary elections in 2026 and Ukraine’s national elections after the war), the value of this example lies in designing election-period support that is both agile and better integrated with longer-term media viability planning. Support strategies that start earlier with locally driven needs assessment and shared coordination mechanisms may improve efficiency and reduce “event overload.” Maintaining elements of election-period agility, simplified procedures, faster decision-making and adaptable budgets into non-election periods could strengthen media viability and information resilience over time. These efforts would go a long way in maintaining Moldova’s democratic development.

By Maryia Sadouskaya-Komlach and colleague

Progress in terms of flexibility in the use of funds?

Allowing greater flexibility in the use of funds, whether for core operational costs or for reallocations necessitated by rapidly changing security situations, was identified as a key demand toward donors in the previous edition of the State of Media Development report. Is any progress evident in this regard? The most accurate answer appears to be: it varies.

The organizations interviewed for this study reported different levels at which funds may be earmarked. At higher levels, funds may be “loosely restricted ... because it is dedicated for a particular program or portfolio, so it has to be used in certain countries or used to address certain problems.” However, many organizations are still confronted with highly granular budget structures that require them to operate within narrowly defined margins. As a media development organization in Southeast-Asia explained, they navigate different scenarios. They have both restricted funds where they “have to make receipts for everything.” But they also have unrestricted funds where the budget can be used more flexibly as long as the agreed outputs are delivered in the end.

One international media development organization has institutionalized they call “milestone grants,” a more flexible approach: “That also gives them a lot more flexibility in terms of how they go about the things that we’ve agreed to work on together.” Apparently, releasing such open calls and grants is quite common among international media development organizations. According to the survey data:

45%

Percentage of the money international organizations spend on media development is based on open calls and grants (n = 14)

In terms of the possibility to re-allocate earmarked funds if the situation demands it, the interviews also revealed different scenarios. An interviewee from Central Asia, for instance, shared how their team was struggling to re-allocate money for even minor, yet essential expenses like a subscription to an online meeting platform: “Our subscription for Zoom, for example, was covered from one donor and it was cancelled. And you cannot pay for it through another grant you have because, if it is not budgeted, you cannot cover it. And usually, we have very strict project grants that do not allow us any or enough flexibility.”

While a representative of an international media development organization perceived a trend of increasing rigidity of their public funder with “less and less ... margins how you can spend the money, to change budget, to reorient objectives,” other reported signs of progress in terms of more flexibility. They observed that public donors are showing a growing understanding of the need for adaptable funding arrangements:

“

I think it’s almost a given that the programs and the interventions will need a certain degree of adjustment and sort of reassessing as we go along to respond to those [changing] circumstances.

In comparison to private funding sources, however, the public sector was generally perceived as more risk-averse and reluctant to invest in innovation and experimentation because public institutions can be held accountable for their use of taxpayers’ money.

This uneven picture is also reflected in the survey data (see figure 3) where 36 percent of the respondents indicated they feel processes for managing funds are efficient while 32 percent took up a neutral position and another 32 percent deemed them rather inefficient.

Efficient processes for managing funds?

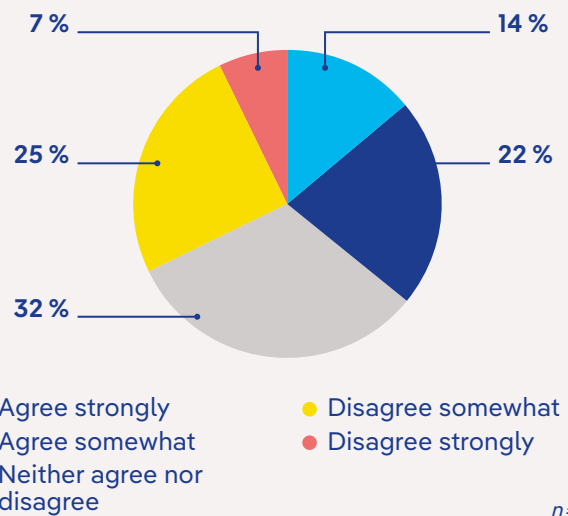


Figure 3: Item: Our donors/organizations we partner with offer efficient processes for managing funds; scale: Likert scale (agreement) 1–5

Length of funding cycles

Another factor that can limit flexibility is the duration of funding cycles. In the previous State of Media Development report, 46 percent of the respondents indicated that the average funding cycle of most projects at their organization is one year or less. This number has only slightly improved to 42 percent, signaling that short-term funding remains a persisting challenge in the media development sector. Interviewees emphasized that such limited time-frames constrain their ability to demonstrate or even generate meaningful impact, asking “What can you achieve in a year?”

42%

Percentage of media development organizations report an average project duration of less than a year (*n* = 72)

As part of the current survey, we also asked media development organizations what percentage of their budget is dedicated to overhead costs (administration, rent, utilities, insurance, etc.). On average, the respondents estimated that overhead costs make up 22 percent of their budget. For organizations whose donors are unwilling to cover these costs or who fund only a limited portion of them (as it appeared to be the case with the EU) this reportedly created significant financial pressures. The challenge has become even more acute since USAID—previously regarded as “actually very good in covering all your costs”—is no longer a major funder. As a result, many media development organizations find themselves in an increasingly precarious situation when trying to cover essential operational expenditures. One representative of an international media development organization in Western Europe went so far as to criticize that “the grant receivers are impoverishing themselves through the grant,” arguing that budget allowances specified by donor are often so unrealistic that they actually discourage applicants from budgeting their actual costs.

22%

Percentage of media development organizations’ budget is dedicated to overhead costs (*n* = 72)

Pressing funding needs to keep media development effective

In light of the current financial situation, we asked our interviewees about the most urgent funding needs to keep media development effective. Their answers revolved around three main issues:

- focused core funding,
- flexible emergency funds and
- media viability support

The need for core funding was emphasized across all regions. Many media outlets are currently facing the imminent risk of shutting down. Several interviewees stressed that once a media outlet closes, it is highly unlikely to reopen.

A representative of a media development organization in the Caucasus illustrated this vividly: “At least in the last two years, we don’t talk about development, but we talk about survival. In the current situation that we have, we have to face reality that the media is not able to operate in a way it has operated for years. [It’s about] keeping them alive somehow, sustaining some basic needs to produce daily news to do some investigations or in-depth reports, not to leave the society in the hands of propaganda.”

To ensure the survival of media outlets with low chances for self-sustainability, such as exile newsrooms or media operating in conflict zones, failed states, rural areas or severely depressed economies, core funding was described as indispensable. Interviewees expressed little understanding as to why this type of support remains uncommon in the media development sector where most donors continue to prioritize project-based activities. This was perceived to stand in contrast to other development fields, as this quote illustrates: “In the health sector, you pay doctors and nurses. [...] I don’t think Médecins Sans Frontières is proposing budgets with trainings and workshops. They have to run their hospitals and pay electricity and pay rent and pay people. That’s what they do.”

Another widely emphasized funding priority was the need for flexible resources to respond to emergency situations. As discussed above, insufficient flexibility in the use of funds prevents media organizations from reacting adequately to unforeseen developments. In addition, interviewees emphasized that funds must be reserved specifically to address acute threats, for example, situations in

which the safety of journalists is at risk. One interviewee recalled that this need became evident very early in the invasion of Ukraine:



There were some difficult conversations with donors about the need for flexibility and about the need to pivot towards security equipment, towards flak jackets, towards using what we might think of as kind of non-traditional suppliers of that equipment. I think there was a variation in terms of the donors who responded to that need really well and those who were almost like ‘The computer says no. The compliance does not allow this.’

The need for support to strengthen media viability emerged as another urgent funding priority across all regions. However, interviewees noted an important caveat: such support tends to benefit media outlets operating in relatively well-resourced markets, whereas core funding remains far more effective for those in more fragile environments. Across all world regions, media organizations were said to find themselves increasingly dependent on tech platforms to reach their audiences. At the same time, audience habits and news production processes are changing and tech platforms capture the overwhelming share of online advertising revenue. Against this backdrop, many interviewees stressed that it is essential to ensure the long-term stability of media outlets by supporting their viability efforts, for instance, in business adaptation, product development or entrepreneurial journalism. Moreover, several interviewees emphasized that media development must broaden its perspective beyond the viability of individual media organizations and consider the entire information ecosystem. As one interviewee in Latin America noted: “I would say that the priority is the strengthening of the ecosystem. [...] Not limiting ourselves to the sustainability of the media, but trying to innovate in ways to keep the ecosystem alive, active and producing quality information based on facts. And that includes [new] networks, people, [...] collectives.”



An indigenous woman demonstrates against Argentinian president Javier Milei's remarks on diversity and feminism on February 1, 2025

© AFP/ Luis Robayo

CASE STUDY

Media diversity at risk

The end of FOMECA, an innovative and successful public policy for promoting local, community and indigenous media

In 2026, the far-right government of Javier Milei repealed the Fondo de Fomento Concursable para Medios de Comunicación Audiovisual (FOMECA), an innovative public policy of the Argentinian state which operated since 2013, and had an enormous and measurable impact on community, indigenous and border media. The suspension was part of a broader offensive against initiatives based on the right to communicate. This repeal is one of this government's communication policies characterized by libertarian authoritarianism because they combine free-market measures that benefit large media and telecommunications corporations with actions that consolidate government control over public communication, to the detriment of small and medium-sized businesses in the sector, non-profit, community-based, and public-state media outlets, activists and journalists, and the public (Longo, De Toni & Segura, 2025).

The application of FOMECA had been neither consistent nor continuous. Various governments, especially

those on the right and far right that promoted communication policies with a commercial focus, modified the amounts available for distribution, the calls for proposals, and the deadlines for allocating the subsidies awarded. The organization and mobilization of media networks, accompanied by universities and press associations, made it possible to maintain the policy's continuity until 2026.

Despite the problems of its application, FOMECA is a positive example of public funding serving to increase the diversity of voices as a result of Latin American communication policies reforms in the 2000s and 2010s (Segura & Waisbord, 2016). Law 26522 on Audiovisual Communication Services established that 10 percent of the regulatory authority's revenue from levies, taxes and fines on audiovisual media must be allocated to a fund for the promotion of community, indigenous and border radio and television stations in order to strengthen the weakest players in the audiovisual sector and, in this way, promote

diversity in the media system. The regulatory authority launched a call for proposals which were evaluated by committees of experts and awarded the funds. Funding was mainly provided for equipment and infrastructure, management and content production. The beneficiary media outlets were required to execute and account for the funds used.

The processes of both the formulation of the law and the effective implementation of the public policy involved the active participation of the country's five community media networks. The implementation of FOMECA had a highly positive impact on the development of the sector. As demonstrated in previous research (Segura et al., 2019), the number of media outlets multiplied in all provinces of the country, their infrastructure improved, and their equipment was upgraded, allowing them to improve their signal and increase their coverage. FOMECA enables community media to produce a higher volume of own content, enabling more local information to become available. They also improved management and administration methods, which led to an increase in their workforce and audiences.

The case of FOMECA demonstrates that it is possible to design public funding mechanisms that avoid affecting the political independence of media outlets. The example of Argentina also shows that these policies are stronger when they are established by law, formulated and implemented with social participation, when there is governmental political will to implement them, and when they are part of broader public policies to promote the right to communicate. Thus, when some of these factors are absent, the initiatives are weakened.

By María Soledad Segura and Bianca De Toni

Interestingly, interviewees expressed diverging views on the role of international media development organizations in keeping media development effective. Among organizations in Asia, there was a widespread perception that funding is largely monopolized by major international organizations, leaving only limited resources for local actors. Consequently, reducing the number of intermediary layers and ensuring that a greater share of resources reaches local organizations emerged as a key priority. That these layers exist is indisputable. According to international organizations' self-assessment, however, the percentage of their funding reaching local, national and regional partners directly is at 60 percent (representing an increase of 20 percent compared to the previous edition of the State of Media Development report).

60%

Percentage of international organizations' funding reaches partners directly (*n* = 14)

Interviewees in Eastern Europe, in contrast, emphasized the essential role that international media development actors play in sustaining the sector. They highlighted the importance of these actors in providing critical infrastructure (such as training, research, coordination, peer-learning opportunities and sub-granting) that keeps the wider system functioning. For them, the priority was to strengthen these organizations in their role as "ecosystem infrastructure," particularly in areas such as coordination, research, convening and sub-granting, which are viewed as essential resilience functions.

What to do?

What should be kept in mind going forward? Based on global evidence from the survey and the in-depth interviews conducted with media development organizations and experts, the following recommendations to improve the media development funding landscape could be derived:

Inspiration for media development organizations

- Diversify your funding sources and do not shy away from new fundraising terrain. It is imperative in the current unstable funding environment.

- Compile evidence demonstrating how media contribute to crisis response, societal resilience, political stability and economic development. Share this evidence across the sector to support coordinated advocacy.
- Use your communication channels with donors to advocate for the urgent funding needs of the media development sector.
- International organizations: Streamline funding chains and ensure more resources reach local organizations directly.

Inspiration for donors

- Follow suit on official announcements about the importance of information integrity and commit financial resources to support public interest media.
- Ensure that support for media development and human rights is not deprioritized in favor of increased defense and security spending. Media development is a core component of democratic resilience.
- Consider multi-year core support to well-selected media that covers salaries, rent, electricity, equipment and other essential operational costs.
- Provide flexible funding that allows media to experiment with business models, product development and newsroom transformation.
- Avoid overly narrow, issue-specific or short-term grants.
- Avoid withdrawing media support from entire regions. The experience in the Sahel shows how quickly China and Russia step in.
- Create rapid-response emergency funds that allow swift re-allocation to safety needs.



CHAPTER 2

Local ownership



How local ownership in media development is working in practice

This chapter explores how the principle of local ownership is playing out in the media development sector, based on views from local, regional and international media development organizations.

Key findings

- Local, regional and international organizations have strikingly different perceptions **about their meaningful involvement in all parts of the project cycle**. While only **37 percent of local/national/regional organizations** agree that they are given a meaningful role in setting project priorities, 91 percent of international organizations are of the opinion that they give local and regional organizations a meaningful role in project priority setting.
- **Calls for proposals from donors vary in contextual appropriateness**, with some being quite relevant and others quite removed from the reality of the context. In sensitive seasons such as elections, there is duplication of initiatives by funders.
- **50 percent of local/national/regional organizations and 91 percent of international organizations see a mismatch** between local needs and donor agendas in the regions they work in.
- **Funders** even within the same government sometimes **lack a unified approach**, which makes advocacy for priority setting more difficult for media development organizations.
- **More international organizations than local/national/regional organizations are involved in international discussions and fora**, with only 44 percent of local/national/regional organizations and 75 percent of international media development organizations respectively involved.

- An average amount of cross-sectoral learning is taking place, with **41 percent** of all media development organizations agreeing that they have **access to best practices and learnings** on media development approaches—clearly lower than the 58% who had access in early 2025.
- Funding requirements sometimes lock out local/national/regional organizations. However, **about two thirds (69 percent) of these organizations have experienced competition from international organizations** for the funding they do qualify for.
- There is a **high degree of local and regional coordination**, with 71 percent of local/regional organizations agreeing that they are meaningfully involved in coordination efforts between media development stakeholders in their countries/regions. This is markedly higher than the 58 percent indicated in early 2025.

Introduction

The principle of local ownership in media development—in the whole development field in fact—is not new. The question of who drives the decisions and sets the priorities—and how to achieve equitable distribution of power among all stakeholders in any initiative meant to foster progress—is one that remains valid and important to grapple with.

International media development assistance remains dominated by donors from the Global North and their understanding of media, democracy and development (Drefs & Thomass, 2019, p. 257). Consequently, Western normative concepts of journalism often transferred via media development programs have come to be promoted as standards, sometimes disregarding local forms of journalistic work more adapted to the respective contexts (Lugo-Ocando, 2018, p. 417). In addition, development assistance is often tied to public diplomacy efforts

(Alexander, 2018, p. 409). Thus, conditionalities connected with the reception of development funds are often mentioned as a challenge to equity, which also make non-traditional donors, e.g. China, an attractive alternative for some media (Li, 2017, p. 202; Marsh, Madrid-Morales & Patterson, 2023, p. 3; Woods, 2008, p.1205).

Nyarko et al. (2020, p. 9), note that media development funding in Africa has often been connected to agenda setting from the side of the donors. They suggest that local regulatory and professional bodies should have a say in approving themes donors put forward to make sure they are relevant to the respective context. Contextual appropriateness matters because externally driven interventions which prioritize donor agendas over local needs often reproduce structural power imbalances and limit the long-term impact of projects as the delivery of aid tends to be “fragmented, opaque and often politically driven,” (Dreher, 2025, p. 4).

As the 2025 edition of the State of Media Development report showed, only half of the respondents amongst local organizations felt that they were sufficiently involved in priority setting when it comes to media development projects and international actors still lead most ODA applications, despite contrary examples (p. 9). Emphasizing equitable partnerships in which local organizations hold more power and are meaningfully involved in all stages of project conception and implementation can improve the impact of media development projects and reduce the risk of misalignment between donor strategies and on-the-ground needs and realities. Such equitable collaboration and locally led decision-making do not only strengthen local actors’ agency, but also increase trust amongst donors, intermediaries and local partners involved in development processes (Clark, 2024; Elbers & Arts, 2011, p. 726; OECD, 2024). In addition, local ownership also contributes to diversity in media content and perspectives, because deep contextual knowledge helps to ensure that local voices, languages and priorities can be effectively included, enhancing pluralism and inclusivity in the public sphere (UNESCO, 2024).

This chapter digs deeper into how local ownership and equity overall is playing out in the media development sector. It examines the existent issues, good practices and gaps as far as local ownership in media development is concerned.

The parameters for implementation of local ownership draw from the OECD (May 2024) Development Cooperation Principles for Relevant and Effective Support to Media and the Information Environment that call for “Strengthen[ing] local leadership and ownership,

empowering media partners as well as other actors in the information environment such as civil society organizations and online content creators to meaningfully participate in policies and programs,” (p. 10).

This is further broken down into more specific expressions of local ownership such as:

- meaningful participation of local actors in diagnostics, priority-setting, design, budgeting, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of policies and programs;
- tailoring assistance to each individual context;
- ensuring assistance is evidence-based, bottom-up and demand-driven;
- accounting for diversity, equality and inclusion principles and standards; and
- incentivizing international implementers to work through local and regional partners and ensuring a more significant share of ODA for media development reaches local and regional actors directly, to enhance their resilience and viability.

Based on the above, this chapter examines (1) if and how local and regional organizations get to meaningfully participate in the project cycle, (2) whether assistance is sufficiently contextualized and demand-driven, (3) whether actors from local and regional organizations get the chance to participate in global stakeholder fora, have access to up-to-date information and knowledge production and (4) what roles they get to play in grant applications. In addition to positive examples and good practices, the chapter also identifies gaps as far as local ownership in media development is concerned.

Meaningful participation in the project cycle

For this aspect, interviewees and survey respondents were asked at what stage of the project cycle they played a meaningful role and if they were meaningfully involved in priority setting.

Organizations overall stated that they were involved in all stages of the project cycle, but concerns were raised around nominal participation in some instances. The interviews with media development organizations

working at different levels—locally, nationally, regionally and internationally—revealed the complexities of trying to ensure local ownership in media development work.

Some respondents working with international media development organizations reflected on how their organizations were working with partners to ensure that relevant needs and priorities took center stage. One was through focusing on the partner’s mission and overall strategy (and helping them develop one if it was not already clear) and then tailoring support to focus on achieving that overall defined mission. In other words, collaborating with an organization to identify its most important growth and impact targets and then figuring out together what would be most useful in helping them get there. This was viewed as preferable to focusing on stand-alone activities, which in and of themselves may not have a long-term positive impact for the organization.

Another way was through having local and regional organizations take the lead in needs assessment and priority setting. As a representative of a Western European organization described it:

“

When we apply for a call, we let our partners decide what is the biggest need and how to develop this project. And of course, we try to have an added value as well, not only being the ... administrative organizer. And that is often acknowledged by our partners. But they are the ones designing and we are just supporting wherever we can. So it's demand-driven in that sense ...

In some cases, in addition to deciding on priorities, local organizations also had the flexibility to set what they felt would be the most fitting parameters for their monitoring and evaluation: “We basically have a hybrid approach where we combine a set of basic standard indicators, which apply to all our grantees, like audience numbers or financial health metrics. But then every grantee gets the opportunity to define their own tailored indicator that corresponds to their strategic objectives. So even on the monitoring and evaluation front, this is very much co-designed and to a large extent defined by the local partners,” described a representative speaking on behalf of an international organization.

Despite the above good practices, negative experiences were also shared. Some organizations described being brought in as implementers of projects drawn up elsewhere, rather than having been involved in thinking up the project in the first place. There were examples given of this from all world regions. Most of the time in such cases, the projects were not fully appropriate for the context. As a media development expert based in Africa explained:

“

Some of the interventions come with a ‘one size fits all’ kind of setup. But each organization, each media development actor, each media system has its own peculiarities ... For example, if we do fact checking, there are approaches that can work in [one country] but not in [a neighboring country] because of the differing access to information laws, cyber laws ...

Other organizations described being involved in the needs assessment and project ideation stage, but when it came to implementation, what had been agreed upon was not necessarily what was done. An organization working in Central Asia shared one such incident: “When [an international organization] were preparing to enter [our country] with long-term projects, they came to try to identify needs and priorities and project ideas ... This was a very productive and inclusive project development phase, all major media outlets were involved in this discussion period [and a strategy was settled on] ... but in the course of time, when the project was in the process of implementation, this strategy somehow changed and suddenly we didn’t know anymore what is happening and what is the priority now and whether those goals identified in the very beginning are valid anymore.”

The survey data showed strikingly different perceptions of involvement in priority setting of projects: Only 37 percent of local and regional media development organizations agreed or strongly agreed that they were given a meaningful role in setting project priorities, which is over 10 percentage age points lower than a year ago (50 percent). In stark contrast, 91 percent of international media development organizations agreed or strongly agreed that they gave local/regional partners a meaningful role in project priority setting.

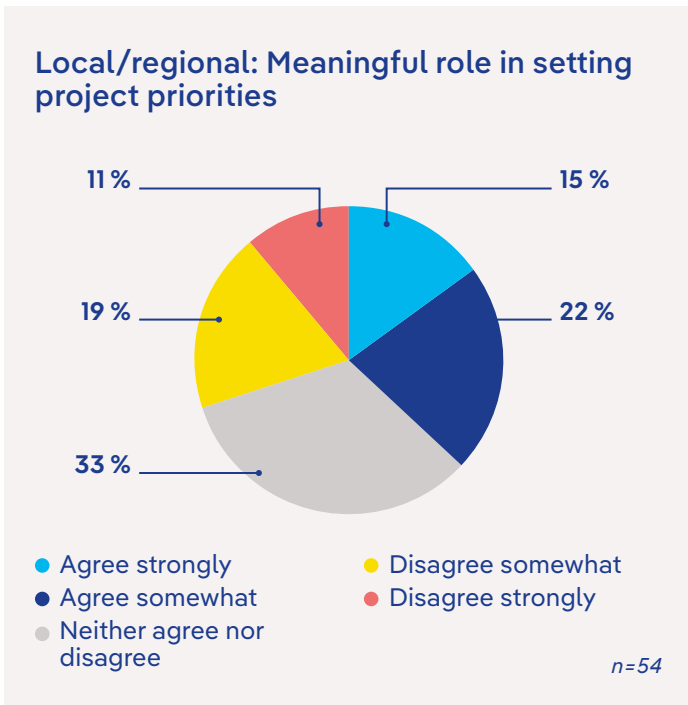


Figure 4: Item: Our organization is given a meaningful, participatory role (as opposed to simply doing what the donors or organizations you partner with want) in setting priorities of media development projects; scale: Likert scale (agreement) 1–5

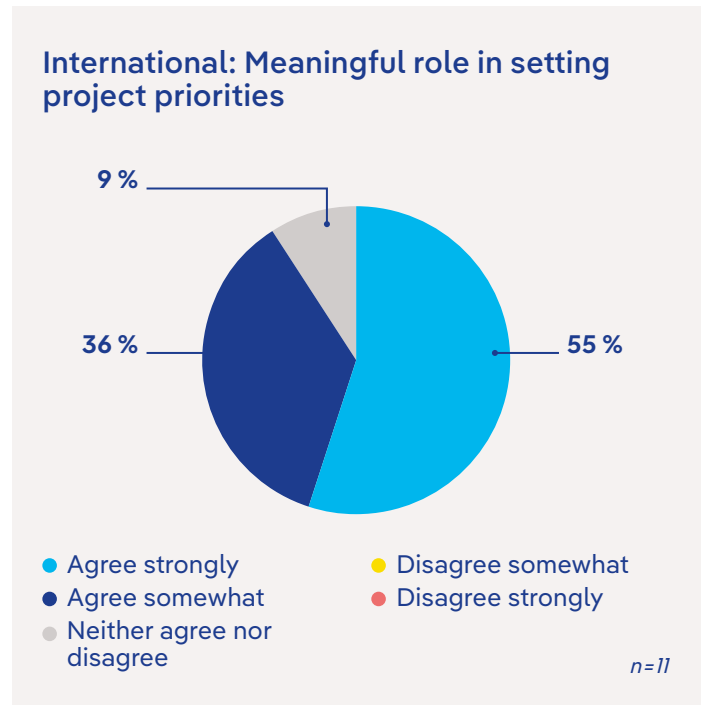


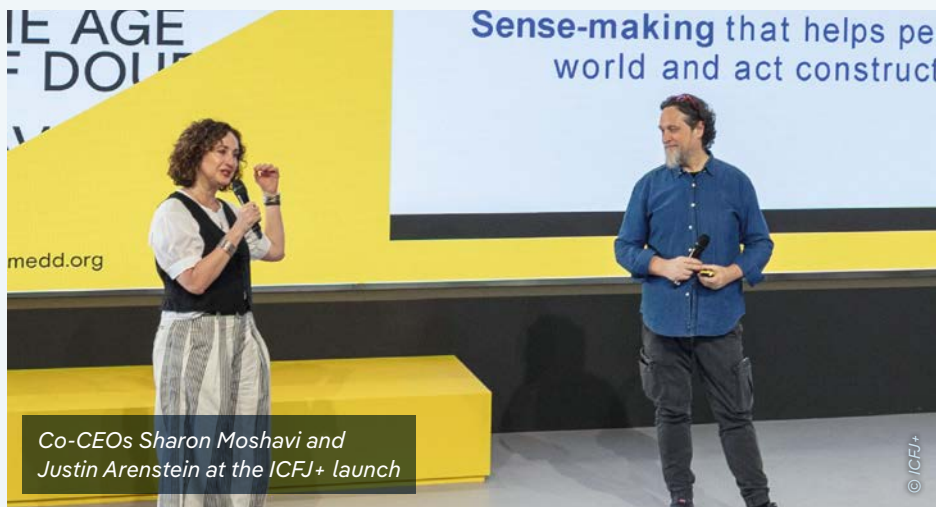
Figure 5: Item: We ensure that our local and regional partners play a meaningful, participatory role in setting the priorities of media development projects; scale: Likert scale (agreement) 1–5

This notable difference in perceptions suggests vastly different understandings of what meaningful involvement should consist of. Figuring out what meaningful priority setting should consist of is therefore one area in which international and local/regional organizations may benefit from sitting together to determine what satisfactory involvement could look like.

Overall, the above data suggests that an initial consultation during priority setting should be prioritized. As summed up by a representative of an organization based in Latin America:

“There could be an opportunity for improvement [through] much deeper consultations with the ecosystem to define agendas that can be much less concurrent, more sustained over time, that respond to more local needs.”

At the same time, there should be a consistent commitment to actually listen to the suggestions and recommendations by local organizations, and to keep communication lines open if other intervening factors come in the way of implementing a pre-discussed project.



CASE STUDY

Joining forces to meet the needs

Pooling resources through ICFJ+ to fix the information ecosystem together

In 2025, the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) underwent a metamorphosis. It merged with two partners, the civic tech network Code for Africa and systems builder PROTO, to create ICFJ+, a new Global South non-profit based out of South Africa. Interestingly, both partners are organizations set up by former fellows of ICFJ's Knight Fellowship program. The joint venture ensures fundraising, tech, service design and product management capacities, as well as makes sure whatever activities the new NGO engages in are grounded in the actual, increasingly digital needs of media worldwide.

So, what appeared as a direct reaction to the US administration's de-prioritization of all things media in 2025 had been planned before the US funding cuts hit. The merger had more to do with the fact that "we saw that the general needs landscape and the media sector were changing dramatically," explained ICFJ+ Co-CEO Sharon Moshavi.

The non-profit organization now explores new ways to adapt and localize media development at a time when the sector faces uncertainty about funding and equitable partnerships. The organizational architecture, of course, also had to do with issues of sustainability and limited resources.

One example illustrating how the new entity functions is the "Plus Hub" initiative, which is funded by the Knight Foundation and supported by the Google News Initiative. The venture aims to offer shared services to diverse groups of information producers so they can use the technical support to improve citizen's access to credible information in their niches and regions. The Plus Hub inverts the traditional model of capacity building to get beneficiaries to "co-implement" the support they receive, ranging from audience development to AI automation.

"Accelerators used to be training-heavy and service-light," said Nasr ul Hadi, the Chief Product Officer at ICFJ+. "We have flipped it, so the Plus Hub is training-light and service-heavy, and we have actual people working with your team—so think of it as an extended team helping you build things and not a random training being imparted."

The offering is not just for journalists but for the broader information ecosystem. "We are working with news creators," Moshavi noted. "There's a whole civic tech world that we are starting to work with, so we are trying to break down those silos."

For ICFJ, the initiative has also had consequences in terms of activities and staff. ICFJ+ enabled a reduction in administrative costs, as well as joint fundraising and hiring activities. The U.S. government's funding cuts, along with the merger led to a reduction in U.S.-based staff and an increase in global staff.

The ICFJ+ story offers a blueprint for media development organizations on funding diversification, cost-effectiveness, tech support and intersectoral partnerships in a reality where international development assistance may never return to pre-2025 levels.

By Waqas Naeem

Tailoring assistance to context

Local ownership as outlined in the OECD principles also includes “tailoring assistance to each individual context with particular attention to underrepresented and marginalized groups,” and “ensuring that assistance responses [are] grounded in local realities,” (OECD 2024, p. 10). This speaks to the contextual appropriateness of interventions. The research therefore also sought to find out how contextually appropriate interventions were, and whether there was a match or mismatch between local needs and donor priorities.

A positive example mentioned was the use of local experts for local projects instead of “parachuting in” experts from abroad as a project or field of work progressed. In the initial stages, a cohort of local experts would be identified to become well versed with the subject matter, and afterwards they would fully take up the expert role whenever there were any projects on the topic in their regions. The topical expertise combined with contextual knowledge was described as a winning combination for impactful interventions.

Organizations on the other hand highlighted that depending on the donor or the season, calls for funding could be quite meaningful or quite removed from the relevance of the individual context. Funding calls issued for specific topics/themes and for a limited period were mentioned, for instance, electoral reporting in the lead-up to elections. While necessary, this sometimes resulted in a focus on project completion rather than lasting impact, because of the awareness that the funds were only available for a limited window and the local organization did not have additional resources to put into developing a long-term approach even if they thought it was important. Furthermore, especially around elections, there was sometimes duplication of initiatives, with multiple funders offering funding for the same thing in the same context, seemingly unaware of the overlaps in their work. This argues for better coordination among funders, and an investment in needs assessments before designing interventions.

In some cases, donor priorities sometimes seemed to take precedence over expressed local needs. Interviewees outlined having their proposals on particular topics rejected, not because the issue was not urgent in their context, but because that issue was not a priority for the donor. In other instances, local expertise on the best timing for some interventions was apparently not trusted, which resulted

in a much more dangerous work situation for the organizations involved. As shared by an interviewee working in an African organization: “It needs to be understood that during election season, the political environment is heavily charged. The first three years [after election] are peaceful. When, for example, I present my election proposal to the donors two or three years before the election, some of them say it’s too early. When these electoral campaigns begin, in the last year or half-year, [the media] are closely scrutinized. The [government] can close you because they think you’re agitating, but if the media had been ready two years ago, all we would have to do [during election season] is tell them to follow our instructions, and they would be able to do a fantastic job. However, when we are seen holding conferences and election meetings, the highly phobic military organizations will simply begin to speculate and put your name out there. If we can be trusted fully when we present the cultural context and the local understanding of issues, it does help in successful, mutually acceptable media development.”

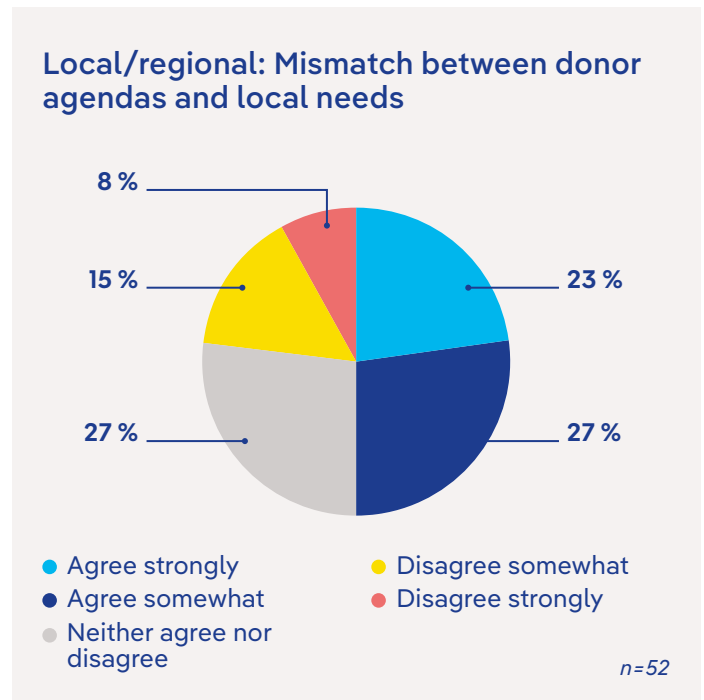


Figure 6: Item: Considering the countries/region(s) in which we work, there is a mismatch between donor agendas and local needs in media development projects; scale: Likert scale (agreement) 1–5

The mismatch between donor and local priorities is a felt issue across the board, as demonstrated by the survey results: 50 percent of local/regional organizations and 91 percent of international media development organizations saw a mismatch between donor agendas and local needs in the areas they worked in.

This majority view that there is a mismatch signals the need for continued efforts, such as actively engaging donors in dialogue, to better align funders and the priorities on the ground. Furthermore, donors need to prioritize needs assessment in the different contexts they wish to work in.



Figure 7: Item: Considering the countries/region(s) in which we work, there is a mismatch between donor agendas and local needs in media development projects; scale: Likert scale (agreement) 1-5



Rural women in Burkina Faso take things into their own hands

© picture alliance / Ute Grabowsky/BMZ/photothek.de

The flexibility of the local radio to adjust to community information needs prior to intervention, and the participatory approach fostering ownership contributed to the project's success. Issues like access to land and climate risk management required a careful mediation process throughout. The community radio La Voix du Paysan proved fit for the job by creating a multi-stakeholder platform for discussions and decision making.

By Senakpon Gerard Guedegbe

CASE STUDY

From on-air dialogue to off-air action

How a fact-checking initiative boosted women's resilience in Burkina Faso

Fact-checking initiatives are sometimes slammed for being donor-driven projects with little connection to local needs. A local broadcaster in northern Burkina Faso in collaboration with a fact-checking initiative managed to prove that it makes a real difference to the lives of women.

To increase the relevance of their programming, La Voix du Paysan launched what they termed a progressive engagement strategy. A key success factor was the transition from on-air dialogue to off-air facilitation. Guided by the fact-checking initiative Fasocheck, the station started with a series of structured radio programs and then convened consultations with local authorities, customary leaders, landowners and community representatives. Through sustained mediation, four agricultural sites in Ouahigouya were identified and made available for displaced women.

Over 500 women have been registered to work on these farms and they were able to produce 3 tons of cereals on such arid lands and despite sporadic rainfall. Despite its diminutive size, the crop represented displaced people's recovered dignity and demonstrated the capital worth that comes with those who seek assistance outside of their hometowns. Instead of being passive recipients of assistance, the program transformed displaced women into active contributors to local food production.

The significance of this success becomes clear when considering that Burkina Faso has been dealing with a long-running security and humanitarian crisis characterized by huge internal displacement, food insecurity and competition for limited natural resources. Thousands of internally displaced people have sought shelter in already vulnerable host villages in Ouahigouya's northern region, which is around 200 kilometers from the capital.

Working towards demand-driven assistance

When it comes to evidence-based, demand-driven support, perceptions differed between local/regional and international organizations of how well this was happening. Only 36 percent of local/regional media development organizations agreed that donors and international organizations took their responsibilities towards local organizations seriously, which is much lower than the 56 percent that said this was the case in 2025. In contrast, 92 percent of international organizations were of the opinion that they took these responsibilities seriously, which is considerably higher than the 81 percent who said it was the case in 2025. Looked at together, these figures show a bigger discrepancy in views than in 2025.

These diverging perspectives between local/regional and international organizations on whether expressed needs are taken seriously suggests that there are different understandings on what exactly taking responsibilities seriously means.

For instance, a respondent from an organization based in Europe described an iterative and adaptive approach when particular projects or activities were not a good fit:

“

We talked a lot to partners about e.g. digital security support: ‘What does that look like? What’s going to be best for you?’ And we heard over and over again very cautiously vocalized complaints about ‘I get offered this digital security training that is completely irrelevant for the context in which I operate, it’s irrelevant for my workflows, the kinds of threats they’re talking about are not the threats that I’m worried about,’ and I think one of the areas where [we have] been really effective here is in completely reshaping the way that we do that aspect of our work. To ensure that it’s very embedded within the experience of partners, that all our trainers are local, that the engagement is long term, so that it’s not just like ‘here’s your training, good luck,’ it’s ‘let’s keep on talking about the risks that you’re facing and how you can navigate them.’

Local/regional perceptions of international partner commitment

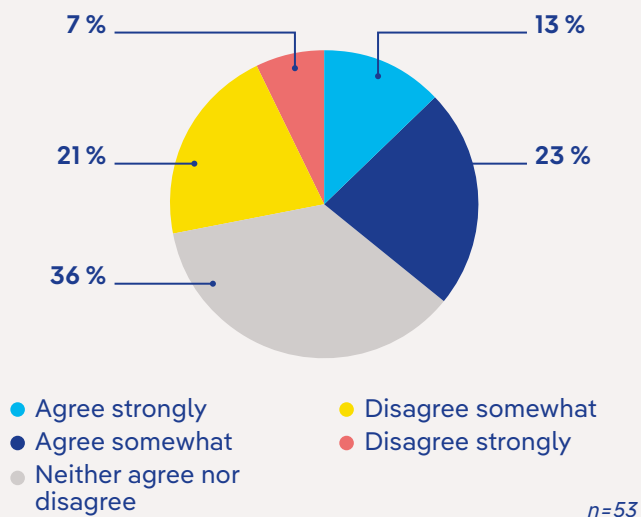


Figure 8: Item: Donors and international organizations take their responsibilities towards us as a local organization seriously; scale: Likert scale (agreement) 1–5

International perceptions of commitment towards local/regional partners

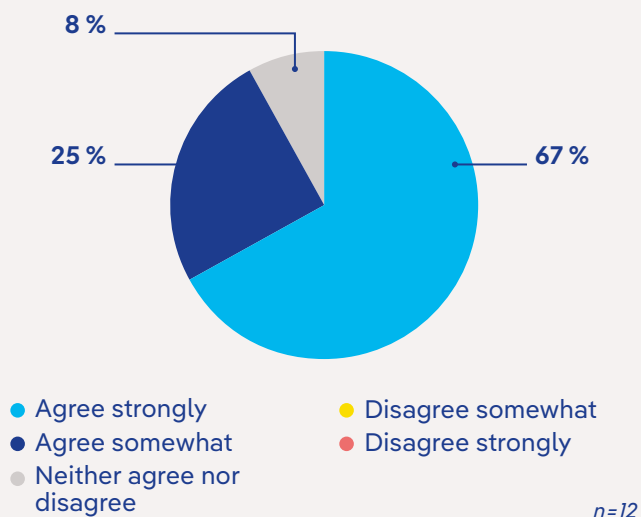


Figure 9: Item: We take our responsibilities towards local organizations seriously.; scale: Likert scale (agreement) 1–5

Other respondents, mostly from international organizations, described seeking to directly engage with donors to negotiate for what was really needed on the ground, such as lobbying for core funding rather than training in cases where organizations on the ground already have the technical expertise. Lobbying donors implies highlighting needs not only deemed important for international organizations, but also for local and regional organizations. The issue here would perhaps be whether they first consulted local and regional organizations to jointly determine the needs, such that they were “mandated” to take the issues forward.

Regardless of the need-determination process, respondents explained that lobbying donors for more contextually appropriate calls was a complex process. One issue raised was seemingly incoherent policy communication or application, depending on which level one was dealing with. There would be one stance from the central government for instance, but another from a regional arm, which made it difficult to devise suitable advocacy. Another was the fact that quite often funders wanted to see “instant” impact, which is at odds with generating evidence for systemic change. As elaborated on by a representative of an organization based in the MENA region:



I don't think a lot of donors understand the value in doing data-driven work, [which] takes time. They usually want the low-hanging fruits. They want impact now. or they want to see it daily. So, most of the interest has been on our fact-checking and investigative work, not so much our data-driven work.

As such, organizations, both local/regional and international, need to continue investing in demonstrating the importance of media development work that is aligned with needs on the ground. It must however be kept in mind that negotiating for a change of approach by donors is long-term structural work. Therefore, organizations should continue efforts to be in constant dialogue with funders, working and talking with them before calls for proposals are issued. This ensures that when the funding opportunities do arise, they are likely to have better results overall. Furthermore, there is need to consult each other as organizations working at the local, regional and international levels and to agree on a coherent set of needs and priorities that can be advanced at various levels in a complementary way.



CASE STUDY

Staying afloat amidst the turmoil

Beam Reports' blueprint for financial resilience beyond the grant in Sudan

In 2023, conflict in Sudan escalated while international donors struggled to adapt their rigid administrative procedures to the realities of a war zone, often leaving local partners without resources at their most vulnerable moments. Media development organization Beam Reports managed to weather the storm and has stayed afloat by adjusting its strategies amid the turmoil.

When conflict erupted in 2023, Beam Reports experienced further complications with donors who failed to acknowledge the situation the organization was in. Highlighting the disconnect, a European donor wanting to help amidst war required formal physical invoices and pay slips while the Beam Reports team was fleeing active combat. In practice, such requirements can expose staff and partners by forcing them to retain, transport or produce sensitive paperwork, reveal identities and locations, or engage local systems that may be surveilled or compromised.

Staff refused the funding rather than provide “faked” documentation. “I told them, you are pushing me into corruption. Because it’s not possible to provide receipts at that moment. So we said no, and we pulled out, which had a significant impact on our funding, of course. But at least we kept our values intact,” said Raghdan Orsud, co-founder of Beam Reports.

Already before the war, Beam Reports had been disappointed by donor behavior. The outlet reached an agreement in 2021 with a large US donor for a 150,000 dollars grant to create a curriculum tailored for fact-checkers in Sudan. Subsequently, the organization operated for eight months without receiving a single payment, despite contacting the donor regularly and offering solutions to process payments inside and outside of Sudan. Beam Reports hired people, conducted research, planned interviews and dedicated resources to the program. When they didn’t get the payment on time, the organization had to let go of staff, their reputation

suffered, and eventually the project was halted. The funds advanced by the team (less than 15 percent of the total amount agreed upon) were finally processed three years later.

These experiences prompted Beam Reports to pivot to a multi-pronged business model. The organization prioritizes service contracts over traditional grants to equalize the power dynamic with international partners. Management now “knows how to say no” if donors have unrealistic demands, Raghdan Orsud emphasized. On the revenue side, the organization aims to expand its sustainability model by offering structured research, media analysis and contextual insight services to international partners, diplomatic missions and private sector actors seeking a deeper understanding of Sudan’s information environment through its “Sudalytica” pillar. In addition, its fact-checking pillar specializes in monitoring and countering foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI), an advanced service that few companies can provide, which it also intends to commercialize. Moreover, the organization plans to launch paid subscriptions for high-value analytical reports, challenging the prevailing regional expectation that news should always be free. Finally, it invested in a multimedia studio in Sudan.

Beam Reports has the strategic foresight to treat media development as a professional service rather than a charitable endeavor. This mindset is essential to counter the rigidity of international donors who fail to prioritize local needs and to guarantee a steady stream of income.

By MJ Daoud and Omar Meksassi

Participation in global discussions, knowledge production and sector coordination

Inclusion in dialogue and discussion at various levels is an important part of strengthening local ownership, because it ensures representation of all voices, not only in the work on the ground, but also in the fora where overarching issues are discussed and, potentially, far-reaching decisions are made. This study therefore also examined the inclusion of local and regional organizations in international discussions and fora, as well as access to best practices and learnings. Slightly under half (44 percent) of local/regional media development organizations agreed that they were involved in the most important international discussions and fora in their regions on media development policy, norms, experience exchanges and information sharing. On the other hand, three quarters (75 percent) of international media development organizations agreed that they were involved in such discussions and fora.

Here one sees that international organizations are the ones most frequently engaged in sector-wide discussions, the result of which may sometimes be far reaching consequences for the sector without the inclusion of diverse, contextualized perspectives. This argues for being more deliberate in including stakeholders from all levels in such discussions. Such inclusion may consist of lowering barriers to access for regional and local media development organizations, through, for instance, ensuring that the discussions are held in parts of the world that are less expensive to travel to and that do not have over-complicated visa processes, or having more online engagements that people can access from the comfort of their home base. There is also need to design more elaborate consultation processes with local and regional organizations to ensure that their views are factored into such discussions at different levels. Furthermore, where relevant, it would be important to strengthen organizational capacities to take a broader view of the media development sector and contribute insights accordingly.

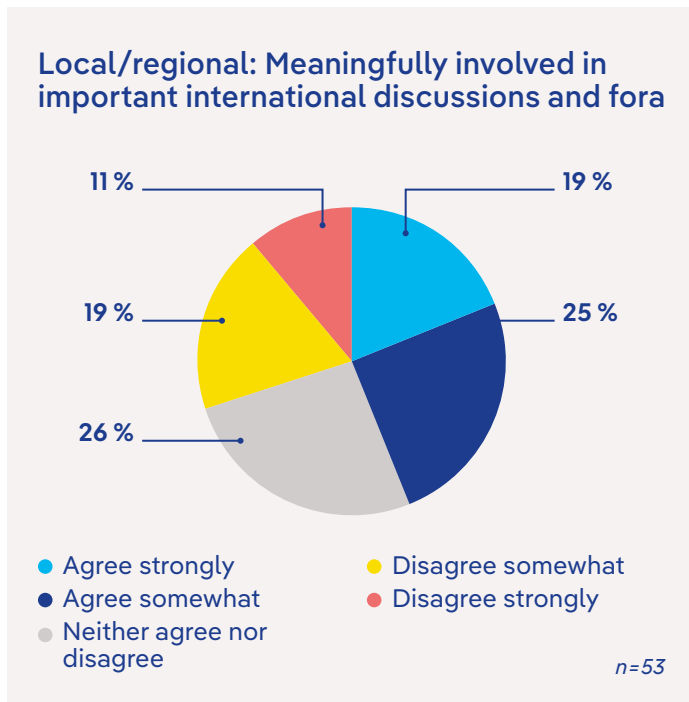


Figure 10: Item: Our organization is involved in the most important international discussions and fora in our region on media development policy, norms, experience exchanges and/or information sharing; scale: Likert scale (agreement) 1–5

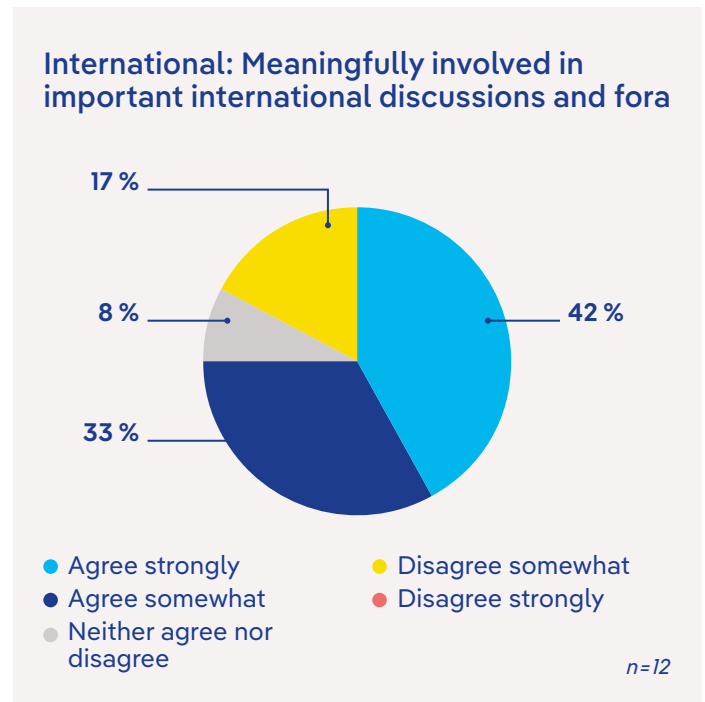


Figure 11: Item: Our organization is involved in the most important international discussions and fora on media development policy, norms, experience exchanges and/or information sharing; scale: Likert scale (agreement) 1–5

In regards to access to up-to-date information, knowledge and research on current developments affecting the media development sector, 41 percent [Fig 12] of all media development organizations indicated that best practices and learnings from media development approaches were sufficiently available to them. This is strikingly lower than the 58 percent that indicated they had access to sectoral best practices and learnings in early 2025.

It is not clear whether this decline is due to less willingness to share information than previously, or whether there is less information available overall. It is, however, worrying that there seems to be less access to learnings at a time when the media development sector is facing significant challenges.

On the other hand, 41 percent of local/regional media development organizations indicated that data from large studies conducted by international NGOs was made available while 70 percent [Fig 14] of international media development organizations indicated that they made such data available to local/regional organizations.

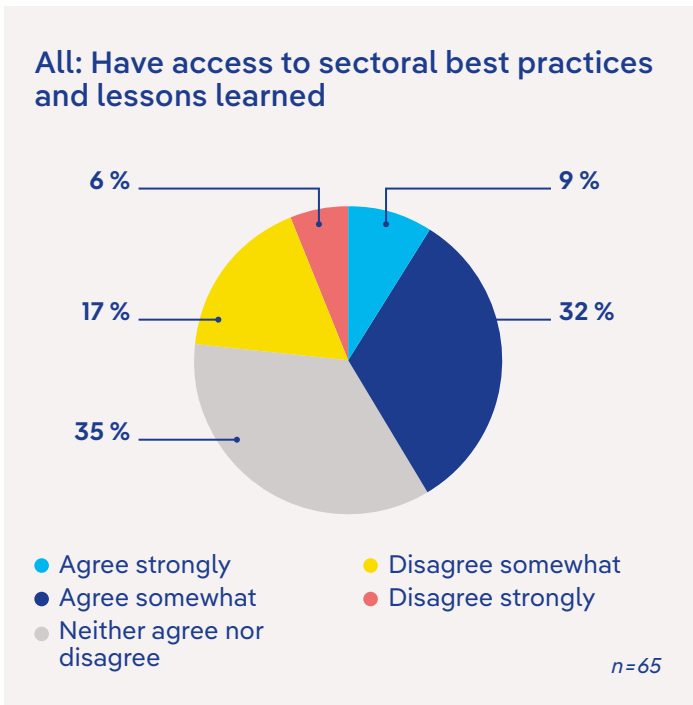


Figure 12: Item: Best practices and learnings from media development approaches are sufficiently available to us; scale: Likert scale (agreement) 1-5

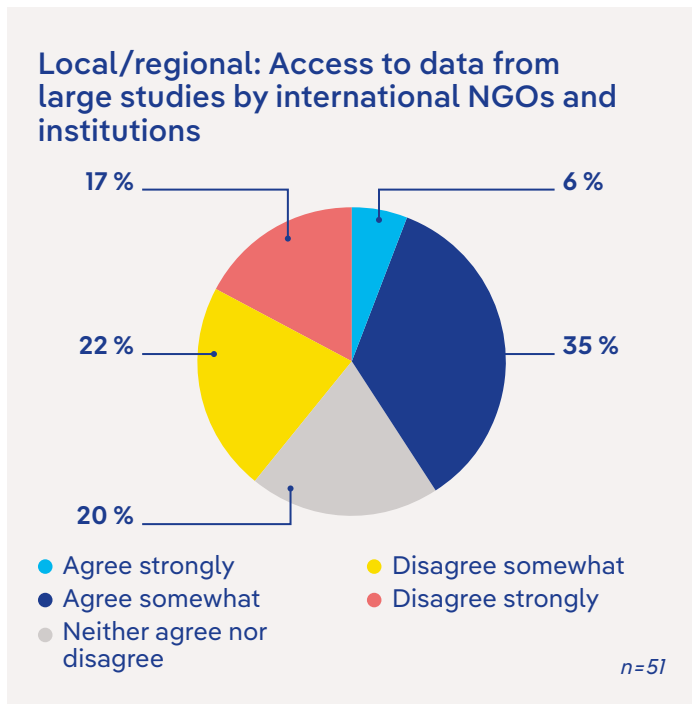


Figure 13: Item: Data from large studies conducted by international NGOs and institutions are made available to us; scale: Likert scale (agreement) 1-5

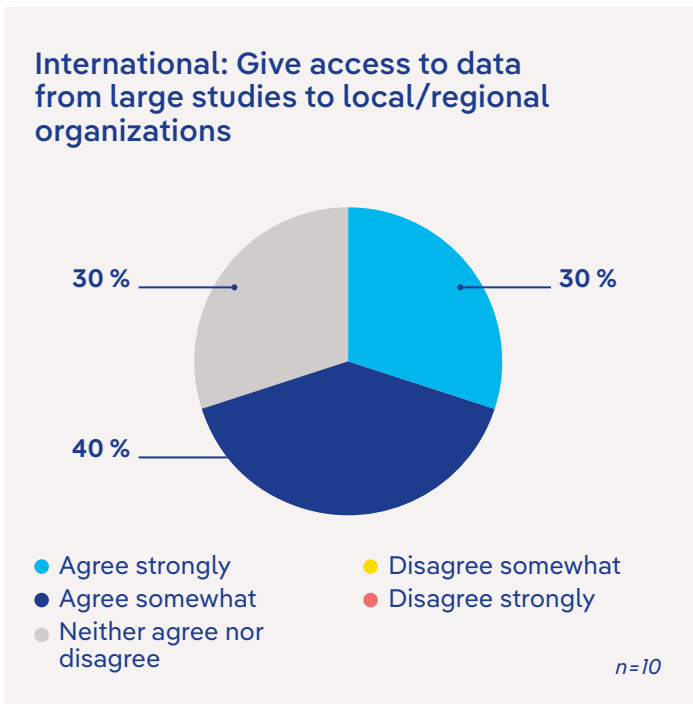


Figure 14: Item: We make data from large studies we conduct available to local/ regional organizations in the countries we work in; scale: Likert scale (agreement) 1-5

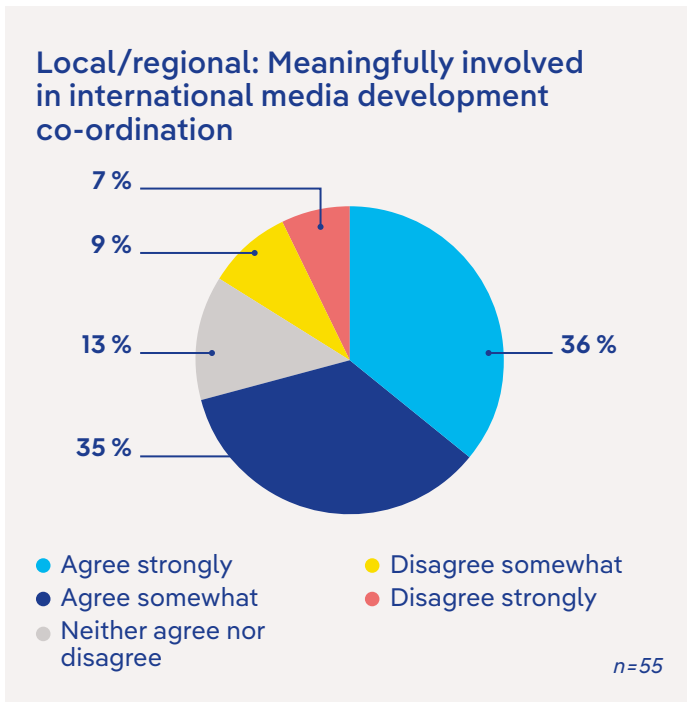


Figure 15: Item: *Our organization is meaningfully involved in co-ordination efforts between media development stakeholders in our country or countries*; scale: Likert scale (agreement) 1–5

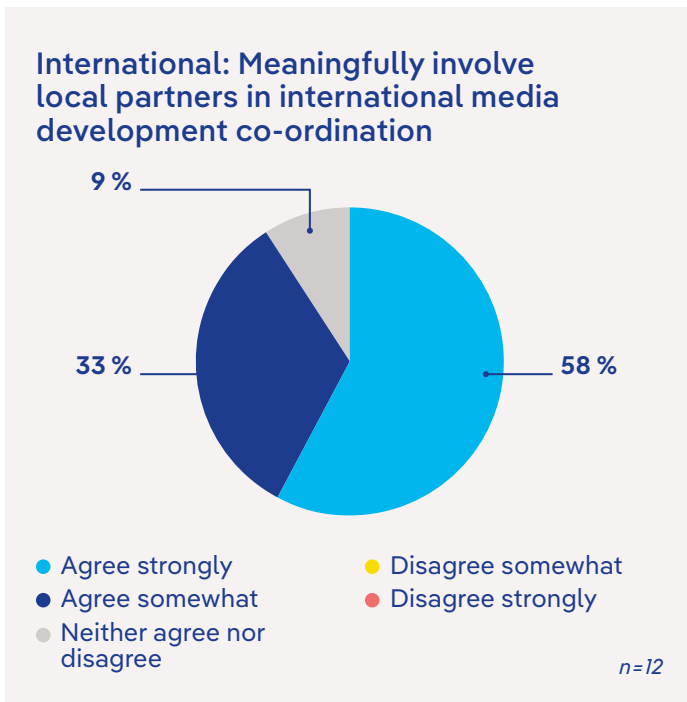


Figure 16: Item: *We meaningfully involve local partners in co-ordination efforts between media development stakeholders in the countries we work in*; scale: Likert scale (agreement) 1–5

Despite the discrepancy in views between the different categories of organizations on data accessibility, there seem to be information flows happening at different levels. For cross-sectoral learning to continue taking place, efforts need to continue to make sure that data from different studies is shared across different levels and actors.

On a further positive note, local and regional organizations are actively involved in coordination of the sector. The survey results showed that 71 percent of local/regional organizations were meaningfully involved in coordination efforts between media development stakeholders in their countries or regions. This is considerably higher than in early 2025, where 58 percent of local/regional organizations felt meaningfully involved.

This high level of coordination is evidenced by the continued development and growth of local networks and alliances as well as regional initiatives, which increasingly set strategic priorities for media development in their regions. These networks play a strong role in ensuring that media development assistance is better tailored to the needs on the ground, that the media sector they represent is more resilient against internal pressures, and that advocacy to donors is grounded in local needs.

Some international media development organizations are increasingly supporting such initiatives, seeing the impact of homegrown efforts on creating a healthy information ecosystem. As summarized by a European organization:

“**Owning the development agenda is not just about control of money by individual media actors. It’s also about who knows and sets the priorities for the sector, who speaks on its behalf, who can identify its needs, who can be a powerful alliance to also push back on governments when governments need to be pushed back on. [This is why supporting the] building of networks, alliances and coalitions has been a fundamental way we have worked. Local alliances and local networks avoid leaving the individual media actors vulnerable.**”

There were, however, concerns expressed that in some instances, locally/regionally led initiatives financed by foreign funds were unduly influenced, especially if they did not have other sources of funding. As such, local and

regional networks need to ensure that they have operational independence, through, for instance, diversifying funding sources.

The increased inclusion of representatives from Global Majority organizations in GFMD leadership was mentioned by interviewees from across various world regions as a positive example of making sure that Global Majority actors are meaningfully involved in overarching media development bodies. On the other hand, the importance of ensuring that such positions did not function as some form of tokenism was underlined by an international expert:

“

I think that is one area where more still needs to be done to strengthen the voice of our local media development actors and give them the confidence to know that they can, and they should be a part of the discourse at the global level in terms of shaping and influencing the discussions, not just being passive recipients and the amplifiers of certain positions.

Nevertheless, the importance of being at the table where decisions are made was clear. A good practice mentioned in this regard was sponsoring individuals from various world regions to be involved in standard setting bodies such as the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), which sets the technical standards for the Internet.

Local and regional organizations in the lead

Regional networks and initiatives that are locally led and making an impact in different parts of the world were mentioned by different interviewees, such as Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism (ARIJ) in the MENA region, M20 in the Southern African region, the Asian Media, Information and Communication Centre (AMIC) in the Asia region and Fundación Gabo in Latin America. There are also national journalism funds (funded nationally and fully led by local actors) in markets like Brazil and South Africa, and there is more South-South collaboration. These are just a sample of initiatives and networks that are taking the lead in driving media development in their respective regions.

One of the other ways in which local ownership is envisioned is through “providing incentives for international implementers to work through local and regional partners and ensuring a more significant share of ODA for media development reaches local and regional actors directly,” (OECD, 2024, p. 10). From information shared about the funds application process, incentives seemed to work in the opposite direction. Respondents from local and regional organizations described the initial financial outlay or application requirements as being beyond their administrative capacities, and which therefore necessitated relying on international organizations to lead the applications. This resulted in a more complex process and in some cases, budgets that were not split fairly as per the perceptions of some organizations.

69%

Percentage of local/regional media development organizations have experienced competition from international organizations for the same funding ($n = 55$)

Furthermore, 69 percent of local/regional media development organizations had experienced competition from international organizations for the same funding. Equally, 67 percent of international organizations indicated that they had competed with local/regional organizations for the same funding.

67%

Percentage of international media development organizations have competed with local/regional organizations for the same funding ($n = 12$)

However, interviewees from local/regional organizations mentioned that they were not eligible for some funding that the international organizations could apply for, disadvantaging them. This is a clear disincentive for these organizations to take the lead in project applications. Furthermore, it suggests that there is less funding available overall that is exclusively for local/regional organizations.

Local and regional organizations occasionally questioned the role of international media development organizations, even while acknowledging that they brought much-needed administrative and financial capacities in many cases. On the other hand, some international organizations described struggling to find reliable long-term partners who had the

necessary organizational capacities. In this regard, some organizations mentioned making use of their long-term knowledge of a particular context—drawn from working in the region for many years—to identify partners to strengthen. Rather than working only with already-established organizations, they leveraged their understanding of the context to increase the pool of eligible strong partners in the long term. They focused on building the capacity of smaller organizations rather than only doing open calls for partners, because they were aware that such calls would tend to favor more advanced organizations which already had the capacity to make successful applications.

A respondent from an international organization mentioned that they constantly reflect on the value they bring within a cooperation, and that they even engage in critical conversations on when it might make sense to not be involved in a cooperation with a local/regional organization:

“

We’ve certainly had numerous occasions where we’ve decided that there’s no value add for us to bring and that there’s no point in taking a share of a budget when the work can be done without us. Again, the funder-partner dynamic is always there, but we will really try and ask the question of our partners, ‘what do you think we can bring to this and why would we be useful?’

Apart from administrative and financial capacities, other important roles articulated by international organizations include mobilizing networks across different countries, working across different contexts that regional and national organizations may not have the capacities to, meeting compliance requirements by donors, and lobbying donors for better understanding of what is needed on the ground. Representatives from two organizations that work across various world regions summed up this added value as follows:

“

Our partnership and business development work is not just about raising money. But also a big part is just to try and represent the needs that we see through our network of local offices and local staff on the ground and make sure that that is surfaced where those funding decisions are made.

“

Another crucial role is identifying trends which may not be obvious when only looking at one situation, but which are significant when looked at from a bird’s eye view. Due to working in different countries and regions simultaneously, international organizations are better able to identify, compare and foresee developments that may be important globally and bring these to the attention of funders or policy makers as needed.



Journalists participate in a training workshop on investigative journalism and media safety organized by Pakistan Press Foundation

© Pakistan Press Foundation

CASE STUDY

Cracking the EU code together

How the Pakistan Press Foundation found ways to access EU funding in a restrictive environment through collaboration

It rarely happens that Global Majority organizations team up to secure consecutive multi-year grants from major Global North donors. And yet two consortia of organizations from Pakistan did exactly that from the European Union (EU). Through collaboration, they managed to overcome the difficulties that often impede local organizations from accessing EU funding while adapting to restrictive national registration requirements.

The first 490,000 euros (570,000 dollars) program, focused on freedom of expression and access to information, was led by the Centre for Peace and Development Initiatives and ended in 2022–2023. The second and ongoing 830,000 euros (964,000 dollars) program is dedicated to digital and media freedom. It runs until December 2026 and is led by Media Matters for Democracy.

“The EU requirements are very high,” a representative from a media development organization confirmed. According to her, it is usually international organizations that manage to convince the donor because of their strict criteria in terms of funding eligibility, co-financing and financial reporting requirements.

The EU is one of the largest donors for media development and journalism support initiatives in Asia, having offered an estimated 14.4 million euros (17 million dollars) between 2020 and 2024, according to a Global Forum for Media Development report.

A PPF representative argued that the “long standing relationships and rapport” between the members of the consortium were one important factor for success. This helped at all three levels of coordination during application, implementation and advocating for follow-on funding.

A second factor was the fact that existing national policies for non-profit registration and foreign funding disclosure had prompted many international NGOs to leave the country. This development left the field clear for local organizations to be lead applicants for EU funding because EU grant calls now included eligibility conditions of non-profit status and local registration in adherence to government policies.

In other regions of Asia, organizations find that international groups often take on the lead role and relegate them to the partner role. By exploring partnerships and forming consortia to jointly bid for EU grant funding, local media development organizations in Asia can effectively overcome the tough eligibility requirements set by the donor even as they demand equitable application criteria and funding shares.

By Waqas Naeem

What to do?

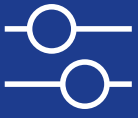
The findings of this chapter show that there is some progress on the implementation of local ownership, but still a lot of room for improvement in all aspects. Some steps that can be taken going forward include:

Inspiration for media development organizations

- Commit to consulting local and regional organizations and the local media sector when it comes to priority-setting for projects. Furthermore, commit to working within the priorities identified and keeping communication lines open should there be changes necessary. This is crucial in ensuring continued buy-in from those on the ground.
- Both local/regional and international organizations should engage in continuous dialogue to determine what satisfactory involvement in priority setting should consist of.
- Organizations at all levels—local, regional and international—need to continue investing in demonstrating to funders the importance of media development work that is aligned with needs on the ground and need to continue the dialogue to lobby for contextually appropriate funding calls.
- Instead of competing, organizations working at the local, regional and international levels need to join forces and come up with a coherent set of needs and priorities that apply across the board. This way it would be easier to develop strategies that target consistent, incremental change in a particular context.
- Both international media development organizations and funders should make sure people and perspectives from local and regional organizations are present at high-level international fora and discussions. This could be through more intensive consultation at the local and regional level, providing funding for travel or through making sure that meetings are held in places with low barriers to entry, or simply online, with assured internet access.
- Data on best practices and learnings as well as from large studies needs to continue being made accessible to media development organizations working at all levels.
- Media development organizations need to strengthen their collaborations with other civil society groups and networks.

Inspiration for donors

- Although funding may be based on government strategic priorities, it is vital to invest in understanding what is needed in a particular context. Therefore, more needs assessment should be done in collaboration with actors working at the local level in order to understand the most contextually appropriate interventions to support. And care must be taken to continue these collaborations throughout project implementation.
- In the same way that many funding opportunities are tailored for the capacities of international media development organizations, funding for local and regional media development players should be ring-fenced such that international media development organizations are not eligible to apply for it. At the same time, some resources need to be allocated to support local and regional organizations in the project cycles where needed. This would ensure that local and regional media development organizations stand a fighting chance to receive direct funding themselves.
- Ensure that continuous learning processes are established on funding applications, project implementation, closure and evaluations, especially for local and regional organizations, to ensure that all actors are involved and heard.
- Include coordination and advocacy as crucial parts of projects and provide necessary funding for it or even have specific advocacy projects rather than advocacy being an underfunded sideline.



CHAPTER 3

Adaptation



How media development organizations are coming to terms with the changing media and information environment

This chapter deals with the challenges facing media development organizations when it comes to new technical, political and media demands.

Key findings

- Media development organizations feel that they are well-equipped to come to terms with the shifting media and information landscape. **71 percent reported that their organizations are adapting appropriately** to the changing environment.
- One of the biggest challenges for media developers is posed by the **disruptions caused primarily by Big Tech**. Beyond the funding issues mentioned previously, Global Majority organizations report of neglect of their countries when it comes to the adverse treatment of public interest content, facilitation of the spread of disinformation and hate speech, as well as pushback against human rights-based regulation.
- A particular focus is currently on **new AI-facilitated innovations**. Media assistance needs to revise its skill set to be able to respond to these demands, while at the same time avoiding the pitfalls that happened with social media. **Guidance is needed**, for instance, when it comes to efficiency gains while safeguarding (human-facilitated) journalism quality and avoiding buy-out of archives to the advantage of the new AI corporations.
- On the political side, media development organizations are feeling the **pressure exerted by authoritarian governments** through foreign agent laws, strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPP) and other forms of intimidation. A new phenomenon is that democratically elected, often right-leaning populist **governments from the Global North are also exerting pressure** on

organizations to deprioritize certain topics and even avoid certain language to make sure they are not targeted for budget cuts.

- Media developers are adjusting to the new hostility towards public interest media by increasing support for media safety. **61 percent of media development organizations offer digital safety support** and **29 percent engage in physical safety support**.
- When it comes to their target groups, the vast majority of organizations are taking a more inclusive approach. **78 percent indicate supporting new kinds of actors** like influencers and start-ups, although several organizations have reservations due to a lack of professional ethics outside of journalism.
- A recurring sentiment, especially amongst international media developers, is that **media development needs to move beyond mere capacity development** to facilitate an enabling media and information ecosystem. The **focus is on collaboration** rather than competition and increasing advocacy efforts is named as a key ingredient for ensuring the sector's survival. **56 percent of organizations indicate that they have recently increased their advocacy work**.

Introduction

Media and journalism have always been in flux, from the invention of the printing press to the advent of audio and television broadcasting to the more recent upheavals associated with digital media. Journalists and outlets have had to adapt to these dynamics. According to biologists, adaptation is crucial for evolutionary success, particularly in changing environments. “Species that evolve too slowly may be unable to adapt to environmental change and are

more likely to go extinct than faster-evolving species,” (Kussell, 2025).

In the media and information ecosystem, adaptation to rapid changes in technical infrastructure, economic models and the political environment is a major challenge to media outlets and media development organizations alike. Social media have become the prime information source for young people (Newman et al., 2025a) while new actors such as influencers and individual content creators are becoming important relay stations in news production (Hurcombe, 2025b, p. 1524; Newman et al., 2025b). At the same time, spaces for free expression are under pressure worldwide. Authoritarianism, national interests and geopolitical realignments threaten not only the media themselves but also the media development sector that supports them (Deane, 2021; Walker, 2018).

When new distribution platforms emerge, when established business models are called into question, when authoritarianism threatens to invade spaces for freedom of expression and dialogue, media and civil society cannot conduct “business as usual.” They need to take these changes in their environment into account in order to be able to continue the important work they are doing.

At the same time, delegating the need for change to individual organizations or even individuals represents a lopsided approach. Often, systemic and structural changes are at the root of adaptation needs and thus interventions need to address the ecosystem as a whole if they want to make a difference, though this is a challenge. Stakeholders will tend to pivot to the individual or the organizational rather than the systemic level for reasons of effectiveness. Many rightly believe that they cannot influence the system as a whole as much as they can benefit the actors within that environment.

Seismic changes such as issues of finance, (re)distribution and agenda-setting were dealt with in the previous two chapters. This chapter will focus primarily on adaptation needs vis à vis two other tectonic shifts in the overall landscape, namely at the technical and political levels. It specifically deals with the relationship between Big Tech and media development, the particular challenges posed by AI, the politics of media development, crisis response of the sector, the inclusion of new media actors and how media development approaches are being adjusted to meet these challenges. Of course, it cannot be denied that the broader issues are interrelated. For example, the excessive influence of Big Tech (technical) has had stark implications for the business models of public interest media

(economic). And the Trump administration’s policy changes (political) have had an equally significant impact on the money in the system (economic).

Adaptability of media development organizations

To what extent are the organizations affected by the changing environment reacting? Our quantitative data showed that a clear majority of media development organizations (71 percent) is convinced that they are adapting appropriately to the changing media and information environment. Though this figure represented a self-assessment, it did illustrate that the sector is adapting its strategies and feels up to the challenges that these changes pose. In social psychology, self-efficacy, i.e. the belief that “one can successfully execute the behavior required to produce the outcomes,” (Bandura, 1977: 193) is regarded as a necessary precondition for behavior change. Thus, media development organizations’ belief that they are adapting appropriately is an important milestone on the path to coping with the current challenges.

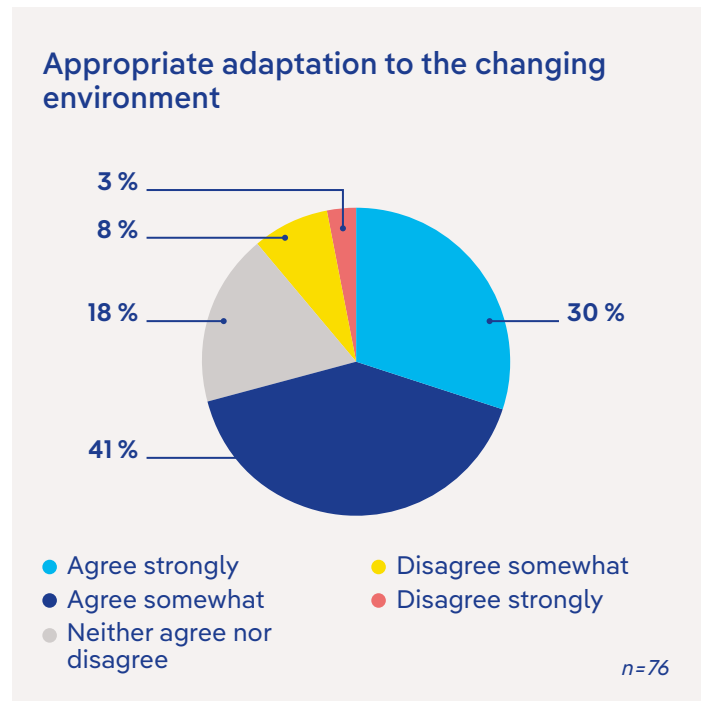


Figure 17: Item: Our organization is adapting appropriately to the changes in the media and information environment; scale: Likert scale (agreement) 1–5

The only region where this opinion was less prevalent, according to our data, was Africa (45 percent). While some African actors emphasize the need to catch up on digital developments, others are particularly well aware of the new technological developments, as well as of the fact that the challenges for journalism are huge. The technical transformation associated with AI, of course, is also very much related to issues of internet connectivity and data availability.

Organizations from Yemen and Burkina Faso, for example, indicated that it is not a top priority in their context. “It’s only now that we are updating our methodologies to also embrace social media and other digital tools,” remarked one representative of an African organization.

Challenges posed by technology

The Big Tech predicament

In many world regions, one of the most transformative challenges came first from search engines, then from social media and is now traversing to all things AI. What challenges have arisen from these technologically driven disruptions and how are media development organizations reacting?

The drivers behind the major technological changes of the past two decades are often referred to as Big Tech, including Alphabet (Google, YouTube), Meta (Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp), Amazon, Microsoft and Apple. Together, these large corporations have a market capitalization of over 14 trillion dollars, illustrating what kind of power they represent. With AI, new players such as OpenAI and Anthropic are joining the mix, further exacerbating the concentration of power in the hands of a small number of corporations. Of course, Big Tech is not confined to the US. Actors such as Bytedance (TikTok) from China or Spotify from Sweden are part of this complex.

The role of Big Tech was mostly regarded as a problem by the sector. When viewed across all regions, many critical points tended to recur while some positive aspects were also mentioned. Media viability/financial issues have already been discussed in the chapter on funding, thus we will not be touching on that challenge in this sub-chapter. The focus will rather be on Big Tech’s neglect of certain countries, deprioritization of public interest content,

algorithm-driven spread of bad content, and efforts to curtail reasonable regulation. How are media development organizations navigating these challenges posed by Big Tech?

The first critical point concerns the tendency of Big Tech to ignore actors from Global Majority countries and to deprioritize markets that, from the point of view of the platforms, are economically insignificant. This has consequences for individual media brands, but also at the sectoral level.

For instance, hostile regimes use what a representative of an Asian organization termed “digital armies” to flag independent media posts on Facebook or X as violating community standards and these are then taken down for lack of content moderation resources. Thus, political pressure and Big Tech complacency combine to stifle the very independent voices that the sector is engaged in elevating.

At the sectoral level, organizations also find it difficult to muster the bargaining power that it takes to confront the digital giants. “It’s really a David/Goliath situation and it’s very pronounced,” observed a media development researcher, recounting that the spaces and partnerships that had existed over the past ten years with Big Tech have gradually eroded.

One of the issues strongly discussed in this context is digital sovereignty. Whereas outlets today are “captive of Meta or TikTok” as one respondent for an international media development organization put it, there is potential for alternatives. Many interviewees stressed that the dominance of Big Tech combined with the current US administration’s pivot away from multilateralism makes looking into alternative systems the order of the day.

In the context of loosening dependencies from Big Tech, some European media development organizations see their role in facilitating exchanges between tech stakeholders from Europe and other continents or South-to-South exchanges. “We see it would make sense to have Moldovans talking to Senegalese on those issues and that’s where we may have a role to play when it comes to building networks,” remarked one interviewee from a European organization. This discussion pertains not only to social media, but also to AI (see below). Stand-alone tech solutions like Rappler’s Lighthouse content distribution and community management platform are also discussed as possible solutions for one-sided Big Tech dependencies.

A second point of criticism concerning Big Tech is the companies' attitude towards independent news content. Examples include the blocking of news content by Google in Australia and Canada, the scrapping of Meta's fact-checking support in parts of the world and X's deprioritization of content moderation. Interviewees stressed the need to convince Big Tech that the quality of content is an asset to them. Said a US-based expert:

“If we could do anything, it would be really prioritizing the centrality of public service media and public good ideals. That it's not just something to be monetized and controlled by Big Tech players or by Wall Street.”

The third recurring criticism of Big Tech is that their algorithms elevate problematic content, such as disinformation and hate speech, that attract people's attention away from reliable information. Added to this, inauthentic content and what is termed AI slop, i.e. trivial AI generated content of no public value, is allowed to flood social media further reducing the prevalence of good quality news and information. A study by the Samir Kassir Foundation found that disinformation, hate speech and propaganda flourish on social media in countries like Lebanon (Baydoun, 2023: 39). And in wholly autocratic systems, according to a representative of an Asian organization, the challenge “is not a question of victory, it's a question of resisting the onslaught.” It is an onslaught that is all too often facilitated by Big Tech platforms.

With the advent of AI, the playing field has once again shifted and broadened. “We are still at the early stages of another big shift in technology (Generative AI) which threatens to upend the news industry by offering more efficient ways of accessing and distilling information at scale,” writes Nic Newman (2026) in his annual outlook for the Reuters Institute. One of the most obvious impacts of AI on media outlets has been the reduction in traffic caused by users clicking on AI summaries rather than search engine results displayed below them (Chapekis & Lieb, 2025). At the same time, the potential for efficiency gains cannot be denied. It is certainly the central reason why media outlets are adopting AI (Simon, 2024: 14).

Finally, Big Tech is lobbying for non-restrictive legislation that does not jeopardize their business models. Research by Agência Pública (2025) has shown how these big corporations use their power in Latin America to prevent laws and regulation aimed at having them take responsibility

for the content shared on their platforms. According to a South American expert, media outlets in the region are prone to “flirting with Big Tech,” since these companies have become a sizable donor in the region. And yet many organizations agree that “important discussions around relationships with Big Tech have to happen, how governments are going to work and regulate OTT (over-the-top) services,” as one African interviewee put it. Some organizations point to the EU and the Digital Services Act as the most effective means of ensuring platform accountability. A representative of a Latin American organization advised to approach regulation from a rights perspective: “Digital rights protection in those environments is key. If we abandon that and yield to technicism, it is not possible to protect rights in that space.”

Big Tech has also been a contributor to media development in its own right and many media houses have profited from this support. One representative of an international media development entity argued:

“We need to engage with Silicon Valley. We need to engage with the Facebooks, the Open AI's of the world. They have tons of resources.”

But many internationals are reluctant to join forces with Big Tech funding-wise for the reasons mentioned above. And advocacy-wise, it is mainly the international actors that raise their voices. “You see it in Europe and the US,” said a representative of an organization based in the MENA region. “I don't see it much in our regions. Technology is being forced on us. I don't think a lot of donors think of that when it comes to Africa and Middle East.”



BCME supports independent media in Latvia in adapting, e.g. to technological developments—here at the Baltic MIL Day in Riga

CASE STUDY

Mastering digital transformation

Strengthening Latvia's small regional media to go digital

When young people in small Latvian villages reached for their smartphones to find out what was happening in their hometown a few years ago, chances are they were not finding much beyond what their friends and relatives were sharing. Small regional media outlets in Latvia struggled to meet the digital demands of younger, digital savvy audiences. Many restricted their output to printed editions.

The COVID pandemic proved to be a game changer in this regard. The EU provided funds to support local media in mastering digital transformation.

“The approach to mitigating this divide in regional media goes beyond the mere purchase of technology,” explained a representative of Baltic Centre for Media Excellence (BCME). “It focuses on capacity building, content innovation and sustainable business solutions by making use of modern IT tools, particularly artificial intelligence.”

BCME and their partners Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences and the learning company KIC quickly noticed that besides digital competencies there was another problem. Regional media's heavy reliance on government and municipality funding reduced their motivation to transform and adapt to changing market demands. So, they decided to help outlets optimize and automate processes, enhance outlets' understanding of audience dynamics and diversify sources of revenue. Through its combined approach of simultaneously investing in technology and skills while also integrating digital solutions across all layers of work, the project enabled regional media to meet contemporary standards and strengthen their long-term sustainability.

Rural media outlets in Latvia, as in other Baltic states and Eastern Europe in general, continue to face challenges after the withdrawal of funds. “Smaller outlets are falling off the grid,” the BCME representative warned, though these media were urgently needed in a context of growing populism and disinformation. Thus, BCME implements a holistic approach to ensure the future of independent voices in Latvia by not just supporting media capacities but also advising government on media literacy policies to teach the value of good quality information to citizens from a young age. Finally, the Centre also advocates for media needs at cross-national donor meetings.

This case study shows the crucial role media development organizations and donors are playing in enabling media's adaptation to the new digital realities. When young people reach for their smartphones nowadays, especially in the Latgales region of Latvia, chances are that they will come across relevant local information brought to them by their regional media.

By Maryia Sadouskaya-Komlach and colleague

The challenge of AI

In a recent publication, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) outlined guidelines for member states on safeguarding media freedom in the age of Big Tech platforms and AI (OSCE 2025). In his foreword, OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media Jan Braathu emphasizes that “this is not merely about technological change. It is ultimately about freedom of information and freedom of expression.” This was one of the prime motivators behind the Paris Charter on AI and Journalism (Reporters Without Borders, 2023) which rallied organizations in media development and press freedom to determine guiding principles that could safeguard media and journalism in the age of AI.

So how can media development organizations tackle the challenges associated with AI? Respondents generally chose a two-pronged approach to answering this question. On the one hand, they called on media practitioners and outlets to adapt to the changes. AI innovations were seen as an opportunity for optimizing reach and efficiency. On the other, they called on the entire sector to reflect and make sure that it does not commit the same mistakes as it did when social media emerged.

According to a report by Thomson Reuters Foundation (Radcliffe, 2025), 81 percent of a group of surveyed journalists from around the world already use AI tools for writing, editing or factchecking. At the same time, only 13 percent have official guidelines for AI usage in their workplace. “I think what you say works now could well not work in six months time or 12 months time. The rate of change is so fast,” observed one representative of an international media development organization. “But I think media have to take part in all the changes that are happening around them. They have to be involved, they have to be flexible and adaptable.”

Media development organizations are assisting media outlets in thinking through how they can use AI to optimize their processes, at the same time acknowledging that “people in smaller or medium-sized newsrooms have a lot of knowledge because they just take time to try things out,” as one European respondent put it. And Global Majority organizations are anxious to not miss the bus. Said a representative of an Asian organization:

“

I think in terms of AI literacy, that is an area which we don't want to be at a point where we are learning it once the West has already learned it. The needs and realities are different here, so I don't think our programming and tools in AI should come once it is figured out by the West but rather it should come now.

On the one hand, efficiency gains could result in mass retrenchment. One interviewee painted a worst-case scenario from his perspective: “Thank you, you taught us how to integrate AI in our newsrooms. We know the processes. Now we don't need those five people.” He continued, warning that “we just have to be very careful and come up with strategies on how to integrate those AI processes in newsrooms and yet support our media owners in their efforts to produce genuine, not synthetic content.” There were also voices that warned the efficiency claims of AI may turn out to be illusory: “We are hearing that it's essential to keep human verification in the loop as a media organization that is committed to trust and accuracy. And so it doesn't replace as much human time and effort as you might expect at first blush.”

Solely concentrating on potential benefits while losing sight of the bigger picture is something that one media development consultant hoped would not happen again:

“

We're going through the same thing as we went through with social media platforms. We as media development on the one hand warned about digital rights, and on the other hand, we actively advocated to our partners to use these tools. And also with AI, there's a genuine tension that we need to step back and go, hang on, we've been through this before and we've made massive errors.

Currently both large corporations and intermediary agents are approaching media houses to buy up their “rare language” archives and both the media and media development organizations do not know how to react or what fair prices are. “I think guidance is needed,” remarked a respondent. While acknowledging that the inclusion of smaller language communities has the potential to improve the diversity of information available on the internet, as witnessed for example by Mozilla's Common Voice

Initiative, the valuation and the terms under which they could be licensed remain unclear.

The rate of change in AI is also a source of uncertainty for media development organizations implementing projects on the ground. One interviewee compared it to the internet in 1999: “Nobody really knows what AI will look like in the next couple of years.”

Several representatives of media development organizations stressed the importance of working together in these technically challenging times. One participant from a European media development organization sees “a tipping point” being reached at which it becomes important for different sectors — media development, humanitarian aid, the green and tech sectors — to find a common position in regard to Big Tech. “That requires perhaps decisions that are brave but not in line with the business as we have done it for decades,” said the respondent, echoing Martin Scott’s perspective article (see p. 6) on reimagining the field of media development.

Political backsliding

The politics of media development

In the political context, it might seem misleading to speak of “adaptation.” Certainly, the term should not imply that media development stakeholders bow to authoritarian pressure, stop advocating for freedom of expression and self-censor. In this context, adaptation is targeted more towards increasing resilience and safety, as well as re-evaluating what is feasible under changing political conditions.

In 2025 and for the first time, Reporters Without Borders classified the global state of press freedom as a “difficult situation” with roughly half of the world’s population living in countries where the situation is judged as “very serious” (RSF 2025). Journalists and media outlets are most severely affected by this. Warned a representative of an Asian organization:

“

I believe that donors need to continue to make sure that they keep supporting the communication, media and information landscape. Without their support it can crumble.

How have media development organizations been experiencing and reacting to this rise in authoritarianism? Several countries have introduced foreign agent type laws, starting with Russia in 2017. In states like Georgia, Peru, Uganda, Nicaragua or Pakistan organizations are having to change their legal status and have their names put on a “foreign agents” list to continue working. And the rhetoric coming out of countries like China or the US have not helped. A representative of another Asian organization referred to the Trump administration as setting anti-media standards “and every other head of state is looking and saying: true, it’s a problem. Let’s all band together.”

But the authoritarian playbook is much broader than rhetoric or legislation. As one international media development representative put it:

“

What we’re seeing more than anything is the ways of undermining the press are so myriad and multifaceted and overwhelming. Because you’ve got everything from SLAPs, threatening individual journalists with financial ruin to threatening their families to squeezing them economically. When you start to list out the different ways that journalists can be placed under pressure even in contexts where you don’t feel you’ve reached that point, it’s quite alarming.

Another respondent noted, there are also always “governments and businesses who want to buy and subvert media,” to capture them for their own interests.

But independent media and media development organizations have proven to be extremely resilient thus far. Several organizations from Asia described how they had reduced salaries and kept going, even after the bulk of funding had been withdrawn. This puts a severe strain on the actors involved, but as yet, respondents indicated that few outlets or organizations have folded. In repressive environments, a respondent from Latin America suggested widening the focus of journalistic formats. In Latin America, journalists would choose creative formats like making reports during bus rides in Venezuela or journalism at the bar in Argentina to rid themselves of the tighter binds that are attached to classic journalism reporting.

So how well prepared is media development to monitor the potential risks and harms associated with rising authoritarianism? Undoubtedly, media development organizations need to closely monitor the risks in increasingly repressive environments. And yet, the proportion of organizations that report having appropriate tools to monitor and prevent harm to public interest media has remained the same as in 2025 (44 percent). Although it seems natural that no radical changes were to be expected from one year to the next, the intensified authoritarian clamp-down in regions like Latin America and Asia makes it all the more important for media development organizations to dedicate more resources and attention to risk monitoring.

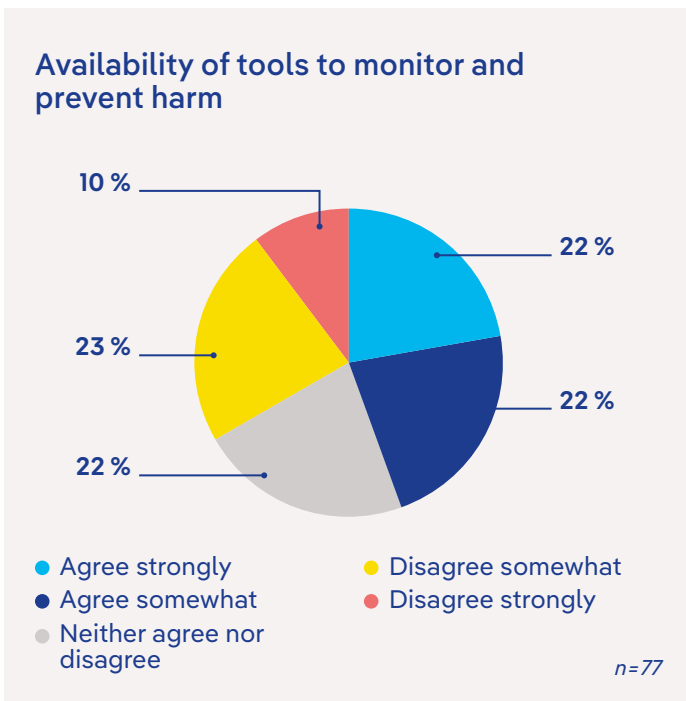


Figure 18: Item: *Our organization has tools to monitor and prevent harm to public interest media organizations*; scale: Likert scale (agreement) 1–5

Shifting donor narratives

Another political trend raised several times in the interviews was the strong focus of donor countries on issues of defense and security. On the one hand, it would seem that this posed an opportunity for the sector to access previously untapped sources of funding. For example, a media development organization from the MENA region regularly took part in security conferences such as the one in Munich to make the case for media safety: “We entered that field and it gives us an aha moment from people who

never hear people coming from the human rights community and civil society. We proactively seek participation in these kinds of events.”

On the other hand, the securitization narrative raised fears that media development organizations and the media they support may be instrumentalized and lose their independence. One international media development representative admitted:

“What I’m not comfortable with is media and security because you are kind of asking media to take a side. As media you have to be able to still criticize laws. So it’s a very touchy association to make. We have to be careful.”

And another worried that topics not aligned with security priorities like the human rights-based approach and gender-sensitive reporting might fall by the wayside. An African interviewee recounted having been asked to work on Russian disinformation in their region and declining for fear of being politically instrumentalized.

Interviewees whose organizations received funding directly from governments found that there is pressure to align with the specific administration’s thematic priorities. This concerned the topics that funding is given for (see chapter on funding). The US has cut funding related to gender issues, fact-checking and disinformation, leading to projects being relabeled and reframed in order to not be subjected to the cuts. One representative from Africa chose to speak of “public interest information” rather than “journalism” for this reason.

Several interviewees also saw donors such as the Nordic governments and the EU concentrating funding closer to home (e.g. Ukraine) and pursuing an agenda that, for instance, curbs migration at the cost of support for media development programs in Africa and Asia. And many interviewees felt that media development money has always been political, just the strings attached hadn’t been pulled as strongly as they are today. Speaking of the MENA region, one respondent formulated: “At least a few years ago, there was still some veil of consistency in terms of political agenda,” which he found no longer to be the case. And an African interviewee said that politicization had prompted funders beyond the US to shy away from funding topics regarded as “controversial,” like fact-checking.



CASE STUDY

Defining priorities in media support

The case of SembraMedia in dialogue with a Big Tech funder

In early 2025, organizations dedicated to media development in Latin America were severely affected by the reduction in international cooperation, particularly following funding cuts from the United States. In this scenario, organizations such as SembraMedia, which works with independent digital media in the region, had to review their strategies and partnerships, seeking to sustain support programs in a context of crisis that affected organizations, media outlets and initiatives to strengthen journalism throughout the region.

In this context, SembraMedia engaged in a dialogue with a large technology company with which it was working on media support initiatives, with the aim of rethinking priorities and evaluating how to sustain and adapt existing programs. Although not a traditional philanthropic funder, this type of actor has gained relevance in recent years in financing and supporting journalistic initiatives (De Toni & Segura, 2025).

At SembraMedia's request, the funder is not mentioned in this case.

The process of readjusting SembraMedia's portfolio took place in a spirit of mutual respect and dialogue, according to those involved in the discussions. Together, the organizations rethought which initiatives were most relevant, evaluating the continuity of existing programs or adapting formats to broaden their reach. This process included an evaluation of recent experiences and a report prepared by SembraMedia on the crisis facing the media, the need for strategic support spaces, and the importance of promoting new projects, especially in contexts of information deserts. The definition of priorities was oriented towards local needs, while taking into account the scope and limitations of available resources.

The experience highlights the importance of funders creating spaces for discussion on funding priorities, something that does not always happen and is even more relevant when resources are limited. While dialogue with large technology companies can be fraught with tensions and asymmetries (De Toni & Segura, 2025), regional actors on the scale of SembraMedia can have these conversations and help define priorities and adapt programs to local needs in order to sustain the relevance and impact of support for independent journalism.

By María Soledad Segura and Bianca De Toni

Media development in the context of crisis

Being active in areas of conflict and war is challenging for media development organizations. Some, having worked under more peaceful conditions in the past, have had to adapt to the harsher climate that exists today. When crisis does strike, the sector is called upon to react swiftly to co-ordinate help. But only 29 percent of media development organizations that took part in our survey thought that media development responded swiftly in crisis, remaining roughly the same as 2025 (30 percent). There certainly remains room for improvement in this field.

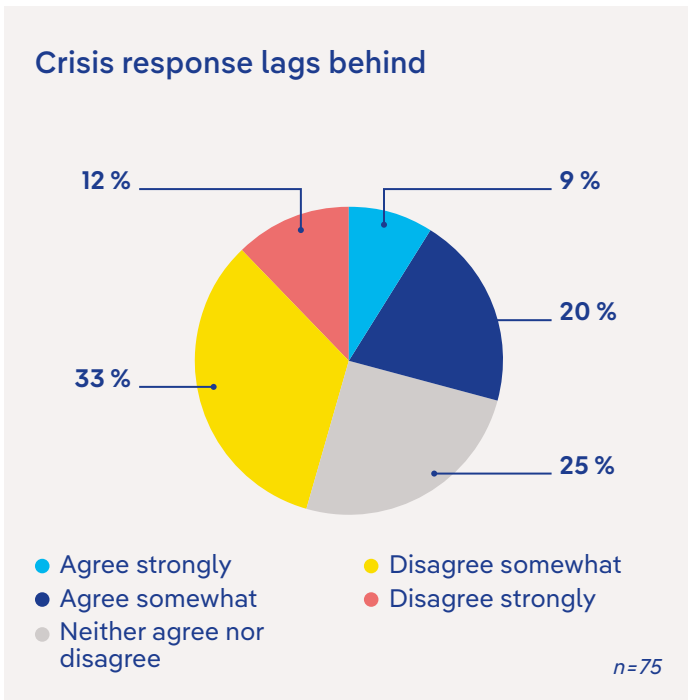


Figure 19: Item: In cases of crisis, media development organizations and donors swiftly co-ordinate to support affected media outlets; scale: Likert scale (agreement) 1–5

One measure frequently supported by media development organizations was safety assistance. Programs to ensure the physical and digital safety of journalists and media personnel had intensified their efforts. 29 percent of organizations offered physical security assistance, which is up from last year’s figure of 25 percent. Digital safety support was even higher. 61 percent of the organizations taking part in the survey indicated offering digital safety/security assistance. Both forms of support, along with psychological and legal assistance, were especially virulent in the context of war. At the same time, Reports Without Borders reminds us that in 2025, Mexico was the second most deadly country for journalists after the Palestinian Territories.

29%

Percentage of media development organizations offering physical security assistance (n = 77)

61%

Percentage of media development organizations offering digital safety/ security assistance (n = 77)

In the context of conflict and crisis, organizations were continuously forced to adjust their strategies. One best practice shared by an international organization concerned getting “actors that have either been operating from exile from other countries or found ways to operate through hybrid model, part in country, part in exile, to kind of share those lessons.”

The support for exile media certainly is a field that has grown in the past years. Initiatives like the JX Fund, but also support programs of media development organizations and donors such as FPU’s Reporters Respond or the Hannah Arendt Initiative, have provided a lifeline for journalists in exile in regions like Central America and Eastern Europe.

Exile media support involves helping outlets to stay relevant when their audiences may be thousands of miles away and helping them to sustain without the revenues of local advertising. Such support also requires greater degrees of flexibility in swiftly reacting to crises as they emerge. “When you have the flexibility, you’re also more open to really supporting organizations when they are in actual need and also to navigate the complexity”, a South American media development expert pointed out. Flexibility is also key in terms of protecting and transferring the funds and securing the staff, as an international media developer mentioned. Organizations like Reporters Without Borders and the Committee to Protect Journalists are often strongly involved in these efforts, with measures for the protection of press freedom and journalists’ safety going hand in hand.

But developments in the recent past have shown that democratic backsliding is no longer something that only takes place in the Global Majority. North American and European countries such as the US, Hungary, the Netherlands and Italy have been affected, too. Several representatives of US organizations chose their words cautiously and went off the record repeatedly during the interviews fearing that it could have repercussions if they spoke openly. One interviewee highlighted the fact that many Global North organizations

do not have sufficient indemnity insurance because this would not have been necessary in the past. That organization is now reverting to tools for secure communication that in the past would only have been necessary in authoritarian contexts. The risks can cascade, as one interviewee explained, citing an example where an Eastern European President had requested a list of their funded partners.

A respondent from one of the European countries affected expressed skepticism whether support for media development would return to “normal” once governments that slashed budgets were out of office: “This is the new normal and we have to deal with it.” A representative from a US media development organization called on the sector to “speak with one voice” and make sure that the sector is not instrumentalized for political reasons: “It would be very important to stay together and to help our donors understand that it is in humanity’s interest to support independent media with no strings attached.”

This call for concerted action, moving from competition to unity in the fight for freedom of expression was echoed by several respondents. An interviewee from the MENA region reasoned:

“

I think we’re all in the same boat and this is what we need to all understand. And if we adopt a short-term competition approach, I think we will all lose. So, we all need to reinvent ourselves. And make sure that the priority is the best way to defend, protect and promote the values that got us into this sector.

An international representative stressed that resilience in the face of democratic backsliding should rely not only on the sector’s backbone, but also on the extent to which coalitions are forged with other parts of society that have a vested interest in upholding democracy and the rule of law:

“

There’s really something here to be learned about how you connect to other parts of the broader democratic infrastructure. We tend to think only about media when we should really be connecting that broader dynamic in terms of civic space. And I feel organizations in countries that are suffering from this kind of backsliding are much better than global organizations at doing that.

The current situation also poses an opportunity for South-North learning, i.e. for organizations from Global Majority countries which have experienced democratic backsliding in the past to pass on their lessons learned to Global North organizations. “What can we learn as Western organizations from the experience of other countries and other cohorts of journalists or newsrooms in terms of resilience?” asked one Global North respondent. And another recounted a meeting in February of 2025 that had brought together international experts with US journalists and academics “trying to marshal support for press freedom in the US, listening to people in other parts of the world who’ve been dealing with this. And how they deal with it was incredibly eye opening for US Americans.”

New media development engagement by authoritarian states

National democratic backsliding is one thing, anti-democratic forces taking influence on the flow of communication beyond their borders is another. “Other states are investing where the US pulled out,” warned a UK-based media development consultant. “The Chinese are offering money to newsrooms. So, it is a real imperative that we should work together more. It’s really a completely different landscape.” One organization spoke of a journalist they had supported who had then been hired by a local Russia Today office “because they offer much higher salaries. But this doesn’t mean that this person doesn’t support shared values. Just that there’s an economic reality of journalism today and we know what it’s like.”

A representative from a MENA-based organization pointed to a trend in the region where state and co-opted business actors were launching very well-funded digital native outlets to push their regional agendas, Blinx from the United Arab Emirates being an example: “They are there to be part of the narrative, to completely influence opinion but using visual codes that the independent media have used. These actors have now invested in our field, paying better salaries, also being very savvy in terms of their use of social media and with a very strong involvement of Gulf actors.”

New approaches and target groups

Engagement for information integrity

Over the past years, propelled by the level of disinformation and conspiracy theories that surfaced during the COVID pandemic, fact-checking and media literacy programs have risen to prominence as ways of coming to terms with the pollution that contaminates existing information ecosystems. This has prompted many media development organizations to adapt to these needs.

Interestingly, the opinions concerning these approaches were mixed. Some highlighted its importance. With disinformation fueling conflict and even sparking wars, for instance, several have been working with media outlets “helping them not to spread disinformation propaganda, understand it, recognize it, debunk and help their readers understand when they’re being manipulated by disinformation actors,” as one respondent explained. Others have facilitated exchanges between fact-checkers in French-speaking Africa and the Arab fact-checkers network or supported journalists in the Amazon region and South-East Asia to conduct investigative journalism and fact-checking on environmental and climate-related issues.

Some interviewees, however, called into question these approaches. One international NGO representative called fact-checking an approach “that might sound very effective or sexy or easy to do” but in fact was “not impactful.” And another from the MENA region criticized that pure fact-checking initiatives were drawing funds that should actually be reaching journalists.



Journalists sit in a tent set up by Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism (ARIJ) in Gaza

CASE STUDY

Safety gear first

How ARIJ pivoted a new model for crisis-responsive philanthropy

The MENA region is characterized by “forgotten conflicts” and sudden eruptions of extreme violence where traditional project-based funding models often fail to meet basic survival needs. In late 2023, ARIJ found itself at the epicenter of a crisis in Gaza, where local journalists were losing not just their equipment, but their homes and lives. Legacy donors, hampered by politics, compliance and rigid “check-box” regulations, often offered psychosocial support when journalists primarily needed physical safety gear, electronic devices and immediate humanitarian aid.

“When journalists on the ground were targeted, killed, many donors ignored this situation. They never came on board. There was a big need,” explained Rawan Damen, ARIJ general director. Faced with limited funds to counter the collapse of local reporting capacity, ARIJ mobilized emergency funds and launched a campaign under the motto “The Coverage Must Continue,” a radical departure from its traditional role as an investigative and fact-checking network.

“ARIJ does not typically run assistance programs, but these were unprecedented times. We could not stand still as we watched our colleagues struggle,” said Damen.

The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) and Reporters Without Borders (RSF) came on board early and supported ARIJ in covering Palestinian journalists’ immediate needs to allow them to continue reporting on the ground. Other US and European organizations helped a bit too. Faced with an increased number of requests, ARIJ launched a public crowdfunding campaign. By early 2025, they had raised enough to support more than 400 out of the 700 journalists who applied for help. They provided them with equipment and survival kits (mattresses and covers, winter jackets, solar systems, tents and care kits for female journalists). They also supported two “hubs” with electricity and internet so that journalists could edit and upload their material.

ARIJ had cultivated over the years a network of trusted journalists on the ground in Palestine. It also had a local partner there, the Palestinian Journalists Protection Center (PJPC), and was knowledgeable of the local nuances and context. Their local coordinators in Gaza were responsible for logistical support. When faced with an increased number of requests, ARIJ formalized the process: they created an application form, compiled all applicants and established clear criteria. Verification included checking the applicant’s work, ID, assessing losses and needs, and considering any prior assistance they had received.

This presence on the ground and their ability to manage the process helped ARIJ partially make up for the lack of interest of major donors. The ARIJ editorial, managerial, administrative and financial staff worked without any administrative fees during the campaign and donated hundreds of hours of their time to run the program.

The ARIJ experience proves that in crisis contexts, the boundary between media development and humanitarian aid is non-existent. Resilience lies in the ability to mobilize a pre-existing community network as well as a solid knowledge of the local context to come up with efficient strategies for when institutional donors retreat. Donors and intermediaries should take seriously the urgent need for creating a “Media Support Task Force” with pre-approved emergency protocols that allow, for example, for the purchase of non-traditional items like tents, eSIMs and solar power stations during active conflicts.

By MJ Daoud and Omar Meksassi

Inclusion of new players in the media field

During an interview, a representative of a Latin American organization highlighted the rise of social media influencers as one of the most important changes in the information ecosystem currently taking place: “Some of whom are journalists, but many more are not. And they often cover current affairs, and it is through them that many young people are beginning to get their news.”

The overwhelming majority of media development organizations (78 percent) support not only incumbent “traditional media” (print, television and radio), but also what we term “non-traditional actors,” such as individual content creators, influencers and start-ups. There were examples of support for an influencer informing his twenty-seven million followers in Indonesia about Chinese propaganda, or collaboration with popular West African new media brands specializing in short videos on social media to inform about disinformation in the context of elections. Observed one international organization representative:

“

We are working less and less with traditional media.

78%

Percentage of media development organizations supporting non-traditional media actors (n = 77)

Different rationales surfaced regarding the motivations behind such collaborations. One primary reason is reaching a broader audience, especially younger segments of the population. Traditional media are sometimes regarded as harder to understand and elitist by audiences. And opinion leaders on social media and messaging apps are seen by some media development organizations as a good means to amplify messages. One international organization has started conducting information ecosystem assessments, not from the supply, but from the demand side, with the intention to hear about information needs and channels, “from the community’s perspective and then try and design programs that perhaps have a better mix of all of those actors.”

The benefits of mutual learning between influencers and traditional actors were also mentioned several times. “It’s not only them learning from us journalists, but also it’s

vice versa, because they have this immediate approach to convincing their audience so they know about building their networks. And also finding revenues,” said one representative of a European media development organization. The lessons learned might include how journalism can win back the hearts of their audience since lack of trust is one of the reasons why users turn to digital creators in the first place (Angwin, 2024).

Interviewees from MENA, Latin America and Asia agreed that there is a shift happening in the system that needs to be taken seriously. As one respondent warned:

“

If we do not understand very deeply how the information ecosystem is evolving in terms of where do people get their information from, what content and what in their environment pushes them to believe or not believe something, we are headed for a bad crash.

Another observed that media outlets are also taking these changes seriously, e.g. by visiting Design Thinking courses, because “the format of where people are consuming the news is changing.”

The question of whether media development organizations should not just support media organizations but also individual content producers and actors sometimes termed “newsfluencers” (Hurcombe, 2025) is related to these questions. A South American expert termed this trend the “substackification” of content production, with the US publishing platform Substack being one of the prime distribution channels for “editors and reporters that no longer feel comfortable working for specific news outlets, be it because of financial limitations or for editorial limitations.” This trend calls into question the classic media development approach of solely supporting media outlets.

It is interesting to note that several international NGOs are nonetheless shying away from supporting individual content creators and influencers. Some argued that in times of consolidation, the money should go to those who need it most. “We try to focus because otherwise you’re losing your scope,” stated one member of a European organization. Others pointed to the fact that influencers often choose a niche approach as opposed to traditional media. “We believe in a generalistic approach to content and giving people things that they are of course interested in, but that they wouldn’t get otherwise. Especially in their local language, in the right format and this kind of thing.

So would these content producers be an added value for sure? I don't know yet", said another European organization's representative.

Individual content creators often have not undergone formalized journalistic training, nor are they bound to the regulations or ethical codices of newsrooms (Reininga & Kellett, 2025). This can pose reputational risks for media development organizations as well. "That might happen by your person just changing or deciding to do something else. From our organizational point of view, this is a significant barrier," related one respondent. Quality assurance was also on the mind of media development organizations. "The standard is getting incredibly low and it's because [traditional media] want to catch up with social media, going for more virality and that sort of approach, which is detrimental, I think, to the quality of a healthy media ecosystem," said an international organization's participant. African respondents reported that these types of actors are often co-opted by political or commercial interests. For instance, in the Sahel region, influencers were regarded by the military regimes as suitable allies to diffuse military propaganda in the war against terrorism and shape the public opinion, according to an interviewee from the region. And in the Caucasus, a representative of a media development organization has observed ex-patriot influencers spreading Russian propaganda.

An international participant summarized:



My intuition is that unless there's a collective investment in the normative side, we're going to struggle to address what audiences need.

There were also suggestions of establishing labels for content producers or extending membership of Press Clubs to include content creators under professional codes of ethics.

One representative of an African organization criticized international media development organizations for being risk averse in their stance towards individual creators, since he thought that "journalism or newsrooms will be less and less significant for the vast majority of the information consuming public. The purpose of media development is not to develop the newsroom. The purpose of media development is to make sure that people have good information so they can make good decisions about their lives." And one from Asia agreed: "We know that content creators are not enemies; they are part of us."

A consultant from Eastern Europe advocated for more trial and error with small grants for content creators, suggesting to create "a collaborative or cooperative legal entity" for them to be able to be supported. He also suggested ear-marking 5 to 10 percent of the annual budget to supporting non-traditional content creators, although he admitted that donors were not taking to the idea very fondly. One international media development organization did however indicate that they were experimenting quite openly with content creators and monitoring their output closely to engage in discussions if factual inaccuracies did occur.

Reimagining media development

There seems to be a move amongst international media development organizations away from classic capacity development, although several Global Majority organizations indicate that capacities still need to be strengthened, especially when it comes to media on the periphery. "It's often not just about trainings," said the head of a European media development organization. "Because there are really, really good and very, very professional partners."

One consequence is that international media development organizations concentrate more on core funding and providing more open grants with less strings attached (see chapter on funding). Some respondents were convinced that the shrinking of ODA for media development would also lead to an overdue consolidation. One interviewee from South America spoke of media outlets that had been "created with funding to address certain issues, and when the project ends, the media outlets disappear." Another from Eastern Europe spoke of unsustainable circumstances where a multitude of organizations terming themselves "media" had sprung up, ostensibly to cash in on funding. Some outlets solely funded by ODA had grown to 50 employees. This kind of development was mainly fueled by funding from other fields rather than from within media development itself, one Eastern European interviewee explained, illustrating that media support is a field best left to organizations that know the information ecosystems they are supporting.

Some organizations are adopting more flexible, demand-driven approaches in terms of service provision. Media outlets and media development organizations come to them for advice and support rather than the other way around. As an example, a US-based interviewee explained the rationale behind their new online service:

“

There's lots of great training programs, there's lots of accelerators but the actual implementation falls off a cliff. People can't afford the resources in house to be able to do things. It's not a knowledge gap, it's a resource gap.

Another consequence of the pivot away from pure capacity development is that media development organizations are taking a more holistic approach, addressing the information ecosystem as a whole. The OECD Principles for Effective and Relevant Media Support (OECD 2024) as well as the discussions around Information Integrity (UN 2025) highlight the necessity of supporting the enabling environment, although some doubt whether this is acknowledged by funders. Said a representative of an international media developer:

“

I don't think necessarily all the donors have understood the importance of a systemic approach to media assistance, that it has become more than support and making grants to individual media outlets. It's always very apparent when you have a transition like you have had in Bangladesh, also in Syria and Ethiopia, in Myanmar until things turned around and went the wrong way. But you need to support those efforts also.

As mentioned above, Global Majority organizations are very much convinced that capacity development remains important in the regions they work in. Several organizations are seeking out novel areas to engage in. In Asia, organizations not previously engaged in these fields have been discovering media and information literacy and media viability as additional pillars for their operations. In MENA, organizations explained that skill sets involving media management and social entrepreneurship were in demand. In Latin America, digital competencies emerged as the need that most participants pinpointed. And in Africa, organizations reported high demand when it came to media viability and fact-checking. In countries that are only opening up, such

as in Syria, the most basic capacity development in terms of journalism ethics and skills were needed.

Some interviewees questioned the role of large intermediary organizations. “There are no thought leaders anymore,” said a European respondent. He questioned whether the big organizations were flexible enough or felt “the urgency of change” and argued that this was the “moment for creative destruction,” in line with Martin Scott’s opinion piece (see p. 6). While a consultant observed more independent funds emerging, he doubted that international NGOs would let this happen without “attempting to control” the flow of money. And another interviewee doubted whether intermediary organizations were an efficient way of delivering assistance. Even if the US assistance were to return, they weren’t convinced that one “should be fully committed to bringing back these intermediaries as a model.”

On the other hand, several interviewees held that intermediaries contribute added value to projects in terms of capacity development, assist partners in administration and due diligence duties, and could act as a “firewall” preventing donors from impinging on the independence of media outlets being supported. They also argued that intermediaries serve as facilitators of mutual learning for media outlets from different world regions and play an important role in providing capacities and resources for digital and physical security of journalists. One international representative noted that “there’s a better relationship between the journalism world and the media development sector” because funding and consultancy were in higher demand in the current situation.

There was a general sense amongst interviewees that the sector had not reconsidered its way of conducting media development enough in light of the radical changes that have happened. For example, one interviewee noted:

“

The sector is trying to kind of meet these challenges. But the speed of the changes is much faster than your ability to react to them. In this kind of situation there is always an emphasis on firefighting. And if you want to create a new strategy and if you want to adapt to these changes and respond to this moment, you also need time for thinking and trying things out. But that is difficult in a funding situation where we are more reliant on projects of shorter time spans. Core funding is missing.

As was mentioned previously in this chapter, one reaction has been to work closer together as a sector, an area in which the GFMD and initiatives like the Media Viability Manifesto group help align organizations. Beyond advocacy coalitions, collaboration can also take place at the level of implementation. Some organizations are front-runners in this field, actively seeking out synergies with other players. “We’re talking to multiple organizations about how we can take what they’re doing, what we’re doing and fit them together. So, we’re really looking at everything like Lego building blocks and not I’m doing my thing, you’re doing your thing. But trying to fit these together. We each come out of it stronger. Then each of our money goes further,” explained the head of a US-based organization. And some others agreed that complementarity of organizations’ activities was key in a setting where funding had been severely reduced.

But coalitions should go beyond the bounds of the sector, several interviewees suggested. As one European participant stressed:

“

We should really focus on processes and frameworks for public interest information and not so much on journalism. We need to regroup and have allies. It could be teachers, it can be academics, it can be content producers, people who believe in public interest content and the way it is produced, the way it is verified, the way it is presented with honesty, with facts and so forth. So, find allies that want to defend and promote the processes, the values, the rationale of public interest content. We are stronger together. And then the political importance will be felt and it will be funded.

According to another European organization’s representative, these efforts should include media outlets and journalists themselves who are often preoccupied with news production. He emphasized that the media sector itself should become more visible and “fight for their own cause,” rather than shy away from activism for their own cause harboring a false sense of neutrality. A media development consultant identified further prospective allies: “The human rights fight is the same as the humanitarian fight, is the same as the journalistic fight, is the same as libraries, is the same as rule of law. Now we’re realizing it’s the same fight as science. It’s the same fight as climate. All of these different things are essentially about public interest values. You have transparent methods and you are accountable.”

Advocating for media development

Around half of the media development organizations in our survey sample have reacted to the changes in the environment by increasing their advocacy and policy activities (56 percent) as well as expanding the work they do in acquiring new funding (48 percent). With less money available, it still seems that almost half of the organizations cannot engage in the necessary advocacy because they had to concentrate on implementation.

Increased advocacy/policy activities

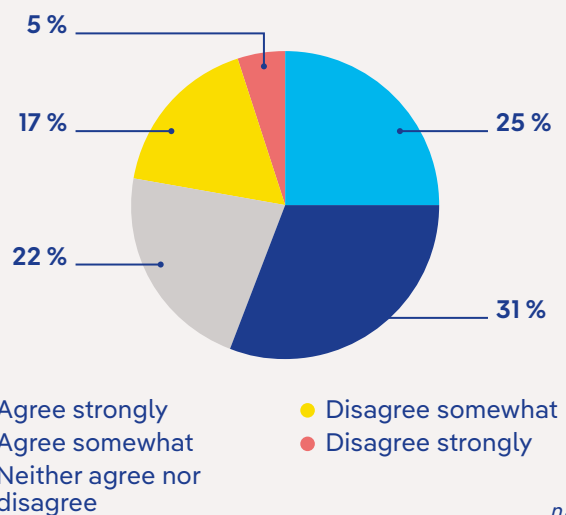


Figure 20: Item: *We have increased our advocacy/policy activities to take the changing political landscape into account*; scale: Likert scale (agreement) 1–5

The sector as a whole has certainly engaged in more concerted advocacy over the past year. Initiatives include M20, the CTRL+J series of conferences and the Media Viability Manifesto Initiative (see chapter local ownership). But as the data suggests, there is additional potential in this domain. For instance, a member of an organization based in that region observed that not one actor from MENA was involved in the Paris Charter on AI and Journalism. This alerts to the fact that though advocacy is a necessary part of molding the landscape to the needs of its actors, it does need to be inclusive (see also the chapter on local ownership).

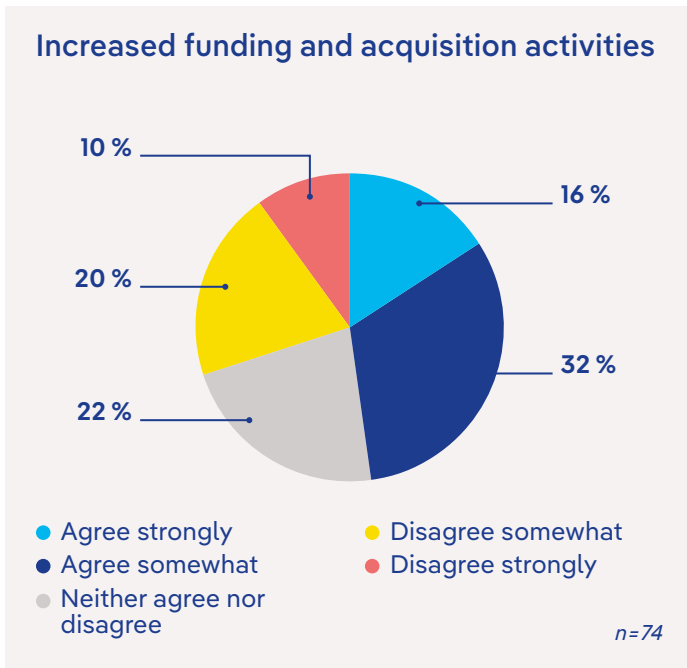


Figure 21: Item: We have increased our funding and acquisition activities to take the changing economic landscape into account; Likert scale (agreement) 1–5

Where and what should media development organizations advocate for? One US organization’s representative sees too much talk within the sector and too little outreach to donors. “Using opportunities like Davos would be good in talking about independent media. That would be more important than basically having another conversation amongst ourselves to support media development, which we’re all supporting anyway.” The respondents variously highlighted the need to produce more empirical evidence on the impact that media development is having, translate the benefits of media development into areas like economics, health and governance as a whole and have media development better integrated into the general development agenda.

What to do?

Based on the survey and in-depth interviews conducted with media development organizations, these are our recommendations in terms of adaptation to the changing environment:

Inspiration for media development organizations

- Build coalitions inside and outside the sector to pressure Big Tech to:
 1. stop neglecting their responsibilities in countries they regard as the “periphery,”
 2. reprioritize quality public interest information over slop,
 3. intensify efforts to curb disinformation and hate speech,
 4. accept regulation that serves journalism as a public good.

- Support AI capacity needs while ensuring that practitioners utilize the technology responsibly, using the available ethical frameworks as a guideline, reflect the broader implications of AI for the sector and advocate for fair use and representation of media sources that the technology draw upon.

- Increase support for media practitioners and outlets in authoritarian contexts, including exile media, professionalize risk monitoring to ensure that no harm is done to the supported public interest media in this context and co-ordinate crisis preparedness to respond swiftly and coordinated when crisis strikes.

- When reframing narratives (e.g. to be in line with security concerns), ensure that independence and a commitment to the core values of the sector as stated in the OECD principles for relevant and effective media support are upheld.

- Move from hyper competition to collaboration and from a watering can approach to consolidation in advocacy and implementation.

- Facilitate South-North learning, especially in terms of how to gain resilience in increasingly oppressive environments.

- Support not just journalists, but all actors serving public interest information while ensuring mutual learning and adherence to codes of ethics.

- Continue capacity development while including measures to stabilize the information ecosystem as a whole.
- Increase advocacy and funding efforts to ensure sustainability of individual organizations and the survival of media landscapes that foster information as a public good.
- Ensure that advocacy efforts and inter-disciplinary learning include organizations from Global Majority regions and adjacent sectors that have an interest in democracy and fact-based decisions.

Inspiration for donors

- When realigning priorities (e.g. with security concerns), ensure that the independence and the core values of the sector as stated in the OECD principles for relevant and effective media support are adhered to.
- Prioritize support for media development in authoritarian contexts, including exile media.
- Acknowledge free media as a value in and of itself and do not misconstrue media development as a hard power instrument to be geopolitically instrumentalized.
- Identify the regions in which non-democratic foreign actors are trying to fill the gaps left behind by the withdrawal of US funds and prioritize independent media support there.
- Enable beneficiaries to expand their portfolios to help stabilize the information ecosystem as a whole, especially in countries that are opening up (e.g. Syria).

Conclusion

What does all this mean for media development organizations? Of course, they will keep advocating for more funding, improving local ownership and adapting to the changing environment. But all actors in the information space need to acknowledge the fact that the tide has radically turned. Media development organizations in particular have to take that extra step from understanding the implications of those changes to developing strategies to successfully navigate these new realities.

Beyond the individual recommendations (to be found at the end of every chapter and in the annex), the skippers of media development organizations need to take several new parameters into account when plotting their course. The resounding opinion in the sector is that we have arrived at a “new normal.” Few expect the sector to return to smooth sailing within the next few years, even if administrations change. If that is true, there are five important takeaways that we can derive from this report.

Firstly, organizations are called upon to reconsider their value propositions. Several large vessels in the sector are gone and no single organization will manage to replace them. While organizational budgets are down by 17 percent on average and there are no funders on the horizon to take the place of those gone missing, it is not enough to simply downsize until the storm has passed. Organizations also need to focus on their value core: What is it that is needed and how can my organization best meet those demands? This also means saying farewell to the full service mind-set and pooling resources where your organization can make a real difference. As painful as the downscaling process at MISA must have been (see case study p. 20), the decision to concentrate on “the immediate needs of our beneficiaries,” as regional director Tabani Moyo put it, was exactly in keeping with this principle.

Secondly, in a setting where the pond is shrinking, the first impulse would be to up the competition to make sure that your organization is the one that survives. But many representatives of organizations interviewed for this report stressed that cooperation rather than competition is the order of the day. If organizations plot their course taking the routes of others into account, chances are that they will all arrive at their destinations. Organizations with blinders on that insist on duplicating or disregarding what others are doing are destined for collision.

A **third** take-away concerns advocacy. Though no one expects calmer seas anytime soon, the sector still needs to explain why media development is worthwhile. Otherwise, we would be committing the same mistake as the fisherman in Hemingway’s “Old Man and the Sea”: Having caught the largest fish of his life, he fails to secure the proof and returns to the harbor empty-handed. The sector needs to collect convincing evidence that support for public interest media bolsters democracy, stabilizes society, and is beneficial to such diverse fields as security, health, anti-corruption and climate action. After decades of trying to make this case, it is now of existential importance to finally drive it home.

Fourth, one of the most striking mismatches in our data concerns priority setting in media development. While only 37 percent of regional, national and local organizations agreed that they are given a meaningful role in determining what needs are addressed in media development projects, 91 percent of international organizations indicated giving them a meaningful role. If you represent an international NGO, reconsider your role. Do you see yourself as the captain driving media development? Or do you see yourself as the pilot, assisting others to steer media development into the harbor? This crisis is an opportunity to reflect on how local needs can actually be effectively met. As one respondent noted: “Local ownership is about empowerment at many different levels.” And that seems to be lacking from the perspective of those who should have their hands on the steering wheel.

Finally, as if all these challenges were not enough, AI seems set to turn into the next maelstrom for media development. The currents generated by Big Tech are hard to resist. Media development needs to support public interest media to come to terms with tech challenges while avoiding the mistakes of the past. Guidance is urgently needed, as one interviewee stressed. Pooling voices and making them heard at different levels of discussions around digital sovereignty and regulation is imperative going forward.

Media development is in dire straits. Our hope is that actors—both implementers and donors—will take the critical findings and recommendations of this report seriously. We all should take inspiration from some of the best practices and hopeful signs gathered here to ensure that media development can fulfill its crucial role, not only for media, but for free and peaceful societies as a whole.

Recommendations at a glance

For media development organizations

Funding

- Diversify your funding sources and do not shy away from new fundraising terrain. It is imperative in the current unstable funding environment.
- Compile evidence demonstrating how media contribute to crisis response, societal resilience, political stability and economic development. Share this evidence across the sector to support coordinated advocacy.
- Use your communication channels with donors to advocate for the urgent funding needs of the media development sector.
- International organizations: Streamline funding chains and ensure more resources reach local organizations directly.

Local ownership

- Commit to consulting local and regional organizations and the local media sector when it comes to priority-setting for projects. Furthermore, commit to working within the priorities identified and keeping communication lines open should there be changes necessary. This is crucial in ensuring continued buy-in from those on the ground.
- Both local/regional and international organizations should engage in continuous dialogue to determine what satisfactory involvement in priority setting should consist of.
- Organizations at all levels—local, regional and international—need to continue investing in demonstrating to funders the importance of media development work that is aligned with needs on the ground and need to continue the dialogue to lobby for contextually appropriate funding calls.

- Instead of competing, organizations working at the local, regional and international levels need to join forces and come up with a coherent set of needs and priorities that apply across the board. This way it would be easier to develop strategies that target consistent, incremental change in a particular context.
 - Both international media development organizations and funders should make sure people and perspectives from local and regional organizations are present at high-level international fora and discussions. This could be through more intensive consultation at the local and regional level, providing funding for travel or through making sure that meetings are held in places with low barriers to entry, or simply online, with assured internet access.
 - Data on best practices and learnings as well as from large studies needs to continue being made accessible to media development organizations working at all levels.
 - Media development organizations need to strengthen their collaborations with other civil society groups and networks.
- ### Adaptation
- Build coalitions inside and outside the sector to pressure Big Tech to 1. stop neglecting their responsibilities in countries they regard as the “periphery,” 2. reprioritize quality public interest information over slop, 3. intensify efforts to curb disinformation and hate speech, 4. accept regulation that serves journalism as a public good.
 - Support AI capacity needs while ensuring that practitioners utilize the technology responsibly, using the available ethical frameworks as a guideline, reflect the broader implications of AI for the sector and advocate for fair use and representation of media sources that the technology draw upon.

- Increase support for media practitioners and outlets in authoritarian contexts, including exile media, professionalize risk monitoring to ensure that no harm is done to the supported public interest media in this context and co-ordinate crisis preparedness to respond swiftly and coordinated when crisis strikes.
- When reframing narratives (e.g. to be in line with security concerns), ensure that independence and a commitment to the core values of the sector as stated in the OECD principles for relevant and effective media support are upheld.
- Move from hyper competition to collaboration and from a watering can approach to consolidation in advocacy and implementation.
- Facilitate South-North learning, especially in terms of how to gain resilience in increasingly oppressive environments.
- Support not just journalists, but all actors serving public interest information while ensuring mutual learning and adherence to codes of ethics.
- Continue capacity development while including measures to stabilize the information ecosystem as a whole.
- Increase advocacy and funding efforts to ensure sustainability of individual organizations and the survival of media landscapes that foster information as a public good.
- Ensure that advocacy efforts and inter-disciplinary learning include organizations from Global Majority regions and adjacent sectors that have an interest in democracy and fact-based decisions.

For donors

Funding

- Follow suit on official announcements about the importance of information integrity and commit financial resources to support public interest media.
- Ensure that support for media development and human rights is not deprioritized in favor of increased defense and security spending. Media development is a core component of democratic resilience.
- Consider multi-year core support to well-selected media that covers salaries, rent, electricity, equipment and other essential operational costs.
- Provide flexible funding that allows media to experiment with business models, product development and newsroom transformation.
- Avoid overly narrow, issue-specific or short-term grants.
- Avoid withdrawing media support from entire regions. The experience in the Sahel shows how quickly China and Russia step in.
- Create rapid-response emergency funds that allow swift re-allocation to safety needs.

Local ownership

- Although funding may be based on government strategic priorities, it is vital to invest in understanding what is needed in a particular context. Therefore, more needs assessment should be done in collaboration with actors working at the local level in order to understand the most contextually appropriate interventions to support. And care must be taken to continue these collaborations throughout project implementation.

- In the same way that many funding opportunities are tailored for the capacities of international media development organizations, funding for local and regional media development players should be ring-fenced such that international media development organizations are not eligible to apply for it. At the same time, some resources need to be allocated to support local and regional organizations in the project cycles where needed. This would ensure that local and regional media development organizations stand a fighting chance to receive direct funding themselves.
- Ensure that continuous learning processes are established on funding applications, project implementation, closure and evaluations, especially for local and regional organizations, to ensure that all actors are involved and heard.
- Include coordination and advocacy as crucial parts of projects and provide necessary funding for it or even have specific advocacy projects rather than advocacy being an underfunded sideline.

Adaptation

- When realigning priorities (e.g. with security concerns), ensure that the independence and the core values of the sector as stated in the OECD principles for relevant and effective media support are adhered to.
- Prioritize support for media development in authoritarian contexts, including exile media.
- Acknowledge free media as a value in and of itself and do not misconstrue media development as a hard power instrument to be geopolitically instrumentalized.
- Identify the regions in which non-democratic foreign actors are trying to fill the gaps left behind by the withdrawal of US funds and prioritize independent media support there.
- Enable beneficiaries to expand their portfolios to help stabilize the information ecosystem as a whole, especially in countries that are opening up (e.g. Syria).

Recommendations at a glance

Annex

Methodology and limitations

The research questions for this report were drawn from the issues arising from the previous State of Media Development report, as well as the seismic changes in the media development landscape. Across all regions, the 2025 edition of the State of Media Development report found that issues were raised with regards to equity across stakeholders in media development—in this report captured under local ownership—as well as the question of adaptation to the rapidly changing media and media development landscapes. Importantly, the interruption and eventual withdrawal of media development funding by the US government was a significant shift that occurred when the 2025 edition was already in the publication process. As such, funding, local ownership and adaptation to a changing landscape are the three pillars that form the core of the research questions. The research is nevertheless still grounded in the OECD Development Co-operation Principles for Relevant and Effective Support to Media and the Information Environment.

For the purposes of this study, a mixed methods approach consisting of quantitative and qualitative methods was employed. In addition to desk research, an online survey and key informant interviews were conducted. The interviews took place before the survey. This was for purposes of additional issue identification to complement the aspects noted from the 2025 research. As such, the interviews were conducted between November 2025 and January 2026, while the survey was fielded from mid-January to mid-February 2026. The survey put into consideration additional aspects from the interviews. The desk research (literature review) was continuous all through the conceptualization, data collection and data analysis phases.

In total, 76 key informant interviews were conducted with individuals who work in the sector. Interviewees included representatives of organizations based in countries across the globe as well as non-affiliated consultants with a good

overview of the sector. To minimize interviewer effects and increase validity, the interviews with organizations based in Asia, Pacific and Oceania; Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia; Latin America and the Caribbean; Middle East and North Africa; and Sub-Saharan Africa were conducted by independent researchers commissioned by DW Akademie. The interviews with non-affiliated consultants and organizations based in North America and Europe (Central, Northern, Southern, Western) were conducted by DW Akademie's report team. The interviews were coded and analyzed with MAXQDA.

For the quantitative section of the report, the online survey was sent to all 224 member organizations of the Global Forum for Media and Development (GFMD), to the media development networks of the researchers commissioned per region, and to the partner organizations of 14 international media development organizations. Furthermore, an open call for participation was made via LinkedIn. Organizations that were solely media outlets, without any stake in capacity development, advocacy or improving the enabling environment for media were excluded. In total, representatives from 77 organizations (16 international, 21 regional, 40 national/local) took part in the survey. The uptake in the different world regions varied:

- Asia, Pacific and Oceania: 14 organizations
- Eastern Partnership Region and Baltic States: 15 organizations
- Latin America and the Caribbean: 8 organizations
- Middle East and North Africa: 8 organizations
- Sub-Saharan Africa: 11 organizations

Because fewer organizations from some regions took part, we did not break down data according to regions, but according to types of organizations (local/national, regional and international). We used SPSS for statistical data analysis and rounded up numbers for legibility reasons. As a result, some numbers do not add up to exactly 100 percent.

For the purposes of this report, the terms local/national, regional and international are used to describe the geographical scope of work of the organizations that contributed the report data. While “local/national” refers to organizations working at national and smaller levels, the term “regional” refers to organizations that work across several countries in a specific world region (rather than a sub-region within a country). The term “international” refers to organizations working across different countries and regions in different parts of the world. As part of the data collection, organizations were given the opportunity to classify themselves according to the above three categories. Therefore, the data presented reflect organizations’ self-classifications.

The data upon which this report is based has two main limitations.

One is the representativeness of the findings. The survey aimed at a complete count of all media development organizations. However, it was difficult to ascertain the size of the total statistical population. In addition to the 224 GFMD members, it is unclear how many other organizations are part of the sector. Furthermore, due to the use of additional personal networks and LinkedIn calls to supplement the survey circulation via the GFMD membership list, the total number of potential survey participants can only be estimated as being above 224 organizations. As regards the key informant interviews, while they do not claim to be fully representative, we aimed for a balanced regional ratio, with at least ten participants from each world region.

The other limitation is the positioning of DW Akademie. DW Akademie is a key player in the media development sector and actively implements projects in approximately 60 emerging economies. As such, the fact that DW Akademie is the commissioning party for the research may have influenced how partner organizations responded. We made efforts to mitigate these factors, for example by commissioning regional researchers to interview partner organizations and by running the survey through trusted channels like GFMD and the international partners of Global Majority organizations.

The report team sincerely wishes to thank the researchers who conducted, transcribed and translated the interviews and boosted survey participation in various world regions: MJ Daoud, Bianca De Toni, Senakpon Gerard Guedegbe, Shafiq Ahmad Kamboh, Omar Meksassi, Waqas Naeem, Adnan Rehmat, Maryia Sadouskaya-Komlach, María Soledad Segura and others who prefer to remain anonymous. Their region-specific reports – allowing for nuanced insights – will be published shortly after this global report.

We also acknowledge the funding for this report by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). Finally, we would like to thank the many people who took part in the interviews and surveys and whose insights were essential to the report.

List of participating organizations

- Afghan Media Support Organization
 - Africa Uncensored
 - Alliance of Independent Journalists (Indonesia)
 - AMEDI
 - Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism
 - Article 19
 - Asociación Latinoamericana de Educación y Comunicación Popular
 - Baltic Centre for Media Excellence
 - Bangladesh NGOs Network for Radio and Communication
 - BBC Media Action
 - Beam Reports
 - Cambodian Center for Independent Media
 - Canal France International
 - Centre d'Éducation pour une Société Durable
 - Comunicares
 - DW Akademie
 - Exile Hub
 - Fakartany
 - Fasocheck
 - Fédération des Radios Communautaires et Assimilées du Bénin
 - Fondation Hironnelle
 - Free Press Unlimited
 - Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung – America Latina
 - Fundación Gabo
 - Fundacion Para el Periodismo
 - hrodmaske
 - ICFJ+
 - Independent Journalism Center (Moldova)
 - International Fund for Public Interest Media
 - International Media Support
 - Internews
 - Latam Chequea
 - Maharat Foundation
 - Media Culture Agency
 - Media Development Investment Fund
 - Media Focus on Africa
 - Media Initiatives Center
 - Media Institute of Southern Africa
 - Media Sac
 - Media Support Fund Lithuania
 - MediaNet
 - Mizzima Foundation
 - Momentum
 - Munathara Initiative
 - Namibia Media Trust Foundation
 - n-ost
 - Observacom
 - Pakistan Press Foundation
 - Palestine Center for Development and Media Freedoms
 - Panos Institute Southern Africa
 - Penplusbytes
 - Press Institute of Mongolia
 - Probe Media Foundation Inc
 - RNW Media
 - Samir Kassir Foundation
 - Sembra Media
 - Skeyes Center for Media and Cultural Freedom
 - Sri Lanka Press Institute
 - Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression
 - The Center for Journalism Innovation and Development
 - Think again
 - Thomson Reuters Foundation
 - Tribal News Network
- ... and others who prefer to remain anonymous.

OECD development and cooperation principles for relevant and effective support to media and the information environment

1. Ensure that assistance does no harm to public interest media.
2. Increase financial and other forms of support to public interest media and the information environment, in order to strengthen democratic resilience.
3. Take a whole of system perspective on supporting the media and information environment to make support more relevant, effective and sustainable. Consider the media and information environment as a development sector in itself, a critical part of efforts to promote and protect democracy, human rights, gender equality and development as well as a sector which can support implementation of other development goals.
4. Strengthen local leadership and ownership, empowering media partners as well as other actors in the information environment such as civil society organizations and online content creators to meaningfully participate in policies and programs.
5. Improve co-ordination of support to the media and information environment, both among donor agencies and between development and diplomatic efforts to support media freedom, especially in contexts of crisis.
6. Invest in knowledge, research and learning.

(OECD, 2024)

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List of abbreviations

AI	Artificial intelligence	OCCRP	Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project
AMIC	Asia Media, Information and Communication Centre	ODA	Official Development Aid
ARIJ	Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism	OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
BCME	Baltic Center for Media Excellence	OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
DAC	Development Assistance Committee	RSF	Reporters Without Borders
EU	European Union	SIDA	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
FOMECA	Fomento Concursable para Medios de Comunicación Audiovisual	SLAP	Strategic Lawsuit against Public Participation
GFMD	Global Forum for Media Development	UN	United Nations
GNI	Google News Initiative	US	United States
ICANN	Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers	USAID	United States Agency for International Development
ICFJ	International Center for Journalists		
IFPIM	International Fund for Public Interest Media		
INGO	International non-governmental organization		
LMNKC	Latvian Media Competence Center		
MDIF	Media Development Investment Fund		
MENA	Middle East and North Africa		
MFC	Media Freedom Coalition		



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