



GFMD

General Strategy 2026-2030



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Part I

The world this strategy is for

Part I is the analysis on which the strategy in Part II rests. It describes the operating environment GFMD and its members are now in (as of June 2026); the two uncertainties that will most decisively shape the next five years; the four scenarios those uncertainties generate; what holds true across all of them; where the money for public-interest journalism actually sits; and what GFMD can and cannot carry forward into the period ahead. It is written for readers who want the reasoning. For the way forward and the conclusion, refer to [Part II](#).

1. Strategic Context

1.1. A sector where the past no longer predicts the future

The world in which GFMD's last strategy was written, in 2021, no longer exists. The assumptions that underpinned media development for two decades that official development assistance (ODA) for journalism would expand or at least hold; that international governance frameworks for press freedom and platform accountability would continue to take shape; that the institutions of independent journalism could plan in five-year horizons, have ceased to be reliable. They are now, in many regions, actively false.

Three forces are converging. Authoritarian governments have learned to use legal, financial, and technological instruments. “Foreign agent” legislation, anti-disinformation statutes, and national security frameworks are all used to constrain independent media, in addition to overt censorship. Major donor governments, most consequentially the United States, have withdrawn or repurposed the development budgets that have underwritten public-interest journalism for a generation, while alternative private capital expands, increasingly drawing from sources whose ethical and political conditions are often incompatible with editorial independence. And artificial intelligence (AI) has compressed the production and distribution of information into systems the public-interest community neither owns nor governs, and in many cases cannot even reliably access.

Each of these forces is structural, not cyclical. Together, they have made one habit of strategic planning obsolete: the habit of choosing a single “most likely” future and building a strategy around it. A strategy built that way is a strategy already exposed when conditions move. The conditions in this sector are now moving abruptly, in different directions, in different parts of the world, at the same time.

1.2. A diverse community, no longer well served by a single theory of change

GFMD's membership spans more than 200 organisations across radically different political, economic, and media environments: journalist-led newsrooms operating under authoritarian pressure and amid increasing democratic backsliding worldwide; press freedom and legal-defence organisations responding to constant crisis; local, regional, and thematic support organisations and networks holding together fragile ecosystems; and large international media development and support organisations based primarily in the Global North.

What sustains one part of this community can be irrelevant, or actively harmful, to another. A policy victory in Brussels is of limited use to a newsroom collapsing in Ethiopia. A grant programme structured for a large international NGO is inaccessible to a small journalism

support organisation. A survival strategy developed by an outlet operating in a hostile environment may travel poorly into an advocacy framework written for democracies.

This is not a problem to be solved by writing a more eloquent mission statement. It is a structural condition. Any strategy built around a single, uniform theory of change for this membership will, by construction, fail much of it. The honest alternative is to hold multiple realities and futures in view simultaneously and to identify the pressures that cut across contexts. This document tests which roles GFMD can sustain across very different conditions, and distinguishes the strategies that must hold whatever happens from the ones that must remain contingent on different scenarios.

1.3. How this analysis was produced

The analysis that follows is the product of a structured, six-phase process carried out through 2025 and early 2026: member and expert consultations; scenario development around two critical uncertainties; refinement of those scenarios into four internally consistent futures with early-warning indicators; testing with outgoing and incoming GFMD Steering Committee members; validation by external experts and an assessment of Secretariat capacity; and will conclude with the establishment of an adaptive monitoring rhythm that will let GFMD adjust course as evidence accumulates about which futures are taking shape. The result is intended as a living strategy. This document is not a fixed blueprint, but a frame within which decisions can be revisited without abandoning the mission or the values. The GFMD team worked with an external consultant to develop the scenario framework, while the rest of the analysis has been developed by the GFMD Secretariat team from inputs, consultations, team workshops and evidence collected over the last four years. AI tools have been used for visuals, and Claude (Anthropic) for final copy editing.

1.4. The two uncertainties that will shape the next five years

Two uncertainties emerged from the consultation as decisive, not because they are the only forces in play, but because almost every other variable that matters to public-interest journalism turns out to depend on them.

Uncertainty 1: Availability of funding

The first uncertainty is whether independent journalism, public-interest media, and the organisations that support them will have access to funding and revenue streams compatible with independence, transparency, and democratic values. The two ends of this uncertainty are not “more money” and “less money”. They are sharper than that.

At the low end, traditional ODA and significant parts of philanthropic funding continue to decline. The remaining resources concentrate in the Global North. Local journalism organisations face existential choices between merging, reinventing themselves as commercial or adjacent-sector

entities, accepting compromised funding, or closing. Private and corporate funding expands only partially, and often with opaque motivations or weak accountability.

At the high end, new funding does enter the sector, from climate, anti-corruption, and crisis-response budgets, and from a growing set of philanthropic actors concerned with democracy and information ecosystems. But a non-trivial share of that money comes from sources whose presence is itself a strategic problem: authoritarian governments seeking influence, ideologically driven technology billionaires, corporate actors whose business models undermine the journalism they are funding.

At both ends of this uncertainty, funding is no longer a neutral input. It is a strategic and ethical terrain that organisations must actively navigate.

Uncertainty 2: Direction of international governance frameworks

The second uncertainty is whether the international and regional frameworks for human rights, press freedom, and public-interest information ecosystems remain credible and enforceable, or become, as they increasingly are in some regions, formal commitments without practical force.

At the low end, multilateral systems weaken further. Far-right and authoritarian actors dominate the policy spaces that matter. Civil society is excluded from decision-making fora; surveillance intensifies; legal environments tighten. International norms persist as text, but their practical value for the community declines: limited protection, limited implementation, limited recourse.

At the high end, states committed to international law form more effective coalitions. Progressive regulation advances, in places, on platform governance, AI, media freedom, and journalist safety. Multi-stakeholder mechanisms keep working, sometimes expanding. Civil society organisations operate as conveners, translators, and interlocutors between policymakers, funders, and journalism actors.

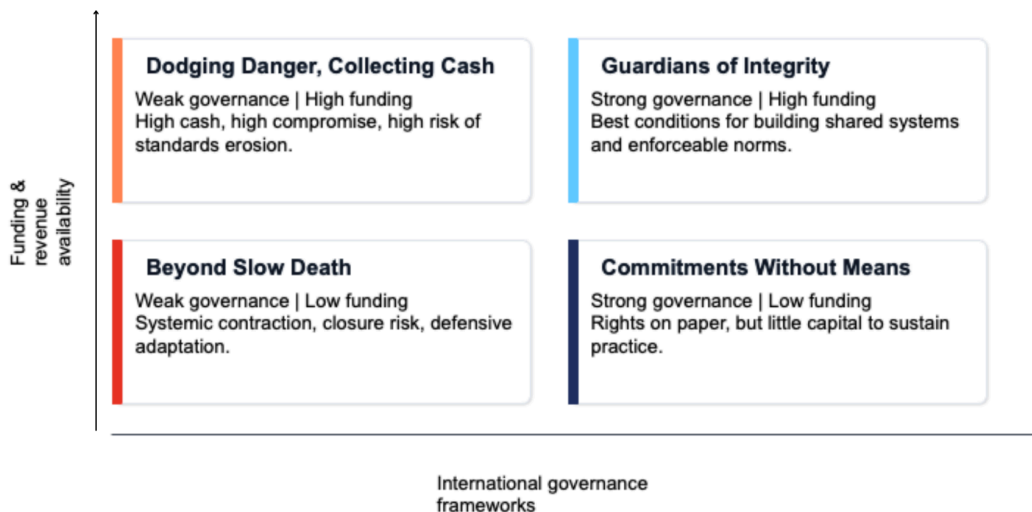
As with funding, governance conditions are unlikely to be uniform. GFMD Steering Committee members emphasised that strong international governance frameworks may coexist with deteriorating national realities, and policy commitments may be adopted without the political will or resources required for enforcement. This “seesaw” dynamic is likely across all scenarios.

As a result, governance can no longer be treated as a stable backdrop, but as a strategic landscape that must be actively navigated across contexts and issues.

1.5. Four scenarios

These two uncertainties, funding and governance, generate four scenarios. They are not forecasts; they are not mutually exclusive descriptions of the future. They are analytical tools for stress-testing GFMD's choices, with the X-axis indicating the direction of international governance frameworks and the Y-axis the availability of funding.

Scenarios used as stress tests - not predictions



Scenario 1: Dodging Danger, Collecting Cash

Weak international governance | High funding availability

By 2030, authoritarian governance will have normalised across much of the world; democratic backsliding has accelerated even in formerly stable democracies. Multilateral institutions persist, mostly symbolically. Civic space contracts; open advocacy becomes risky in many contexts. Paradoxically, money flows freely into the media but largely from sources seeking influence rather than independence. State-linked funding from China, Russia, and the Gulf expands strategically. Ideologically driven technology billionaires open parallel channels aligned with their politics. Commercial revenue grows for sensational and polarising content. Philanthropic giving is overstretched and under-credible.

Public-interest journalism in this scenario faces existential choices. Some organisations accept higher risk funding while attempting to firewall their editorial work; others refuse and operate at minimal scale. The sector fragments along funding choices. Competition for the limited remaining ethical funding strains collaboration; the risk of a sector-wide race to the bottom on standards rises. Policy advocacy becomes dangerous in many contexts, shifting activity towards informal diplomacy and regional coordination.

What this means for GFMD. GFMD's network enables solidarity and sense making, but also introduces security risks. Its convening role remains valuable, but must adapt to low visibility, security conscious modes. Public advocacy recedes in favour of coordination, translation, and resilience. Credibility and neutrality become central assets. The role shifts towards enabling shared approaches to risk assessment, commercial incentive analysis, transparency norms, and secure coordination, helping the sector navigate a high-cash, high-risk environment without a collapse in standards.

Scenario 2: Guardians of Integrity

Strong international governance | High funding availability

By 2030, democratic states form effective coalitions that resist authoritarian pressure and stabilise key elements of the international governance framework. Progressive regulation advances on platform governance, AI, media freedom, and journalist safety in many middle-income countries. International institutions move from symbolism into limited but real operational capacity. Funding for media and journalism support expands. Traditional ODA stabilises; new philanthropic actors enter; technology sector funding grows. The abundance comes with persistent ethical complexity, because much of the new money originates with actors whose business models depend on attention economics, data extraction, or market dominance. Even where governance strengthens, local conditions in repressive contexts may deteriorate the seesaw stays.

Public-interest journalism operates more openly in democratic contexts, and policy engagement becomes safer and more effective. Funding access expands, but requires sophisticated due diligence and legal capacity. Outlet numbers stagnate even as consolidation slows, increasing pressure for collaboration and coalition building. Regulation increasingly addresses journalism's position within AI and platform ecosystems, including intellectual property (IP), data access, and content use. The sector shifts, in this scenario, from crisis response towards longer-term capacity building and system design.

What this means for GFMD. This is the scenario closest to GFMD's comparative advantage, its consultative status, its long running relationships with donor and multilateral institutions, and its standard setting work. Strong governance frameworks increase demand for coordination, translation, and standard-setting rather than ad hoc advocacy. The role centres on reducing dependency on Big Tech: convening alliances around shared infrastructure and safeguards; translating regulatory and policy developments into actionable guidance for diverse members; representing collective positions in high-leverage policy spaces; and connecting media organisations, publishers, funders, and policymakers around enforceable norms, including protections for journalism IP within AI systems. Influence grows not by expanding programmes, but by acting as the connector between funding, infrastructure, and governance.

Scenario 3: Beyond Slow Death

Weak international governance | Low funding availability

By 2030, the journalism and media support ecosystem has entered systemic contraction. International frameworks weaken further; far-right and authoritarian policies dominate regulatory environments; progressive regulation survives only in pockets. Funding collapses across most regions. Philanthropy cannot meet demand amid overlapping global crises. Remaining resources are increasingly captured by large ventures and politically aligned actors, often serving ideological or strategic information objectives rather than independent journalism.

Independent journalism, in this scenario, faces existential pressure. Many outlets close. Others survive with skeleton staff and severely reduced reach. Media deserts expand, particularly in underserved and marginalised communities. Talent leaves the sector; audiences disengage; the

polarisation of the information environment accelerates both trends. Mainstream media in country after country becomes compromised by capture, sponsorship, or elite alignment. Public access to reliable information deteriorates. At the margins, pockets of innovation persist. Outlets disaggregate journalism into combinations of investigative reporting, civic information services, local data products, and crisis-focused formats to remain relevant and survive, but these models are fragile and context-dependent. Traditional support models prove financially unsustainable; competition for vanishing resources erodes trust and collaboration; collective bargaining power weakens precisely when coordinated engagement with platforms and AI actors matters most. Advocacy narrows to defensive intervention, crisis navigation, and harm reduction.

What this means for GFMD. This scenario poses an existential challenge. The current operating model becomes unsustainable without a stable funding base and clear focus. GFMD pivots decisively or risks irrelevance. Value shifts from broad convening towards crisis navigation, consolidation support, and selective coordination: facilitating mergers and strategic partnerships among members; prioritising national and regional engagement over global processes; working across sectors such as development, environment, security, telecommunications where information integrity is recognised as foundational. The role becomes one of helping the sector adapt to contraction: identifying where journalism functions can be reconfigured into civic information provision, supporting engagement with non-traditional funders, translating emerging risks for donors and partners. Strategic discipline is paramount. Activities are scaled back ruthlessly, and effort concentrates where collective action still delivers value.

Scenario 4: Commitments Without Means

Strong international governance | Low funding availability

By 2030, democratic governance frameworks remain formally in place. Progressive regulation continues to advance on media freedom, platform governance, and information integrity. Multilateral cooperation persists despite political and economic strain. Public commitments to press freedom and pluralism continue to be made. At the same time, funding for media and journalism support collapses. Economic crises, political pressure, and strategic reorientation by donors sharply reduce traditional ODA for media. Philanthropic funding fails to compensate. The private sector shows limited interest in supporting public-interest journalism. A widening gap emerges between policy ambition and financial reality: governments articulate strong normative commitments while withdrawing the resources required to realise them.

Media organisations operate in legally permissive environments but face financial extinction. Rights exist on paper; the capacity to exercise them erodes. Some outlets are captured by political or commercial interests; others close. Surviving organisations pursue radical self-sustainability strategies like audience revenue, cooperative ownership, hybrid commercial-mission models, partnerships with aligned commercial actors. Journalistic labour atomises: journalists become individual creators, freelancers, hybrid workers across civic information, content creation, and advocacy. These models work unevenly: outlets serving affluent or urban audiences are more likely to survive on memberships and subscriptions; organisations serving marginalised communities or operating in fragile markets struggle

disproportionately. Quality journalism becomes a luxury good. Information inequality deepens as audiences shift towards AI-driven platforms, creators, and informal digital sources.

What this means for GFMD. GFMD's role shifts decisively. With limited funding to broker and reduced advocacy impact, GFMD becomes primarily an ecosystem mapper convening, learning, and coordinating a network focused on adaptation rather than growth. Effort concentrates on facilitating peer exchange around sustainability models and hard transition choices; connecting members with alternative revenue opportunities and mission-aligned commercial partners; building bridges to adjacent sectors, namely creative communities, academia, smaller technology actors, telecommunications providers, distribution platforms; supporting members through consolidation, mission redefinition, or orderly closure; and documenting and translating lessons from organisations that successfully adapt. Membership boundaries evolve to reflect changing realities, with greater inclusion of individual practitioners and hybrid actors alongside organisations. Value lies less in policy influence than in practical coordination, sense-making, and problem-solving. This is a future where rights exist, but resources do not.

GFMD Steering Committee members observed that the sector already operates, in parallel, in "Beyond Slow Death" and "Commitments Without Means".

1.6. What holds across all futures

The four scenarios differ sharply in governance and funding conditions. They converge around three structural pressures that hold whatever else happens, and that together describe the operating reality GFMD and its members are now in.

Threats to independence intensify in every scenario

Political influence, ideological agendas, and captured information ecosystems expand in both high-funding and low-funding environments. Funding sources become more ethically complex. Independence cannot be assumed to flow from good intentions or favourable policy frameworks. Stronger internal firewalls, shared safeguards, and sector-wide standards become essential, and without them, editorial autonomy erodes gradually, and public trust erodes with it.

Sustainability crises persist, even where money is available

In higher-funding futures, resources are volatile, conditional, or misaligned with public-interest values. In lower-funding futures, collapse is widespread. In neither case does grant funding alone sustain the field. Media and support organisations are pushed to diversify through civic-tech and information products, creative and commercial partnerships, audience revenue, and local sponsorship. New formats, AI-supported products, and hybrid information services, and adjacent services become central to survival; not as innovation for its own sake, but as a response to structural market failure.

Fragmentation and declining societal impact continue, unless actively countered

Journalism risks becoming niche, elite-oriented, or marginal as information ecosystems are reshaped by platforms, creators, and non-traditional actors. Without coordination, the sector fragments, weakens its bargaining power, and accelerates a race to the bottom on standards. Local and regional information systems remain critical, particularly in crisis contexts, but cannot sustain themselves without shared infrastructure and connective mechanisms.

Taken together, these pressures redefine what media and journalism support means. The challenge is no longer to support individual newsrooms or projects, but to sustain the public-interest information ecosystem under conditions of political pressure, economic instability, and technological disruption. That requires moving beyond narrow conceptions of journalism support, towards cross-sector collaboration, shared infrastructure, funding and revenue collectives, and collective norm-setting.

Across all futures, the binding constraint is not the absence of activity or goodwill. It is the absence of coordination, leverage, and durable systems. This is the space in which GFMD's strategic role is clearest: not as a programme implementer or funder substitute, but as ecosystem connector aligning actors, reducing fragmentation, enabling collective responses that remain viable as conditions diverge.

The implication for GFMD's positioning is that the strategic challenge is not to choose the right future, but to remain relevant, legitimate, and effective across multiple possible futures and clear about which roles GFMD must always play, which must remain contingent on conditions, and which activities must be scaled back or abandoned, in phased and pre-announced ways, when they no longer serve members.

2. Where is the money?

Across every scenario, one fact is constant: the crisis facing public-interest journalism is not, primarily, a lack of money. It is a structural mismatch between the incentives of existing markets and subsidies and what journalism actually needs in order to survive.

Where the money is and why it still fails journalism



What this means

The constraint is not only the money. It is the absence of standards, marketplaces, commissioning models, and bargaining power that redirects existing pools towards public-interest work.

Strategic answer

GFMD does not invent new funding pools. It helps the field navigate, connect, and reshape the ones that already exist or are on a growing trajectory.

Limited and fragile "dedicated" funding

Directly fungible funding for independent journalism, including ODA, philanthropy, pooled funds, and platform initiatives, remains modest and fragile. Globally, these sources together amount to roughly \$0.7–0.9 billion per year. ODA for journalism continues to decline and fragment under shifting donor priorities and political pressure. Philanthropic funding is heavily concentrated in a small number of actors and geographies, particularly the United States, with limited capacity to grow at scale. Pooled funds make important but small and time-bound contributions. None of these streams is, on its own or together, enough to sustain public-interest journalism as a system. They are unstable, conditional, and unevenly distributed.

Structural revenues already inside the media system

Vastly larger pools of money already circulate within the media system. Public service media generate roughly \$45–50 billion annually. Commercial news publishers earn an estimated \$125 billion globally through subscriptions and advertising. Only a small share of these revenues is presently directed at public-interest or investigative reporting, but even marginal reallocations

would transform the funding landscape. Illustratively, directing 3% of combined public-service and publisher revenues towards accountability-grade independent journalism would generate roughly €1.35 billion per year in Europe alone, and around €5 billion globally, an order of magnitude greater than current aid-based funding. This is not a prediction. It is a scale-setting benchmark: it shows where durable financial power already resides.

Across the scenarios, access to these structural resources depends less on new grant programmes than on policy design, commissioning rules, bargaining frameworks, and the shared infrastructure that lets public-interest journalism compete inside existing systems.

The creator economy: scale without structure

Alongside institutional media sits another system financing content production at scale: the creator economy. Platform payouts, brand sponsorships, subscriptions, and tipping mechanisms collectively generate an estimated \$45–50 billion per year globally. This money is not designed for journalism. It is optimised for reach, short engagement, and brand outcomes, and ultimately economy of scale for platforms and as a consequence, it incentivises sensational, polarising, and low-quality content, dynamics visible across several of the scenarios above. But the scale is undeniable. Even a small redirect of creator-economy revenues towards public-interest content would rival or exceed existing journalism aid. The question is not whether the money exists, but whether structures, standards, and coordination mechanisms can channel a portion of it into sustained accountability work rather than short-term individual production.

What this means across the scenarios

In every scenario, journalism suffers when funding remains fragmented, uncoordinated, and without shared standards regardless of whether money is abundant or scarce. Dedicated journalism funding is too small to carry the system alone. Structural media funding and creator-economy revenues are large enough to matter, but mostly misaligned with public-interest outcomes. Without coordination, these systems reward scale, speed, and engagement over local reporting, independence, and depth. With coordination, even modest reallocations could stabilise public-interest journalism at a level no current funding model can achieve.

“The implied binary in our sector that donor money is good, while commercial money is tainted, does not survive scrutiny. Commercial funding can be ethically managed. The right question is whether GFMD can engage with a wider range of funding sources to support the information infrastructure, with the editorial integrity safeguards in place.”

— strategy validation session participant, March 2026

The strategic implication is consistent across all futures. The constraint is no longer money in the abstract, but the absence of connective mechanisms: shared standards, marketplaces,

commissioning models, and the bargaining power that allow existing funding systems to serve public-interest journalism at scale. This is the domain in which GFMD's strategy operates: not by inventing new funding pools, but by helping the sector navigate, connect, and reshape the ones that already exist.

3. What GFMD can and cannot carry forward

3.1. Strengths, weaknesses, and the structural vulnerability beneath them

Reading through the lens of the four scenarios, GFMD's strategic position shows a consistent pattern. Its strengths are systemic, relational, and strategic; its weaknesses are structural, operational, and prioritisation-related. The implication is not that GFMD has to be reinvented. It is what GFMD has to do, deliberately and at scale, what it already does best and stop doing the things that dilute it.

Enduring strengths

Policy and advocacy



EU MEDIA ADVOCACY WORKING GROUP



GFMD-led **EU Media Advocacy Working Group** has been key in the development of the **European Media Freedom Act (EMFA)**. In September 2023, GFMD joined 79 organisations in an **open letter urging MEPs to ban spyware against journalists**.

Over two years, the Group collaborated with partners to influence and refine the legislation—demonstrating the **power of coordinated advocacy in protecting media freedom and transparency across the EU**.

UN ENGAGEMENT & GLOBAL MEDIA ADVOCACY



In 2024, GFMD launched the **UN Policy Group**, enabling **100+ members** to engage with the **UN Summit of the Future, the Pact for the Future, and the Global Digital Compact**. Through coordinated statements—such as the **WSIS+20 position paper and FFD4 advocacy toolkit**—GFMD influenced negotiations and strengthened advocacy for media freedom, access to information, and public-interest journalism.

OECD DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION PRINCIPLES ON EFFECTIVE MEDIA SUPPORT



Adopted in March 2024, they represent a **landmark for media development** by affirming the media's vital role in **democracy, transparency, resilience to disinformation, and freedom of expression**. The Principles were the culmination of **over two years of advocacy led by GFMD and CIMA**, in cooperation with the DAC secretariat and representatives from the UK, Sweden, Switzerland, the US, France, and others.

NATIONAL FUNDS FOR JOURNALISM (NFJs)



GFMD supported and empowered local **National Funds for Journalism (NFJ)** – e.g. Brazil & Colombia -- through a discussion paper demonstrating how NFJs provide independent, long-term support for public-interest media, strengthen accountability and equity, and enable **locally led funding, particularly in the Global South**.

GFMD's core value does not lie in programme delivery or operational scale. It lies in the ability to hold, interpret, and align the system for independent journalism, for the wider civic information ecosystem, and for the institutions whose decisions shape both. GFMD's convening legitimacy across donors, multilateral institutions, policymakers, technology actors, and a highly diverse global membership is exceptional. It is widely trusted as a neutral broker capable of bringing

together actors with different mandates, incentives, and power asymmetries, particularly in fragmented or politically sensitive environments. That legitimacy underpins GFMD's distinctive role as an ecosystem connector: rather than competing with members through implementation, GFMD reduces fragmentation by coordinating, translating, and brokering collective positions and alliances. This positioning remains viable across all four scenarios, including the contractionary and ethically complex ones.

Crisis coordination



CRISIS RESPONSE COORDINATION

GFMD strengthened resource mobilisation, coordination, and advocacy across crisis-affected regions.

Key initiatives included a white paper on long-term financial support for **Ukrainian media**, an open letter urging donors to support journalists in **Palestine**, the formation of the **Sudan Media Forum**, and locally led coordination in **Lebanon** in partnership with the Samir Kassir Foundation. 17 coordination meetings held, engaging **400+ participants worldwide**.



REGIONAL INFORMATION-SHARING MEETINGS

GFMD convened **12 regional meetings**—both in-person and online—uniting members to advance coordination and strategic alignment across the media development sector.

These gatherings directly informed a series of media funding mapping studies in the **Levant, Western Balkans, Asia-Pacific, and Africa**, capturing best practices and regional insights. As a result, **membership expanded and engagement deepened, strengthening GFMD's role as a hub for collaboration and evidence-based action.**



A further enduring strength is the capacity to translate complexity into actionable insight. Across policy, funding, and ecosystem intelligence, GFMD has repeatedly turned diffuse information into shared tools, datasets, frameworks, and reference points that lower the cost of collective action: policy and advocacy toolkits; funding and donor intelligence; standards and processes such as the OECD Principles for Effective Media Support or the UN Global Digital Compact; coordination mechanisms that themselves function as ecosystem connectors. GFMD's long-term relational capital in global governance spaces, namely the UN system, the OECD, EU institutions, the Media Freedom Coalition, the Internet Governance Forum, gives it the ability to translate in both directions: field realities into policy, regulatory and market shifts into actionable guidance for members. And GFMD has demonstrated, in the past two years, growing credibility in convening alliances where no single actor can lead, the Journalism Cloud Alliance is the clearest example, alongside an emerging crisis coordination function. In Ukraine, Sudan, Palestine, Syria, and Lebanon, GFMD has filled a systemic gap between emergency response, coordination, and advocacy. Equally important, it plays a forward-looking stewardship role on behalf of members: holding the long-term, system-level perspective that individual organisations focused on day-to-day survival cannot afford.

GFMD's 2025 impact in numbers



Persistent weaknesses

GFMD's primary risk is not irrelevance. It is strategic diffusion. The agenda has at times been shaped by external expectations, reputational pressures, resource scarcity and crisis-driven demand, diluting focus and making it difficult to consistently calibrate effort against impact. Weak impact follow-through, uneven feedback loops, and underdeveloped narrative coherence have, on occasion, obscured the added value, particularly to donors and newer stakeholders. The core coordination, intelligence, and crisis-response functions remain under-defined and under-funded as services. They are not yet fully costed, systematised, or monetised, which limits visibility into real costs, constrains reinvestment, and increases vulnerability to donor priorities. GFMD also faces structural limits in activating its membership as a strategic asset: variations in capacity, risk exposure, and readiness for collective action are large enough that engagement cannot be uniform, yet differentiated models are not yet fully embedded, which risks over-reliance on a subset of higher-capacity or Global North actors. In high-complexity policy domains such as Big Tech and AI the role clarity is harder than it sounds: when to invest in in-house expertise, when to convene and translate, when to step back. And the system-level ambition sometimes runs ahead of collective readiness.

Opportunities and threats

Opportunities cluster around reframing journalism as a keystone species in the information ecosystem, offering resilience and public value rather than charity; brokering partnerships, shared services, and alliances that reduce fragmentation; unlocking scale through structural media funding and AI, and creator economy reallocation rather than marginal grant growth; and using differentiated, persona-based engagement and stronger member-to-member exchange as a core value.

Threats are largely external: funding contraction and realignment towards security priorities; ethical pressure and mission-drift risk; donor agenda capture; overreach into crowded or hyper

technical policy spaces; and the erosion of global fora into performative rather than decision making arenas. Public-interest journalism, media organisations, and civic information providers are now operating in conditions of political pressure, economic contraction, and technological disruption. The support ecosystem around them is too fragmented to respond with the speed, safety, and collective power that the moment demands.

The structural vulnerability beneath all of this

Underneath many headline crises sits a quieter structural weakness. The public-interest information ecosystem lacks strong connective capacity and shared infrastructure across technology stacks and managed support, pooled funding and revenue mechanisms, common standards, coordination, and collective bargaining power. It depends on privately governed platforms and vendor ecosystems for hosting, distribution, monetisation, identity, safety, and security. And it confronts those dependencies in hundreds of separate, duplicative ways. The result is a deep structural vulnerability:

- Fragility by design: a single policy change, demonetisation decision, or account loss can collapse a trusted information provider overnight.
- A regressive "infrastructure tax": smaller and at-risk organisations pay more, in cost, in risk, and in staff time, for tech stacks, security, capital and market access, legal compliance, and talent.
- Fragmentation without leverage: hundreds of actors separately procure the same services, negotiate the same terms, and respond to the same threats, with little collective bargaining power.
- A democratic dependency: when the civic sphere runs on private infrastructure, public-interest outcomes become contingent rather than guaranteed.

This is not a failure of journalism alone. It is a failure of governance in the public interest. The information layer of democracy has been treated as if it could be outsourced to markets that were never designed to deliver it. Internally, GFMD's principal operational risks stem from sustained capacity stretch within a small Secretariat and from systems development lagging behind strategic ambition.

Taken together, this analysis reinforces the logic of the strategy that follows in Part II: GFMD must protect and formalise what only it can do, exit activities that dilute focus, and invest in the priorities required to remain effective across multiple possible futures.

3.2. Personas: the actors GFMD is representing

Across all scenarios, one strategic reality cuts through. GFMD operates within a highly uneven ecosystem of actors whose needs, incentives, and capacities differ fundamentally. These differences cannot be addressed through a single value proposition, a single engagement model, or a single representation matrix. The persona analysis that follows focuses on organisations rather than individuals, and on structural roles within the public-interest civic

information ecosystem rather than organisational labels, and on what each role requires from collective action, coordination, policy, funding, and shared infrastructure.

Frontline actors

Frontline actors form the largest and most vulnerable part of the ecosystem: local and investigative news organisations, community and independent media, press freedom, media development and safety and legal-defence organisations, gender- and inclusion-focused media initiatives. Across all scenarios, they operate under persistent financial, political, legal, and physical pressure. Their primary focus is maintaining day-to-day operations, protecting journalists, and preserving organisational viability. They provide the ground truth of the sector, the lived realities that determine whether standards, policies, or shared infrastructures actually work.

For GFMD, these actors are central to legitimacy and hardest to serve. They have limited bandwidth for consultations, long processes, or abstract policy debates. High participation thresholds risk structural exclusion. Across scenarios, their needs are consistent: low-burden coordination, practical intelligence, crisis-escalation pathways, and visibility that does not increase risk.

“If GFMD’s resources only work in advanced English, and most convenings happen in European working hours, a large part of the community cannot really participate. Accessibility is a strategic choice, not a logistics problem.”

— strategy validation session participant, March 2026

Strategically, frontline actors rarely initiate new markets or funding models on their own, but they are decisive in determining whether collective approaches gain credibility. If shared infrastructure, safety protocols, funding standards, or coordination mechanisms do not work for these actors, they fail the system test.

System-shaping actors

System-shaping actors are fewer in number but disproportionately influential: regional, global, and thematic networks; digital rights and media policy organisations; media development implementers, journalism and media support intermediaries, and training organisations; media-tech specialists; and hybrid NGOs combining representation, advocacy, and implementation. They operate at the interface between practice, policy, and funding. Implementers and training organisations translate donor priorities into programmes, curricula, and operational models that shape how journalism is supported in practice across regions. Alongside policy specialists and networks, they influence regulatory debates, funding norms, professional standards, and the dominant narratives about what "effective" media support is.

Across scenarios, system-shaping actors seek convening legitimacy, collective positioning, and coordination capacity. They are often first to engage emerging issues, including AI, platform governance, safety frameworks, sustainability models, and frequently serve as interlocutors between local realities and international decision-making.

“Recognise not only small and large actors, but also the mid-size organisations. They need different resources, and the strategy has to address that.”

— strategy validation session participant, March 2026

For GFMD, this group benefits most directly from the broker, translator, and agenda-setter role and creates a structural risk in equal measure. Without deliberate balancing, system-shaping agendas can drift away from frontline realities, reinforcing a two-tier ecosystem in which implementation priorities, training models, and policy positions are set without sufficient grounding in survival-oriented contexts. The challenge is therefore not access to system-shaping actors. It is alignment and keeping their influence anchored in the operational constraints and lived experience of those producing and defending public-interest journalism on the ground.

Funders, policymakers, and ecosystem builders

The third group sits partly within and partly outside GFMD's formal membership: donors and philanthropies, multilateral and regional institutions, policymakers and regulators, public service media, technology providers, and other actors shaping the conditions in which the information ecosystem operates. They control resources and rules rather than producing journalism themselves. Their incentives vary widely from democratic accountability, geopolitical influence, commercial return, to reputational value. Across all scenarios, they are decisive in determining whether funding is ethical, whether markets reward public-interest outcomes, and whether governance frameworks are enforceable.

For GFMD, engagement with this group is less about representation and service provision and more about translation and coordination. Funders and policymakers often lack a granular understanding of how funding, regulation, and technology decisions play out on the ground. Ecosystem builders include smaller tech actors, telecoms, distribution platforms, and often operate adjacent to journalism without structured interfaces to it. GFMD's role is to bridge these gaps: translating field realities into policy and funding design; translating regulatory and market shifts back into actionable guidance; and convening alliances where no single actor can credibly lead.

What this means for strategy

The tension is not between these three groups. It is between their structural positions. Frontline actors confer legitimacy but lack capacity. System-shaping actors drive agendas but risk

detachment. Funders and ecosystem builders control resources but often lack grounding. GFMD's strategic task is to hold these groups in productive alignment by lowering coordination thresholds for frontline actors, anchoring system-shaping work in lived reality, and translating between power and practice.

This requires abandoning one-size-fits-all engagement. Persona led design must replace exclusively region- or activity-led planning, and the distinction between membership, partnership, and leadership roles must be made explicit. GFMD's effectiveness depends not on serving everyone equally, but on connecting these roles deliberately across radically different realities. That is the analytical conclusion. Part II is the strategic one.

Part I ends here. Part II sets out GFMD's mission, theory of change, two priorities, four delivery functions, and the strategic discipline that will guide what GFMD will and will not do over 2026–2030.



Part II

What GFMD will do, 2026–2030

Part I of this strategy makes the case for why the next five years require a different positioning for GFMD. Part II describes the mission and the role we are taking on, the change we are incorporating, the two priorities that organise our work, the four functions through which we deliver, and the discipline we will apply when deciding what GFMD will and will not do.

It is written for the people whose decisions will shape whether the strategy works: our members, the partners who work alongside us, and the funders who back the field. For background or context, please refer to Part I of the document.

1. Mission, Vision, Role

The Global Forum for Media Development (GFMD) is an international network that exists to represent and sustain the global community of organisations that make public-interest & civic information possible. That community is plural. It includes local, community, exile and other small investigative and accountability journalism and media organisations; local and international press freedom and media development NGOs; journalism unions, associations, networks and councils; think tanks and policy makers; donors, funders, and investors in information ecosystem; regional networks; fact-checkers and the small but growing number of digital-rights, information tech and information-integrity actors whose work has become inseparable from the work of journalism. What this community has in common is a single vision: that societies are better off when reliable public-interest and civic information is produced, distributed, and protected by independent institutions rather than left to platforms, propagandists, or the state.

That vision is much harder to reach in 2026 than it was in 2021. The funding environment has declined sharply. Governance norms negotiated over the previous decade, on platform accountability, on freedom of expression, on the rights of journalists, are being unpicked in real time. And artificial intelligence has compressed the production and distribution of information into systems that the public-interest community neither owns nor governs, and often doesn't have access to. None of these forces is going to reverse on its own. The question for the next five years is whether the community organises well enough and fast enough to keep standing.

GFMD's role is to help it do so. We are an ecosystem connector, the place where this community convenes, the standard-setter for how its support is governed, and the bridge to the institutions whose decisions shape its future: donors, regulators, platforms, and multilateral bodies. We do not lead the community, and we do not deliver journalism. We hold its space.

Vision

We envisage a world in which democracy, human rights, and peaceful and just societies benefit from a free, pluralistic, and informed public sphere, underpinned by a free, independent, and viable public-interest and civic information ecosystem.

A world in which the community of public-interest and civic information organisations is recognised, resourced, and connected: not as a residual category of journalism, but as the institutional backbone of how reliable information reaches citizens.

In this future, public-interest and civic information, of which independent journalism and media are key components, is not treated as a luxury good or a niche community project, but is sustained as an essential public good, and supported by ethical funding and investment, an enabling policy environment, and collective action across borders.

Public-interest journalism and media organisations, local newsrooms, public-interest creators and initiatives, policymakers, and journalism supporters and funders are connected through shared standards, interoperable systems, and trusted coordination mechanisms allowing the public-interest information ecosystem to survive and adapt under pressure.

Mission

GFMD represents the global community of public-interest and civic information organisations. We convene, set standards, and bridge so that the community has the shared infrastructure and the collective power to sustain reliable information in every context where it is needed.

Over the next five years, GFMD's mission is to act as the **ecosystem connector**, coordinating, safeguarding, and re-wiring the systems that enable public-interest journalism and civic information to endure under conditions of political pressure, economic contraction, and technological disruption.

”The strategy should clearly show what GFMD pursues for members, not just what GFMD does as an organisation. We serve the community.”

— strategy validation session participant, March 2026

What this mission rules out is as important as what it commits us to. GFMD does not deliver journalism. It does not substitute for the organisations it represents. It does not exist to provide a portfolio of individual services to individual members; the test of any service we run is whether it strengthens the community as a whole. What it does commit us to is representing this community competently and making sure that the institutions whose decisions shape its future know who it is, what it has agreed, and how to act on it.

2. Theory of Change

The change we are betting on, is stated plainly:

If the global community of public-interest and civic information organisations is connected through shared infrastructure, represented by a credible collective voice, and governed by standards it has set together, then it can negotiate funding, regulation, technology, and crisis response on better terms than any of its members can secure alone. That is what allows reliable information to keep reaching citizens in conditions where that is becoming harder, not easier.

The analysis behind it

The scenario analysis, funding and revenue review, SWOT, and persona mapping completed as background analysis for this strategy and presented in Part I of this document all point to the same conclusion: GFMD's strategic challenge is not to predict the future, but to remain effective across multiple possible futures in which money may be misaligned, governance uneven, and fragmentation persistent.

Across all scenarios:

- funding and revenues are volatile, ethically complex, or structurally misaligned;
- medium and long-term survival and sustainability depend more on bargaining power and controlling critical infrastructures and resources than on grants alone;
- policy influence only matters when it connects directly to operational reality;
- frontline actors confer legitimacy but lack capacity;
- system-shaping actors and ecosystem builders hold influence but risk detachment from frontline realities; and
- coordination failures, rather than lack of effort, are the dominant source of inefficiency.

Three assumptions sit underneath the theory of change, and we name them so that the strategy can be tested honestly over the next five years.

First, that representation creates collective power and influence that narrow focus on survival is unable to do. A community that organises around shared infrastructure and a common policy voice has a position from which to negotiate. A community fragmented into perpetually competing organisations and individual grant relationships does not.

Second, that GFMD's standards work matters more than any single project we run. The Code of Practice, our work to develop and then align with the OECD Principles on Effective Media

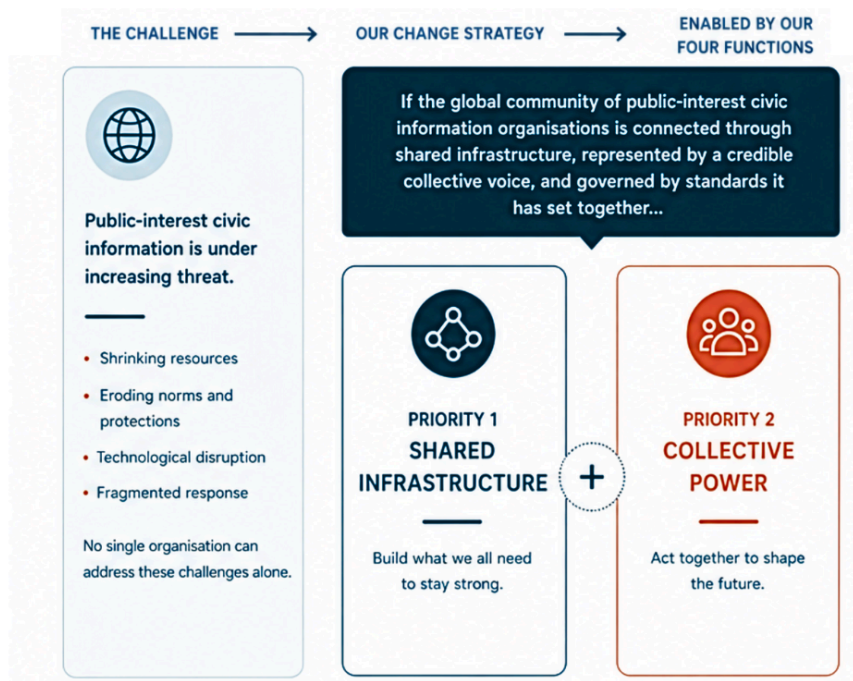
Support, and the standards we hold ourselves and the field to are what give the community something to organise around. If the standards weaken, so does the community.

Third, that the field is wider than the membership we have today, and that the strategy has to reach beyond it. Public-interest and civic information is increasingly produced and shaped by actors who are not, and may never be, members of GFMD. Representing the community well means representing more than ourselves.

Our theory of change



How GFMD strengthens the global community so reliable civic information can endure - even in increasingly difficult conditions.



3. Priority 1: Shared Infrastructures

The first priority is to facilitate building, and improve the shared infrastructure that the public-interest and civic information community depends on but cannot build alone. Infrastructure here means the practical systems for funding intelligence, knowledge sharing, technology access, and crisis response that any single organisation in this field finds too expensive to build for itself but that no one else will build for it.

This is a deliberate move beyond project-based delivery. A project ends. Infrastructure persists. Where GFMD has historically run time-bound and resource-constrained interventions, the strategy commits us to facilitating, incubating, and continually improving a smaller number of durable systems and to making sure they are visible, accessible, and used.

What this looks like in practice:

Spot and connect parallel efforts, then help them converge or cooperate – GFMD has already done this with cloud and infrastructure conversations alongside OCCRP and through facilitating the Journalism Cloud Alliance (JCA): taking something that could have stayed as disconnected technical initiatives and turning it into a shared, field-facing effort with a governance logic and a wider coalition.

Provide the essential support that makes shared infrastructures real – Alliances fail without coordination, rules, and trusted facilitation. GFMD provides the convening backbone: the meeting architecture, common documentation, decision processes, and neutral stewardship that allow diverse actors to co-own something without it becoming a turf war. Over the past years, we've done this repeatedly.

Over 2026-2030, GFMD will apply the same enabling role to other gaps where fragmentation drives costs and risk, such as:

- **Funding intelligence and resilience.** Tools, datasets, and analysis that help members read the funding environment, diversify income, and reduce exposure to single-source dependence. The Fundraising Guide and the funding intelligence work continue and expand here, with explicit attention to the funders that smaller and survival-context members find hardest to reach: digital security, climate, gender, and AI-adjacent funders.
- **Knowledge and coordination infrastructure.** Working groups, member exchanges, communities of practice, and the curated knowledge systems that consolidate what is otherwise scattered across newsletters and ad hoc groups. The fragmentation of outputs that members flagged in consultation is treated here as a design problem, not a communications problem.
- **Operational shared back-ends.** Practical shared services that smaller and higher-risk actors can access safely. This gives smaller and mid-size organisations access to services and tooling that they could not negotiate individually.

“The funding database already helps, especially for digital-security funders. What we need now is intelligence that lets us build funding resilience and geographically diversify income.”

— strategy validation session participant, March 2026

How we will know this priority is working

Two signals, used together. First, uptake: the share of members and partner organisations actually using the shared infrastructure, with particular attention to small and survival-context members. Second, resilience: the extent to which members report that the infrastructure has helped them whether a funding shock, a security incident, or a technology disruption. We do not measure infrastructure by what we have built; we measure it by what holds up under pressure.

4. Priority 2: Collective Power

The second priority is to build and use the community's collective power: in policy, in funding, in standards, and in the institutional spaces where decisions about public-interest and civic information are made. Where Priority 1 is about what the community shares, Priority 2 is about what the community can move.

This is not advocacy for its own sake. It is the practical insight, repeated by senior figures across our consultations, that survival-level grants do not change the conditions in which independent media operate; collective action does. A community that turns up in Addis Ababa, = Geneva, Kuala Lumpur, or New York, and in the funders' coordination meetings with one well-prepared position is treated differently from a hundred organisations turning up with a hundred. Collective power is the mechanism by which the field is taken seriously.

“Survival does not bring grants. Leverage does”.

— strategy validation session participant, March 2026

What this priority covers

What this looks like in practice:

- **Translate where power and money sit so that the community can act on evidence rather than assumption.** GFMD's funding mapping and briefings have already sharpened how both members and funders understand the landscape. This strategy takes that further, shifting from “what grants exist” to “what revenue sustains public-interest and civic information, and where the gaps lie”. It spans public-interest journalism and media, publisher economics, platform rules, and creator and brand markets, while identifying the coordinated actions needed to realign incentives towards public-interest outcomes.
- **Pick high stake processes with influence potential and organise collective engagement around them** – GFMD has a track record of bringing actors together around shared positions and coordination moments. We brought the community together to advocate for shared positions around major international and regional digital frameworks and regulations. We were the leader of the field in engaging in key UN processes, from the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through to more recent tracks including the Global Digital Compact, the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development (FfD4), and the World Summit

on the Information Society (WSIS). Going forward, it will structure fewer, higher-leverage engagements where policy influence links directly to operational pathways.

- **Strengthen member-led coalitions rather than substituting for them** – GFMD’s comparative advantage is not “negotiating on behalf of everyone”; it is enabling members to do so with more power. That means supporting coalitions with shared analysis, common reference materials, and coordination, in the same way GFMD has reinforced member-led processes in its advocacy and field coordination work.
- **Make sure smaller and higher-risk actors can participate without being excluded by compliance or scale** – A practical feature of GFMD’s collective power work is the standards-based participation: clear minimum standards, safer pathways, and shared support so local and high-risk organisations can join collective initiatives without compromising independence. National-level advocacy is amplified, not duplicated, through working with members already active in their own jurisdictions.

How we will know this priority is working

Three signals. First, position: whether GFMD-coordinated positions are visibly reflected in the policy texts, donor strategies, and platform decisions that affect the field. Second, presence: whether the community is present in the rooms where its future is decided and whether the community includes frontline actors, and non-traditional voices, not only its largest members. Third, accountability: whether the standards we ask of donors and platforms are standards we are visibly meeting ourselves.

5. The Four Delivery Functions

GFMD does not have a separate apparatus for each priority. The same four functions deliver both, and the strategic choice in this period is to use these functions more deliberately, to drop the activities that do not fit them, and to make the functions visible enough that members know what to expect from us.

Convene and connect

We bring the community together. We meet in person, online, and in the durable working groups and exchanges that sit between events. This is the function through which the community recognises itself as one. Over the strategy period, convening is rebalanced: fewer one-off events, more structured groups, more peer-based collaboration grouped by context (frontline, system-shaping, regional), and clearer participation pathways for members who do not currently have the bandwidth to take part in everything. GFMD will organise participation around roles and capacities: who can co-lead alliances, who can host pilots, who can validate standards, and who needs safe on-ramps. The goal is practical activation, not membership growth for its own sake.

Shape the rules

We translate the community's positions into policy advocacy and standard-setting at the levels where decisions are made: European, multilateral, national-when-asked. This is the function that turns a community into a constituency. Members across the consultation made advocacy their highest-priority continuation: it stays at the centre of what GFMD is for. GFMD will focus on fewer, higher-impact policy domains that materially affect sustainability (e.g., platform governance, artificial intelligence, public-value frameworks, etc.), translating complexity into usable guidance for different members, and translating field reality into credible, evidence-based positions.

Build and share infrastructure

We run the funding intelligence, knowledge, technology, and crisis infrastructure described in Priority 1 and we make it accessible. Accessibility is treated as a deliverable: the infrastructure has to work in more languages than English, in more time zones than European working hours, and on bandwidth and device profiles that frontline and survival-context members actually have.

Represent and respond

We speak for the community when it has agreed on something to say, and we coordinate a response when the community has agreed on something to do. Both halves matter: representation without coordinated response is rhetorical; response without representation is project work. GFMD will treat recurring crises, ethical dilemmas, and safety risks as system inputs: distilling lessons, aligning approaches, and feeding them into design, engagement, and policy work (rather than running them as disconnected activities).

6. Strategic Discipline

A strategy is as much about what an organisation will not do as about what it will. The validation conversations were direct on this point: GFMD does too many things, communicates them through too many channels, and finds it hard to step back from spaces where its influence has flattened out.

What GFMD does

We do the work that has to be done at the community level and that no individual member can do alone: shared infrastructure, collective representation, standard-setting, and crisis coordination. We do this work to a published standard, the Code of Practice, and we hold ourselves to it visibly.

What GFMD enables

We enable members and partners to do the work they are best placed to do. Where a member already leads on a topic, on a region, or in a coalition, GFMD's role is to back them, connect them to others who can amplify the work, and feed it into the community's collective positions. Enabling is not a soft function; it is a decision to invest in others' capacity rather than reproduce it inside our own structures.

What GFMD steps back from

We step back from project-by-project delivery that carries the risk of competing with our members. We step back, in phased and pre-announced ways, from coordinating spaces that have matured to the point where another structure can carry them better. We step back from arenas where investment of time and political capital is high but where influence is low. The criteria for stepping back are made explicit, decisions are taken transparently, and the learning is carried forward into other parts of the work.

Membership and the Code in this strategy period

The membership model and the Code of Practice will continue to evolve through this strategy period, governed by the Steering Committee and the General Assembly. The strategy does not settle that evolution, that is the work for governance, but it commits to one principle: changes to

membership and to the Code are made in service of the community's representativeness and credibility, not in service of administrative convenience or donor preference.

Organisational discipline and resilience

GFMD will formalise its core services, improve cost visibility, and invest in coordination and intelligence systems. The Secretariat will protect its ability to say no, including stepping back from low-impact fora, donor-driven conversations without relevance to membership, and advocacy that is not connected to real pathways. This is not retrenchment. It is the condition for executing the strategy above.

7. 2026 / 2027 Workplan

Intelligence & Member Platform

One platform, two editorial voices. The Intelligence & Member Platform brings revenue intelligence and policy intelligence together. One access, one team, one pipeline, serving public interest media organisations, newsrooms, practitioners, funders, and ecosystem partners worldwide.

Intelligence is structured and scored. All content flows through a systematic assessment process: policy developments are evaluated across key dimensions including accountability, access, and plurality; funding and revenue opportunities are assessed for relevance, strategic fit, and urgency. This ensures that members receive prioritised, actionable intelligence.

Five Priority Areas	Platform Products
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Digital Public (Interest) Infrastructure 2. Funding, Revenue & Sustainability 3. AI & Digital Policies & Governance 4. Emergency & Crisis Response 5. Shared Services & Infrastructures <p><i>GFMD Regional Member Meetings will be organised in line with these five priority areas, bringing together members to advance shared agendas and strengthen collective action.</i></p>	<p>Public — free Intelligence newsletters and sector report summaries, open to all.</p> <p>Members & subscribers Monthly policy and intelligence brief, full sector reports, funder intelligence profiles, and working group access.</p> <p>Commissioned Strategic intelligence reports, funder briefings, flagship annual report, and roundtables — delivered on request</p>

Year 1 Delivery Phases

Foundation (Jun 2026)	Roles confirmed, platform architecture established, intelligence frameworks tested, editorial portfolio defined.
Pilot (Jul–Sep 2026)	First outputs published. Intelligence scans running. Pilot newsletters live. User onboarding mapped.

Deployment (Sep–Nov 2026)	Full publishing cadence established. Member-only content live. Working Group sessions begin. First commissioned report delivered.
Revenue & Refinement (Jan–May 2027)	All commercial pathways live. Product analytics reviewed. Member retention and automation refined.
Consolidation (Mid-2027)	Phase 1 review and Year 2 roadmap prepared. , including dedicated intelligence hire and annual report publication.