Policy Brief

Supporting Journalism in Conflict Societies

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Executive Summary

This policy brief puts forward suggestions for improved journalism support in the context of democratisation conflicts. It draws conclusions from interviews with journalists and media development actors.

Journalists in conflict societies frequently face critical working conditions. Our interviews with journalists from Egypt, Kenya, Serbia and South Africa identify political pressure and socio-economic insecurity, a lack of formal in-house training and juniorisation within the newsroom as well as exposure to violence, attempts at interference and a lack of resources on the ground. Trauma and ethical dilemmas create problems in all case study countries (see section 2).

Media development organisations regard polarisation and a lack of ethical standards as the main problems in conflict societies. Our interviews with both Europe-based and local media development actors show that their support programmes address journalists as enablers of an inclusive public discourse and as proponents of the human right to freedom of expression. Assistance for journalists increasingly considers the bigger newsroom structure, taking the form of long term counselling or mentoring and often focusing on professional standards and ethics (see section 3).

In addition, media development actors emphasise a need for increased coordination and cooperation within the sector, higher prioritisation of media development in foreign policy and a more thorough understanding of local conditions before commencing engagement on the ground (see section 4).

In view of these findings, this policy brief concludes with concrete recommendations as to how media development efforts can be better geared to the realities of conflict reporting, thus enhancing the effectiveness of support measures (see section 5).

The recommendations in brief:
- To consider the safety of journalists
- To take local conditions as a starting point
- To intensify research and evaluation activities
- To involve multiple stakeholders and facilitate exchange
- To prioritise long-term formats
- To make allowance for flexible budgets in media development projects
- To establish learning and exchange mechanisms between the various organisations that are active on the ground
- To apply a qualitative approach for evaluating media development projects

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1. Introduction

Understanding conflicts in democratic transition

Many **transitions to democracy** are characterised by fierce conflicts and even violence. While acknowledging the various social, political, economic or religious causes, the project 'Media, Conflict and Democratisation' (MeCoDEM) focuses on **conflicts as communication events** that crystallise around the interpretation of events, contested values and the legitimacy of power. Journalists, government officials and representatives of civil society are important actors in the arena of public communication, each having their own agenda, interpretations and goals within a given conflict. **Conflict resolution and reconciliation** are achieved through communication and the transformation of language that is used to address differences. This brief makes suggestions as to how media development efforts could be designed to provide **useful assistance for journalists** communicating democratisation conflicts.

Role of journalism in portraying democratisation conflicts

This brief focuses on **journalists** as one of the main communication actors in a conflict. Journalists observe society and select and provide topics for debate and decision-making. In doing so, they do not 'mirror' reality, but **construct a reality** in its own right. With their agenda-setting power and their ability to create interpretive frames, journalists reporting on democratisation conflicts are **key players in transitional contestations**. They not only share factual information with their audience, but also emotions like anger and rage, trauma, grief and relief. Coverage contributing to **a non-violent course of conflict and a constructive outcome** relies on certain contextual conditions. This brief identifies **specific conditions in need of improvement** from the journalists' perspective and considers ways to foster progress.

MeCoDEM's research objective

MeCoDEM's research programme compares and contrasts different types of democratisation conflicts across four countries: **Egypt, Kenya, Serbia and South Africa**. We investigated three conflicts linked to democratisation, or the demand for democratic change, in each of these countries. Considerable efforts were made to study **journalism practices and ethics** in connection with these conflicts. Likewise, the **current practice of media assistance** by European and local development actors was investigated. Together, the findings from these two sets of interviews identify **room for improvement in journalism support in conflict societies**.

2. Approaches and Results I: Journalism practices in conflict societies

<u>Background information</u>

Journalists are key players in democratisation processes, and media coverage of conflicts can have a significant impact on how a society deals with divisions. Several types of conflict were considered relevant to our investigation.

Democratisation involves **conflicts over the distribution and control of power**. Media coverage can play an important role in holding those who are in power to account (e.g. during community protests in South Africa).

Likewise, **conflicts over different notions of citizenship** emerge after authoritarianism. Previously marginalised groups (e.g. Coptic citizens in Egypt) demand recognition and may use media attention to further their cause.

Election campaigns in democratising regimes often revive and reshape existing social divisions and conflicts (e.g. during the 2007 Presidential election in Kenya). Journalistic coverage that frames the election as a zero-sum game may fan hostilities between competing political camps.

Another form of democratisation **conflict** involves struggles over the authoritarian past and **over transitional justice**. Journalists may deal with the accountability of old elites and their legacy of repression and violence (e.g. against the background of the extradition of former Serbian President Milošević to the ICTY).

<u>Data collection</u>

Our research is based on **qualitative semi-structured interviews with journalists** working in a broad range of different news media in their respective countries and who covered the particular conflict cases under study. The sample includes junior, middle ranking and senior level journalists, male and female journalists and journalists from print, radio, TV and online media as well as public and private organisations. The dataset consists of material collected in **100 interviews** conducted by MeCoDEM country teams in the four countries: 24 interviews in Egypt; 26 interviews in Kenya; 25 interviews in Serbia; and 25 interviews in South Africa.

The interviews were based on an **interview guide** covering core themes, while at the same time allowing flexibility to explore issues specific to a particular interviewee, country or conflict case. The interviews also built on a **reconstruction method**: during the interviews

the journalists were shown a copy of a story they had produced in the past in order to encourage them to recall and reconstruct the processes involved in the coverage of that story. The aim of this approach was to encourage interviewees to focus on the particular circumstances of an event when reflecting on issues of professional practice, editorial processes and newsroom pressures and ethics.

What did we learn?

Working conditions of journalists in conflict societies?

The journalists we interviewed described the process of covering stories about a specific conflict, starting from the decision to pursue a story until its eventual publication. The following points stand out in the journalists' description of their work within the newsroom:

- **Political pressure** and an **atmosphere of socio-economic insecurity**: Journalists are often faced with the dilemma of pursuing a story of public interest critical of an influential political source whose cooperation will be needed in the future. They are subject to arbitrary human resource policies in media houses which function according to a 'carrot and stick' system. Journalists risk being demoted or even losing their jobs if they pursue the 'wrong' stories.

- **Lack of formal in-house training**: Journalists report that most of the time they acquire skills by learning 'on the job'. They are left alone to work out ways of covering conflicts and often stick to their own, self-taught methods because of a lack of opportunity to learn the 'right way'. Due to a lack of internal support, expectations to deliver weigh heavily on journalists.

- **Juniorisation**: Newsrooms are increasingly staffed by young, relatively inexpensive reporters and editors. They may be tech-savvy, but cannot rely on long-term experience of covering conflicts.

Journalists may face even more challenging conditions outside the newsroom. The following points were mentioned repeatedly in descriptions of their work on the ground:

- **Witnessing violence**: Journalists literally work on the frontline. High intensity events can turn violent in a split second, and journalists covering these events find themselves in situations where physical attacks, or even death, occur at close proximity

- **Attempts at direct interference**: While pursuing conflict stories, journalists also experience threats and obstacles directed both at them personally and their work. Means of interference range from bribes and withholding of information through to threats of legal action, imprisonment, personal intimidation (insults, tapping phones and tracing conversations with sources) and even physical assaults.

- **Lacking resources:** Journalists often feel they are unable to cover conflicts appropriately due to limited resources. They lack the correct safety equipment, sufficient technical equipment or staff support to report on major ongoing conflicts.

Covering conflicts in volatile environments

Problems arising from the critical conditions described are manifold. **Across all case study countries** aspects of **trauma** and **ethical dilemmas** stand out as recurrent problems. Journalists who are exposed to violence and death are likely to experience trauma, while at the same time there are no adequate mechanisms in place to address these experiences. Likewise, reporting violence and death presents journalists with ethical problems such as having to break news of death to a victim's family or feeling the need to protect identities of victims of conflict while amateur image material is already in circulation.

Spotlight on Egypt:

With a view to the **Egyptian context** our study points specifically to the problem of **political alignment** becoming almost unavoidable. Egyptian journalists feel that there is no way for them to remain politically neutral.

(Photo: Nehal El-Sherif / Flickr, made available under a "Attribution-NoDerivs 2.0 Generic" license.)

What is the underlying reason for this problem?

Media ownership: Because of the visible sway that media held in the lead-up to and during the January 2011 revolution, investors began to see media as a profitable investment. Many Egyptian journalists speak of media owners capitalising on their support of particular politicians and a degree of partisanship and political alignment evident in the media's shifting orientation towards power, acting as its amplifier as well as safeguards of popularity and influence: "Businessmen fund these papers, which serve their interests. Part of their interest is allying with whoever is really in control of the country." (Egypt, Interview 22)

Spotlight on Kenya:

A problem especially salient in the **Kenyan context** is **self-censorship**. "There are some stories you can't run" was a sentiment evident among many Kenyan journalists. Experiences of losing major advertising revenue as a consequence of publishing a critical story had triggered this situation. Many journalists consider it necessary to ignore professional standards in the interest of protecting the business interests of their media organisation and their own employment.

(Photo: Iginio Gagliardone)

What is the underlying reason for this problem?

In Kenya the **government and powerful political groups**, alongside marketing companies, are among the **biggest advertisers** and use this financial leverage to influence media houses and journalists' reporting, threatening to withdraw advertising if met with negative reporting: "They call the newsroom and say they will pull off the adverts, and that is a danger to journalism" (Kenya, Interview 17). Furthermore, having been accused of inciting the inter-ethnic violence that followed the 2007 general elections, Kenyan journalists engaged in self-censorship during the election process in 2013. As part of a broader 'peace narrative' they refrained from live broadcasting and from airing potentially inflammatory remarks.

Spotlight on Serbia:

Serbian journalists were especially **concerned about constraints** arising from **lack of resources**. During long election periods, some media could focus only on party conferences and sometimes accepted "videos and a bit of speech" (Serbia, Interview 17) provided by political parties, to be edited into news stories. In the case of major events, such as the Pride Parade, they are forced to "rent additional equipment and additional capacities." (Serbia, Interview 17)

(Photo: Christa Lohman / Flickr, made available under a "Attribution-NonCommercial 2.0 Generic" license)

What is the underlying reason for this problem?

In Serbia **the journalistic profession seems to be held in low esteem**. Journalists felt that there is little public awareness of the value of independent journalism and that Serbian citizens "are not ready to support any kind of independent media project" (Serbia, Interview 13). Accordingly, quality media are struggling to survive and their staff's financial situation is precarious.

Spotlight on South Africa:

An ethical dilemma particular to **South African journalists** was their role as **manufacturers of protests**: "(…) the moment you bring a camera, the moment you know, there's this feeling that people need to play for the camera" (South Africa, Interview 15). Journalists said the ethical challenge goes both ways – people start performing once they see the media, and likewise the media might ask people to perform in order to get engaging footage.

(Photo: Yazeed Kamaldien)

What is the underlying reason for this problem?

Too often when it comes to covering community-based conflicts, journalists parachute in only when there is visible conflict. Hence, civil society has started to seek **media attention through extreme action**. In other instances, journalists also have to ensure they aren't dealing with a manufactured protest – when people are hired to participate in a protest with a promise of receiving food: "Sometimes it happens that you get, what do you call it? Rent a crowd? That's happened to me a few times where it's about a political issue and politicians will bus in people with the promise of lunch or something else." (South Africa, Interview 13).

In summary, where do journalists feel they need support?

- Institutional, professional psychological support after experiencing trauma as a result of witnessing violence.

- Safety equipment and agreed organisational safety policies.

- Advanced training in conflict reporting, especially when it comes to ethical dilemmas.

- Opportunities to exchange expertise and know-how between different generations of journalists within the newsroom.

- Legal protection and support in view of many of the interferences to which they are subjected.

- In many contexts, increased economic and political pressure hinders journalists in their work. Journalists want to find alternatives to existing media business models: "the media of the future would need more niche, will be crowd sourced, will be for consumers and as a result will be more democratic" (Kenya, Interview 16).

3. Approaches and Results II: Media assistance in conflict societies

<u>Data collection</u>

This part of the research is based on **qualitative semi-structured interviews with implementers and donors from the media development sector.** The sample consists of members of European media development organisations who operate on an international level and local actors from the case study countries. It includes intergovernmental actors (such as *EuropeAid* or *OSCE*), state-funded actors (such as *Sida*) and non-state actors (such as *Internews* or *Free Press Unlimited*). The interviewees were selected according to the position they hold and their relevant expert knowledge. In total **19 interviews** were conducted. Researchers used an **interview guide** ensuring that core subject areas were covered across all interviews; flexible handling of the interview guide allowed exploration of any points which came up in the course of a particular interview.

<u>What did we learn?</u>

What is the sector's understanding of problems in conflict countries?

We asked our interviewees to define the key problems in conflict societies. The majority of their answers amounted to the two following points:

- **Polarisation:** The polarising nature of conflicts was named as a significant overarching problem. It has multiple consequences:

  - Marginalisation of certain issues and groups: Conflict coverage is said to often reproduce the main lines of conflict and dichotomies between conflict parties dominate the reports. As a consequence, many issues are neglected and voices remain unheard. The interviewees observe that minorities often feel misrepresented during democratisation conflicts and so establish their own media outlets; however, these, tend to be radical and are often unable to address transitional issues on a national level.

  - Partisanship: Many experts pointed out that the polarisation during conflicts forces all members of society to take sides. In this situation they often observe that journalists see themselves very much as political activists and become prone to engaging in hate speech and reproducing prejudice.

- o Distrust: Another effect of polarisation mentioned by the interviewees is that people judge each other only in light of the conflict. In this atmosphere journalists are often afraid of making mistakes with potentially dangerous consequences.

- **Ethics become secondary:** The interviewees find that in times of crisis journalists are more concerned with matters of economic survival than with ethical questions. Journalists often struggle to make ends meet and are prone to corruption. Ability to publish and be heard in unpredictable circumstances is a major concern and does not leave much opportunity to reflect on ethics.

How do media development organisations address journalists?

Journalists seem to be the natural target for media development efforts. Accordingly, provision of professional assistance to journalists has always been an important part of media development. However, journalism training has come a long way. Our study provides insight into current practices and policies of journalism support by media development organisations:

- Journalists are increasingly addressed as **intermediaries**: Media development organisations increasingly consider **marginalised or underprivileged groups** as key beneficiaries. In other words, while media development efforts are directed at journalists, the actual target group is elsewhere. In an effort to incorporate these groups in the public discourse of a conflict society, media development organisations focus on journalists as providers of topics for public debate.

- The big ideals: Media development organisations increasingly frame their journalism support activities as an effort to contribute to the **human right to freedom of expression and access to information**. In doing so, journalists are addressed as 'defenders of human rights' or 'change agents' who fulfil functions that ultimately contribute to the welfare of citizens and society as a whole.

- Journalists are increasingly regarded as **embedded in a newsroom structure** and addressed **in relation to their sources**: Many media development organisations have begun to view journalism as part of an 'information eco-system' or 'media ecology'. As a result, they expand their activities to encompass the journalists' newsroom working environment, for example by tackling organisational structures or media management. There is also an increasing focus on multi-stakeholder activities that bring journalists together with potential sources (such as NGO representatives, government spokespeople or scientists).

- Journalism as **one addressee among many**: Against the background of the emerging 'human rights agenda', the activities of media development organisations are not only aimed at journalists, but also at 'defenders of human rights'. For example, support is increasingly provided to freedom of expression groups or civil society organisations specialised in media.

- **Professional advice, support and mentoring** have replaced short-term training: Contemporary journalism support rarely takes the shape of workshops; media development organisations shun this concept as unsustainable 'parachute training' preferring to develop their efforts as long-term activities. Assigning journalists to a senior mentor, providing long-term consultancy advice for entire newsrooms or building centres of excellence are now common interventions.

- **Input** focuses on **professional standards**, **ethics, digital safety**, **special beats/issues:** Issues considered as essential for journalism training in conflict societies usually revolve around the basic question of what makes good journalism. Media development organisations perceive a lack of professional standards and ethics as typical of conflict societies. In terms of safety, the focus often lies on how journalists can better protect their data and thus themselves. Also topics such as malaria or ethnic and religious diversity are on the agenda.

How do media development organisations understand challenges within their own sector?

In the interviews, we invited our interview partners to reflect on the efficiency of their practices. As a result, some of the sector's own approaches and mechanisms were put under critical scrutiny:

- **Cooperation between media development actors:** Many interviewees are critical of the sector's lack of cooperation at policy level, for example in establishing learning mechanisms. There is a need to optimise the process by which they can learn from each other. At project level, some interviewees regard a certain degree of competition as inevitable and even, at times, fruitful. Others, however, find competition unhelpful and express a strong preference for cooperation when it comes to implementing activities on the ground.

- **Over-/undersupply and lack of coordination**: Another perceived problem in effective media development is regional imbalance. While some target regions receive the lion's share of attention, others are largely ignored. Both media development implementers and donors note that there are trends in donor preferences and are concerned about wasted resources in the absence of coordinated and strategic implementation.

- **Dependence on foreign policy priorities:** There is a sense of being subject to foreign policy interests and a suggestion that these priorities result in media development being neglected as donors fail to see its importance. If media development does get funding, the implementers often feel challenged by donors' conflicting goals and sometimes incoherent strategies.

- **Distorted image of media as tools**: Several media development actors feel that, at times, they are subjected to a confused understanding of the functions of the media within their sector. They suggest that the notion of media as instruments for achieving short-term goals and immediate impact is still widespread. They argue that such an understanding causes misguided expectations regarding the outcome of media development and fails to acknowledge the media's own value.

- **Bureaucracy as an obstacle for local implementers**: Media development organisations point to rigid funding requirements in terms of accounting and administration as a stumbling block for local facilitators of media development. While interviewees expressed understanding of the need for financial transparency, they also pointed at the paradoxical situation it creates: Implementers who are particularly challenged in times of conflict are asked to complete time-consuming and labour-intensive paperwork in order to acquire funding.

- **Media development as a potentially harmful endeavour**: The interviews reveal that media development actors are often concerned about the potential risks involved in their activities. Many are aware that certain interventions can be counter-productive or even harmful, for example by causing market distortion or when participation in media development projects puts journalists in danger. The challenge within the sector is to make informed decisions as to how to design activities so that they do not cause harm.

- **Necessity of pre-action analyses of local conditions**: The media development organisations also pointed out that more importance should be attached to thorough analysis of context. Many interviewees emphasised that acquiring a sense of the bigger picture of local conditions and contexts of journalism before becoming active on the ground is essential, but is often neglected in project proposals. Political economy analyses are identified as particularly relevant.

4. Conclusion

By emphasising polarisation and the lack of robust ethical standards, media development organisations identify key problems faced by journalists in conflict societies. In general, the media development sector's general goal to broaden public discourse and make it more inclusive is in accord with many journalists who regard it as their responsibility to give a voice to the voiceless. However, on a practical level there are several points where media development could align its efforts more closely to the realities of conflict reporting:

- While considering institutional newsroom structures and placing emphasis on journalists' (digital) safety, media development actors should also pay attention to trauma. Journalist interviewees identified traumatic experiences as a pressing problem in their day-to-day work.

- While professional standards and ethics are highly relevant objectives of journalism support, it is important to ensure that there is a real chance they can be applied in concrete situations faced by journalists during conflicts. There is a pressing need to develop codes of victim-related ethics and sustainable professional standards in mediatised conflicts.

- The fact that media development increasingly takes bigger political and economic structures into account when providing journalism support is to be welcomed, especially in the light of the vulnerability of journalists caused by political ownership and entanglement.

- The interviews with media development actors reveal that the range of addressees goes beyond journalists and has expanded to include other groups of society. Journalists would appreciate an increased public awareness of the value of their work and so efforts in improving media literacy among citizens would be welcomed.

- A stronger focus on establishing mentoring structures within newsrooms is a key requirement of media development, especially against the background of juniorisation and the lack of institutionalised processes of knowledge transfer reported by journalist interviewees.

- The acute conditions in conflict societies require fast and flexible support mechanisms. Against this backdrop, requirements for local media development implementers to devote considerable time and effort to dealing with bureaucratic paperwork appear counterproductive.

The media development sector's critical self-reflection boils down to three main points:

- There is a need for increased exchange within the sector in order to facilitate coordination and create opportunities for cooperation.

- Media development needs to be granted higher priority on foreign policy agendas in recognition of the media's general value to a democratic society. Currently, the media development sector is struggling to be seen as making a serious contribution to human rights.

- It is crucial to understand local conditions as a starting point of any support activity in order to reduce the risk of causing damage and to ensure sustainability.

5. Implications and Recommendations

- To think of all aspects of journalists' safety starting with practicalities in volatile situations (safety equipment), and the impact of exposure to dangerous situations and violence (trauma), to handling digital threats.

- To take local conditions as the starting point for addressing professional standards and ethical dilemmas.

- To intensify research and evaluation activities that take into account journalism's place in specific political and economic contexts and let these inform project design.

- To intensify research and evaluation activities that take into account how the audience responds to journalistic content and let these inform project design.

- To involve multiple stakeholders and facilitate exchange: Journalists benefit indirectly from improved communication capacity of their sources (such as government officials or political activists) and media literacy and empowerment of their audience (such as marginalised groups or minorities).

- To prioritise long-term formats such as mentoring, and professional support and advice that take into account the specific challenges and needs of journalists and the context of the specific newsroom structure in which they work.

- To make allowance for flexible budgets in media development projects in order to provide accessible support in times of acute conflict.

- To establish learning and exchange mechanisms within the media development sector, for example under the umbrella of the Global Forum for Media and Development.

- To apply a qualitative approach for evaluating media development projects. It does not make sense to focus on quantitative, short-term results as a measure of success while the outcome of media development is a multifactorial, qualitative and long-term process.

Acknowledgements

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