**Position Paper**

Medas 21 "Media Development Assistance in the 21st Century"

## Lessons Learnt from A Media Development Research Program

### Executive summary

This position paper puts forward suggestions for further practical and theoretical engagement with media development cooperation. It draws from the experience of the four-year graduate school MEDAS 21 engaging with diverse perspectives in this broad field.

'Media development cooperation' means the efforts of different actors, often internationally, to both enable, build and strengthen free and independent media ('media development') and to use media as a tool ('media for development') to work towards development goals (Manyozo, 2012; Scott, 2014). It includes but is not limited to journalism trainings, advocacy for press freedom and right to information, establishment of media outlets, community engagement, production of media contents, media literacy and communication campaigns.

The graduate school MEDAS 21 has tackled these topics through seven independent PhD research projects and one postdoc project in collaboration with eight practice partners in different contexts in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. Beyond research and publications, the collaboration resulted in debates, field access, workshops and conferences, collaborative studies and practical efforts to enrich exchange and knowledge about media development cooperation. This made MEDAS 21 a post graduate program that actively sought to contribute to addressing issues of practical relevance.

This paper summarizes important conclusions and learnings drawn from the work in the graduate school and suggests recommendations for future work at the intersection of media development cooperation's theory and practice.

### Introduction

Within renewed development policy debates since the early 2000s (Barder 2009; Fischer 2010), a vibrant free and reliable media space remains key for fostering a pluralist debate[1] and strengthening democracy (Kumar 2010). In the last years, however, attempts at democratization worldwide have suffered from various intersecting crises like the resurgence

of coups in Africa, the Taliban taking power in Afghanistan, restrictions on civil liberties in democracies presented as liberal, to name but a few (Storm, 2021; Masomy, 2022).

This led to new reflections about the impacts and limits of international assistance. The consequences of the Russian war in Ukraine and the clash between value systems and rule-based order that all these separate examples bring to the fore will undoubtably have huge effects also on media development cooperation[2], which can so far only be guessed at. Reacting to these shifting dynamics, several donors like the US have signalled their readiness to invest more in strengthening civil societies worldwide.

At the same time, new actors including autocratic states have entered the "media development cooperation" stage, 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 (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 which purposes.

Defining the contested term 'media development cooperation' is an ongoing process. Without taking a position on whether or not it constitutes a separate field of research, these objectives can serve as references for what is named in this paper 'media development cooperation'— meaning any engagement by the media themselves and by development actors that promotes either *participatory communication* (the use of communication to enhance endogenous social change), *media for development* (the use of media for development purposes) or *media development* (the targeted development of an independent media sector including a favourable environment, media organizations and outlets, journalists and the audience/ media literacy) (Manyozo 2012; Scott 2014). As James Dean (2019) states, this diversity of the field "is not necessarily a bad thing given the diversity, fluidity and complexity of shifting challenges, but it has shown little sign of collective lesson learning of what works and does not, coordination or even a clear semblance of a long-term strategic ambition" (p.162).

The graduate school MEDAS 21 has contributed to the discourse on media development cooperation through different research projects[3]. It has engaged with questions related to UN radios' role in peacekeeping missions, development actors' roles in fragile media systems, the media's role in public health and peacebuilding, sustainability discourses in media development cooperation programs, imbalances and diversity in journalism trainings, as well as women journalists' perspectives.

Research in collaboration with practitioners in the field has resulted in critical debates and practical efforts to enhance the field. This position paper engages first with the question why media development cooperation is more relevant than ever (section 1). In a second part, the paper highlights the role of the four-year graduate school (section 2) and ends with lessons learnt from these experiences (section 3).

## 1) THE MEDIA IN A CONTEXT OF GLOBAL CRISES – A KEY TO REDUCING POVERTY?

The Human Development Report (UNDP 2001) identified information and communication technologies (ICTs) as "key to reducing global poverty". In its World Development Report 2002, the World Bank (2002) also described the growing importance of the media in development processes. The same year, its special report "The right to tell—The role of mass media in economic development" used the term "equitable development" and mentioned that:

> "The information industry, in which the media play a key role, tends to develop faster in democratic societies that generally foster freer information flows. However, the media industry can also promote greater degrees of freedom and stronger democracies over time. While each affects the other, the important question for those who are involved in designing policy is what types of discreet steps might be taken to establish and maintain free and independent media. This is a concern for all countries, rich and poor." (Islam 2002, 21)

Current global policy developments also affect the communication sector: a few Transnational Corporations (TNCs) concentrate the ownership of new public spaces. New technologies and the effects of media convergence change the way citizens access contents, creating new imbalances and asymmetries. As put by Fels,

> "the focus of competition authorities and regulators has turned to content supply and the way in which the sale and distribution of content affects competition in downstream markets" (2013, 367).

In addition, the work of journalists is still severely hampered in 70 of the 180 countries listed by Reporters Without Borders (2022) and restricted in 62 others. Only 8 out of 180 countries can still rely on a favourable information environment and 40 on a quite favourable one. Overall, the ranking reveals a double polarisation: polarisation of the media within countries leading to or resulting from fractures and polarisation between states at an international level.

Public diplomacies – strategies and practices of influence of international media – are being transformed by the combined effect of networks, the emergence of new players (Koch and Mattelart, to be published in 2023), the setting of an agenda (Sida 2010; SDC 2020), with new priorities (Thomaß et al. 2004) and an increased demand for transparency and accountability (Fengler 2019).

### *Preventing aid from doing harm*

In the field of media development cooperation, with an increasing number of providers (Evans 2010), calls for changing and adapting established practices have been made. In particular to prevent aid from doing harm:

> "Over four decades donor agencies have repeatedly committed themselves to change, but reform has been slow. Developing countries express their frustration that donors are failing to live up to their commitments, and public confidence is sapped by a succession of books and articles pointing out the deficiencies of the system." (Barder 2009, 3)

More effectiveness was promoted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) with 10 "strategic principles" for media assistance (Odugbemi and Deane 2014) as part of related support for governance[4]:

> 1. "Incorporate media assistance into a larger framework of development aid // 2. Incorporate media indicators and audits into governance diagnostics and needs analysis. // 3. Co-operate with media development CSOs and determine media objectives and outcomes, not methodologies. // 4. Focus on building public demand for inclusive policy dialogue. // 5. Support independent, sustainable, and capable local media in developing countries. // 6. Foster ownership as a central component of support. // 7. Promote citizen access to the media and mobile technologies as well as citizens' media literacy. // 8. Encourage links between media institutions and the rest of civil society. // 9. Support systematic research on the effects of media and information access on domestic accountability. // 10. Learn about and harness new technologies."

Nonetheless, it is important to look at the 'watchdog' role free and independent media can play by holding not only governments accountable, but also private actors and development agencies and their practices. This is only possible if the media remains independent also from donors' interests. However, Lugo-Ocando (2020) notes that the idea of "watchdog" journalism is contextualized mostly in a "Western" understanding of journalism.

### *Constructing the field: continuous relevance, new challenges*

Important documents generally drawn upon to stress the media/development *nexus* include the Media Development Indicators (UNESCO 2008), Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development (UN 2015) with its dedicated target on public access to information[5], the International Declaration on Information and Democracy (RWB 2018) and the Windhoek+30 Declaration (UNESCO c 2021a, 2021b), which declares information as a "public good".

Renewed forms and methods of co-operation, giving full scope to endogenous efforts for media development cooperation and to private sector action, must respond to this new context. As put by the joint draft concept note of the Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA) and the Global Forum for Media and Development (GFMD):

> "Stronger coordination consensus among the DAC donors could make it easier for other players in the media development effort – private foundations, international and local investors, and even local authorities – to contribute more effectively to this complex and multifaceted challenge. The process could lead to innovation in support mechanisms, including challenge funds, loans, scholarships, and other approaches to incentivize investment." (2022, 2)

This document by CIMA and GFMD proposes five principles for media assistance, summarized in the following:

> 1. "Integrating media development into the international development and governance agendas // 2. Informing efforts to improve donor strategies in the media sector // 3. Fostering a growing commitment to long-term, locally-led, and participatory approaches to media development // 4. Integrating media development with internet governance and strategies to counter disinformation // 5. Ensuring that instrumental engagement with the media sector does no harm"

The launch of a new International Fund for Public Interest Media[6] (IFPIM) in the early 2020s corresponds to the emergence of a "step change" strategy that has emerged in other sectors in recent decades (Global Fund to Fight Aids, Tuberculosis and Malaria in 2002, Green Climate Fund in 2010, Global Innovation Fund in 2014...). It suggests:

> "Scaling up [funding to international media] through existing systems would involve significant new investments by development agencies in hiring new staff, establishing new learning and evaluation systems and changing organisational architectures. It would also involve creating new co-ordination and learning systems between agencies to ensure that funding was informed by the best evidence and practice of what works and what does not work, which is particularly important in such a fast-moving and dynamic arena. Such systems do not currently exist." (Luminate 2020)

Here again, a list of potential risks that could arise—and therefore the issues to be addressed—is mentioned, summarized in the following:

> 1. Cost-effectiveness // 2. Become a political target // 3. Regulatory prohibitions // 4. Dependence // 5. Market distortion // 6. Political co-option // 7. Lack of existing models to follow // 8. Donor/Western or other influence // 9. Weakening of country ownership // 10. An overly narrow focus // 11. Funding the wrong institutions // 12. Cannibalising funding from existing media support efforts // 13. Corruption, financial mismanagement and safeguarding risks" (CIMA & GFMD, 2022)

These updated lists of risks correspond to a need to open up the sector and make it more accessible to related fields such as communication, development studies, evaluation studies, political science, technology, etc. This reflection intends to include concerns that are still under-covered in this sector, such as impact studies, gender studies, peace and conflict studies, history, sociology and a consideration of post-coloniality, to name but a few.

## 2) EXPERIENCES AND RESEARCH RESULTS OF MEDAS 21

Besides individual scholarly participation in conferences and the production of peer-reviewed papers in journals and books, the MEDAS 21 research programme has also contributed collectively to the production of practical knowledge. During these four years, in a unique set-up supported by the Volkswagen Foundation, MEDAS 21 worked in close connection with its "*praxis* partners"[7] and prominent stakeholders throughout the world at the intersection of academic theory and practical application. The graduate school has thus deployed an original methodological approach to the sector at the crossroads of communication, journalism and media studies. The seven projects have resulted in relevant and intriguing research results, based on in-depth review of academic and grey literature, field work, innovative methods and thorough analysis.

**Viviane Schönbächler: Women Journalists in Proximity Radio: Access, Interaction, Participation in Conflict Resolution and Transformation Processes in Burkina Faso**

- Considering intersectional barriers for audience participation, it is key to offer a wide range of channels for audience interaction to ensure more inclusive radio programs.

- Respecting and valuing women's programs in radio stations is important to foster women's participation in public discourses.
- Journalists working in conflict settings should co-decide on the formats and discourses of project-related content to be able to negotiate the trade-off between voice and protection.

**Michel Leroy: The Social Construction of Sustainability in Media Development Evaluations. A Critical Discourse Analysis.**

- The PhD demonstrates that from its very premises, sustainability came out of the purely environmental sphere to become a very flexible and also polysemic motto
- A meta-analysis of 287 assessments conducted over the past 20 years challenges the sustainability discourse of the media development industry. Qualitative data from Uganda and the DRC confirm how instrumental the injunction to sustain may be.
- It suggests to focus more on the sustainability of values than of the sole development outputs.

**Mira Keßler: How journalism trainings negotiate asymmetries and diversity**

Offering a journalism training, trainers may be under pressure to deliver specific knowledge and to legitimize it. Thus, there is no room for contextualization and participation. These would be possible if:

- No "fixed" knowledge is assumed.
- Trainers then see themselves only as facilitators who acknowledge journalists with their own local knowledge as experts who have their own answers to "development questions".
- Research on different journalistic values and role perceptions is included in the training (and thus no universalism is assumed).
- Religion and trauma must also be addressed if not included in the curriculum as part of the working and living contexts of many journalists.

**Roja Zaitoonie: United Nations' Media Interventions in Peace Operations. A Comparative Study on Sierra Leone, Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire**

- UN media interventions are crucial to the success of UN peace operations. They promote domestic peace and media development tremendously.
- However, UN media interventions face various challenges, such as insufficient concepts and approaches, communication biases towards the UN and domestic governments, reverse effects on domestic media markets, bureaucratic and financial constraints, as well as sustainable transition strategies after a peace operation ends.

- UN media interventions have improved significantly during the past two decades. Nevertheless, they need further improvement, especially in terms of material and personal resources, to realize their full potential.

**Stefan Wollnik: Health Journalism and its Social Importance in the Context of Global Media Development Assistance: An Empirical Investigation Using the Example of Sub-Saharan Africa**

- The data material revealed that, contrary to its great societal potential, health journalism in Sub-Saharan Africa does not play a major role for actors in media development assistance, even though health journalism requires external support.
- Furthermore, the example of African health journalism showed that unequal power constellations in media development assistance can quickly lead to dependency relationships with journalists and media houses, which can endanger the objectivity of journalistic health reporting in countries with weak media systems.
- Despite the obvious need for support initiatives for health journalism in Sub-Saharan Africa, the sustainability of such initiatives remains at least questionable if the conditions of the media system in general are not considered and adapted carefully enough.

**Fabíola Ortiz dos Santos: Journalism and Peacebuilding: Challenges and Approaches to Media Development. Radio Guira and Ndeke Luka in the Central African Republic**

- Through the examination of radio stations in the Central African Republic, different editorial practices were observed such as what it means to be neutral, independent, impartial, objective, and transparent. They acquire different connotations according to the structure under which the radio station operates.
- The data collected through a three-month fieldwork showed the existence of differences on how journalists shape their spaces of action and exercise their agency. In such a hostile environment, the journalists' narratives accounted for courage against intimidation and expressed their notion of reconciliation and responsibility towards society. They understand the role of radio as early warning and expressed the need to change the rhetoric of the conflict.
- The data suggests that radio should serve as a safe space for channelling different perspectives on the conflict in the Central African Republic and how it could be transformed. Thus, media development and particularly journalism, should always integrate peacebuilding strategies in contexts of conflict.

**Johanna Mack: Media Systems transformation in a context of stable instability: Conceptualizing Media Development in Guinea-Bissau**

- Media capture is a strong element in Guinea-Bissau's media system throughout different historical phases: Various interest groups influence and finance media (e.g.,

political, religious, economic). Development actors contribute to "agenda-setting upside down" by financing and providing contents.
- In a media environment characterized by political instability, economic and infrastructural paucity and political parallelism, small proximity media outside of the power centres are the least restricted, but also the most vulnerable.
- Media for development projects in Guinea-Bissau consider media outlets as civil society actors rather than in their journalistic function. This perpetuates an activist/ interventionist/educative role understanding amongst journalists.

Next to the individual PhD projects, the MEDAS 21-fellows have also organized a variety of events to connect academia and practice, including two seminars for students at Technical University Dortmund, three sessions at the IAMCR 2021, the autumn school "Disrupted Ethnographies" and the workshop series "Knowledge for Tomorrow".

## 3) LESSONS LEARNT AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

The work of the MEDAS 21 team goes beyond the research projects, thanks to the intensive discussions with the supervisors and practice partners, with researchers, media development experts and journalists met at conferences and during field research.

Summarizing and taking into account all the experiences of the four fruitful years of MEDAS 21, academics and practitioners of media development cooperation together hereby commit themselves to the following principles, which are intended to enhance the value of research not only for its own sake but also in the service of its practical application:

- Acknowledging that the media is facing new challenges due to a global rise of polarization, authoritarianism, intersecting crises, **digitization/digitalization, economic challenges and globalization**, and media development cooperation needs to adapt to these new challenges;

- Arguing that theory and practice have to work hand in hand to achieve **a more comprehensive understanding of media development cooperation that draws from study-based findings as well as contextualized field experience** and addresses the diversity of different living and working contexts, but also the complexity of questions of evaluation and planning of projects;

- Demanding to prioritize efforts to **bridge important gaps in the media development cooperation sector**: the practitioner/academic gap; the "North/South" divide in knowledge production; qualitative & quantitative methods of impact assessment; online and offline analysis;

- Recalling that free and independent media can only be fostered if media development cooperation practice is based on effective and ethical standards that respect **do-no-harm** principles;

We recommend the following:

1. It is of utmost importance to **provide wider access to data sources** on the sector, many of which are still confidential. This is particularly the case for baseline studies and *ex-post* evaluations of projects. The sector's learning process is hampered by limited access to data and contact persons – this is all the more important as the next few years will see a significant number of stakeholders invested in organisations born after the collapse of the USSR in the 1990s retire.

2. In order to broaden the perspective, it is necessary to **put an emphasis on learning from on-site actors** (Drefs and Thomaß 2015). "Local ownership", "trust", or "participation", for instance, are popular terms that hardly anyone involved in international media development cooperation projects would be opposed to. Research by Waisbord (2008) or Noske-Turner (2017) suggests that participatory approaches to media development cooperation are often undercut by institutional imperatives and pressures resulting from fixed project cycles and bureaucratic systems. This finding is in line with Elbers et al.'s (2014) study of development cooperation at large with the title "Trust or Control? Private Development Cooperation at the Crossroads". The authors argue that two diverging institutional logics are shaping how development cooperation is enacted: The so-called "social transformation logic" regards development as a process by which people are empowered and trust is the guiding principle of collaboration. In contrast to this, the "managerial logic" acts on the assumption that development can be rationally planned and measured. Here, control is the guiding principle. It is this control that limits participatory approaches in media development cooperation, and thus the autonomy of local recipient organizations and their ownership (Elbers & Arts 2011, pp. 719-723). A reflection on neuralgic points in interactions between international partnerships in media development cooperation is still to be prompted in this matter.

3. It is also a priority to **make failures much more visible** and to be able to share not only successes, as a good principle of learning method. This makes it possible not only to react to rectify them but also to value them and act creatively. In the media development cooperation sector, there seems to be few considerations for failure. It often comes with a negative connotation, synonymous with unfulfilled objectives, frustration or even defeat. Benequista and al. (2019) insist that "practitioners of media development have also been reluctant to acknowledge scholarly critique of the field. Amid a competitive environment for funding, there has been a disincentive for practitioners to communicate doubts or failures." (p. 2019, 6)

4. 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). Media development cooperation research, through its cornerstone "the impact assessment", is trapped in the quantitative-qualitative methods debate. Recent technological developments have nevertheless brought new questions to the foreground. The methodological questions revolve around the discussion whether 'new' technologies need 'new' methodologies or 'old' methodologies can be adapted.

5. More broadly, **theoretical perspectives should also be renewed** 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 a topic 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 which research about whom? Which theoretical and hierarchical background does development research come from? Who has access to funds and whose work is read? Can universal or "pluriversal" values or guidelines for media development cooperation exist, and which are they? Should international normative standards be questioned, what are the risks related to that and where are we confronted with inconsistencies and lack of effectivity in their implementation?

6. A concern for transparency and the consideration of implicit knowledge patterns (Loenhoff 2011) make it necessary to **re-examine the basic concepts of the sector**, their origin and their normative value: Is community synonymous with ethnicity (Lefebvre 2021), does development always go with growth (Berger 2010)? How does a participatory approach discriminate between expectations and needs (Kindon, Pain & Kesby 2007)? Moreover, many issues are still under-researched as the actors' sociology, evidence-based impact of behaviour change, the South-South co-operation, the role of Foreign Direct Investment in media development cooperation just to name but a few…The sector could benefit from more focused debate, as is the case in the academic sector, with discussants criticizing papers.

7. Undermined by chronic under-investment, the hazards of foreign scholarships and the fast-growing student population, the state of research on media development cooperation in the poorest countries is often extremely precarious. There, perhaps even more than elsewhere, research is a solitary mission. The demand for supervision of research seminars or facilitation of debates between peers makes **much greater higher education cooperation indispensable** over the long term – between universities themselves and between universities and practitioners.


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[1] Pluralism is one of the values that characterize the European Union state members, according to Article 2 of the European Union Treaty.

[2] This terminology, aligned to the German *Medienentwicklungszusammenarbeit*, has been preferred to the simple and debated 'Media Development'.

[3] See https://www.medas21.net/projects.

[4] CIMA and GFMD launched a consultation in January 2022 with a view to renewing them for the 2023-24 OECD/DAC GovNet programme of work

[5] Target 16.10, "Ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements", intended to support the goal 16 to" promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels"

[6] Public Interest media is defined by its promoters as "media that is free and independent, that exists to inform people on the issues that shape their lives, in ways which serve the public's rather than any political, commercial or factional interest, to enable public debate and dialogue across society, and to hold those in power to account on behalf of the public interest."

[7] African Media Initiative, Catholic Media Council, Deutsche Welle Akademie, Eirene, Fondation Hirondelle, Internews, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, Media in Cooperation and Transition, Panos South Asia, Radio Netherlands Training Centre

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