The industry known as 'media development'

Analyzing media assistance from a cosmopolitan perspective in mass communication

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Introduction: Media development in a changing geopolitical context—Cosmopolitan research perspectives are a "must"

For cosmopolitan communication studies, media development[1] is a field of utmost relevance. Whenever organizations—traditionally from the Global North—intervene in the media systems and journalism cultures of transformation or (post-)conflict societies, different concepts and norms of news and news making collide. Mostly "Western" actors—state- or privately funded, from major global actors like the NGO Internews to small but highly visible foundations like the Swiss-based Fondation Hirondelle—address media practitioners and newsrooms that act in profoundly different political and economic contexts—even if they share normative concepts of journalism with donors. The latter seek to contribute to professionalism and freedom of expression in "target countries." However, good intentions cannot be realized effectively without understanding the restrictions and rationalities of local media actors involved in the cooperation, both on the micro and meso levels (Fengler & Jorch, 2012). For example, more participatory forms of content production in sub-Saharan Africa—transforming media users into content producers or co-producers, particularly of investigative content—also increasingly expose journalists to threats from armed or extremist groups; thus, promoting "Western" journalism concepts can have unintended detrimental effects on local media practitioners (Schönbächler, 2023).

1 This chapter will focus on media development, also defined as media assistance or media action (Leroy, 2025). "Media development cooperation" means the efforts of different actors, often internationally, to enable, build, and strengthen free and independent media ("media development") and to use media as a tool ("media for development") to work toward development goals (Manyozo, 2012; Scott, 2014). It includes but is not limited to journalism training, advocacy for press freedom and right to information, establishment of media outlets, community engagement, production of media contents, media literacy, and communication campaigns.

Media development activities often transport normative ideas of how media systems should function. However,

> Western models of media systems cannot be easily applied to new democracies. Instead, new hybrid forms of political communication are emerging that blend liberal ideals of a free press with the trajectories of the past, indigenous values and the constraints and experiences of transition. (Voltmer, 2013, p. 23)

Especially in fragile states, media development is part of the set of influences on the transformation of media systems. The cases of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Ahmetašević, 2024) and Afghanistan (Wollenberg & Bahar, 2023) are just two recent examples of how norms of free media that are introduced from the outside into a context where conflicts are still ongoing do not permeate the media system in-depth, so newly established institutions or achievements remain vulnerable. Misconceptions and shortcomings often become obvious only much later—the return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan and the instant collapse of decades of development initiatives to strengthen civil society and freedom of expression is one striking example. Another is the fragmented, polarized, and "captured" broadcasting landscape in the Balkans, where many stations established by Western donors after the war in former Yugoslavia were "captured" by local media oligarchs once the donor community stopped funding and moved to other global "hotspots". A "cosmopolitan" approach to such spectacular failures also implies acknowledging particular conditions, such as imbalances and power asymmetries (Keßler, 2022), and the self-interest of local media practitioners (Fengler & Ruß-Mohl, 2008). The fact that a majority of studies analyzing the impact of media development have been commissioned and produced by the media donors themselves thus far limits a comprehensive assessment of the context-sensitive applicability of media development initiatives. All actors involved in such evaluations might have a strong interest in not questioning the effectiveness of funding (Noske-Turner, 2017).

At the time of this writing, the "era of innocence" in media development—that started with strong hopes for worldwide democratization processes after 1989/90—has come to an end. Already, the failure of the "Arab rebellion" made that obvious, and the geopolitical context for media development has changed profoundly with the Russian invasion of Ukraine and now the escalation in the Middle East. Reacting to these shifting dynamics, the USA has signaled its readiness to invest more in strengthening civil societies worldwide—while France has completely withdrawn from all (media) development activities in the Sahel region after the coups in Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso. Given the increasing polarization of the world, it will also be more challenging for actors like Germany who have been acting for most of the post-WWII period without a geopolitical agenda to conceptualize and implement media development initiatives that local decision-makers will not perceive as Trojan horses for political interference. While the "autocratization" (Nord et al., 2024) of states across continents continues, explicit legal restrictions have also been implemented in countries such as India to discourage foreign media development projects. Awareness about media capture (Mungiu-Pippidi & Ghinea, 2012) through media development actors has also increased.

The cultural challenges of media interventions in Afghanistan and Bosnia and Herzegovina may also serve to illustrate the need for a cosmopolitan perspective in the analysis of media development, which helps to renew theoretical perspectives with critical and plural approaches: Who is theorizing media development cooperation, how, and for what? The legacy of colonial hierarchies and continuing postcolonial tensions are not only topics in practical media development cooperation and in the collaboration between partners from different countries. They are also at the foundation of theories and theory building. Who is doing what research about whom? Awareness and recognition of imbalances and power asymmetries are part of such an approach. "Local ownership," "trust," and "participation," for instance, are popular terms in the industry of international media cooperation that hardly anyone would be opposed to. However, research by Waisbord (2008) and Noske-Turner (2017) has suggested that participatory approaches to media development cooperation are often undercut by institutional imperatives and pressures resulting from fixed project cycles and bureaucratic systems. A less illusionist and idealistic—at least theoretically—but more critical and comprehensive, collaborative, and integrative, and thus cosmopolitan perspective may also serve to increase the sustainability of media development—which has been at the center of critical investigation within the Graduate School MEDAS 21, funded by VolkswagenStiftung from 2018 through 2023.[2] Eight research projects were initiated to provide independent academic analysis of the structures and processes of media development projects in sub-Saharan Africa and Asia. All of the studies using qualitative methods have placed the perspective of local actors and institutions at the core of the research, thus supporting the pledge made by Richter et al. (2023): "Nur mit Wissen über inter- und transnationale Zusammenhänge lässt sich auch an *Global Governance* teilhaben und lassen sich weltweite Interdependenzen mitgestalten" (*"Only with knowledge of inter- and transnational interrelationships is it possible to participate in global governance and help shape worldwide interdependencies,"* [p. 4]). However, due to the space restrictions of a book chapter, this chapter will provide only a highly condensed overview of MEDAS 21 key research results. In a kaleidoscopic manner, it will highlight the Graduate School MEDAS 21 findings on key issues of a cosmopolitan approach to media development: postcolonial Western but also new forms of authoritarian non-Western influences on structures in media development; cultural challenges of media interventions via media development; influences and sustainability of media development on the transformation of media systems in the Global South; and collaborative and integrative approaches in media development to counter power asymmetries and promote participatory approaches.

Media development: An "industry" between postcolonial and authoritarian influences

A "cosmopolitan" perspective on media development also demands a sober analysis of donors' motives. Foreign aid for media assistance is a global phenomenon with

2 https://brost.org/medas21/

historic links to public diplomacy, but it is also rooted in colonialism and market expansion (Lugo-Ocando, 2020). International organizations have often treated media development as something that is done to other countries—as a supply-driven service performed and funded by outsiders mainly operating internationally (Miller, 2009). A donor-driven approach can imply that "locals" may be required to abandon their historical methods to adapt to donor-mandated practices (McPhail, 2009). Within the media development domain, international NGOs enjoy a unique position of non-partisanship seen as anti-political, apolitical, and supra-political, despite their financial support coming from states or regional bodies. Media assistance is, by its very nature, an act of political-cultural intervention (Miller, 2009, pp. 26–27). The legacy of history is a key consideration for the so-called media development sector: most of the implementers (INGOs or semi-public bodies) were born at the time of the collapse of the Soviet world, the war in the Balkans, and the genocide of the Tutsis in Rwanda (Leroy, 2021). Their credo thus often stems from post-Cold War geopolitics. The existence of mechanisms that can be regarded as prefiguring media development in the pre-independence Global South remains under-researched, although they are increasingly being addressed by scholars in the British (Potter, 2012), Portuguese (Ribeiro, 2014), and French contexts (Asseraf, 2019).

This situated view is compounded by the fact that the forms taken by transnational state media influence strategies have undergone profound changes since the end of the twentieth century, in line with changes in the geopolitical context and the emergence of new dissemination formats, including digital ones (Mattelart et al., 2022, p. 106). This combination of public and private diplomacies in the service of dedicated agendas highlights the interweaving of different spheres of influence, which is reshaping mass communication. Thus, from the 1990s onward in Eurasia and even more so in the following decade in Africa (Frère, 2012, 2022), a standard of intervention made the promotion of "democracy" the main thrust of media development strategies.

At the same time, new actors, including autocratic states, have entered the "media development cooperation" stage in past years, bringing different value systems. China's increasing investments in media in Africa and beyond (e.g., Gagliardone, 2015; Kumar, 2022) and the engagement of other global players from the BRICS countries to Turkey (de Albuquerque & Lycarião, 2018) and the Gulf States make it even more relevant to reconsider which values and norms are actually supported in media development cooperation and for what purposes. Increasing and value-driven competition between traditional "Western" and emerging "non-Western" media development actors should also draw more attention to the agency of actors from countries that receive media development support (see e.g., Lugo-Ocando, 2020). Myers (2018), for instance, described how Nigerian newspaper editors "talk about being able to 'circumscribe,' 'define,' 'pick and choose,' and that they seem to be able to assert their own strategies in the face of donor power" (p. 38). This raises the question of the power relations (Berger, 2010; Harris, 2018; Keßler, 2022) between various media development actors as well as their respective room for maneuvering.

Media development and peacebuilding: Case studies on UN radios in peacekeeping operations

In the context of conflicts—whether they be armed, political, or social struggles—the media plays a pivotal role. When conflicts emerge, the media often become, intentionally or not, key actors as they disseminate, withhold, and manipulate information in ways that can influence the unfolding of the conflicts (Mano, 2021). Scholarly debate has more frequently supported the media's agency in escalating conflicts but also in contributing to peace by defusing tensions and enhancing the prospects of conflict transformation, particularly through radio with its large outreach in hard-to-reach places (Hoffmann & Hawkins, 2015; Legatis, 2015; Maweu & Mare, 2021; Orgeret, 2021; Rodríguez, 2015; Santos & Schönbächler, 2022; see also Schleicher & Sarısakaloğlu in this book).

In the 1990s, the UN started deploying so-called UN radios in some of its peacekeeping operations.[3] The first of these radios, Radio UNTAC in Cambodia, went on air in 1992. Since then, the UN has set up more than a dozen radio stations to support its peacekeeping operations (see Betz & Papper, 2015; Lehmann, 2015; Orme, 2010). Peacekeeping operations often take place in countries with poorly developed and disrupted media landscapes. In this context, UN radios are sometimes the only non-partisan media source available. They provide the local population with reliable information about peacekeeping operations, the peace process, and other relevant issues. Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that some UN radios became the largest and most popular broadcasters across the country. However, UN radios are not without controversy. What is the exact role of UN radios? What impact do UN radios have on the local media landscape? What happens to UN radios when a peacekeeping operation ends?

After and during peacekeeping operations, UN media (particularly radio) have often become the standard of accuracy and professionalism for local media (Loewenberg, 2006). On the other hand, UN media have also become a "controversial matter" (Oksamytna, 2018, p. 80), as the assumption that it is appropriate for external actors to "educate" the local population in human rights and democracy is disputable and problematic.

In general, research in media development has frequently relied on theories that specify the role of Western mainstream news media in armed, militarized conflicts (Bratic, 2015; Budka & Bräuchler, 2020; Stupart, 2021), neglecting perspective and lived experiences of "local" journalists who work and reside in conflict areas (Santos & Schönbächler, 2022). Therefore, it is essential to involve local practitioners and experts in cross-border research.

Zaitoonie's (2025) case studies of Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Côte d'Ivoire have focused on the short- and long-term impact of the UN's media strategies in peacekeeping operations and thus reflect on media sustainability as well. The three countries were hit by severe and protracted civil wars. In the course of these civil wars, the UN adopted

3 Peacekeeping operations are UN interventions consisting of military, police, and civilian components that seek to stabilize conflict-affected countries after a peace agreement has been concluded (for further detail, see Gowan, 2018).

peacekeeping operations with comprehensive media strategies that included the establishment of UN radios: Radio UNAMSIL in Sierra Leone, UNMIL Radio in Liberia, and ONUCI FM in Côte d'Ivoire. The preliminary results of Zaitoonie's case studies revealed that the UN's media strategies—the UN radios in particular—significantly contributed to domestic media development in the respective countries. All three radios became major broadcasters with large audiences and a high degree of professionalism, which had a considerable spillover effect on the local media landscape. In respect to this context, UN media development expert Bill Orme (2010) claimed that UN radios, by design or default, "contributed more to media development in certain post-conflict countries than any other concurrent media assistance programs" (p. 8). Notwithstanding, UN radios also face certain challenges: becoming major domestic broadcasters bears the risk of distorting the local media market. Various key informants pointed to the fact that UN radios poached the best media workers—and the audiences—from local media outlets, which could not compete with the UN's considerable resources. Another point of criticism is the ambiguous role of UN radios. While they formally represent a strategic communications tool of the UN, they are often perceived as de facto public broadcasters. Nevertheless, UN radios are bound to the UN's peacekeeping mandates and cannot act completely independently, even if their staff have a great deal of editorial freedom. Until the end of the 1990s, UN radios were usually packed up and removed at a peacekeeping operation's end, which could leave behind a sudden void in the domestic media landscapes (see Betz & Papper, 2015, p. 174; Orme, 2010, p. 9). Therefore, more and more voices have called for the continuation of UN radios beyond a peacekeeping operation's end. However, the case studies have indicated that a lack of financial resources and editorial independence can severely endanger the quality of successor radio stations.

Santos's study (2024) has confirmed these constraints faced by journalists working for UN missions. She has studied the situation in the Central African Republic (CAR), where attempts at state building have failed, and the state has been plunged into an eternal spiral of violence. Santos compared Guira, a radio station run by the UN mission in the CAR (MINUSCA), and radio Ndeke Luka, which is run by the Swiss-based NGO Fondation Hirondelle, with regard to the norms and agency of media professionals belonging to these two stations. Agency refers not only to the intentions people have in doing things but also to their "capability of doing those things" (Giddens, 1984, p. 9). Through the journalists' narrated experiences, it was possible to detect layers of differences in how both radios shaped local journalists' spaces of action and how the journalists from these radio stations exercised their agency. Central African journalists working for the UN radio tended to have more prestige but less agency. Landing a position at a UN radio station would be a significant professional step for the journalists toward a higher social status, and their improved image would have positive outcomes for their peers, family, surroundings, and ultimately the country. However, while they had more resources for their work, there were also more rules that local UN journalists had to abide by, as well as more restrictions of what they could publish and broadcast. For example, they were not allowed to reach out to representatives of armed groups to avoid diplomatic imbroglios. The contrasting degrees of agency of journalists working in the UN radio Guira and the NGO-run radio Ndeke Luka became evident in their coverage of the process of the peace

talks and the event of the signature of the Khartoum peace accords in February 2019.[4] As narrative analysis revealed, Hirondelle's Ndeke Luka showed a more investigative approach by questioning the actors involved in the peace negotiations and attempting to delve into the specific details about the accords and to publicly unveil what was being secretly discussed. On the other hand, the narratives about the peace talks aired by the UN's Guira mainly portrayed the official top-down perspective of the ceremony of the peace accord signature without delving into the nuances of how these accords were negotiated. The peace deal that had been discussed and agreed upon behind closed doors in Khartoum appeared as a given fact and as taken for granted. Guira's approach neglected that it had been a construction process under intense negotiation. Additionally, the views of the society at large about such accords were not included in the UN broadcast, and when it did attempt to reach out to the people, the goal was mainly to "sensitize" the population and raise their awareness about that new piece of document.

Assessments of the context sensitive applicability of media development initiatives: Examples of gender-focused projects in a conflict state and of health journalism in Africa

Volatile conditions in conflict-affected areas require a particularly thoughtful media development approach, taking postcolonial structures, religion, gender, and related values into account (Geertsema-Sligh, 2019). However, Schönbächler's study (2023)[5] has shown how Western media development projects have contradictory effects on local female journalists. While women might gain access to media production, they are also more exposed to discrimination and risk. Due to persisting local social norms, women journalists continue to have less access to capacity building. Almost all female journalists interviewed by her in Burkina Faso claimed to be discriminated against when it came to being selected within their own newsrooms for attending training organized as part of media development initiatives.[6] However, many training organizers have noticed the lack of participation of women journalists and have thus adopted positive discrimination, explicitly asking for the participation of women journalists in their training. According to Schönbächler (2023), this practice has been highly appreciated by the interviewed Burkinabè women journalists, who have not only been able to develop their skills but also to earn additional income. Female journalists are also more often hired for media development projects, which can cause them to be increasingly exposed to

4 The signature of the *Accord politique pour la paix et la reconciliation* (APPR; Political agreement for peace and reconciliation) signed by the Central African government and 14 armed groups was brokered by the United Nations and the African Union.

5 Passages have already been published in Schönbächler (2023). Short text items have already appeared in onsite actors' agency within international media development (Drefs, 2022a).

6 In one case, the per diems were even used as an argument to change plans at the last minute: a male colleague was sent instead of the woman who was supposed to attend the training. The reason given was that the male journalist needed the money because his wife was in the hospital. This example illustrates very well how monetization of aid combined with local gender role expectations can lead to gender discrimination.

risks. In particular, when women journalists address topics related to gender, schooling, early/forced marriage, female genital mutilation, and family planning—often pushed by media development initiatives—they are threatened by transnational groups in Burkina Faso (Yaméogo, 2018). Almost all radio stations in the area covered by Schönbächler's study (2022) have experienced armed groups threatening them, their staff, and their families. As donors like to encourage journalistic formats that are more open to the voices of journalists and listeners, female radio journalists are also more vulnerable to abuse when covering these sensitive topics in interactive radio shows. Thus, her study has revealed a trade-off between giving voice and ensuring protection.

Promoting coverage of health issues in African countries is another example of cultural and normative challenges to media development, as socially prevailing patterns of interpretation in the project countries may stand in the way of professional health journalism Western donors support as agents of change. The divergence between cultural values on the one hand and generally accepted social knowledge on the other (Schimank, 2007, p. 126) can lead to cognitive dissonance concerning journalists' understanding of their professional role. In many sub-Saharan African countries, Western funders of media development train journalists to cover health issues comprehensively to make an impact on public health. However, according to Wollnik's study (2025), certain health topics are forgotten or neglected in African mass media. In this context, journalists from Uganda resort to "self-censorship" in their newsrooms after participating in training: they seek to avoid certain health topics that are undesirable in media houses due to prevailing social values. Examples are reporting on homosexuality, being considered a risk factor for infection with HIV, or deliberately induced abortions. According to a health journalist from Uganda in 2021 (Wollnik, 2022), covering these issues could require shifting the focus of reporting, for example, to (legal) access to post-abortion care, or applying the issue to certain social settings such as the special situation of refugees. Mental health disorders are another example. They have not only been on the rise in African countries since the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. Chen et al., 2021; Sankoh et al., 2018) but are locally associated with religious superstition or witchcraft (Wollnik, 2022, p. 5). As a result, in some African countries, there is rarely any talk about these illnesses in the media (cf. Alemu et al., 2023).

Cultural challenges and power imbalances: Dealing with differences in media development between actors and countries

Media development donors may also be confronted with "media" that have little resemblance to Western concepts of newsrooms. Least developed countries (LDCs) are a particularly complicated terrain both for local media practitioners and international donors: in a context of permanent state fragility (instead of sudden conflict), they experience influencing by various interest groups, ambiguous constraints, and lack of resources, among other issues. Mack's study (2025)[7] investigated the media of Guinea-Bissau and their in-

7 Note: Some contents of this paragraph written by Mack have been published in the Central European Journal of Communication, Special Issue on Media Capture.

teractions with international actors. In the media system of such a small, politically, and economically fragile country, which is also marked by cultural diversity (Kohl, 2012, p. 643), a basic task of media development actors has been to train authorities on how to deal with media, whose stability is rather dependent on the will of current political leaders. The few donors from the Global North "compete" with new international actors, such as Christian and Muslim religious actors as well as the Chinese embassy, who do not prioritize media development but rather stress ideological loyalty. Journalists face restrictions and risks, and they often work without a stable payment. Due to the financial dependency of large parts of the media systems on either state/party or donor funding, journalists accept per diems and other benefits from politicians—and donors—despite being aware of the ethical compromise (Sampaio-Dias, 2019, p. 2352). Suitable partners for media development projects are difficult to select, as state media depend on the president and private media either belong to or are financed by politicians, so donors often have to compromise. Donor fatigue is one consequence of the continuous fragility (Walker & Gomes, 2021, p. 12), and "agenda setting [being] upside-down" (de Barros, 2012, p. 99) is another; that is, rather than the media setting the agenda, the "donor topics" determine the public debate.

Journalistic training projects can have unintended effects, as they may be characterized by an imbalance of agency between representatives of donors and trainees from the Global South. A study focusing on the negotiation of knowledge and positions between trainers and trainees (Keßler, 2024) hinted at enduring stereotypical role conceptions even in a phase of intense debates about postcolonialism. The author's examples point toward a lack of "cosmopolitanism" among the trainers tasked with addressing media actors from other journalism cultures and working environments. Keßler examined journalism training in order to detect if a "dominance of Western ideas" of development and journalism (Banda, 2013; Lugo-Ocando, 2020; Manyozo, 2012, pp. 200–207; Miller, 2009; Murphy & Scotton, 1987; Phiri & Fourie, 2011) may still be visible in concrete interactions between trainers from the so-called Global North and trainees from the Global South. Despite having been described in the literature as partially overcome (Communication Initiative et al., 2007, p. 44; Drefs & Thomass, 2019; Tufte & Mefalopolus, 2009), various practices of inequality emerged in Keßler's participant observation of training (see also Keßler, 2022 and Keßler at al. in this book). For example, trainers and organizational leaders tended to emphasize the superiority of their experience and theories coming mostly from the USA and Europe, and they relativized trainees' professionalism, thus stereotyping and infantilizing trainees (as known from discourse analyses of development actors, see Kogen, 2018). However, the trainees in turn emphasized their unique role as agents of change in their countries, their context-specific knowledge, and different understandings of journalism, social change, and how to address the audience. Religion, in particular, emerged as a key aspect of the discussions and negotiations between trainers and trainees;[8] it becomes clear here that religion is an important influencing factor that both media development researchers and practitioners should pay more atten-

8 For example, both sides negotiated stereotypes of a misanthropic Islam on various occasions and the importance of religiosity for campaigns of social change and the definition of credible sources in general. In addition, the impossibility of an organ donation campaign being shown was dis-

tion to (e.g., Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit [GIZ], 2023; see also Bundesministerium für Wirtschaftliche Entwicklung und Zusammenarbeit [BMZ], 2016; Jahnel, 2018).

Drefs's (2022b) qualitative study of representatives of on-site actors and their agency comes to a somewhat ambivalent conclusion. Her exploratory interview study confirmed power imbalances but also pointed toward the considerable authoritative resources on-site actors possess in interactions with donors. So-called "authoritative" resources enable agents to have an influence on relevant aspects of social situations, such as "organisation of time and space, chances for self-development, organisation between people" (Best, 2003, p. 6). Overall, the study indicates that on-site media development actors display knowledge about the rules that structure the context in which they act. They know that international media development offers a field of action that allows them to strive for their idealistic goals. Motives like fighting media capture or enabling investigative reporting go well with the democratic agenda of international media development organizations and their funders, which also indicates that from the perspective of on-site actors "shared democratic values" (Drefs & Thomass, 2019, p. 267) are fundamental building blocks for media development partnerships. However, whether on-site actors' democratic values are genuine or displayed to serve as an advantage in the competition for media development resources is raised as an issue that requires scrutiny. After all, the interviewees' doubts about other local actors' sincerity to the cause confirm Berger's (2010) problematization of the media development sector as a market for resources. Yet, even for "genuine" actors, media development serves as a source of revenue. Thus, they are very much aware of the expectations and bureaucratic requirements attached to this field of action. The way they act upon them ranges from embracing these rules and aligning one's own organizations' structures accordingly to playing along while not actually subscribing to them or even opposing them. Especially when it comes to structures that have been installed by other actors for whom there is quite a big imbalance in allocative resources—that is, material resources such as financial means, products, or raw materials—on-site partners seemed to prefer to circumvent rules they find hard or annoying to fulfill, rather than questioning them openly. This finding implies an important realization for those actors who are rich in allocative resources, such as governmental organizations or private foundations who fund media development programs. In the quest for improved effectiveness and impact, many of them have introduced managerialist-inspired funding conditions and formalized procedures for monitoring and evaluation (Elbers et al., 2014). Yet, when on-site actors do not see a chance to question the appropriateness of such conditions and procedures in their local contexts, they might just work around them and—in doing so—reduce them to absurdity.

In other situations, especially when on-site actors' positions are strengthened by a good deal of authoritative resources, they make strategic use of their capabilities. On-site actors' local expertise and a network of long-term and diverse partners can work as authoritative resources that give them leverage in shaping projects and, in extreme cases,

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cussed due to the religiously based sanctity of the body. Furthermore, participating media actors also acted as spiritual or Christian public actors in their countries.

even allow them to make a difference by ending a partnership. As far as allocative resources are concerned, the power imbalance between external organizations that give out funds and on-site organizations that receive them cannot be denied. While this, at times, prompts on-site actors to take on projects that not everybody on their team is particularly interested in, many seem to base such decisions on broader strategic considerations intended to benefit their organization overall and to enable other concrete endeavors they want to undertake. For Drefs (2022a), the question arose whether an open and argument-based discussion about the relevance and urgency of specific funding lines would not be more beneficial for all parties involved within this interplay of on-site actors' authoritative resources and international organizations' or donors' allocative resources. It would allow on-site actors to explain why certain issues are higher on their agendas than others. Likewise, it would help donors avoid funding projects that do not have local ownership.

Rethinking the transformative dimension of media development to foster its sustainability

One of the topical issues that regularly crops up in development discourse is sustainability (Leroy, 2021). The desire for impartiality on the side of Western media development actors illustrates, above all, the difficulty of thinking about media development from a "transnational" and not just an "international" perspective. The standards for evaluation in development assistance are still those defined by the principles for evaluation (1991) of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development's Development Assistance Committee, the successor to the Organization for European Economic Co-operation, which in 1948 was responsible for administering the Marshall Plan. This inherited divide perpetuates a kind of (at least discursive) power imbalance. This has, for example, resulted in Germany and, more marginally, France accounting for the broadcasting of their overseas media as Official Development Assistance to the Global South. The border between inside and outside—or, to put it another way, belonging—is no longer perceived in the same way.

Media development projects have long been built on the assumption that media growth is equated with media development (Berger, 2022). The emergence of a concern for sustainability and social impact shows that the growth = development equation is not always verified. In the development sector, a number of meta-evaluations had already been carried out to measure the effectiveness of "interventions" against the facts, with, to give just three examples, a sample of 34 evaluations from 2003 through 2005 (Forss et al., 2008), 340 randomly selected evaluations from 2009 through 2012 (Hageboeck et al., 2013), and 72 evaluations from 2018 through 2022 (African Development Bank [AfDB], 2023). They respectively showed that 38% of the evaluations were rated as poor or not satisfactory on their sustainability analysis, 34% had imprecise findings (simply "some," "many," or "most"), and shortcomings in institutional sustainability and strengthening

of capacities were found in 42% of cases.[9] A meta-analysis focusing solely on media development projects and bringing together a corpus of 289 evaluations from 1999 through 2019 reached similar results (Leroy, 2025), as many as 45% of the ex post evaluations did not provide an opinion on the sustainability of their project, and when a judgement was made, it was mostly depreciatory (27%). Also, the study found that a concern for the economic dimension of sustainability was growing, with the ideal of a business-oriented transformation. With numerous references to "adaptation," the results also showed a reactivation of the old "modernization" pattern. For half of the study period, this universal goal of media sustainability excluded and essentialized Africa as a continent where sustainability was not an issue, or even where media projects were doomed to be unsustainable.

Following universalist roots (Hume, 2004), media development has entered a post-missionary era (Noske-Turner, 2017) but struggles to define its very purpose. It is probably no coincidence that information is not a Sustainable Development Goal as such among the 17 to be reached by 2030 adopted by the United Nations. The one that comes closest is the sixteenth, which is the goal to "*promote[s] peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide[s] access to justice for all and build[s] effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels*" (UN, 2015, p. 14, emphasis added). The media only appear explicitly in Target 10 with Indicators 16.10.1 and 16.10.2 linked to the imprisonment and death of journalists, that is, criteria that are undoubtedly less debated than the very aims of media interventions. For the rest, it seems that agreement on objectives is difficult to reach. As a normative view of democracy or democratic formalism (Bonnard et al., 2021) is sometimes adopted by autocratic regimes to legitimize themselves, the focus is now shifting to a consideration of a true "participation" and the conditions that enable it to emerge, as summarized in a discussion paper based on findings from a project in Niger: "*It is crucial to ensure* broad *participation and to have participants agree on ground rules for their exchanges to create a productive dialogical setting*" (Drefs & Souleymane, 2023, p. 10, emphasis added).

Lessons from the MEDAS 21 research: Suggestions for a more cosmopolitan media development practice

MEDAS 21 has published a set of policy recommendations aiming to improve research and practice of media development.[10] These recommendations (summarized below) describe a roadmap for how to "cosmopolitanize" theory-building, empirical research, and actual practices in media development. Systematically including the knowledge of on-site actors and scholars in the Global South will be a relevant first step to challenge (and thereby improve) an industry that still lacks the academic scrutiny needed in a time of uncertain global prospects. The MEDAS 21 recommendations are as follows:

9 On 29 November 2023, the institution organized a dedicated learning event on the theme of sustainability in development interventions based on these findings. This last figure was quoted by AfDB Evaluator General Karen Rot-Münsterman in her Opening Remarks.

10 https://www.medas21.net/resources/.

- It is of utmost importance to provide wider access to data sources in the sector, many of which are still confidential. This is particularly the case for baseline studies and ex post evaluations of projects.
- In order to broaden the perspective, it is necessary to put an emphasis on learning from on-site actors (Drefs & Thomass, 2019). A reflection on problematic points in interactions between international partnerships in media development cooperation is still to be promoted in this matter.
- In the media development cooperation sector, there seem to be few considerations for failure. Negative evaluation often comes with a negative connotation, synonymous with unfulfilled objectives, frustration, or even defeat. Benequista et al. (2019) insisted that "practitioners of media development have also been reluctant to acknowledge scholarly critique of the field" (p. 6).
- While the online and offline lived realities can no longer be separated, research has to increasingly take into account digital spaces and practices as well as their interaction with offline spaces and practices (Schmidt-Lux & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2020).
- The state of research on media development cooperation in the poorest countries is often extremely precarious. This makes much greater higher education cooperation indispensable between universities themselves and between universities and practitioners over the long term.

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