

Policy Brief

Communication and conflict in transitional societies – Integrating media and communication in development cooperation

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August 2017

1. Introduction

Conflicts are an inevitable part of transitions to democracy. They crystallize around power struggles between competing elites, the politicization of identities, or contested values and visions of the country's future. Media development cooperation in emerging democracies, which is the focus of this policy brief, aims to contribute to post-conflict stabilization to make a deepening of democratic structures more likely. Media development cooperation is part of the broader field of supporting communication in emerging democracies, and it is embedded in the even wider aspirations of development cooperation in general.

The project 'Media, Conflict and Democratisation' (MeCoDEM) is based on the assumption that conflicts are to a large extent communicatively constructed: their nature and dynamics depend on how they are framed and interpreted in public discourses. Thus, effective development cooperation that is sensitive to conflict contexts has to integrate media and communication into their overall strategy by taking into account the communicative needs of societies faced with democratization conflicts. In view of this policy problem, empirical evidence gathered by the MeCoDEM project in four transitional countries (Egypt, Kenya, Serbia and South Africa) helps to understand the communication dynamics between journalists, activist and political actors. This policy brief presents some key findings from the project with the aim of informing future policy development.

2. Evidence and Analysis

The project 'Media, Conflict and Democratisation' investigates the role of traditional media and ICTs in conflicts that accompany and follow transitions from authoritarian rule to more democratic forms of government in Egypt, Kenya, Serbia and South Africa. It focuses on the three main stakeholders in those conflicts – governments, civil society actors and journalists – and aims to understand the dynamics of conflict by analysing the communications of these actors in key conflicts that highlight contested issues during transitions. This paper juxtaposes findings from the MeCoDEM project with current media development practice. By doing so, we hope to advance the ongoing discussion about the role of media development aid in volatile contexts.

a. Media assistance in complex contexts: from short-term intervention to long-term cooperation

- Media development has advanced from a format that for a long time represented the gold standard of engagement: the training workshop. This format used to take individual journalists out of their newsrooms to be taught by external trainers. Now the times of flying instructors in and out seem to be over. Instead, this approach is increasingly replaced by long-term mentoring or continuing dialogue – formats that consider the communicative contexts of different public communicators and their interdependence.
- The re-orientation of the media development sector reflects the observation that the attempt to implement a universal model of journalism regardless of context has been unsuccessful. This is corroborated by our findings from interviews with journalists: Across all four countries in the study, both **situational constraints and the broader cultural context were consistently found to shape how journalists approach their work**. Context influences journalists' perceptions of their role in society, whether or not they take sides in ongoing conflicts, and how they approach country- and conflict-specific dilemmas.

b. Media development practitioners have embraced the ideal of participation at many levels – with the exception of monitoring and evaluation

- Media development practitioners no longer see media as an aim in its own right but as part of a broader communication ecosystem. This has led to a new policy paradigm: the paradigm of participation. Social change is no longer regarded as a linear process in which media are promotional instruments serving a Western notion of modernization which journalists are trained to deliver. Instead, active participation of all stakeholders in the communication process is recognized as a value in its own right and media are only one means to realize this.
- The consideration of context now ranks high in media development practitioners' approach, but contextual factors receive less attention in subsequent processes of monitoring and evaluation. Our interviews with media development actors reveal that they often feel under pressure to produce quantifiable results that can be presented as an objective proof of impact. Funding is often perceived to depend on measurable impact; even more so when it comes to public funding. It is therefore likely that **organisations try to please donors by coming up with simplistic indicators.** These in turn perpetuate the instrumental approach of the past.

Spotlight on Kenya

Our comparative analysis of the role played by the media in Kenya's 2007 and 2013 elections shows that external interventions can have detrimental effects on journalism practice if they assume linear media effects instead of considering the broader media ecosystem.

What did we look at?

In 2007/8 Kenya suffered widespread ethnic clashes following a controversial election. While mainstream media found their protocols insufficient to manage their response to this crisis, some vernacular radio stations broadcast messages condoning ethnic cleansing. In the aftermath of this crisis, donors and media NGOs launched a wave of "peace programming" designed to train Kenyan journalists in how to cover elections without contributing to ethnic conflict. Our study explores how the rise of "peaceocracy" shaped Kenyan journalists' response to the 2013 elections.

What did we find?

Some of the most severe problems surrounding the 2007 elections involved vernacular radio stations whereas most mainstream media managed to maintain a certain level of journalistic standards. Yet public criticism of the media rarely recognized this distinction, instead tarring a range of radio, television and newspaper outlets with the same brush. In the run-up to the 2013 election, media development initiatives then supported a pervasive peace narrative. Against this backdrop, and fearful of triggering fresh violence, Kenyan journalists and editors censored themselves. They kept potentially controversial stories off the front pages. In doing so, **they safeguarded peace, but at the expense of holding government and the electoral commission to account.**

At the same time the divergence of opinions about how to cover elections within the media houses during the 2007 crisis remained silenced and unresolved. This applied in particular to editors, whose own interpretation of events was often coloured by their personal ethnic identity. In addition, those editors who wanted to take a stand in defence of democratic principles stood opposed to those media owners whose main concern was to secure peace by not antagonizing the government. These complex circumstances were not sufficiently taken into account by media development activities



c. Civil society as partners in media development

- Contemporary media development is no longer only aimed at journalists. Instead, civil society actors have become important addressees (albeit to varying degrees). However, our research shows that **the range of addressees within civil society is very narrow**. The media development sector prefers civil society partners who specialize in freedom of speech or access to information because their commitment to democratic values is evident.
- As a consequence, the new multi-stakeholder format of media development initiatives remains very much centred on journalism. Journalists are the main participants in this format while civil society organisations (CSOs) and political actors are almost exclusively approached as journalistic sources rather than as autonomous communicative agents.
- Our interviews with civil society actors show that limiting engagement with CSOs predominantly to their role as sources for journalistic news stories ignores a lot of their communicative potential in conflict contexts. By employing a broad variety of non-mediated communication formats (including artistic means such as songs, murals and graffiti), CSOs are able to reach large sectors of the public that might not be reached by mainstream media, thus shaping the way in which a conflict is understood. **Building stronger links between civil society activists and journalists would help to make these voices heard.**

Spotlight on Serbia

Our case study of public communication and power struggles between government, opposition parties, civil society actors and traditional and new media during a smear campaign against Serbia's ombudsman underscores the democratic potential of CSOs to hold those in power to account.

What did we look at?

In 2015, Serbia's ombudsman, an institution of horizontal accountability, initiated several official investigations into abuse of state resources. A smear campaign against the ombudsman followed, led by a pro-government tabloid and a private broadcaster who claimed that ombudsman Saša Janković was involved in the death of a student friend over 20 years ago. We explored coverage of this smear campaign in traditional and social media and looked at the use of media as tools of authoritarian manipulation. We also investigated the ways in which an alliance of civil society organizations opposed the government's attempts to undermine the ombudsman's legitimacy.

What did we find?

Our findings show the significant influence of the government on the way the ombudsman was portrayed in the media. There was a major difference in media representations of the ombudsman between pro-government outlets and all other media. While most mainstream media did not take part in the smear campaign, they largely failed to hold the government to account for its abuse of state institutions and public resources. Actual resistance to the smear campaign instead arose from a range of actors, some within state institutions but most of them external: various civil society organisations, associations and individuals, opposition parties and, occasionally, international actors. The most powerful oppositional response came from parts of civil society, principally NGOs that focused on human rights, the rule of law and democratization. In addition, civil society organisations and associations mobilized activists and the wider public by drawing on a mix of conventional and digital protest strategies up to a point where a prolonged campaign created problems for the government internally and damaged its reputation abroad.

Strengthening the ability of CSOs to speak out in conflicts with power holders can be an important aspect of development cooperation. This involves focusing on wider communication processes, not only on media.

d. The dilemma of bringing in the state

- **In transitional contexts most media development actors regard the state as an antagonistic force that threatens the independence of the media. They are therefore reluctant to involve politicians in their activities. This is also the case with some of our interviewees from the media development sector. They express a feeling of unease when it comes to bringing journalists together with politicians or lawyers as part of media assistance activities. They fear a loss of credibility when involving these supposedly antagonistic players, even though multi-stakeholder formats have become fairly common. However, governments in transitional countries often lack the communication capacities and skills to engage with the wider public in an open and effective way. Therefore it is important for media development activities to look out for innovative forms of cooperation between media and political authorities, and to strengthen the ability of the latter to articulate policies and to engage in dialogue with citizens.**
- **Our analysis of the communication strategies of political actors suggests that it is crucial to take into consideration a broad range of political authorities. This also includes unelected, informal actors who often exert a considerable degree of influence in the transitional societies we examined. This ‘hybrid’ form of governance might diverge widely from normative ideas of democratic government and formal accountability, but in many instances turns out to have greater authority – and capability – to resolve conflicts than the official state apparatus.**

Spotlight on South Africa

Our case study of a communication initiative by the South African Presidency surrounding the 2015 State of the Nation Address (SONA) suggests that there is great demand for involving political actors in media development efforts.

What did we look at?

The South African Presidency embarked on a social media listening exercise in the weeks leading up to the SONA. They invited contributions from the public on social media, asking users to make suggestions of what the President should speak about in his address. The public responded in a wave of many hundreds of messages directed at the Presidency. In our analysis, we evaluated the extent to which the ensuing dialogue between the Presidency and citizens on Twitter constituted a deliberative engagement in a process-oriented approach to democratic listening.

What did we find?

Our findings suggest that the listening exercise initiated by President Zuma constituted an empty performance. Quantitatively, the two presidential Twitter accounts involved tweeted relatively little about the listening exercise and hardly engaged in conversation with citizens at all. Nor were they seen to be listening to citizens' suggestions.

We also looked for evidence of depth of listening in the Presidency's engagement with citizens. We did not find that the Presidency made suggestions, asked clarifying questions, or reacted in a differentiated way to opposing viewpoints. In this respect the Presidency's limited follow-up communications had very little depth.

The SONA case **highlights the risks associated with the inability – and unwillingness – of governments to engage with citizens in developing democracies**, as it contributes to cynicism and a widening gap between political representatives and citizens.

e. Doing good – avoiding harm: dilemmas of media development interventions

- **While media development interventions are aimed at strengthening independent journalism and developing an open public sphere, they can also have counter-productive or even harmful side effects. For example, they can endanger journalists through their participation in media development projects or open up spaces for anti-democratic and illiberal voices. At the same time, our conversations with media development actors reveal that pre-action analysis of potential unintended consequences are not always obligatory in project proposals. The occasional lack of pre-action analysis contrasts with the finding that media development practitioners try to approach their field from a more holistic point of view.**
- **"Media ecologies" and "information ecosystems" have become standard jargon across the sector. In fact, after successfully lobbying for "access to information" to be included in the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals, it is inevitable that media development includes the perspectives of the citizens and their individual well-being as the final objective of media development cooperation.**

Spotlight on Egypt

We examined how minority media articulate Coptic Christian identity in struggles for group recognition after the Arab Spring. This conflict case demonstrates that in transitional contexts identity discourses are fluid and open to politicization. In this situation, minority media play an important role in giving voice to marginalized groups. But they are also important players in shaping the way in which the conflict is framed and interpreted, with wider consequences to the possible outcome of the conflict.

What did we look at?

Since the 2011 uprising, Copts have increasingly suffered from attacks on their community. We examined several types of Coptic newspaper publications during three attacks and analyzed the different discourses that these outlets used to cover the conflicts.

What did we find?

Our analysis shows that minority media play an ambivalent role in identity-based democratization conflicts. While some minority newspapers emphasized a human rights discourse that promoted reconciliation and collaboration between different communities, others mobilized a particularistic Coptic view and nationalist discourses. In cases of interethnic conflicts, mediated mobilization led to the polarization and fragmentation of communal identities. On the one hand, some Coptic newspapers with a national focus encouraged Coptic political participation and their integration in national life. Other newspapers made a discursive shift by assembling 'activist constructs' of Coptic identity. Episodes from Coptic history were reinterpreted to encourage the community to engage in contentious politics which set communal identity apart from national identity.

Thus, Coptic media were crucial in the politicization of Coptic identity by condemning an external enemy who is to blame for injustice and suppression. **Any media development activities which do not address these dangers of communication in identity conflicts could do more harm than good.**

3. Policy implications and recommendations

a. Context matters

- **There is no one-size-fits-all approach to media development in transitional societies, and what works in one context might be harmful in another. Communication is a complex cultural practice that is rooted in local meanings, customs and history. Therefore, baseline studies of local contexts are crucial for the success of any development intervention. This will help reduce the risk of causing damage and ensure relevance and sustainability. Foreign policy interests and trends in donor preferences should not get in the way of thorough analysis of the context.**
- **The infrastructure of media production as a foundation for independent media remains an important aspect of media development. It must be appropriate for the given social and economic conditions. In view of global media concentration and powerful market actors, high quality local production must be strengthened.**

b. Participation is key

- **Sustainable social change can only be achieved through inclusive participation. However, a participatory approach is not conceivable without local partners contributing to the process, with defined own goals. Inclusive and open participation should therefore be the standard approach of any media development policy. It should also guide the methods of monitoring and evaluation.**
- **Policy makers should increase support for pre-action analyses and a qualitative monitoring and evaluation approach. Both have to be implemented within the standards of participation.**

c. Involving civil society actors

- **Support that concentrates solely on CSOs working on issues of media freedom has the potential to narrow the "marketplace of opinions" and runs counter to the ideal of diverse public discourse that is a basic feature of a democratic society. Development communication should therefore aim at the participation of all parts of society.**

- **It is only the thorough knowledge of context that can limit the risk of media development becoming an instrument of problematic parts of civil society that foster intolerance and polarisation in a conflict.**
- **The principle of participatory communication also extends to journalists. Engagement with civil society actors should therefore be an integral part of journalistic practice, which otherwise favours elite voices.**
- **The communicative needs of those who are not heard in the public discourse have to be taken into account. This is a particularly challenging task where socio-economic inequalities exclude these voices from articulation by organised groups.**
- **If training is still the format of choice, sensitizing journalists to participatory communication and communication with civil society actors should be an integrative component of media assistance initiatives.**
- **Media literacy and cultural diversity should be general aims of development cooperation as they contribute to creating and maintaining decent standards of living.**

d. Involving government actors

- **Political actors are an important part of the communicative landscape of a country. They should be involved in any development strategies in order to make them aware of the necessity of an open mediascape and the right to access to information. Multi-stakeholder activities have to be prioritised as they contribute to a widening of the discourse.**
- **Development cooperation should address the communication capacity of governments, their ability to articulate policies, respond to media investigation and engage in a dialogue with citizens. Listening to citizens and developing forums for this endeavour is an important element of this approach.**

- Involving government actors has problematic aspects as it is not the purpose of development cooperation to strengthen undemocratic governments. Considering the context and looking out for individual partners who are willing to cooperate and to work for a stronger democracy are key in this respect.
- Strong media depend on reliable media legislation and on political actors who understand the need for independent journalism. That is why involving political actors in media development efforts should be advocated as a constructive rather than a destructive approach.
- In the case of media assistance interventions in hybrid political orders there is a special need for thorough pre-action analysis: What kind of groups can be considered political actors, apart from the formal ones? What authorities exert influence within communities and on the government? These actors will have to be considered and addressed directly if efforts for increased transparency in political communication are to be fruitful.
- **Securing the independence of media from vested economic and political interests should be a guiding principle.**

e. Benefits for citizens

- **Policy makers should enable long term interventions. Any intervention should be conceived from the perspective of citizens as the final addressees of media development cooperation. This is a more comprehensive approach than the traditional media-centred approach.**
- In order to pursue a coherent do-no-harm approach, cooperation of the various actors of development communication must be supported and promoted. Cooperation for development communication should integrate both media corporations and international actors.

Concluding recommendations:

- **Our research shows that** media development should be broadened to communication development. **Partnering with civil society groups, beyond their instrumental value to journalists, and bringing in state actors are part of this approach. What democracy needs is a healthy public debate in which the media play a central, but not the only, role.**
- **In addition to this, we suggest a further step for discussion and consideration: The goal for policy makers should be to develop** a media-and-communication mainstreaming strategy. **Similar to the concept of “gender mainstreaming”, which considers the implications of gender for policy actions in all areas and levels, “media-and-communication mainstreaming” should consider communication-related actions for development activities in all areas and levels. Development communication should be given leverage: It should become an instrument for building global development partnerships alongside governance democratization efforts. Media organisations and media outlets should be seen and promoted as enablers of social dialogue that matters to all aspects of development and development cooperation.**

4. Research Parameters

In contrast to our previous policy brief, which focused on the support of journalism, this policy brief looks back on the full range of studies conducted as part of the MeCoDEM project. It combines findings from our research on media development organisations on the one hand, and fieldwork in the four countries of our study on the other:

We interviewed practitioners acting in the field 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 we conducted 19 qualitative semi-structured interviews.

The policy brief also draws insights from research on the communication practice of journalists, civil society actors and governance actors. We conducted 100 qualitative semi-structured interviews with journalists (24 in Egypt, 26 in Kenya, 25 in Serbia, and 25 in South Africa), 91 interviews with civil society actors (19 in Egypt, 24 in Kenya, 20 in Serbia, and 28 in South Africa), and 67 interviews with governance actors (10 in Egypt, 22 in Kenya, 19 in Serbia, and 16 in South Africa).

All 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 with journalists 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 is 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.

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This project has received funding from the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme for research, technological development and demonstration under grant agreement no 613370. Project Term: 1.2.2014 – 31.1.2017.