



PRIMED

PROTECTING INDEPENDENT MEDIA
FOR EFFECTIVE DEVELOPMENT

MEDIA VIABILITY

LEARNING BRIEF

About PRIMED

Protecting Independent Media for Effective development (PRIMED) is a three-year programme to support the provision of public interest media in Bangladesh, Ethiopia and Sierra Leone. PRIMED seeks to build the resilience of public interest media to political and economic pressures that are undermining viability, and to develop information ecosystems that enable a better flow of trusted public interest media content. This includes support to collective advocacy initiatives – advocacy “coalitions” – that are pushing for improvements in the information ecosystems of programme countries. With a strong focus on research and learning, PRIMED is also looking to shape media development policy and practice globally. PRIMED is implemented by a consortium of media support organisations with expertise in different aspects of media and development

Introduction

This learning brief aims to summarise the main strategies and approaches embraced by media development actors seeking to tackle the challenges associated with media viability. It was written in 2020¹ during PRIMED's co-creation phase to offer a point of departure for the country-specific strategies that are envisaged under the PRIMED programme.

Drawing on the PRIMED consortium partners' collective experience of enhancing the viability and sustainability of public interest media in fragile contexts, the paper notes that work in this field remains diverse and fragmented. There is, therefore, a pressing need to reach consensus on the key indicators of success and how these indicators can be measured across the PRIMED programme.

PRIMED is looking to test and develop the sector's understanding of these strategies and approaches through practice, the programme's monitoring and evaluation and answering the learning questions.

Definition

At the time of writing this brief, there was no agreed definition for "media viability". While all current approaches address the financial aspects of media operations, most practitioners believe that viability is also linked to the manifold conditions needed to ensure professional standards, editorial independence and pluralism.

The Deutsche Welle Akademie (DWA), a leading source of research and knowledge in this area, argues that interventions aimed at supporting viability need to look beyond individual media outlets to assess the ecosystem in which they operate. For Free Press Unlimited (FPU), this ecosystem includes factors that media outlets can, to some extent, influence (such as human resources and the organisational culture) as well as factors that they cannot influence (such as the legal framework, economic conditions and the advertising market).

The Media Development Investment Fund (MDIF) characterises viable media as "resilient, resourceful businesses that are strong enough to maintain their editorial independence and fulfil their critical role of providing society with timely and reliable information". As noted by BBC Media Action, such organisations should aim to achieve financial sustainability without jeopardising their editorial integrity or their ability to produce high-quality content that reflects audience needs and priorities.

PRIMED's definition of media viability is linked to the pre-existing economic and political conditions in the three target countries (Bangladesh, Ethiopia and Sierra Leone) which have worsened as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, political instability and pressures on media in the PRIMED countries. PRIMED, therefore, seeks to improve the ability of potentially viable public interest media outlets to become more resilient to uncertainty while continuing to serve the public interest.

This approach may not lead to a measurable increase in revenue for media outlets during the project lifecycle but it will equip media partners with the skills and insight to understand, anticipate and withstand shocks and stresses in the operating environment. It will help them to respond positively to these challenges through adaptability, preparedness and innovation with a view to achieving viability in the longer term.

¹ The original Learning brief was written in 2020 but edited and published in 2022.

Measuring media viability

As with the definitions above, there was no single approach to measuring media viability. DWA's Media Viability Indicators are designed to assess viability on three levels, considering the overall economic environment (macro); the structure of the media market and potential sources of revenue (meso); and the resources and structures of media organisations operating in that market (micro). Conversely, MDIF seeks to promote the long-term financial well-being of individual media outlets. Its metrics are composed of seven company-specific indicators that are built using data from client business records.

PRIMED will seek to measure viability at the ecosystem level as well as at the institutional level. It will examine the extent to which media partners become more resilient to environmental shocks and stresses by improving their management systems and adopting new business practices. The programme will analyse their organisational performance against a resilience index which includes their ability to deliver inclusive and relevant public interest content.

Strategies for improving media viability in fragile contexts

There are no one-size-fits-all solutions for enhancing media viability and any workable strategy needs to be tailored to the organisational needs of the beneficiary outlet. Arguably, interventions that work on only one level have less chance of delivering long-term impact than those which endeavour to strengthen organisations across multiple areas of activity as well as attempt to remove or overcome obstacles which exist in the operating environment. A fully holistic approach to improving media viability might include all or some of the following components:

Systemic reform

In most fragile or conflict-affected states, the growth of the media sector is stymied by restrictive policies and laws that act to inhibit freedom of expression and access to information in general, and public interest journalism in particular. Addressing these obstacles may include enhancing legal frameworks and regulatory structures as well as facilitating the creation or functioning of appropriate management and supervisory bodies.

Reform programmes for public service broadcasters will include looking at funding models that aim to ensure that these institutions are able to remain relevant and connected to their audiences while, at the same time, moving them from a state broadcasting system that is directed and controlled by government to a system that is publicly funded.

Organisational development

Media development organisations offer beneficiaries training, consultancy and advice on issues ranging from the granular to the strategic, from optimising advertising networks to developing new products that have strong revenue-generating potential. Such strategies need to be fully adapted to the contours of the operating environment, for example identifying cost-effective audience and market research methods that are suited to fragile contexts.

Substantial progress can be made by promoting greater innovation in business management. This includes developing strong brands with an in-depth understanding of their audiences and media market environment and supporting senior managers who have the skills necessary to drive innovation; facilitate business development; and reduce operating costs, where possible.

Mentoring and other forms of capacity-building at the senior level can be effectively supported by small, targeted grants aimed at implementing new strategies – for example, to conduct market research, purchase new equipment or hire experienced sales staff. Externally funded

interventions can also work to forge alliances, coalitions and networks between media actors both nationally and regionally.

Connecting with audiences

Building connections between media and their audiences is key to achieving long-term viability and ensuring that content offers or schedules respond to diverse needs. This often includes addressing community relationships as well as issues of language and cultural relevance. Leading media development actors work to enhance their partners' understanding of audience interests and priorities by helping to introduce robust feedback and engagement mechanisms.

At the same time, there is a widespread need to tackle endemic barriers in the workplace that prevent women and marginalised groups from participating fully in the development and production of public interest content. Efforts to improve the diversity of editorial teams and promote inclusive journalism can have a direct impact on public trust and market profile. However, evidence of the links between improved gender representation in the workplace and improved media viability is poorly explored and is therefore subject for further interrogation within PRIMED in the expectation that the evidence base can be improved².

Diversifying income streams

In recognition of the limitations of most advertising markets in fragile contexts, it is widely recognised that media outlets need to diversify their income streams and introduce new business models in order to survive. Such initiatives can be facilitated by offering coaching on industry trends; providing support for specific product launches; building fundraising, reader revenue and audience engagement capacity; and facilitating an exchange of knowledge and experience between peers.

Clearly, different skills are required for different types of organisation and for their diverse markets. In some contexts, the priority may be for practical support in the mechanics of online advertising; in others, competing for traditional radio and TV commercials may still be the primary concern. Furthermore, consultancy may be needed to help partners establish clear lines between editorial and advertising content or develop new formats or revenue verticals such as partnership initiatives, native or branded advertising.

Similarly, strategies aimed at persuading audiences to pay for news are highly dependent on market and cultural forces. Media development projects can give beneficiaries the opportunity to road-test multiple options such as introducing membership schemes disciplines and subscription models, erecting paywalls, targeting diaspora audiences and launching crowdfunding initiatives.

Media outlets have also explored ways of subsidising their journalism by selling a range of services such as consulting, training, editing, translating, event-hosting, filming and post-production. There may be opportunities for sharing costly resources such as office space, web hosting, printing presses, and audience research.

Public and donor funding

In countries where advertising markets are poorly developed or unable to sustain a pluralistic media sector, and where state support is limited or undesirable, independent media depend on donors for survival. Donor funding is particularly critical for outlets seeking to provide reliable news and information to remote or vulnerable communities which are unable to pay for high-quality content. With donors increasingly willing to provide grants directly to media outlets, there is a

²This is one of PRIMED's other learning questions

perceived value in helping local partners to identify and access funding opportunities as well as to manage grants.

In other countries, where markets are poorly developed but there is political will to support independent media, the potential for introducing public subsidies can be explored. These might include tax breaks, fiscal advantages associated with charitable status and postal distribution subsidies. As part of the PRIMED initiative, BBC Media Action has published a [working paper](#) that outlines approaches, models and incentives for governments to introduce public subsidies. There have also been a number of notable initiatives set to mobilise public and donor funds to media. For example the International Fund for Public Interest Media ([IFPIM](#)).

Evidence of impact

Numerous factors play a part in determining the success of initiatives aimed at enhancing media viability. Using the DWA framework, these factors could be categorised as follows:

- **Macro:** national/regional economy, political stability.
- **Meso:** advertising market, government interference in the market, media capture, competition from global tech companies, safety of journalists.
- **Micro:** commitment/mindset of owner and key personnel, management and technical capacity, content strategies.

Furthermore, when considering whether or not a media outlet has achieved the goal of producing content that serves the public interest, impact assessments should consider the quality of the content; the level of audience engagement; the efficiency of the outlet's editorial operation; and its ability to cover production and distribution costs in the medium to long term.

Despite the many challenges, PRIMED partners have reported significant evidence of impact in the framework of sustained interventions. FPU concludes that, as a result of recent programmes aimed at improving business models, media partners have become less dependent on its funding and, in 2019, most beneficiary outlets reduced this dependency to 10-50% of their budget. Core funding provided by FPU has allowed partners to focus on producing quality content and to experiment with new approaches.

MDIF's Impact Dashboard provides an analysis of the impact of its work by analysing client business data over time. In 2019, it found that, after five years of working with MDIF, clients had increased their revenues by an average of 218.3% (a median of 80.1%). Furthermore, beneficiaries had seen their revenues grow by a median rate of 16% per year over the same period.

IMS has supported the development of an informal network of like-minded media organisations in the Middle East. Members of the February Meet-Up Group assist one another with content production and business development, which they say has contributed to their survival (according to a 2018 evaluation). Furthermore, IMS has made demonstrable progress in improving diversity in the workplace. In Somalia, for example, it helped female media practitioners to negotiate better working conditions, as a result of which beneficiaries reported improved chances of promotion and greater willingness to remain in the profession.

Lessons learned

As stated in an article written by MDIF and published by DWA, “There is no silver bullet to overcome the economic challenges of running a media organisation and successful news companies do plenty of things differently, depending on their size, audience niche, resources available, distribution and many other factors”. Consequently, media development organisations are learning constantly from their experience of enhancing viability and developing new business models. A few key learning points are shared below.

Implement tailored interventions

Interventions must be individually tailored to an organisation’s needs and must enjoy the full buy-in of the owner and of key personnel. Staff should share a commitment to embracing change and helping the organisation generate more of its own revenues. Collaboration with international media development partners works best when common interests are clearly defined and common goals are agreed with all stakeholders.

Give media room to experiment

Media need to have the time and space to experiment with and test new approaches. This requires financial resources, inspiration and the right mindset. Media development organisations have an important role to play in this process by providing core funding; delivering training or coaching; and ensuring that the impact of new business models is properly monitored and assessed. They can also act as a knowledge broker, exchanging experiences between media outlets in fragile contexts.

Audience listening has never been more important

Consumption habits are in a state of rapid evolution and, therefore, retaining existing audiences while attracting new ones requires constant planning and adjustments. Media should check that they are continuing to meet audience needs and should be prepared to make changes to products and adjust newsroom workflows if research findings call for a course-correction. Linking audience listening to a defined value proposition will create additional opportunities for audience engagement, developing new products and generating revenue.

Collaboration can improve reach, impact and efficiency

Alliances and partnerships can serve to extend audience reach beyond traditional coverage. They also provide added value in terms of introducing new areas of expertise, talent and specialisation. Furthermore, collaboration can achieve cost efficiencies by allowing for resource-pooling and cost-sharing or, as demonstrated by the February Meet Up Group in the MENA region, open up new commercial opportunities.

Reach and viability do not necessarily go hand in hand

While media need to engage with and grow their audiences, there are no guarantees that audience size and credibility ultimately translate into financial security. BBC MA’s experience with Al Mirbad, the most popular source of news in southern Iraq, is a case in point. Despite best efforts over the past 15 years to reduce dependence on donor funding, Al Mirbad is able to cover just 20% of its core costs from advertising. This is largely because the advertising rates offered by YouTube and other platforms in poorer economies are much lower and these operators can easily undercut mainstream media.

Support of content production should be combined with business support

The experience of multiple media development organisations suggests that support with introducing new business models should be an integral part of all development programmes, particularly those aimed at creating new content or formats. The business case for launching new products needs to be fully interrogated (assessed in terms of mission impact, reach, costs and return) before investing in these initiatives.

Definitions

'Media viability/sustainability': Media viability and sustainability are often used interchangeably, although many interpret 'viability' as including an element of public interest. The terms can be used to refer to an individual news organisation's ability to generate revenue to cover costs or the wider environment in which media operate (economics, politics, technology etc).

Media resilience: is the ability of communities of media producers, comprised of organisations, networks of individuals, collectives and other organisational forms, to collectively produce information and journalism that helps people to participate in civic and political life, regardless of any environmental shocks and stresses, such as sustained or opportunistic attempts of coercion or the success or failure of any one media outlet.

Institutional resilience: the ability of a media institution to understand, anticipate and withstand shocks, long term stresses, and sudden changes to environment and respond positively through adaptability, preparedness and innovation to ensure the continuity of its critical function of generating content in the public interest. Resilience is necessary in order to become viable.

'Public interest media/journalism': Public interest media is generally used to refer to a journalist or organisation pursuing information that the public has a right to know. It includes watchdog and investigative reporting, as well as other factual news/information and providing a platform for debate. Whether it is produced in an ethical manner is more important than the business model of its producer.

'Independent media': Independent media may refer to ownership, content or both. In practice, independent media are generally seen as media that are free from the influence of government, political parties, religious and corporate interests, although a growing number of practitioners no longer use the term, preferring 'public interest media' instead.

Evidence and further reading

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