EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Research conducted by the Global Forum for Media Development (GFMD) over the past five years has consistently highlighted a broad range of concerns and frustrations relating to fundraising and business development in the media support sector. Experienced by all media development organisations to a greater or lesser degree, these frustrations include:

- The short-term nature of funding and a marked lack of continuity in development programmes.
- A tendency by donors to view news media as a tool for their communication strategies rather than a crucial requirement for democracy-building.
- Top-down relationships between donors and implementing agencies.
- Opaque funding programmes and lengthy, overly complex application procedures.

This has led to the emergence of a fragmented sector that is plagued by duplication of efforts and poor coordination. Both media outlets and media support organisations spend a disproportionate amount of time applying for and servicing grants. Grants often cover non-essential activities rather than core business. This state of affairs has had a negative impact on the credibility of media development efforts worldwide. In Eastern Europe, for example, there is a perception that cumbersome, underfunded interventions have helped to fuel the Kremlin's narrative that the West is ideologically weak and divided.

However, there is little evidence that donors are responding to repeated calls for a shift in the funding paradigm. Most still use antiquated templates for applications and few provide useful feedback to applicants. Funding programmes are based on assumptions rather than empirical evidence and the very long lead-times for some grants mean that projects risk being obsolete by the time they are launched. The burden of reporting to multiple donors is seen to be untenable.

On the positive side, several major donors have started commissioning needs assessments of media communities in the MENA region and Eastern Europe. The findings of these assessments are used to determine funding priorities. Furthermore, several players have adopted more flexible funding arrangements. It is widely hoped that these best practice models will be embraced by the wider donor community.

This report draws on the feedback of media development actors to present a set of recommendations for both donors and implementing agencies. These include proposed improvements to the development and roll-out of funding programmes as well as measures that can be taken by both parties to introduce more effective ways of working and enhance engagement and collaboration across the sector. The key recommendations are presented in the table below.

Donors

- Offer core or institutional support to independent media outlets, recognising that, without core funding, many of these actors will cease to exist and the diversity of voices will be diminished.
- Take steps to improve dialogue with media development partners and engage in the co-creation of projects.
- Conduct or commission regular, structured assessments of media landscapes and use the findings to shape funding programmes.
- Invest in country-based audience research which can give proper insight into the themes and formats which are likely to resonate with different target groups.
- Simplify procedures and reduce lead-times for applications.
- Harmonise procedures across the donor community, thereby enabling joint reporting and collaborative monitoring and evaluation.
- Give leadership roles to media support organisations from the Global South, acknowledging their in-depth knowledge of local media landscapes and their credibility among local actors.

Implementing agencies

- Diversify the donor base and consider opportunities for commercial activity to supplement grant-funding.
- Prioritise donors who offer their beneficiaries long-term partnerships based on a common vision and shared goals.
- Avoid pursuing funding opportunities that have limited chances of success or that are a poor fit for core activities.
- Engage in network- and coalition-building with a view to pooling resources with counterparts.
- Improve resource allocation within in-house teams and consider ways of streamlining business development work.
- Improve M&E systems in order to generate stronger evidence of impact and success.
- Enter into strategic partnerships with other implementing organisations that have complementary skills.
- Establish a clear and distinct position on the media development market.

The findings of this report complement GFMD's ongoing initiative to update its Principles for Effective Media Development and Support to Journalism. It is anticipated that these principles will be adopted by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) Development Assistance Committee in early 2024 with a view to holding a meeting for donors in March or April to consider ways of operationalising the principles.

This process, in turn, will lend greater weight and credence to collective efforts to increase the percentage of overseas development assistance (ODA) allocated to the media sector – which currently stands at just 0.3%. It recognises that any increase in overall support will only deliver tangible benefits to independent journalism if funds are disbursed in a fair, proportionate and transparent manner and if funding decisions are shaped by audience needs and professional priorities.

Background

This report builds on the findings of surveys conducted by GFMD in 2018 and 2022 to assess members' perceptions of fundraising processes and donor priorities for the media and the media development sector. Respondents in both surveys reported difficulties in covering a wide variety of organisational needs through donor support, particularly:

- Fundraising (51% - 2018) and (40% - 2022)
- Human resources (43% - 2018)
- Unplanned emergency needs (38% - 2018)
- Leadership and development (33% - 2022)
- Strategic planning (27% - 2022)

The majority of these needs are critical for the survival of an organisation and reflect a recurring frustration at

the perceived donor preference for programmatic grants over core funding. When asked what kind of operational improvements they would like to see, 94% of the 2018 respondents expressed the desire for more institutional/core funding. One 2022 respondent complained, "We are required to fulfil more and more needs (due diligence, additional policies like PSEAH, gender, etc.) with less resources allowable at HQ or for quality assurance."

When asked what they perceive as being the greatest challenges in the provision of funding, respondents cited:

- The amount of funding available to the sector.
- Length of the funding cycles, with short cycles compounding the difficulty of demonstrating impact.
- An absence of donor strategies specific to media development.
- Low donor understanding of media development and of journalistic values.
- Lack of coordination between donors and within the journalism support and media development community especially those operating on the ground.
- Politicised donor agendas.
- Competition between international and local media development organisations.
- Bureaucratic requirements on the part of the donors.

One respondent commented, "Media development priorities must be agreed through consultation between support groups and respective countries or regions." Another echoed this view: "Sometimes I have to shake my head at the way some donors think they know what to do in specific situations. And, they sometimes go to the wrong people... with ulterior agendas. Donors need to talk to people on the ground... with experience, foresight and knowledge."

Apart from fierce competition between international and local organisations, a significant number of respondents reported that the time and skills required to apply for and manage donor grants present a major challenge for their organisation. Common sources of concern include complicated application processes and a long lead-time between proposals being submitted and decisions being made.

Smaller organisations, particularly those which rely on a large number of small grants, spoke of the difficulties of having to produce multiple reports simultaneously, commenting that the level of effort required for reporting on small grants was often equivalent to that required for larger projects. According to the GFMD survey conducted in 2022, "These organisations cite the human resource constraints involved in such efforts, noting that focusing on data collection and reporting can take time and focus away from other key needs."

Methodology

This study was based on a body of desk research as well as a series of online interviews with GFMD members from Eastern Europe, Asia and South America. The questions covered the following issues:

- The scope of funders and existing grant cycles.
- Regional funding patterns and perceived ability to influence donor priorities.
- Fundraising capacity and capabilities, including procedures and administration.
- The overheads of donor reporting.
- Gaps in funding and ways of dealing with them.
- Fundraising challenges, including their impact on institutional strategy.
- Partnerships with other organisations.
- Donor relationships.

Respondents were also asked to offer advice to their counterparts, including ways of addressing common pitfalls and risks. In addition, the interviews covered the perceived value of GFMD resources designed to support business development and train new staff.

All of those interviewed during the study requested anonymity in this report.

Findings

Making ends meet

The majority of respondents to GFMD's surveys derive the bulk of their income from donors, playing a complicated juggling act as they spread their fixed running costs across multiple budgets. However, all surveyed organisations share concerns about funding gaps, exacerbated in some cases by delays in payments. At least one said that this meant salaries were sometimes held back until funds came through. Another commented, "The challenge is also that, when we can piece together the grants, it might cover, like 90% of that person's salary, which sounds good, but then you're losing money on the final 10%."

The co-founder of an online media platform in the Middle East said that the pressure to cover running costs meant that media development organisations were forced to make compromises. She said, "Media development organisations water down their approaches to go after every pot [of money] available. They have staff and salaries they have to pay."

All recognised the very considerable efforts required to maintain income levels. One respondent said that, in 2022, the organisation made 18 applications for funding of which 60% were accepted. She added, "We've had to diversify our funding and get to more donors [because] we get less money from each donor. In the past, we had only maybe five donors. Now we need to have 20 to cover the same type of budget. We are doing triple the work [that we did] before."

To make matters worse, only a minority of media development organisations can afford to maintain a team of dedicated fundraising staff. In most cases, staff are asked to pitch in where necessary and the workload is spread across a number of employees. "For me, it's like one tenth of what I have to do," said the director of a well-established agency based in Central Europe.

Ensuring continuity

Several respondents highlighted the burden imposed by short-term funding. The head of a leading journalists' union in Eastern Europe commented that, although the union was working with ten donors concurrently, the longest grant cycle was less than a year. Some spanned just a few months. A media manager from the MENA region noted that short-term grants meant her team struggled to build on previous projects because they were uncertain about whether they would be able to secure funding to continue them in the future. "Long-term funds provide the opportunity to plan and implement sustainable projects that will have a lasting impact," she said.

A number of media development actors are working to reduce their dependence on donor funding, some by introducing commercial income, others by experimenting with approaches such as membership schemes, commercial training courses and summer schools. The director of one online platform said, "We are really determined to get away from the grant financing. We don't want to stay overly grant dependent the way we are now." He went on to say that the proportion of the platform's budget covered by non-grant sources had fluctuated over time, ranging from around 25% to 15%. "However," he added, "it's important to note that most of this income is allocated toward programmatic expenses and 'money out'."

The ebb and flow of donor priorities takes their toll. Following the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011, donors flocked to support pro-democracy movements in the MENA region; following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, attention has shifted to Eastern Europe together with the bulk of available funding. "And yet," says the director of an investigative journalism agency based in the Middle East, "the problems are not being solved: 10 years [have passed] since the Arab Spring, and unfortunately, deep states [have become] much stronger and the civil society space is shrinking."

Relationships with donors

Media development organisations often argue that the dynamic between donors and implementing partners needs to change. This view was reiterated in GFMD's 2023 survey, with one respondent commenting that they felt like "supplicants" rather than partners. A GFMD member from South America said that she particularly valued regular engagement with donors who maintained a sustained interest in their work. "I think the National Endowment for Democracy is a great example, because we have meetings. And, actually, I feel that they do read our reports, because then they come back with questions."

The need for trust-based relationships is particularly acute in the context of the war in Ukraine. As noted by a Ukrainian respondent, "It is important when donors are constantly in touch... It is very convenient if there is one person in the donor organisation who is directly responsible for this project. It's difficult when different people communicate with you about the same thing, and you don't know whom to turn to." Appreciation was expressed for donors who were "flexible if something doesn't work out the way you expected it to".

A leading media development actor in the MENA region insists on holding preliminary conversations with donors to ensure a good match. Its Senior Grants Officer said, "Grants are just the beginning of a longer process that requires preparation and attention to detail." She considers that it is "essential to devote considerable time to building relationships with potential donors".

Influencing

As noted in a 2022 IMS report on coalition-building in the media sector, "Local partners should feel empowered to define and influence the support they receive from the international community." Respondents to the IMS study said that programmes should be driven by demand rather than by donor assumptions or thematic priorities that do not fully reflect the situation on the ground.

Currently, dialogue between donors and implementing agencies is patchy and does not always lead to positive outcomes. A Ukrainian respondent commented, "They often agree with us, but often they don't. Many topics are actually far from relevant for modern Ukrainian society. For example, now, when there are generators everywhere on the streets, it is not the time to write about environmental problems. These are certainly important problems, but they are peacetime problems."

Other respondents to the 2023 GFMD survey pointed out that funders often had a simplistic understanding of what success looked like. The business development manager of an online media outlet in Iraq said, "We still live in a world where donors want to see x pieces of content. These are seen as indicators of success. But there is still a lack of understanding on the part of large donors that the funding provided is not enough – that organisations need core funding to be able to grow and develop."

Similarly, an FCDO-commissioned report entitled "New Approaches to Countering Disinformation in the Eastern Partnership" criticised donors for a tendency to provide "helicopter money" which does not contribute to the long-term sustainability of their beneficiaries or allow for the capital investments that are essential to media outlets' ability to produce high-quality content and drive innovation.

One development organisation based in the regions does not feel its voice is being heard when donors formulate their strategies and/or design new programmes. Its director explained that the network was far from the country's main media hubs. As a result, he said, "It is impossible for us to interact with donors, embassies, and even Ministry of Information high-ups due to the non-availability of funds."

The need for collective influencing was voiced by several interviewees. One MENA respondent said, "Media development organisations have no chance to protest. There's no collective voice where everyone has a role." At a December 2021 meeting of the GFMD-supported Lebanon Joint Coordination Mechanism, a representative of the European Commission agreed that there was a need for "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".

Lack of transparency

The opaque nature of donor funding is a common source of frustration. Respondents to the GFMD survey said they often found themselves applying for programmes when "it was not clear what their chances were" or which topics were prioritised. Respondents to a 2023 study of media development in Central Europe criticised some programmes for lacking transparency, claiming there was no information about their focus, their status or their results.

The head of a journalists' union in Eastern Europe said that the situation was particularly daunting for representatives of media outlets who were concerned that donors would "interfere with editorial policy". "They don't know where to begin," she concluded.

Respondents to the 2023 GFMD survey offered advice to media and development agencies seeking to get started. One senior manager said, "I think visibility first then fundraising, for any newcomers into this field. It's like the egg and the chicken. How can I do visibility without fundraising? You need to have a small grant at the beginning, do a lot of visibility, then go for the big grant."

Generally, it was agreed that donor priorities do not always appear to be based on a clear rationale or an apparent understanding of the situation on the ground. A GFMD member from South America said that the situation in the sub-continent was perplexing. Colombia remained a perennial favourite but Ecuador was overlooked since it was not considered to be a priority country.

Insistence on donor themes and priorities

Similar frustrations are expressed when it comes to the choice of donor themes or focus areas. A common criticism was that media development donors do not "understand journalism" and that funding organisations lacked media specialists. "If the organisation wants to help journalism, it needs to understand journalism. And that is not usually the case,"said one interviewee.

Several respondents noted a lack of appreciation for the time and resources required to produce high-quality content. One complained that some funders impose restrictions on grant usage, "such as prohibiting the use of funds for salaries, which is essential for the sustainability and well-being of employees".

Grantees in Georgia interviewed during a 2022 study commissioned by the FCDO highlighted the frustrations of chasing small production grants from donors in order to survive. One said that short-term, theme-based projects – which were rarely based on audience-first principles – forced media to divert resources from core activities and undermined strategic development.

Furthermore, several media outlets complained that they had been obliged (out of necessity) to take on projects which posed real risks for contributors (such as attempting to forge links with media in the breakaway republics of Abkhazia and North Ossetia). Equally, the director of a community radio station said that too much effort and funding were expended on publishing reports that led to no concrete action, either by donors or by the Georgian Government.

Respondents in Ukraine were particularly outspoken about the "old-school" approaches adopted by international donors and implementing agencies, stating that approaches to training, in particular, were "stuck in the 1990s". They complained that international organisations did not consult enough with local beneficiaries when designing their projects and that, too often, the selected approach and activity plan appeared to be a "fait accompli".

Stakeholders agree that the priorities of the donor community are not necessarily those of their putative beneficiaries. Respondents in Georgia were critical of Western donors' insistence on promoting "ultra-liberal" themes through grant-funded projects. They said that these issues had little relevance to the genuine problems faced by ordinary people and, consequently, came across as self-serving. Furthermore, they were cited by pro-Russian propagandists as evidence that Euro-Atlantic narratives were at odds with Georgian culture and traditions.

A media expert from the UK commented, "Thematic strands distract from more pressing concerns and allow donors to fund programmes which are politically palatable in host countries but which are unlikely to lead to sectoral change." And one (female) respondent to an EU-funded assessment explained, "Themes like gender equality force media to constantly reinvent themselves rather than focusing on the core task of serving the public at large and improving the quality of their reporting."

Media development approaches which only offer assistance at one level – for example, in training or content production – come under heavy criticism. It is generally argued that effective programmes should be holistic, covering all aspects of media production and management. The reluctance to invest in new equipment is often cited as an example of this. As one respondent commented, "We ask for equipment and technical support but they give us training instead. Donors are teaching us to run, then tying our legs together."

Furthermore, the focus on donor-specified priorities means that some topics and areas of work remain underfunded. According to the grants officer of one media agency based in the Middle East, it is highly challenging to find funding for innovation projects in the region. "Foundations and organisations are hesitant to invest in innovation due to the risk of failure," she said. "Donors prefer clear KPIs, activities, and outcomes."

Complex procedures

Most grant application procedures are seen to be highly work-intensive, although the level of complexity varies from one donor to another. According to one interviewee, "EU and German foundations are very time-consuming and bureaucratic in terms of reports and proposals. US funders are more flexible with changes compared to EU donors. Furthermore, American donors [that we talk to] are usually decision-makers themselves, while EU donors have a lot of bureaucracy and require approval from higher-ups."

Some proposals are lengthy but not necessarily complicated, although a considerable volume of information and documents is required. In addition, said the same interviewee, some donors have unwieldy processes for submitting supporting documents and their platforms are not "user-friendly".

As a result of these challenges, implementing agencies find themselves overstretched. In one agency, the grants officer and the director estimate they spend 40-50% and 100% of their time respectively on fundraising. An Iraqi media start-up has developed a five-year plan that includes the ambition to appoint a dedicated business development officer by 2024. In the meantime, however, the co-founder manages business development and partnerships on a pro bono basis. Most practitioners agree that donors are loathe to fund business development positions or business plans and this is seen as a significant impediment.

The difficulties of sourcing qualified personnel are common to most regions. A respondent from Eastern Europe said, "All project managers [here] are already busy, and if you hire people who do not have relevant experience, then more time will be spent on training [them] than doing it yourself." In some cases, local organisations prefer to apply with an international partner as the lead applicant in order to avoid grappling with the complexities of funding programmes. "We depend on others who have experienced the application process," said a grants officer from the MENA region.

The complexity of application procedures leads to mistakes being made. For example, inexperienced applicants tend to under budget their projects which can have negative consequences when it comes to implementation. An interviewee from South America said, "You have no idea how many people lose money because they don't know how much a thing costs when they present the project."

Managing grants

All organisations, large and small, struggle with the administrative burden of managing multiple grants. One director estimated that his organisation wrote 25-30 reports per year while a respondent from the Middle East said the total was more than 100 and that the agency was managing a total of 13 projects at the current time. She added, "Four people are dedicated to reporting full-time and three others [provide] support in reporting 40-50% of the time."

Several respondents called on donors to harmonise their procedures, commenting it would be easier if there were a "unified package of basic documents". One senior manager explained, "Donors have varying reporting requirements, with some needing reports after every event or activity, and others requiring monthly or quarterly reports. The core donors are more understanding when it comes to the compliance of the reports since they are satisfied with annual, quarterly, or bi-annual reports."

The representative of a journalists' union in the former Soviet Union said "Some donors require such detailed reporting that [our] team even refuses to participate in an offline event because then there will not be enough time physically to report (which is a shame of course)." She went on to say, "The problem is not so much in the reporting of funds as in the preparation and collection of documents. For example, [two international partners] provided 160 scholarships to individual journalists. [We] had to make the selection and provide all the individual documents for each journalist."

A 2019 study by the Baltic Centre for Media Excellence concluded, "Consultations conducted during the study process and feedback from the country researchers yielded formal and informal expressions of frustration with current models. Media reported devoting disproportionate amounts of time and resources to chasing and documenting grants and, as a result, operated like NGOs, not regular media outlets."

Partnerships

Donors actively encourage partnerships, particularly between local and international organisations. However, these are not always welcomed by applicants for funding programmes. A senior manager from the MENA region said that small local entities were hesitant to be associated with his organisation, fearing that it could harm their funding.

Another respondent reported negative experiences with past projects involving large media development agencies. His organisation encountered difficulties with project administration, budgeting, limited partner input and a lack of transparency. He went on to say that would-be partners were often only fishing for advice. In a 2022 GFMD report entitled "Review of the Funding Landscape for Media Development Actors in Lebanon", a representative from Lebanon's Maharat Foundation said she felt exploited by international partners who, she claimed, were primarily interested in mining their contacts and accessing their intellectual property without giving much in return.

One respondent described a "colonial" approach whereby international partners took a controlling role in project development rather than making genuine efforts to empower local partners. "We are looking for an equal partnership," she said.

Potential solutions

The paragraphs below explore a range of solutions for addressing the challenges highlighted in this report. These recommendations are based on the premise that systemic change is necessary in order to ensure that donor funding better reflects the needs of key stakeholders and that available resources enjoy optimum impact. Real improvements would require concerted efforts on the part of the donor community as well as implementing agencies, thereby achieving greater accountability, transparency and responsiveness from both sides.

Donors

It is recognised that most donors support multiple spheres of human endeavour of which media development is just a small part. They often use generic templates and procedures for all funding programmes and will be reluctant to introduce separate frameworks just to address the specific needs and limitations of the media sector. Thus, it is unlikely that issues relating to complex procedures and grant administration will be solved in the near future.

However, there are a number of best practice models used by some donors which could be more widely embraced across the donor community. This would help to align donor programmes and introduce the possibility of better strategic development, improved coordination and harmonised reporting procedures. A selection of these models are presented below:

Core support: most practitioners agree that the growing calls for institutional funding fully reflect the shifting needs of media outlets in an environment where advertising revenue is shrinking and political pressures are growing. Many see core support as an existentialist need and, without sustained, unrestricted funding, many independent media outlets will simply cease to exist. Project-based funding, they say, has not stood the test of time and, for many, has become a hindrance or a distraction rather than a help.

Dialogue and co-creation: the desire for improved dialogue is a common thread in all discussions of donor-implementer relations. There is a perception that donors build walls around themselves and are reluctant to engage with potential grantees. However, there are clear exceptions. OSF and NED, for example, have a strong reputation for fostering long-term partnerships with their beneficiaries and providing ongoing support throughout project implementation. Similarly, USAID runs co-creation sessions with implementing agencies which serve to improve project design and align expectations. Other donors would benefit from adopting similar approaches, including, perhaps, offering seed funding for project development that might allow for proper consultation and needs assessment.

Regular, structured needs assessments: as noted above, several donors have recognised the value of gaining up-to-date insights into the needs and priorities of future beneficiaries. This approach has been widely lauded and there are several recent examples of funding programmes that have been shaped by expert reports and recommendations. However, this process is still ad hoc and the assessments are often implemented by international experts rather than local institutions. The 2019 EU Needs Assessment of Independent Media recommended investment in a robust assessment mechanism that tasks local partners with the collection and dissemination of findings on a rolling basis. This research could also include comprehensive mapping of media projects in partner countries as well as independent impact monitoring. Data collection would need to be performed according to an agreed framework and operating guidelines which are consistent across the two regions.

Audience-first policies: while donors have got better at assessing the needs of media practitioners, there is still little investment in country-based audience measurement which can help identify the themes and formats likely to resonate with different target groups. Such insights would enable donors to develop programmes that prioritise audience needs rather than simply promoting the development agenda.

Simplified procedures: although systemic change is likely to be slow, there is, nevertheless, ample room for simplifying application procedures and some donors have made efforts to streamline processes in recent years. Electronic submission and reporting are now ubiquitous while most funders now place restrictions on page lengths and supporting documents. In addition, there is an urgent need to reduce the lead-times for funding programmes as approaches and ideas that may be relevant during the application stage can swiftly be overtaken by events.

Harmonising procedures across the donor community: joint reporting for multiple donors could help remove a heavy bureaucratic burden which currently hinders both implementing agencies and media outlets from conducting their core business. While all beneficiaries fully recognise the need for accountability and transparency, the bewildering variety of reporting templates and cycles can be intimidating and the resulting workload cannot easily be absorbed by small organisations. Harmonised reporting procedures could be underpinned by joint monitoring and evaluation efforts that enable development agencies to generate empirical data simultaneously for multiple donors.

Giving leadership roles to media support actors from the Global South: the centre of gravity for media development still remains in the hands of a small number of US- and EU-based development agencies which have accrued a stellar track record of delivering large-scale projects in a broad range of different environments. There are only a few examples of actors from the Global South who are genuinely able to compete. And yet local organisations have the networks, resources and insights to engage with local media in a way that their foreign counterparts can rarely emulate. Furthermore, they can offer greater value for money as well as pools of experts who are better attuned to the realities of the local media environment. Donors urgently need to move away from the perception that international organisations are "a safe pair of hands" which are uniquely capable of delivering high-budget interventions.

Definitions of success: there is a perceived need for aligning expectations across the development sector. As noted by one of the respondents to the GFMD survey, many donors see quantitative metrics such as the number of content items produced or the number of people reached as the most significant indicators of success. Qualitative indicators relating to institutional resilience and editorial integrity are harder to measure and seem less impressive; hence, they are often ignored. Consensus between donors and implementing agencies over "what success looks like" is long overdue.

Implementing organisations

Organisations that are dependent on donor funding often experience a sense of helplessness as they grapple within an apparently impassive system that provides little feedback and shuns engagement. However, there are measures that can be taken to alleviate these pressures and to restore a sense of agency. Examples are listed below.

Diversification: having a diverse donor base is the most effective way of maintaining business continuity over time, however, as described above, it can significantly increase bureaucratic overheads and expose grantees to considerable fiduciary risk. Some media and other agencies have investigated the possibility of branching out into commercial activities such as selling products and services as well as looking beyond traditional donors to engage with philanthropists and high-net-worth individuals. The experience of some organisations in Central and Eastern Europe shows that persistence can pay dividends.

Prioritising donors who offer their beneficiaries long-term partnerships based on a common vision and shared goals. A 2019 EU-funded needs assessment of independent media praised donors who viewed grantees as "partners" and supported their activities through regular funding cycles. The report concluded, "[This approach} gives beneficiaries a sense of community as well as enough assurance of regular income to be able to make long-term plans and key strategic decisions." Conversely, as stated in the GFMD MediaDev

Fundraising Guide, media support organisations should "resist the temptation to pursue long shots and focus on opportunities which play to [their] competitive strengths". The guide recommends that grantees "take a targeted approach to donor engagement and align [their] ambitions with the realities of the local funding landscape."

Advocating for improved coordination: GFMD's 2022 report entitled "Coordinating Media Assistance and Journalism Support Efforts" urges implementing agencies to establish national coordination bodies that ensure proper inclusion and full participation across the media development landscape. Robust knowledge-sharing platforms, strong leadership, independent governance and an effective interface with the donor community are essential ingredients for meaningful coordination that goes beyond a simple exchange of information and considers opportunities for pooling resources wherever possible.

Network- and coalition-building: the value of coalition-building has been demonstrated in certain environments where media development agencies work together to raise funding and have a strong say in the way that funding is disbursed. Outstanding examples include Lebanon's Media Support Fund established after the Beirut port blast of 2020 and the coalition led by the Media Institute of South Africa (MISA) in Zimbabwe where agencies have developed an overarching media development strategy and fundraise collectively to ensure that each can deliver the activities that best reflect their strengths. This approach has the advantage of removing or, at least, diminishing the element of competition and giving donors a single point of contact with the local media development community.

Improved resource allocation: the overheads of completing funding applications can be reduced by accumulating a body of generic material that can be used in diverse scenarios. It is also important to assess skillsets across an organisation and decide who is best positioned to carry out the various tasks involved. Several agencies from the Global South have a positive experience of outsourcing proposal-writing to trusted consultants who are familiar with their work and can rapidly compile the required documentation. Given the peaks and troughs of the fundraising calendar, this solution can be more cost-effective than hiring full-time business development staff.

Enhanced M&E systems: strong evidence of impact and success plays a key role in developing compelling proposals that stand a higher-than-average chance of success. Furthermore, the M&E component is often overlooked in proposals or consists of generic activities, leaving donors to conclude that the applicant organisation is unsure of its ability to achieve measurable success. Making improvements to knowledge management processes is also key, thereby enabling agencies to act on lessons learned and build a reputation for innovation.

Strategic partnerships: as noted elsewhere in this document, entering into partnerships with other implementing organisations that have complementary skills can reap rewards. It can be helpful in accessing new donors or entering into joint bids where each partner has a clear role and brings added value. Partnerships also mean that the overheads associated with proposal-writing and project reporting can be spread across multiple teams. Strategic partnerships can serve to grow a portfolio and make the transition from securing small grants to accessing larger ones.

Market positioning: as highlighted by at least one respondent to the 2023 survey, visibility is of paramount importance. Organisations need to be noticed by donors and to gain a reputation as a go-to provider of specific services. They also need to have a clear understanding of how to position themselves in the context of competitive bids. Furthermore, the ability to generate valuable intelligence about the market and the immediate competition is a decisive factor – particularly since these insights enable would-be applicants to make an informed decision on whether or not to apply for a funding programme.

Conclusions

The findings of the GFMD surveys conducted in 2018, 2022 and 2023 show that widespread frustrations still exist within the media development community. These stem primarily from the perception that time and effort are being wasted through engaging in archaic systems that do not legislate for better projects and divert attention from more important, strategic goals. Furthermore, the spirit of competition which has grown up amongst development agencies is counterproductive and undermines the coordination efforts that are vital to improving the cost effectiveness of funding.

Moreover, there is a real need for role allocation across the media development community. Rather than assuming that all implementing agencies are generalists who can be deployed in multiple scenarios, more thought needs to go into recognising organisational strengths (or weaknesses) and orchestrating fruitful partnerships. Equally, international development actors should be more sensitive and responsive to the perceptions of their beneficiaries. Increasingly, the international community is accused of being wasteful and promoting confusing messages, creating a mounting cynicism among local organisations who feel their interests have become a secondary concern.

While donors have shown an increasing willingness to consult with beneficiaries, they have displayed little desire to address systemic problems or grant-giving policies. In addition, they appear reluctant to coordinate amongst themselves and explore synergies between funding programmes. As a result, well-worn approaches are still the norm and beneficiaries are increasingly loath to take part in consultation processes that do not seem to result in concrete improvements. Best practice models in the donor community remain islands of excellence rather than being adopted as industry standards.

As a representative body for the media development community, GFMD has an important role to play in leading discussions with donors and ensuring that the voices of all stakeholders are heard. Furthermore, the Centre for International Media Assistance (CIMA) and GFMD's International Media Policy and Advisory Centre (IMPACT) have developed productive working relationships with the member states of the Network on Governance established by the OECD's Development Assistance Committee as well as the OECD DAC Secretariat. The Network acts as a forum for ongoing efforts to increase the level of funding allocated by OECD members to media development programming.

However, any increase in funding risks being wasted if systems are not improved and duplication is not avoided. Similarly, efforts to collaborate are only possible if all donors have an overview of concurrent activities and can make informed decisions on how their funding can complement other efforts. Consequently, GFMD is calling for "a greater emphasis on developing comprehensive national agendas and common strategies for an independent media sector, as well as generating incentives for public and governmental support for the enabling environment for media."