GLOBAL FORUM FOR MEDIA DEVELOPMENT

COORDINATING MEDIA ASSISTANCE AND JOURNALISM SUPPORT EFFORTS

The need for coordination within the media development sector is widely recognised – particularly in the wake of conflict or crisis.

Common wisdom holds that it plays an essential role in avoiding duplication or contradictions between programmes funded by different donors and offers a unique opportunity to explore synergies between complementary strands of work.

Stakeholders suggest that coordination can also help to harmonise or combine efforts to assess the needs of beneficiaries and to evaluate the impact of programming across a wide portfolio of projects. Ideally, then, coordination should involve donors, implementing agencies, and local organisations — recipients of the assistance — thereby ensuring that the development community can make optimum use of available resources by determining priority areas and apportioning spheres of interest and responsibility.

Dedicated coordination and information sharing also enable media development actors to address diverse needs within any given media ecosystem and, therefore, ensure that the impact of any one project is not undermined or blunted by endemic weaknesses in the operating environment.

The importance of effective coordination becomes particularly acute when donors and media development agencies respond to a crisis situation. The war in Ukraine is the most recent example and the rapidity with which international and local actors have joined forces to support the country's media sector has been unprecedented.

While there have been numerous attempts to coordinate project-based activities on a national as well as a regional level, these initiatives have generally struggled to maintain stakeholder buy-in over a sustained period of time.

Furthermore, the level of donor participation in groups convened by implementing agencies has been underwhelming and, in at least one country, donors and implementers have formed separate coordination bodies that work in parallel and are connected only through a shared mailing list. These have rarely facilitated an open and constructive dialogue between donors, implementing agencies, and local partners with a view to determining strategic priorities.

Typical obstacles to effective coordination include widespread competition between implementing agencies, which is driven primarily by mechanisms used by donors to disburse funding. These market forces mean that agencies are often unwilling or unable to share the information that might give their rivals a competitive advantage. Moreover, the donor-implementer-recipient relationship remains top-down and is shaped by shifting programmatic priorities that may reflect political imperatives or ephemeral themes rather than actual needs.

> At a coordination meeting organised by GFMD in 2021, a representative from one major donor organisation expressed a readiness to move toward "longer-term programming whereby donors, media development organisations, and media partners can sit together and develop a plan that considers how we can best support and bring added value to media organisations".

Subsequently, GFMD IMPACT in cooperation with the Samir Kassir Foundation's SKeyes Centre for Media and Cultural Freedom and the International Media Support (IMS) commissioned a study that analysed the scope and focus of media assistance coordination efforts, highlighting common pitfalls as well as best practice models. This policy brief presents a set of major findings and recommendations for practical steps that could be used to inform future coordination initiatives, including in conflict and emergency situations.

Key Findings

There is no default template for coordination groups, and most are shaped by the force of circumstance. Typically, however, they comprise a cycle of scheduled meetings underpinned by shared databases, online groups, and bespoke events. Most have been initiated and led by international organisations, often as part of a wider development programme.

All coordination mechanisms studied during the research have **embraced information- and knowledge-sharing as their primary focus**. Related activities have included mapping past, present, and future projects as well as keeping members informed of upcoming funding opportunities. Coordination groups have also created and managed online platforms that include databases of projects, beneficiaries, partners, suppliers, and consultants.

Coordinating bodies have facilitated resource-sharing among their members in areas such as training and fundraising, but the **potential for conducting joint needs assessments and quantitative or qualitative research has yet to be fully exploited.**

Several respondents interviewed during the study highlighted the **value of collective monitoring and evaluation to track positive changes across media ecosystems,** arguing that this would significantly reduce duplication of effort.

In addition, **coordination groups have engaged in advocacy,** either by lobbying donors to commit funding to specific initiatives or by mobilising members around priority issues such as reforms to the legislative or regulatory environment. This work has typically been driven by coalitions of local organisations with strong leadership and a formal administrative structure.

Strategic development remains the holy grail of coordination: an ambition to look at the bigger picture and determine how individual organisations can contribute to a national work plan based on agreed priorities and imperatives. However, experience shows that attempts to devise an overarching strategy are impeded by the rigid nature of funding programmes and overlapping agendas within the development community.

Recommendations

Sharing information and exploring synergies should be fixtures of the media development landscape in any given country. The positive impact of such activities on value for money, aid effectiveness, and public perceptions of development programmes was recognised across the board and particularly in the context of the fundamental principles of the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness.

Clearly, the scale of coordination work will depend largely on the volume of programming on the ground. However, even in those countries that see low levels of activity or have a single dominant programme, there was perceived value in introducing media development as a separate thematic strand in wider coordination efforts. The format and structure inherent in the selected coordination mechanism will also be shaped by the needs and priorities of local actors, but in general, a scheduled exchange of information combined with a platform for knowledge management was welcomed.

Thus, in real terms, there is no silver bullet or single best-practice model. However, **based on its findings and conclusions, this study recommends that a strong level of interagency engagement should become the default position for all media development projects. Donors should make sustained coordination and knowledge sharing a requirement that is reflected in project reporting and external evaluation.** They should also encourage grantees to include an allocation for information and knowledge sharing or coordination work in their budgets. These funds could be used collectively to support related activities as well as the human resources and technical solutions needed to underpin these processes.

Strong leadership that ensures proper inclusion and full participation:

Leadership plays an essential role in keeping activities on track, motivating participants, and driving effective engagement with external stakeholders. In the context of meetings, this extends to inclusive moderation that ensures all attendees can participate fully and that discussions are properly balanced between local and international actors, large and small organisations, and men and women.

Leadership organisations should be independent and professional, and they should have sufficient resources to sustain coordination over time. Having strong existing contacts across the media and development industries will ensure that they are able to develop a coordination structure that has a lightweight hierarchy but is inclusive and bottom-up. A number of respondents raised the question of whether coordination should be led by donors or implementing agencies. Donor or implementor leadership can be helpful, but in certain cases, local implementing agencies are better positioned to set the agenda since they have greater insight into local needs and enjoy the trust of local beneficiaries.

Scope and focus of work, administration and meting formats:

It is important to define the objectives, outcomes, and structure of the coordination project and meetings, as well as to identify its target groups and core activities.

Identifying the right arrangements and frequency for coordination meetings is essential to ensuring buy-in and maintaining stakeholders' momentum. This issue should be discussed upfront between all parties, considering members' availability and levels of commitment. Most coordination processes include a periodic exchange of information on developments in the sector, including any shifts in national policy. Ensuring that the coordination group's functions are not duplicating the work of other organisations or structures is also key.

Effective interface with donor community

Local organisations can often feel disconnected from the international development community. In most cases, they have limited capacity and smaller budgets, and consequently, they feel less able to invest time and energy to make sure that their views are taken into account. Introducing effective mechanisms for including and listening to local views, needs, and priorities makes coordination more relevant. Due consideration given to the local context is paramount, and roles, responsibilities, and priorities should be apportioned accordingly.

Establishing equal partnerships and participation:

Concerted efforts should be made to ensure proper representation from across the spectrum of media development organisations and to maintain a quorum and clear objectives for each meeting. Ultimately, this will involve "selling" the concept to the putative membership and demonstrating its value from an early stage.

Good level of visibility and ability to engage

The potential for coordination groups to lead advocacy efforts in transitional democracies should not be underestimated. This requires a joined-up strategy and consensus on the target issues, but a coordination body that unites key local media actors can play a significant role in identifying realistic objectives and mobilising the resources necessary to achieve them. A good level of visibility can assist such initiatives by garnering support among multiple stakeholder groups.

There is an urgent need for substantive discussions on developing national strategies and ensuring proper complementarity between funding programs. To date, this engagement has been haphazard and implementing agencies remain hostage to the ebb and flow of donor funding. In the short term, donors should be encouraged to invest in collaborative research, monitoring, and evaluation. This could act as an entry point for sustained partnerships between funders, implementing agencies, and local organisations receiving the support.

A stable and predictable source of funding:

Understandably, coordination processes that have enjoyed sustained donor funding or support have outlasted those that have led a hand-to-mouth existence or have relied on the good will of participants alone. Stable funding ensures that groups can establish a secretariat and IT assets (including digital platforms). The ability to commission sectoral research on an ad hoc basis can be of significant benefit to all stakeholders, while expert advice on new thematic priorities can help inform and drive working group discussions.

Sufficient flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances and priorities:

Coordination bodies should avoid developing complex bureaucracies or onerous operating procedures. They should act as a catalyst for efficient and effective actions. Several respondents recommended using coordination bodies as a platform for discussing thematic imperatives and finding solutions to sectoral challenges. Dynamic groups that are committed to collective problem-solving and can rally individuals and organisations around concrete initiatives will enjoy higher levels of interest and buy-in. Ultimately, successful coordination groups need to remain relevant, reactive, and engaged.

Adequate knowledge- and information-sharing platforms:

Respondents to the study highlighted the importance of mapping databases and sharing spreadsheets that provide stakeholders with an up-to-date overview of the local media development landscape and empower them to make informed decisions on future projects. A centralised and searchable repository of studies, reports, and legislative documents is also likely to enjoy a good level of take-up.

The study and methodology:

About the report: _Coordinating Media Assistance and Journalism Support Efforts_, was produced by GFMD IMPACT, in cooperation with the Samir Kassir Foundation's SKeyes Centre for Media and Cultural Freedom, and with support and in cooperation with the International Media Support (IMS).

Methodology: The report is based on desk research and a series of interviews that were conducted in June 2022 with key stakeholders who have participated in coordination groups over the last five years. It was authored by Aida Al-Kaisy and Michael Randall. The findings and recommendations were refined and discussed during a consultation process between September and November 2022.

About GFMD: The Global Forum for Media Development is the largest global community for media development, media freedom, and journalism support. Through collaboration, coordination, and collective action our members and partners create, promote, and deliver policies and programmes to sustain journalism as a public good.

About GFMD IMPACT: GFMD's International Media Policy and Advice Centre is an initiative that helps donors, funders, policy-makers, and practitioners make informed, evidence-based decisions on strategy, programming, funding, and advocacy for media development and journalism support. For more information contact the GFMD IMPACT help desk helpdesk-impact@gfmd.info

To access the full report visit:
https://gfmd.info/briefings/coordinating-media-assistance-journalism-support