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COMPILATION OF BRIEFING PAPERS ON THE MEDIA SECTOR DEVELOPMENT IN ETHIOPIA

INTERNATIONAL MEDIA SUPPORT AND PROTECTING INDEPENDENT
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PRIMED
PROTECTING INDEPENDENT MEDIA
FOR EFFECTIVE DEVELOPMENT



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This set of Briefing Papers analyses the state of media, media space and coalitions in Ethiopia. The briefing papers presented in this edition discuss the findings of various studies regarding the media regulatory reform agenda, the safety of journalists, media coalition-building efforts, and the role of conflict-sensitive journalism in Ethiopia. It also reflects on major learnings about coalitions in sub-Saharan Africa. As this compilation of Briefing Papers provides insights into the PRIMED programme approach to media development, it identifies areas of improvement and encourages an evidenced approach to future media development interventions in Ethiopia.

The primary target audience for this set of briefing papers is the media sector stakeholders who are particularly interested in supporting media development efforts in Ethiopia.

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THE MEDIA SECTOR DEVELOPMENT IN ETHIOPIA**

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Reflections on Lessons Learned and Future Media Development Intervention Priorities in Ethiopia

By David Lush and Elsabet Samuel Tadesse, Ph.D.

This set of briefing papers is a testament that while national political, economic, and social dynamics and capacities differ in countries, lessons learned from evidence-based media development interventions can offer valuable insights into what has been achieved and must be done to support an enabling environment for free and independent media in Ethiopia.

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The achievements made so far in supporting coalition-building efforts to advance the safety of journalists, conflict-sensitive journalism, and active engagement of stakeholders in the ongoing media reform process present a window of opportunities to guide robust partnerships between local and international media actors to future media development interventions.

As media sector actors continue to take centre stage in the media reform process, the focus should be on developing and sustaining collaborative work between local actors and international partners in order to achieve their shared objectives of protecting freedom of expression and media independence. The learnings documented in this compilation of briefing papers highlighted that there is still much work to do to ensure that policy advocacy and influence are understood and actively implemented in the media sector.

The critical role media and journalism associations play in the ongoing media reform process should also be enhanced by a strategic approach to strengthening their institutional capacity to help them be visible and trusted actors in protecting the media space. Advancing the safety and security of journalists should be one of the key goals of journalists' associations through the coalitions they have formed.

The success achieved in encouraging collaborative action between rights-based civil society organisations and journalists' associations to advance the safety of journalists in Ethiopia can be replicated in other media policy advocacy initiatives. One of the primary issues that require coalition efforts is promoting freedom of assembly and association, aiming to ensure the establishment and sustainability of journalists' associations in all regional states.

Community radios in Ethiopia play a vital role in conflict prevention, reduction, and reconciliation. However, the safety and security of community radio journalists, volunteers, and radio stations that different groups have frequently attacked require collaborative advocacy and coordinated media development support.

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The learnings documented in this edition show that international media development organisations must aim to improve their programme design and support, considering internal and external factors that influence the media ecosystem in Ethiopia.

They need to develop a continuous and constructive dialogue with local media actors in order to understand their interests and capacities. This will help design effective technical and financial support to local partners that may lead to a lasting impact. Most importantly, tracking and documenting evidenced learning and integrating lessons learnt into future interventions is vital for meaningful collaboration and support.

The lessons related to the themes presented in this publication showcase the achievements and key improvement areas where local media actors and international partners must focus their efforts. The way forward to respond to identified challenges and reshape future media development interventions requires commitment from local and international media actors. Therefore, local media actors must focus on the following:

- **Develop a culture of defending human rights and democracy.** Being a human rights defender is one of the mechanisms that help to mobilise grassroots support, acceptance in a broader collaboration, and transnational cooperation with like-minded partners who protect freedom of expression and media independence.
- **Promote active participation and collaboration within coalitions and strategic alliances with key actors in the sector,** including government organisations, to encourage local ownership over intervention and the effectiveness of policy advocacy. Incorporating the issue of minorities, women, and community radio journalists' needs and interests into project designs to ensure media independence and rights issues are embedded and inspire sector actors' cooperation.

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- **Collaborate with civil society organisations from the onset** in freedom of expression and media independence advocacy initiatives. The lessons documented in this edition show that cooperation with civil society organisations enables effective and sustainable coalitions that promote media reform and the safety of journalists.
- **Diversify sources of funding.** Local media actors need to consider raising funds domestically from public and private entities as well as individuals through various fundraising schemes, along with diversifying international donors. For media and journalists' associations, collecting membership fees should be a priority.

Improving the state of media and helping improve the space for freedom of expression takes time and resources, but what matters is the commitment of all media stakeholders to make it happen. It is high time to collaborate and gain momentum to achieve the goal – an enabling environment for free and independent media. Therefore, the international media partners must focus on the following:

- **Engage early and maintain support and momentum of media development interventions.** This can be done by designing a comprehensive and continuous intervention involving local stakeholders and considering the political dynamics during programme planning and implementation.
- **Ensure the sustainability and scalability of successful media development projects.** This can be achieved by strengthening the institutional capacity of local partners by providing need-based technical support and financial resources.
- **Active and inclusive engagement with local media actors,** including community radio, online media, and regional journalists' associations, facilitates sector-wide engagement as an integral part of media development interventions.

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- **A strong and viable national multi-stakeholder forum in coordination with local and international actors** is crucial in ensuring that existing media development initiatives are supported and monitored and that learnings are documented at the national level. This can be achieved by strengthening the Ethiopian Media Sector Alliance to prioritise the needs of Ethiopian media, coordinate interventions based on the needs and interests of local media actors, and encourage international media organisations to provide support based on their expertise and objectives.

The State of Media Regulatory Reform in Ethiopia

By Abdissa Zerai, Ph.D.



Validation Workshop: The State of Media Reform In Ethiopia 29 March 2023 Jupiter Intranational Hotel



Background

Soon after it took control of power in April 2018, the new government of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed committed itself to taking serious steps toward reform endeavours. One of these steps was liberalising the political and communicative spaces. Especially in its liberalisation of the communicative space, the new government passed decisions to unblock hundreds of news websites, blogs, portals, satellite TV, and radio channels that its predecessor had jammed. It allowed diaspora-based political dissidents and opposition parties, including those who had been running media outlets, to return home and legally operate in the country.

What is more, the new government initiated serious sectoral reform endeavours in a wide range of areas, including the media sector. The media sector reform initiative that involved the participation of relevant stakeholders was then launched to discuss Ethiopia's media policy and the legal and regulatory landscape that informed the reform process.

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Abdisa Zerai, Ph.D.

After two years of hard work, the “Media Reform Working Group” was entrusted with the responsibility of revising the media law as well as proclamations that directly affect the media sector, such as the Access to Information Proclamation and the Computer Crime Act, delivered a liberal media law.¹ The new media law liberalised the media ownership roles, registration, and licensing requirements as it strikes a balance between media independence on the one hand and their obligations on the other hand. Among the achievements of the new media law are the recognition of online media and the decriminalisation of defamation. The law recognised the media's self-regulatory mechanisms in promoting journalism professionalism and ethics. It also established the Ethiopian Media Authority as an independent media regulatory body accountable to the House of Peoples’ Representatives.

As commendable as the progresses noted above were, there was high hope that the provisions of the media proclamation would soon hit the ground and thereby contribute to the improvement of the media sector. This being the case, the rapid assessment conducted to understand the state of media regulatory reform in Ethiopia highlighted a mismatch between stakeholders’ expectations and what is on the ground regarding the substantial progress made and major challenges that stifle the media reform agenda.

The rapid assessment commissioned by the International Media Support (IMS) examined the media regulatory reform process, its achievements, challenges, and measures different actors have taken to overcome the challenges. The assessment further discussed the role of the media and civil society organisations in advancing the media regulatory reform endeavours and what is needed to strengthen media civil society organisations’ networks and coalitions in promoting the media reform process. Thus, this briefing paper relies on the findings of the rapid assessment to discuss how the reform endeavour is faring, followed by ways forward in designing appropriate intervention mechanisms to make the reform a success story.

Overview of Assessment Methodology and Approach

A qualitative approach was pursued to examine and understand the media law reform process and its achievements so far. Under this approach, key person interview was used as the principal data collection tool, followed by document analysis.

As a secondary data source, pertinent documents, such as Media Proclamation no. 1238/2021 and Diagnostic Report produced by the Media Reform Working Group, were carefully examined. Moreover, relevant literature, scholarly works, and reports on the subject were also reviewed and used to support data collected through primary sources.

The interviews were conducted with fifteen informants purposively selected from civil society organisations, media CSOs, media associations, media regulatory bodies, the Ministry of Justice, and academia. The interviews were carried out from the 16th of February 2023 to the 1st of March, 2023, via telephone, face-to-face, and email. The collected data was transcribed, translated, and thematically organised for analysis and interpretation to gain insights into the media regulatory reform process.

Key Findings

Major Achievements of the Media Reform Process

The study on which this briefing paper bases itself looked at the significant achievements of the regulatory reform endeavour at the level of process and the level of outcome.

At the process level, the following were identified as the main achievements of the media reform endeavour:

- The formation of an independent expert group to handle the media reform task,

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- The commissioning of a diagnostic study to identify major gaps in the previous media proclamation,
- The participatory nature of the media law reform process, and
- The reform process created an opportunity for gaining valuable knowledge and experience from other countries, i.e., South Africa, Kenya, and Ghana.

At the level of output, the study identified the following as the key achievements of the media reform:

- The amendment and approval of the media law that meets international human rights standards and the democratic principles of media regulation,
- The decoupling of the media law and access to information law,
- Decriminalization of defamation and the prohibition of pre-trial detentions,
- The restructuring of the Ethiopian media regulatory body to ensure its independence,
- The empowering of the media sector to undertake the task of media self-regulation,
- The broadening of media ownership rights to ensure media plurality and content diversity,
- Easing the registration process for engaging in the media sector.

Challenges the Media Reform has Encountered

Despite the fact that the media reform endeavour has recorded commendable achievements both at the process and at the outcome level, there appears to be a growing disconnect between the initial expectations and what has transpired on the ground over the last couple of years. In this regard, except for the Ethiopian Media Authority, the interviewees invariably believe that the media reform agenda backslides on advances made since 2018. The study identified key factors that have posed serious challenges to the reform endeavour and contributed to its dismal state of affairs, which includes a lack of commitment to institutionalising the reform. The assessment analysis shows that there is convergence of interviewees' views with respect to the lack of commitment on the part of the government to the reform process.

The government's lack of commitment to the implementation of the revised law has manifested itself in the arbitrary detention of journalists and the appointments of board members affiliated with the ruling party for the media regulatory body and the publicly funded media organisations in violation of the media law.

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The lack of interest in finalising and passing draft laws, such as access to information and computer crime proclamations, hindered the regulatory reform process.

Other key challenges the media reform endeavour has encountered include media capture by state and non-state actors, weak professionalism in the media sector, role confusion of journalists (i.e., professionalism vs. activism), the proliferation of misinformation, disinformation and hate speech. The assessment findings further indicated that the regulatory organ's misgivings about the new media law emanating from its perceived sense of being disempowered by the provisions of the revised media law hampered the regulatory reform.

Attempts Made to Overcome the Challenges of Media Reform

As a result of a collaborative effort between the state and civil society organisations to protect media independence, Ethiopia adopted a liberal media law that acknowledges the importance of media self-regulatory mechanisms in upholding freedom of expression. Despite its successful adoption, further challenges now lie ahead in terms of implementation. As the media law does not fully guarantee the right to access information and the right to privacy, getting supporting proclamations that are under revision finalized is a long overdue matter. Institutional mechanisms for media regulation need budgets and clear policies in place to operate in accordance with the law. This requires careful intervention from all media stakeholders, including the government, to overcome the challenges encountered. This briefing paper identified efforts exerted to address the challenges from the side of the government versus from the side of the broader civil society.

Efforts exerted by the government to address media reform challenges

Concerning the government's effort so far to address the challenges the media reform has encountered, the study revealed that there is what is known as the Reform Implementation Follow-up Team formally set up by the Ministry of Justice. One of the sub-teams was meant to closely follow up on the progress of the implementation of the revised media law. In practice, however, the sub-team has not done anything in that regard. Assessment interviewees asserted that the government does not appear to have an interest in seeing the media reform through. In fact, they argued that the government has lately become part of the problem in its penchant to take control of the communicative space.

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Efforts exerted by civil society to address media reform challenges

The findings of the rapid assessment show that the efforts made by civil society in general and media CSOs in particular towards addressing the challenges the media reform has encountered were far from adequate. Even though there were efforts made here and there, these efforts needed to be more cohesive and coordinated. The lack of concerted and organised efforts is attributable to the weak collaboration and networking among media CSOs as well as among media associations. Particularly, the poor partnership and the absence of mapping of activities among the media CSOs have resulted in unnecessary duplication of efforts and inefficient utilisation of scarce resources. It could, thus, be said that the role of CSOs in general and media CSOs in particular in advancing collective positions during the reform process as well as in attempting to address the challenges the reform has encountered, leaves us much to be desired.

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Conclusion

This briefing paper highlights that in spite of the fact that the media regulatory reform has resulted in the passing of a media law that meets international standards, it has also faced serious institutionalisation challenges. The government, which enthusiastically embarked on the media reform in the earlier stages of its tenure, now appears to have lost the appetite to see the media reform through. Owing to the civil war in the northern part and the inter-ethnic conflicts that have sprung up in different parts of the country, coupled with the polarised political and digital environment, seem to have increased the real or perceived sense of vulnerability of the incumbent with respect to the control of narratives, and, hence, its increased temptation to retreat to its default mode.

The media sector also suffers from a lack of professionalism, and as a result, its role in shaping the media reform leaves much to be desired. What is more, the CSOs in general and the Media CSOs in particular lack coordination and synergy among themselves in order to be able to exert meaningful pressure to keep the reform in the spotlight. Overall, it could be argued that there has been a progressive narrowing of the media space over the last couple of years if the baseline for our comparison is the early stages of post-2018. Such deterioration of the media space could partly be attributable to the politico-security context.

The Way Forward

Based on the study's findings, this briefing paper set the following recommendations for action.

- **A renewed commitment by the government to the reform agenda:** The gains that came about as the result of the reform endeavour ought to be consolidated. The government needs to reaffirm its commitment to the reform endeavour and thereby take concrete steps towards the institutionalisation of the media law.

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- **A collaborative effort by media sector actors to influence policy and implementation:** It is incumbent on civil society organisations to ensure that these gains are not undermined or reversed. The broader civil society organisations, in general, and the media civil society organisations, in particular, should collectively and synergistically exert positive pressure on the government through advocacy work and lobbying so that the government passes the remainder of the laws that were part of the media reform package. Promoting a voluntary self-regulatory mechanism within the media sector should also be a priority. Civil societies should exert coordinated and concerted efforts in advocating and lobbying for the transformation of both publicly funded state media into a genuinely public media that operates independently and professionally and party-owned quasi-commercial media into a genuinely commercial media.
- **Strengthening the capacity of media associations and civil society organisations to create solidarity and shared vision:** Media associations should undertake the task of coalition building and networking among themselves by creating an all-inclusive inter-associational forum to advance shared goals. Such a forum would be instrumental in bridging government-versus-private, centre-versus-periphery, and regional divides and thereby reduce fragmentation and collision by boosting solidarity, cohesion, and the overall agency of the media community. Media CSOs should have a well-structured consultative forum where they meet periodically and map out their activities to have a shared knowledge of who is doing what. Such activity mapping and the knowledge of who is doing what would help media CSOs avoid duplication of efforts and inefficient use of scarce resources and would instead help them channel their efforts towards areas that complement each other and are demand-driven as opposed to supply-driven. Media CSOs and Media Associations should focus on organising need-based capacity building programs that would enhance professionalism in the sector. They also should collaborate in fighting misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech by strengthening fact-checking initiatives as well as by promoting media literacy.
- **Coordination among international media development partners:** International partners should have a consultative forum where they create a common understanding of the activities the media CSOs are implementing so that they can ensure the allocation of funding on a merit basis.

The Safety and Security of Journalists in Ethiopia

By Tewodros Negash Bayu



Background

The safety of journalists² goes beyond simply ensuring physical safety. It ranges from creating a safe work environment to ensuring the freedom to carry out their work free from violence and obstruction. Due to the ever-increasing investments in surveillance technologies and repressive practices aimed at silencing activists and critical media reporting, ensuring the digital safety of journalists increasingly requires collective action. This is why several journalists and media associations in Ethiopia have taken the initiative to work collaboratively as a form of coalition. However, protecting the safety of journalists and the well-being of media institutions is not only a concern for journalists but for all.

² Those licensed or registered for broadcasting, periodicals and online media are legally recognized as 'journalists' by EMA, the media regulator.

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As part of its effort to build sustainable coalitions, IMS supported and strengthened national safety mechanisms for journalists and continued to work with national, regional, and international partners. Under the Protecting Independent Media for Effective Development (PRIMED), a three-year flagship programme³, International Media Support (IMS) led the ‘Coalitions for Change’ workstream to create supportive, resilient alliances and networks of media practitioners in Ethiopia. IMS employs a comprehensive approach to media safety, which combines a strategy of not only responding when journalists are harassed or attacked but also preventing them from happening.⁴ This is why protecting journalists' safety and advocacy for safer media working environments is incorporated into its programmes and is at the core of its work.

The briefing paper aims to enhance awareness about the safety of journalists, promote dialogue and coordination, and contribute to the realisation of an enabling environment vital to the support of good journalism and the enjoyment of freedom of expression in Ethiopia. This briefing paper mainly relied on the findings of the IMS-commissioned independent study published in April 2022 to assess the safety of journalists in Ethiopia. Informed by UNESCO's indicators⁵ and the IMS approaches to the safety of journalists,⁶ this paper starts by briefly discussing the state of the safety of journalists in Ethiopia, the root causes of attacks and threats they face. It then proceeds to explore the potential roles of key state and non-state actors in order to propose mitigation measures and recommended actions.

³ The PRIMED programme is funded by Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO)

⁴ [IMS-Safety-approach-pdf.final_.web_.pdf](https://www.mediasupport.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/IMS-Safety-approach-pdf.final_.web_.pdf) (mediasupport.org)

⁵ <https://en.unesco.org/themes/safety-of-journalists/journalists-safety-indicators>

⁶ https://www.mediasupport.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/IMS-Safety-approach-pdf.final_.web_.pdf

Summary of Study Approaches

The study used a qualitative approach to provide a holistic picture of the status of the safety of journalists in Ethiopia. It generated primary data through interviews with journalists directly threatened by state and non-state actors and purposively identified key media stakeholders whose experience would provide insights into understanding the safety of journalists in the country.

To that end, in-depth interviews were conducted with leaders of recently formed professional associations, scholars, public and private media editors, lawyers, and civil society organisations working on media development. Data collected from stakeholders' consultations and roundtables held between October 2022 and June 2023 were also used to understand practical approaches and the role of key state and non-state actors in protecting the safety of journalists during political and security reforms in Ethiopia.

Additional data were obtained through continuous monitoring of the state of safety of journalists and desk review of study assessments, partner reports, and joint resolutions on the state of media space and freedoms from May 2022 to the end of June 2023 in order to derive recommended actions to protect the safety and security of journalists.

Key Findings

Shedding Light on the Post-2018 Challenges to the Safety and Protection of Journalists

1. Shrinking Media Space and Freedom

Key informants of the study on the safety of journalists argued that, unlike its predecessor, the current government had been committed to policy formulation and institution building that facilitates media freedom and the safety of journalists. Media safety in Ethiopia initially improved in the period following the change of administration in April 2018. Several restrictive laws and regulations, including the Civil Societies Proclamation and the Media Proclamation, have been revised as part of the political and legal reform initiatives.

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The new Media Proclamation⁷ garnered widespread support among interviewees for establishing the independence of media regulation, decriminalising defamation, and strengthening the role of professional associations. The challenge, however, remains the disjuncture between policy and practice, where weak institutional capacity becomes a major obstacle to broadening the space for free media and freedom of expression. The disjuncture can also be explained by the violation of existing laws, which contributed to the shrinking media space where the most recent press freedom gains have been weakened since Ethiopia became embroiled in ethnic conflicts. It is ranked 130 out of 180 countries in the 2023 Press Freedom Index.⁸

Study interviewees further accentuated that although the initial media reform measures strengthened free speech, an integral component of the safety of journalists, and narrowed the grounds on which journalists can be arrested, many of them self-censor or use pseudonyms to avoid persecution. The media and civil society's ability to reflect the views of all social groups, influence policy processes, and resolve tensions between communities has also become limited in practice. Yet again, the arbitrary arrests and proceedings continue to violate the revised media law.

Ethiopia's judiciary is officially independent but has been criticised for being subject to political interference, with judgments rarely deviating from government policy and interests. Security forces have significantly influenced the judicial process, especially in cases against journalists, opposition leaders, and other political adversaries. The police also overruled several court-approved bail orders during the year 2022. Study findings indicated that the use of the courts to seek justice is not seen as favourable by many journalists, who also avoid seeking help from the police when in distress.

“ I’ve been to court 59 times. It would be crazy for me to ask the police for help. ”
Study interviewee

⁷ Media Proclamation No. 1238/2021.

⁸ Ethiopia | RSF

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Nonetheless, media associations and coalitions strived to take positions and speak out in defence of freedom of expression, access to information, and the safety of journalists. They also struggle to facilitate constructive debates on media ethics and standards as civic participation, freedom of expression, assembly, and association are regressing.⁹

This briefing paper argues that the state of safety and security has deteriorated mainly due to the war in Tigray, violent conflicts in various places, as the government clampdown on journalists over allegations of lack of professionalism. Despite the peace agreement signed in November 2022, journalists still fear reprisals that press freedom and independent media have been increasingly threatened, and the working environment has become increasingly hostile and unsafe for journalists. The insecure operational environment and rise in violent conflict enabled the state and non-state actors to threaten journalists working for national and international media, exposing them to unlawful detention, physical attacks, and harassment. According to key informants, intimidation and psychological threats occur both online and offline, and women journalists are particularly affected by gender-specific forms of online attacks, such as doxing, which is the dissemination of their personal information and threats of sexual violence. Moreover, where there is offline conflict and violence, journalists are being threatened and intimidated on social media, which shows that there is a strong correlation between online attacks and real-world consequences.¹⁰

“ They are organised around some ethnic or religious identity or associated businesses. They are always there to threaten you, particularly with cyberbullying, posting your photo saying you have done wrong.

Study interviewee

⁹ Freedom in the World report, 2023, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/ethiopia/freedom-world/2023>

¹⁰ European Institute of Peace, 12 April 2021, Fake news misinformation and hate speech in Ethiopia: A vulnerability assessment

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The deterioration of the safety of journalists in Ethiopia is partly related to the political polarisation that divided the media along partisan lines and an alarming rise in social media posts advocating for ethnic violence that exposed online journalists, bloggers, and internet users to violence intended to silence them. Study informants emphasised that journalists find it challenging to speak with a common voice on pertinent issues, including their rights and safety, as the fast expansion of social media and the spread of hate speech and disinformation changed the media landscape.

The study findings indicated that the scale of violence against journalists, including growing attacks over recent years, has a far-reaching and chilling effect on freedom of expression. More specifically, this has affected the practice of independent journalism and created an environment of fear in which journalists either self-censor or decline reporting assignments for fear of repercussions.¹¹ This is evidenced by the findings presented in this paper that journalists often act in fear or are generally uncertain about their profession. One of the reasons is that journalists often do not get adequate protection from their employers, which paves the way for increased fear and uncertainty among journalists and other media practitioners. Findings from roundtable discussions elucidated that government and private media organisations do not have procedures to protect journalists who report from conflict-ridden areas. As a result, journalists feel disempowered to bring vital information to the people and find it challenging to hold authorities accountable through accurate and objective reporting. Hence, they cannot play their watchdog role and become agents of democracy and freedom.

2. Arrest and Imprisonment of Journalists

Between April 3 and April 13, 2023, security personnel arrested at least six journalists and media professionals and allegedly assaulted two while in custody, according to CPJ.¹² During the same period, two other journalists were arrested in separate incidents in the Amhara and Oromia regional states. The arrest of the six comes amid political unrest in Amhara state, as protests erupted against government's plan to dissolve regional forces.

¹¹ UNESCO, *Assessment of media development in Ethiopia: based on UNESCO's media development indicators, 2022*, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000384256.locale=en>

¹² *At least 8 journalists detained amid renewed unrest in Ethiopia - Committee to Protect Journalists (cpj.org)*

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On May 6, 2023, Ethiopian authorities announced the arrest of the editor and founder of a privately owned YouTube-based broadcaster who fled refuge to Djibouti. This journalist and 46 others (including at least five journalists who were already in detention) were accused of involvement in terrorism in the Amhara regional state.¹³

As part of a broader crackdown, which the Amhara regional state called a “law enforcement operation”, over 4,500 people have been arrested for allegedly being involved in illegal activity. These included at least 11 journalists and media workers who were arrested during the week of May 19, 2023, in Amhara regional state and Addis Ababa.¹⁴ Furthermore, on May 20, 2023, the Government Communication Service statement vowed to “continue to take decisive measures against those engaged in illegal activities, intentionally causing public alarm and turmoil, as well as those who are working to cause violence and disturbance among the public under the disguise of journalism and media work.”¹⁵

Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) also documented the arrest of at least 63 journalists and media workers since November 4, 2020, at least eight of whom remain detained as of August 1, 2022. All the detentions that CPJ has documented during this period have been in Addis Ababa, Oromia, Amhara, Afar, Tigray and Somali states. During the same period, the Tigray region has been under a telecommunications blackout, making it difficult to gather information about the state of media and journalists. Ethiopia then ranked with Eritrea as sub-Saharan Africa’s worst jailer of journalists.¹⁶ During the first six months of 2021, two journalists were killed in Ethiopia in the circumstances connected with their work, the first such deaths since 1998 and a strong indicator of the critical situation of the safety of journalists in the country. In 2022, numerous journalists have been imprisoned without charges. They also faced pressure, arrests, threats, and harassment—both online and offline—from the government to disclose the identities of their sources. In some cases, they were detained, expelled from the country, or had their licenses revoked. In August 2022, the federal police announced that charges had been filed against 111 owners of “illegal digital media” outlets, accusing them of working to incite violence.

¹³ *Journalist Gobeze Sisay facing terrorism investigation in Ethiopia after arrest in Djibouti - Committee to Protect Journalists (cpj.org)*

¹⁴ *Ethiopian authorities arrest 11 employees of 4 independent media outlets - Committee to Protect Journalists (cpj.org)*

¹⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/FDRECommunicationService/videos/1020456538833034/>

¹⁶ *Journalists face growing hostility as Ethiopia’s civil war persists - Committee to Protect Journalists (cpj.org)*

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The security institutions claimed that the media outlets charged are not recognized by the Ethiopian Media Authority, and they are investigated for organized crime and inciting violence simply for reporting conflicts.¹⁷

3. Killings of Journalists

The CPJ's database on journalists killed in the course of their work shows there had not been a journalist who died in Ethiopia since 1998.¹⁸ However, the killing of 'journalists' is recorded during the post-2018 period. For instance, on January 19, 2021, unidentified attackers in the Tigray region shot and killed a 'journalist' and his friend.¹⁹ He was working for the state-owned broadcaster Tigray TV and had been detained by police three days earlier and questioned about his coverage of the war in Tigray, according to CPJ and several study interviewees. Again, on May 9, 2021, a journalist working for the Oromia Broadcasting Network was shot and killed in Dembi Dollo town.²⁰ Moreover, study interviewees elucidated that impunity for attacks on the media leads to aggravated physical attacks and kidnappings of journalists in Ethiopia. This claim can be supported by documented abduction and kidnapping cases of journalists that occurred between 2021 and 2023.²¹

4. Targeting of Journalists Based on Ethnicity

There appears to be a trend of journalists not only being polarised along ethnic lines but also face attacks based on one's ethnicity, be it online vilification, threats, and arrests. Ethnic and political agendas dominating Ethiopian media risk journalism professionalism. A Fojo-IMS study²² also shows that journalists are highly inclined to use sources that support their ideological interests and avoid quoting sources from other ethnicities that could balance the story. Moreover, most private, and online media outlets are established to satisfy distinct political or ethnic groups' interests, while reports from state media outlets comply with the ruling party's narrative. Media also polarised and divided along partisan lines and social media posts continue to disseminate misinformation and hate speech and advocate for ethnic violence.²³

¹⁷ News: Fed. Police file charges against 111 "illegal digital media" outlets suspected of "working to make Ethiopia center of violence" - Addis Standard

¹⁸ CPJ Explore CPJ's database of attacks on the press

¹⁹ CPJ, 2023, Reporter Dawit Kebede Araya shot and killed in Ethiopia - Committee to Protect Journalists (cpj.org)

²⁰ CPJ, 2022, Oromia Broadcasting Network journalist Sisay Fida shot and killed in Ethiopia - Committee to Protect Journalists (cpj.org)

²¹ News: Journalist Gobeze Sisay released after 9 days of MIA - Addis Standard

An audio recording exposed the security men who abducted the journalist, Gent Asmamaw | Addis Zeybe - Digital Newspaper

Ethiopian journalist Abebe Bayu abducted and assaulted by unidentified men - Committee to Protect Journalists (cpj.org).

²² IMS 2021, The ethnification of Ethiopian media | IMS (mediasupport.org)

²³ <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/news/how-ethiopian-news-media-have-become-dangerously-divided-along-ethnic-fault-lines>

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Conflict also continues to aggravate pre-existing and deep-rooted tensions between polarized political and ethnic groups, often giving rise to further polarization and outbreaks of violence, displacement, and human rights violations. These developments affected the safety of journalists and the practice of independent journalism and created an environment of fear in which journalists either self-censor or decline reporting assignments for fear of repercussions.²⁴

5. Internet Shutdowns and Digital Safety

Study informants asserted that frequent and prolonged internet shutdowns affected their ability to access and disseminate information. For example, since 2015, the government-imposed Internet access restrictions a total of 11 times, while access to popular social media platforms has been blocked at least until July 2023.²⁵ According to study interviewees, despite slow internet connections and limited access to digital communication technologies, they actively use the internet to contact sources, verify facts and file reports. Because internet shutdowns occur during times of war and conflict, journalists could be challenged to obtain accurate information and balance their reporting. In some instances, media owners and leaders require journalists to travel to conflict areas without adequate information to assess the security situation due to the disruption of the internet and telecommunications.

Evidence also indicated that the safety of journalists is more threatened during internet shutdowns. Interviewees indicated that many of the detained journalists were accused of passing information to “terrorists and anti-peace elements” for the government to justify its unlawful action of blocking the internet.

Others have also mentioned that detained journalists’ mobile phones and computers are confiscated and checked by security forces, exposing them and their news sources to attacks. This claim can be supported by the fact that the Ethiopian government monitored phone calls and hired hacking firms to spy on selected diaspora members, journalists, and media organisations.²⁶

²⁴ UNESCO, *Assessment of media development in Ethiopia: based on UNESCO’s media development indicators, 2022*, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000384256.locale=en>

²⁵ *Ethiopia: One month on, authorities must immediately lift blockade on selected social media access in the country* - Amnesty International

²⁶ *How Ethiopia Spies on Its Diaspora in Europe* | Human Rights Watch (hrw.org) Accessed on September 23, 2021.

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Although there have been efforts by individual journalists and human rights advocates to hold the government accountable, the open letter issued by 47 human rights organisations calling on the Prime Minister to ensure unfettered internet and digital communications access is remarkable as it highlights the safety of journalists. The letter argued that disruptions to internet access contribute to the erosion of press freedom in Ethiopia, making an environment already characterised by frequent arbitrary arrests of journalists even more hostile.²⁷

6. Social Media and Attacks by Non-state Actors

The latest figures show 20.86 million internet users and 6.40 million of these use social media (5.1 % of the total population) in Ethiopia.²⁸ Telegram and Facebook dominate the social media scene in Ethiopia, although Twitter and Viber have been used to express political opinions and to mobilise the masses.²⁹ Conversely, social media facilitated the spread of rumours, hate speech, disinformation and nonstate actors' aggression against the safety of journalists.³⁰ Key informants of this study articulated that nonstate actors, such as insurgent groups and social media influencers, poses security threats to the safety of journalists and the well-being of media outlets. This assertion is triangulated with a comprehensive study that also argued that local journalists face increased security risk that includes physical attacks, mobility restrictions, and online slurring than foreign correspondents.³¹ Even though the government itself poses a threat, it repeatedly failed to protect the safety of journalists from attacks by non-state actors. An interviewee said that because armed groups in some areas have supporters within the government structure, it has been difficult for the government to discharge its responsibilities of protecting freedom of expression and the media.

7. Threats to Foreign Media Operating in Ethiopia

On December 24, 2021, a Reuters cameraman covering the war in Tigray was arrested at his home in Addis Ababa. He was later released without charge after 12 days. A week earlier, a Reuters photographer was beaten by two federal police officers. An Ethiopian freelance journalist accredited to The Associated Press was also detained without charges for months.³²

²⁷ *Open letter to the Ethiopian Government: urgently end ongoing internet shutdowns in all regions across the country - Access Now*

²⁸ *Digital 2023: Ethiopia — DataReportal - Global Digital Insights*

²⁹ *Why is Telegram so popular in Ethiopia and not WhatsApp? (qz.com)*

³⁰ *Fake news misinformation and hate speech in Ethiopia: A vulnerability assessment | EIP*

³¹ *Téwodros W. Workneh (2022) From State Repression to Fear of non-state Actors: Examining Emerging Threats of Journalism Practice in Ethiopia, Journalism Practice, 16:9, 1909-1926, DOI: 10.1080/17512786.2021.1919176*

Recommended Actions

The circumstances in Ethiopia showcase that realising a strong, effective, and efficient mechanism for the safety of journalists requires long-term commitment, cooperation, and collaboration among key stakeholders, including the government itself and coordinated actions and information exchange as stipulated in the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity.³³ In that light, there have been efforts by the IMS-PRIMED partners³⁴ to facilitate collaboration and solidarity between relevant local actors, specifically media associations and civil society organisations in Ethiopia, to defend the safety and security of journalists through strategic engagement and advocacy coalitions. Despite the achievements recorded so far, concerted efforts by local and international partners are required if the safety of journalists and the well-being of media institutions are to be ensured. The following suggested approaches help to protect media freedom and the safety of journalists in the country.

- **Support for an enabling media environment:** In addition to the liberal legal provisions, the government must affirm its political willingness concretely to protect media freedoms and the media environment. Civil society organisations should actively monitor and promote freedom of expression, right to information, and journalist safety to encourage media inclusiveness, pluralism, and diversity. This can be achieved by supporting relevant actors to advocate for increased state support for the media, media freedom, enabling environment, and mapping and analysis of media owners and funders to promote support for good/quality journalism. Enhancing the capacity of a core group of the most credible and balanced media and journalists to recognise better and counter misinformation and disinformation online and offline is important to create an enabling media environment.
- **Capacity Development and Awareness Raising:** Ethiopia's legal and justice system needs reform to protect journalists better, and the capacity of human rights defenders, including human rights lawyers, should be enhanced.

³² Ethiopian journalist accredited to AP is released on bail | AP News

³³ UNESCO, 2016, *un-plan-on-safety-journalists_en.pdf* (unesco.org)

³⁴ CARD, 2022, <https://www.cardeth.org/journalists-safety-guide-handbook>

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Conducting joint regular risk assessment together with CSOs concerned with freedom of expression and human rights, academia, and media associations help improve the work of advocacy coalitions in monitoring, documenting, and publicising violations against journalists. This may also support the media to hold debates and promote inclusive, fair, and constructive dialogues between key government decision-makers, the media, CSOs and the public.

- **Advocacy, Lobbying, and Campaigns:** Key areas of advocacy include encouraging the emergence of more critical civil society, demanding media support from the government, transforming state media into public service media, improving relations between the media and law enforcement agencies as well as awareness creation about digital safety of journalists.
- **Government needs to be part of the solution:** Government has big role to play, and it should establish clear mechanisms to coordinate and cooperate with civil society and a more responsive and transparent mechanisms to address the challenges of the sector. It should also show its commitment in practice, specifically for the protection of the right to information, press freedom and freedom of expression.
- **Coalition building, Cooperation, Collaboration, and Coordination:** Spaces for the safety of journalists' dialogue between media and public officials, including the justice and security sectors, must be created, and sustained to build trust, ownership, and cooperation. Regular and joint dialogues between media, journalists, political parties, and security forces are crucial to foster understanding, respect, and trust and improve relations and mutual understanding. The media should promote dialogues on core grievances between affected communities and policymakers, aid agencies, and government to create a space for inclusive, constructive, and locally owned solutions that directly contribute to the betterment of the safety of journalists. Efforts must be made to enhance the ongoing safety of the journalists' coalition and its acceptance by local, regional, and international actors. Enhancing the coordination among the international media development actors and donors, collective advocacy, and employing holistic approaches and long-term programming, and diversification of funding sources should also be further strengthened.

Conflict Sensitive Journalism in Ethiopia: Experiences and Learnings

By Teshager Shiferaw, Ph.D.



Background

The coming of Abiy Ahmed to power inspired hope as he initially took measures that included releasing imprisoned journalists and members of the opposition parties aimed at improving the political environment by opening up the space for dissent and the press. However, the blossoming freedom of expression quickly regressed due to communal conflicts and the war in the northern part of the country, creating public doubt concerning the government's capability to ensure the rule of law and protect fundamental human rights. The worsening security situation further exposed the inability of the government to produce a participatory roadmap that would drive the transition process by responding to the growing demand for self-governance, free and fair elections, and freedom of religion. As conflicts intensified, more than five million people, including community radio journalists and volunteers, left their homes due to communal clashes and the war in the northern part of the country.³⁵

³⁵ International Displacement Monitoring Center (2022). "Ethiopia: Displacement Data".
<https://www.internal-displacement.org/global-report/grid2022/>

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The livelihoods of Internally Displaced People (IDPs) become in danger, instigating competition over scarce resources with their hosting communities and exposing them to a lack of access to timely information and freedom of expression. Conversely, the safety and security of journalists and media outlets are jeopardised, challenging their ability to present accurate, impartial, and reliable information to the public during violent conflicts. While promoting professionalism and ethics in journalism has received more attention from media sector actors in recent years, a growing base of evidence derived from empirical studies and field practices suggests that the overall context in Ethiopia calls for the practice of conflict-sensitive journalism.

This briefing paper. This briefing paper presents findings from studies funded by the PRIMED programme to discuss why conflict-sensitive journalism is important in facilitating conflict reduction and the peace process and informing future interventions in promoting conflict-sensitive journalism in Ethiopia. The briefing paper based its analysis on a rapid assessment of conflict-sensitive journalism and the findings of a study on media coalition-building efforts. Additional insights were extracted from coalition-building dialogue forums and training workshops supported by PRIMED and other programmes implemented by International Media Support.

Overview of Research Approach

The empirical data presented in this briefing paper mainly draws on a qualitative approach. Part of the empirical basis of this briefing is a context analysis conducted to understand factors that affect the media coalition process and progress in Ethiopia. It also draws on IMS's practical experience in supporting local actors to promote conflict-sensitive journalism through coalition-building dialogues and media training workshops from May 2021 to April 2023. The data pertaining to the actual conflict reporting exercise and message framing is obtained through qualitative content analysis of purposively selected samples of media reports from Addis Zemen and The Reporter newspapers, Ethiopian Television (ETV), Ethiopian Satellite TV (ESAT), and Amhara Media Corporation (on YouTube). The content analysis examines the frames that the media used in reporting. The key conceptual framework of the assessment is "framing theory",³⁶ which facilitates the examination of how the media selects, organises, structures, and presents stories to convince people of the value of any given position and to change the narrative of events.

Key Findings

A Brief Empirical Note on Media and Conflict in Ethiopia

This briefing paper argues that local media, specifically radio and online platforms, have a wider reach and, as such, an agenda-setting role at times of political crisis in Ethiopia. According to data from coalition-building dialogues on conflict-sensitive journalism, the broader community in conflict areas relies on radio to access information about conflicts. At the same time, urban-educated youth utilise social media platforms to acquire, produce, and disseminate messages with the potential to spread disinformation and hate against groups and individuals. The media engagement of groups and individuals in Ethiopia at times of conflict revolves around ethnic, religious, and political ideology differences, aiming at manipulating public understanding of the situation in favour of key actors in the conflict. In such cases, some media outlets in conflict areas employed manipulative conflict framing using the media to embed their personal and institutional beliefs in order to inspire a desired action.

The media landscape analysis indicated that key actors in major conflicts following the 2018 government change include the government, opposition political parties, insurgence groups, religious groups, ethnic-based collectives, and influential individuals with direct and indirect media ownership and control. The key actors in recent conflicts appeared to disseminate disinformation and hate against their opponents to create a sense of suffering among their supporters through legacy and online media. Thus, the key problems consistently observed in media conflict reports analysed are shaping conflict stories through the lenses of hate and isolation frames. The omission of significant facts involving a lack of the perspectives of involved parties is also captured through state-owned media reports.

According to IMS-Fojo's commissioned study on media ethnifications, the interaction between online and legacy media fueled communal conflicts in Ethiopia, and there is a direct correlation between online hate speech peaks and offline violence eruptions.³⁷

³⁷ *The ethnification of the Ethiopian media study*

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Conversely, the cyclical occurrences of conflicts were used to justify the government's repeated action of employing censorship, detention of journalists, and shutting down the internet and media houses. The findings of media content analysis indicated that the government used an externalising frame to portray opponents, local armed groups, human rights defenders, and journalists as "illegal groups that are advancing foreign interests".

...The widespread conflict in Addis Ababa and Oromia that claimed more than 200 lives following Hachalu Hundessa's assassination is one example of the media's negative role in fueling communal conflicts...

Federal Chief Ombudsman, during a coalition building dialogue forum, February 21, 2023

Content analysis of selected media reports depicted that media ownership structure influences the news coverage of conflicts. The regional and state media often normalised and legitimised conflicts as an eminent measure to defeat the "enemy." Such acts of militarising the media involved propaganda for war to convince the public that the war was legitimate.

Access to balanced information regarding conflicts have also been unavailable for the public to make informed decisions. Although the political and legal reform process aimed at transforming state-owned media into public media, the volatile situation in Ethiopia delayed the transformation process and contributed to the backsliding of media independence.

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Based on personal accounts reflected during coalition meetings and training workshops, the interference of conflict key actors in many forms negatively affected journalism professionalism and ethics. Journalists take sides and disseminate false information, often crafting conflict stories through ethnic frames. Content analysis from selected media reports indicated that journalists appeared to amplify the values of their ethnic and/or religious groups. The lack of accuracy and impartiality in the news-making process ruins journalists' reputations, losing public trust and making them vulnerable to attacks from different groups. Conversely, testimonies during coalition dialogues accentuated that journalists shy away from accurately reporting conflicts for fear of persecution and violence. This claim was supported by a statement from the Federal Chief Ombudsman, who argued that the Ethiopian media failed to provide the public with accurate and responsible information regarding conflicts because of fear and threats against journalists and media outlets. Conversely, poor quality and biased reporting have also been identified as why journalists are exposed to attacks.

Conflict Sensitive Journalism: Insights from Local Media

With all the challenges, the Ethiopian media strived to provide coverage of the various conflicts in different parts of the country. The findings from coalition-building dialogues on conflict-sensitive journalism show that some media outlets, specifically community radios, managed to provide information that promoted mutual understanding between the communities they serve. As much as regional media is said to be inclined to serve the interests of regional governments and ethnic groups they claim to serve, community radios contribute to peace by restoring levels of trust between communities. Data from conflict-sensitive journalism training workshops show that the regional media contributed to obstructing the peace-making process during the Tigray War. Content analysis of the Amhara media reports supported this claim, showcasing that conflict news lacked representing both sides of the story and the voices of the minorities.

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“Raya Community Radio is located within a diverse community. We knew from the outset that the country was heading to war as the propaganda from both directions filled the air. What we did then... started inviting community representatives of each ethnic group residing in our area, and letting them come to our studio to discuss their issues and grievances without us, journalists, airing our opinion. We minimised harm by not taking sides and doing this continuously.

Trainee, Conflict Sensitive journalism training, May 2021

In contrast, community radio journalists claimed they managed to provide reliable and inclusive information in conflict-prone communities.

The Ethiopian experience highlighted that community radios and privately-owned media, with relatively better knowledge of conflict-sensitive reporting, tend to give voice to those calling for peace and negotiation yet are ignored by state-owned media. The effectiveness of community media in conflict-sensitive reporting emanates from their ability to give voice to minorities and those who directly suffer from conflicts. Community radios encouraged open discussion and negotiation between conflicting parties through impartial and balanced reporting. Best examples documented from Ari Community Radio and Raya Community Radio highlighted that media could play a role in bringing diverse ethnic groups regularly to discuss potentially divisive political and economic issues.

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In Omo Valley, where Ari Community Radio operates, conflicts often arise over access to grazing land and water. Therefore, this radio designed a regular show that invites community members and local authorities from surrounding ethnic groups to discuss fair and agreeable grazing land and water use to reduce conflicts over scarce resources. On the other hand, Raya Community Radio's approach to conflict-sensitive reporting helped communities reduce clashes by serving as a debating platform for the public to resolve differences and create common grounds on issues that may otherwise lead to an interethnic conflict. Likewise, findings from the media coalition study show that privately owned and online media platforms supported by the PRIMED programme gave voice to those who were silenced by the conflicts.

For example, Addis Zeybe, an online media outlet, reported the impact of climate change and drought in the Somali and Oromia regions that exacerbate resource-based conflicts in the area. In contrast, ARTS TV, a privately owned television, reported about the lives of IDPs in the Amhara and Afar regions, providing personal yet socially relevant information to promote conflict resolution and peace. Media content analysis results show that The Reporter, a privately owned newspaper, exerted efforts to go beyond information generated from official sources to verify facts and include various public views in situations where access to information about conflicts and violent incidents becomes challenging. The content analysis results further show that state-owned media favour more war-oriented content focusing on isolated incidents without clarity and excluding diverse views on conflicts, which conforms to the notions of isolation frame that categorises conflicting parties as “the people” and “small bad group”.

Why Conflict Sensitive Journalism Matters in Ethiopia?

There are major reasons why conflict-sensitive journalism is important in Ethiopia. The findings of the PRIMED-supported studies show that conflict-sensitive journalism plays a significant role throughout the phases of conflict. Conflict-sensitive journalism is key in **preventing communal conflicts**, especially in areas where the demand for equitable access to available resources is at the centre of the dispute. For example, Ari Community Radio focuses on reporting about the fair share of resources, good governance, and the role of communities in preserving the environment by giving examples from other communities to create greater understanding and build relationships among ethnic groups in the Omo Valley.

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Ari Community Radio's regular panel discussions between community members and local authorities facilitated community participation that led to decisions respected by everyone. The case of Ari Community Radio further suggests that conflict-sensitive reporting helped to avoid major clashes by creating space for the public to become active stakeholders in policy formation and implementation.

The media content analysis results elucidated that media can also help **reframe the narratives** from each conflicting side by presenting them from different angles and with an alternative view of the situation. Describing the problem that leads to a conflict differently attracts the audience's interest and leads to the development of negotiation initiatives. For example, in the Raya area, the "interethnic tension" in late 2020 was reframed as an issue of mutual coexistence where people from different backgrounds live together as families and neighbours, while the state media and social media platforms became a battleground for parties involved in the Tigray war.

Moreover, in an environment where the media space is narrowing down, conflict-sensitive journalism enables the media to be **a dialogue platform for parties in conflict**. The Ethiopian experience shows that communities make informed decisions about their conditions when the media helps all parties in conflict to express their grievances and look for peaceful solutions. The experiences from community radios and selected private media outlets further indicated that accurate, impartial, and balanced information encourages a dialogue that often leads to mutual understanding in a way that resolves conflict.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The Ethiopian media reflects the political landscape, which is highly divided and polarised. The media needs comprehensive support to build its capacity to overcome the challenges. The conditions need to be changed by promoting professional independence and public interest journalism. In this regard, conflict-sensitive journalism would help to promote peace, stability, and a democratic political system through accurate and impartial reporting that facilitates mutual understanding, tolerance, and peaceful coexistence. However, access to adequate information on conflicts has been restricted, so the stories rely on limited and inconsistently available official sources.

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This is partly related to the lack of diversity of sources in the context of conflict and political controversy. Also, the tendency of news content does not reflect the elements of conflict-sensitive journalism, specifically impartiality and accuracy. Less responsible reporting dominated the scene, which has seriously affected media credibility. Hate speech and hostile references are used against parties that could potentially come together to meet for peace talks, which in turn heightened the vulnerability of the safety and security of media practitioners. Therefore, further intervention, considering the following suggestions for promoting conflict-sensitive reporting, is warranted.

- **Capacity building training on conflict-sensitive journalism:** Local media can play an agenda-setting role in conflict-prone areas, especially when the media outlet prioritises the needs and interests of the people. Therefore, advanced knowledge of how to apply conflict analysis and diverse perspectives in news reporting helps to promote professionalism and the scrutiny of power and authorities.
- **Promoting the safety and security of journalists and media outlets:** Efforts to protect freedom of expression and media independence could only be sustainable if the overall environment the media operates in is peaceful. This can be achieved by promoting conflict-sensitive journalism that would ultimately contribute to the safety and security of journalists and media outlets in conflict areas.
- **Ensuring the right to access information:** Conflict-sensitive reporting can be effective when the right to access information is protected. Journalists must be able to move from one place to the other to cover conflicts and gather information representing all sides of the story. Besides, the public right to know must be protected by providing them with important information they need to make informed decisions. Hence, advocacy and awareness creation activities targeting law enforcement agencies can facilitate easy and safe access to information for all.
- **Institutional support to community radios:** International partners often focus on facilitating capacity-building training for journalists. However, the experience in Ethiopia shows that providing institutional support to community radios is important to help them continue amplifying the voices of minorities who are directly impacted by conflicts. This can be achieved by funding the core costs of running a radio station to keep them sustainable in conflict areas.

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Media Coalition Building Process and Progress: Analyzing the PRIMED Programme's Support to Media Coalitions in Ethiopia

By Elsabet Samuel Tadesse, Ph.D.



Background

Media freedom is often best defended and advanced by organisations with a shared interest in the issue of working together to effect change. This is why the "Protecting Independent Media for Effective Development (PRIMED)" programme³⁸ is supporting various types of "coalitions" striving to improve the information ecosystems of Bangladesh, Ethiopia, and Sierra Leone.

³⁸ The programme, funded by the UK Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), is implemented by a consortium of media development agencies led by BBC Media Action together with International Media Support (IMS), the Media Development Investment Fund (MDIF), Free Press Unlimited (FPU), the Global Forum for Media Development (GFMD) and the Communications Initiative.

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PRIMED's support to coalitions between 2020-23 has been part of a broader initiative aimed at enabling local media actors to produce free, independent public interest journalism and provide fora for constructive public debate by:

- Improving the capacity of media outlets to manage their organisations,
- Coordinating sectoral support for and defence of media freedom (“coalition building”), and facilitating coherent support to media development policies and practices through evidenced learning.

Considering the dynamic media landscape in Ethiopia, it was necessary to examine factors that are most effective in enabling locally driven coalitions for change to emerge and thrive through externally supported media development efforts. Therefore, IMS commissioned a study in March 2023 that aimed to deepen the understanding of the PRIMED consortium and its partners of coalition building processes in Ethiopia and the progress these had made, taking the case of two selected coalition efforts that the programme supported.

The study titled "Media Coalition Building Process and Progress: A Study Analysing the PRIMED Programme's Support to Media Coalitions in Ethiopia" derived formative knowledge about changes that had occurred in the media environment, factors contributing to the emergence and sustainability of coalitions, and the contribution of coalitions to the media ecosystem. This briefing paper draws on the findings of this study to provide insights into the coalition building strategies that worked well in Ethiopia and tactics that did not seem to work so well. The paper further highlights coalition-building objectives, structures, leadership, and the role of international media development organisations in the dynamic local context.

Overview of Research Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative design, combining an environmental scan through a PESTLE (Political, Economic, Social, Technology, Legal, and Environmental) approach and a stakeholder power analysis framework to examine how media coalitions emerged and evolved through external supported media development efforts in Ethiopia between 2020 and 2023.

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Primary and secondary data were collected through key informant interviews, direct observation of a coalition meeting, and desk reviews of project documents, progress reports, studies, statements by human rights organisations, and media reports to scrutinise the process of coalition-building and coalitions' progress and effectiveness over time. Initial study findings were validated through a workshop with key informants and relevant stakeholders. Major findings of the study were also triangulated with case examinations of two coalition initiatives, one aimed at advancing the safety of journalists and another that addressed the ongoing reform of policies and laws affecting the Ethiopian media ecosystem.

Description of Case Studies: PRIMED-supported Coalitions

1. Influencing the Ongoing Media Reform

In August 2021, IMS initiated a partnership with Ethiopian National Media Support (ENMS) to assess the role of media in the June 2021 national elections and media scenarios going into the future and to hold a dialogue forum on the assessment's findings. Since then, ENMS has brought media actors in Ethiopia together to identify priorities and potential collaborative actions. As a result, the media reform dialogue forum continued to discuss identified coalition issues, such as the role of the media in peacebuilding and conflict-sensitive media, which created a space for media stakeholders to discuss topics that matter to their day-to-day work.

2. Advancing the Safety of Journalists

Considering the results of the 2020 stakeholder assessment, IMS partnered with the Center for Advancement of Rights and Democracy (CARD) for a media dialogue on the safety of journalists in December 2021. The overall objective of the partnership was to help media stakeholders promote the safety of journalists in response to a deterioration in the media environment (see next section). Following a continuous and open discussion among journalists' associations, members decided to establish a coalition with a formal structure and legal registration. To this end, elected associations are working as steering committee members to formalise the coalition with technical backstopping from the CARD. The steering committee facilitates shared leadership and local ownership of the coalition issue, as the primary goal of associations is to advocate for the safety of their members.

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Key Findings

Country Context and Its Influence on Media Coalition Building: A Summary of PESTLE Analysis

This briefing paper argues that the country's political, economic, and social context positively or negatively affected each stage of media coalition-building efforts. Ethiopia had a peaceful intraparty power transition in 2018, primarily welcomed by the public as an opportunity to lead the country toward democracy. The relative political stability right after the change created a conducive environment for media independence advocacy, while the volatile context later on stimulated coalitions to find ways for collective action. The first months of the reform period witnessed significant political and legal developments, including ending the prolonged state of emergency, releasing political prisoners, opening up the media landscape, and initiating legal reforms that protect fundamental human rights and promote democracy. The relative political stability created an enabling environment for the collaborative efforts of media actors to play a significant role in the political and legal reform process. However, the Ethiopian media landscape between 2020 and 2023 is characterised by the regression of freedom of expression, deterioration of the state of journalism and the safety of journalists, and the prevalence of hate speech, disinformation, fake news, and militarisation of the media and propaganda for war. The fragile political situation in Ethiopia sought repeated Internet shutdowns, the closure of some media outlets, and the mass arrest of journalists.

The deterioration of the media environment forced media actors to identify possible entry points for strategic engagement with the government. The repeated attack against the media and journalists led associations like the Ethiopian Mass Media Professionals Association (EMMPA) and the Ethiopian Media Council (EMC) to voice their concerns and call for an end to the arbitrary detention of journalists by upholding their responsibility to defend the rights of their members.

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The actions taken by EMMPA and EMC triggered associations' willingness to mobilise and participate in a broader collaboration as the war in the northern part of the country escalated. As a result, the EMMPA, Ethiopian Media Women Association (EMWA), and the Editors Guild of Ethiopia (EGE) joined the short-lived Coalition of Civil Societies for Peace, which spearheaded a collaborative effort to call for peace talks and demand for de-escalating war propaganda during the war in Tigray.³⁹ The Coalition of Civil Societies for Peace proved that an alliance between civil society organisations and journalists' associations could effectively achieve common goals. Similarly, the enthusiastic reaction of the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) to call for the release of journalists and its continued engagement to help improve freedom of expression in the country has been a source to inspire commitment and action both for journalists' associations and media coalitions.⁴⁰

The high cost of living, the high inflation rate, and the shrinking advertising market size have also challenged the media market between 2020 and 2023. Communal conflicts and the war in Tigray hindered stable trade and transaction of food items between regional states as the desert locust invasion destroyed cropped areas and range lands, exacerbating food shortages and unemployment for the media community in different parts of the country.⁴¹ The deterioration in the national economy hampered the media business, directly impacting the growth of good-paying job opportunities and demand for the workforce. According to study informants, the rising cost of living exacerbated the practice of brown journalism, where journalists accept gifts and payment for the stories they cover. Such practice directly impacts productivity, professionalism, and ethics, influencing news sourcing, production, and broadcasting, resulting in public distrust of the media.

³⁹ *Call for Peace: More than two dozens local civil society orgs call for cessation of hostilities, deescalate conflicts and war propaganda in Ethiopia - Addis Standard*

⁴⁰ *Ethiopian rights body seeks release of detained journalists | Africanews*

⁴¹ *Locust Invasion in Ethiopia : Scope and Impact (worldbank.org)*

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Therefore, PRIMED-supported coalitions identified promoting journalism professionalism and ethics as their priority to build media trust among the public and encourage public interest journalism.

The fragile political context sought the weakening and closure of once-popular advertiser companies owned by the state and political parties. However, the government remains the largest media advertiser, with its preference only to provide ads to state-owned media houses. The economic pressure forced many media outlets to close down as the government continued to influence editorial autonomy. This inspired privately owned television broadcasters to establish the Association for Ethiopian Broadcasters (AEB) in September 2018. The AEB advocates for an equal share of public advertisement, access to business capital, and media business incentives such as tax reliefs. The AEB is also an active member of the Ethiopian Media Council, engaging with policymakers to promote sector-wide media practice independence and press freedom.



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More radio stations were established than television and print media houses between 2020 and 2023.⁴² Nevertheless, a need for more finance, adequate human resource, and knowledge to run the media as a profitable industry restrict media functionality and outreach.

⁴² Ethiopian Media Authority. *Unstructured data on the numbers and types of media organisations in Ethiopia, 2022.*

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Media organisations in Ethiopia tend to hire female journalists, yet they pay them less than their male counterparts and retaining them in the media industry has been challenging. The number of women as media owners and managers is still lower. The only association advocating for gender equality in the media sector is EMWA. The association hosted consecutive roundtables to advocate against gender-based violence and unequal pay in newsrooms. EMWA directly addressed the gender pay gap in newsrooms as coalitions respond to the effects of underpayment, lack of professionalism and ethics in the media sector. However, EMWA's active participation in media coalitions ensured the representation of women journalists and their interests. The study findings show that journalism professionalism in Ethiopia has deteriorated from time to time because of the lack of quality journalism education and training, self-censorship, and the government's interference in the media, which led to public distrust.



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The media neglects diverse public interest issues, such as climate change and the plight of Internally Displaced People (IDPs). The Ethiopian Journalism Educators Network (EJEN) is the only existing functional informal coalition in the media landscape advocating for improved and standardised university education curriculum and delivery since 2021. EJEN organised capacity-building workshops for its members on promoting professionalism in classrooms, supplemented by conference meetings on diverse issues such as the role of the media at times of conflict. Conversely, the Ethiopian Media Council (EMC) is a media self-regulatory body with increasing member media organisations, including online media, regional media and associations. The EMC has already started to accept complaints, which are being solved through the lenses of self-regulation. The strengthening of the council facilitated coordinated action by media organisations to correct their mistakes and make themselves accountable to the public.

The timeframe between 2020 and 2023 witnessed the expansion of religious media that have been involved in disseminating hate and disinformation against religious groups and igniting inter-religious clashes in Ethiopia.⁴³ Expansion of religious media requires close follow-up and engagement to combat media polarisation and hate speech through dialogue forums and coalitions. New regional and ethnic-based journalism associations emerged and would continue to emerge so long as the federal political structure stays in place. However, the registration and administration of journalism associations in regional states diverge from the federal Civil Societies Proclamation 1113/2019, which calls for a coalition of regional journalists' associations to advocate for standardised implementation of the proclamation. The past three years have witnessed the emergence of profitable and accessible online media outlets due to the new Media Proclamation 1238/2021, which recognises internet-based outlets without any discrimination compared with legacy media.

“ Many are leaving the profession searching for good-paying jobs, while others look for other means to diversify their income... ”

Key Informant

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The enactment of the 2019 Communications Service Proclamation and the establishment of the Ethiopian Communications Service Authority (ECSA) could continue to promote the emergence of private entities to invest in the telecom sector and promote access to the Internet and reliable connectivity that will facilitate easy and affordable content production, dissemination and audience engagement. As the fast expansion of digital technology requires new coalition initiatives to advocate for safe online space and content moderation, the previous collaborative effort campaigning against online violence-inciting speech was impactful. In August 2020, local and international civil society organisations, including CARD, called upon Facebook to act on hate speech, disinformation and incitement of violence that became rampant.⁴⁴ Shortly after the call, on October 23, 2021, Facebook announced that it hired content moderators who review Amharic, Afan Oromo, Tigrigna, and Somali posts. It also introduced a “Lock Profile” safety feature in Ethiopia to reduce the prevalence of online hate speech, disinformation, and individual privacy breaches.

“ If the informal coalitions stay for a reasonable time without registration, the pressure from the government increases. No one knows when the coalition will be labelled as a clandestine group working to overthrow a legally elected government.

Key Informant

Coalition Building Structure and Acceptance in Ethiopia

Coalition building in Ethiopia challenges PRIMED’s working definition of a coalition as a “temporary alliance of different actors with a variety of interests and affiliations looking to achieve common goals through collective action and advocacy” and suggests that there are different types of coalitions. Historically, journalism associations experienced government infiltration that deliberately weakened their system and led to a loss of credibility. This legacy continues to influence the emergence of coalitions, as well as their governance, structure, and sustainability, even when the political context seems conducive. As a result, alliances and coalitions are equated with individual associations rather than being seen as a coming together of a number of associations for a shared vision.

⁴⁴ The Africa Freedom of Expression Exchange (AFEX). 13 August 2020. Ethiopia: AFEX Joins Call for Facebook to Act on Violence-Inciting Speech - African Freedom of Expression Exchange (africafex.org) Accessed on April 12 2021.

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For example, coalition initiatives today are often crafted with a formal structure because less formal networks are associated with personal gain, misconduct, and ineffectiveness. Some study respondents felt that both formal and informal coalitions are ineffective because they focus more on capacity building than on policy advocacy to avoid confrontation with the government. Others felt that some coalitions, whether formal or informal, are structured to serve the interests of a particular group and often lack the knowledge and resources needed to reach their objectives. Informal coalitions formed to promote media independence are more challenged to survive and garner the support of media stakeholders owing to members' low level of engagement and the lack of resources and legal protection. The study's findings indicated that sustaining an unregistered group working on rights issues would create suspicion from the government authorities and expose members to danger. Nonetheless, there are cases where informal and temporary coalitions have achieved their objectives. A good example could be the Coalition of Civil Societies for Peace, which spearheaded civil societies' collaborative effort to call for the cessation of hostilities in the north of the country. A few media associations were active members of this informal coalition, the success of which confirms the effectiveness of informal coalitions in achieving their goals.

The study's findings show that informal coalitions can emerge and thrive in the Ethiopian context when members believe that the cause genuinely appeals to their organisational objectives. Informal coalitions can have a lasting impact when they work on their visibility and share experiences with their members and like-minded groups through frequent interaction and open discussion. However, formal coalitions seemed preferable and more sustainable in Ethiopia, which differs from the learning in other countries. Formal coalitions remain dependent on donor funding for survival, but formal coalitions in Ethiopia enjoy relative freedom and legitimacy to engage in policy advocacy, as their structure helps them to reinforce shared values, decision-making, transparency, and accountability.

Objectives, Practices, and Approaches to Coalition Building Efforts

Coalition building in Ethiopia is currently characterized by a lack of clarity about objectives and appropriate activities, weak institutional capacity, and the fragmentation of coalition issues. Although local media actors previously initiated effective coalitions on peace and digital rights, coalition building initiatives in the media landscape were more a response to available funding than to the realisation that coalitions are effective responses towards achieving a common goal.

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The study results indicated that coalition building practices in Ethiopia are not based on a thorough analysis of the relevance, potential, and credibility of the agency leading a coalition. It is also evident that ongoing and upcoming coalition initiatives, especially those addressing the safety of journalists, conflict-sensitive media engagement and the role of media in peacebuilding, and media self-regulation, are susceptible to duplication and double funding. Therefore, there is a need for continuous communication between existing coalitions, coalition lead agencies, and international media development partners to avoid competition over scarce resources and to ensure that local actors are empowered through flexible and customised support.

Effective Coalition-Building Strategies in the Ethiopia Media Context

The study findings identified strategies that worked well and those that could have worked better in the Ethiopian context. Having narrowly defined coalition issues, fewer members, and a credible individual leader have the potential to attract the majority of the stakeholders with similar interests in a coalition and to obtain results quickly. Such approaches help coalition members to develop trust, share information and resources, and work together towards a common vision. The experience of the safety of the journalists' coalition shows how having a narrowly defined issue makes it easy for member associations to take on specific roles and assignments suited to their own objectives. Although coalitions are built between associations, what matters most in the Ethiopian context is the ability and credibility of individuals who can build bridges between different associations by prioritising the coalition cause over their own self-interest.

The Contribution of Coalition-Building Initiatives in Improving Media Business

The study examined the participation of individual media outlets in coalition-building efforts to understand if coalitions have had a direct influence on these outlets' businesses. Coalition initiatives provided a safe space for media outlets to share experiences and report on topical issues discussed during coalition meetings. The study findings indicated that the coalition for the safety of journalists attracted more private and online media because the independent press is primarily suffering from targeted attacks. Moreover, media outlets recognised the safety of the journalists' coalition as being essential to their business and survival. The study found that media outlets' profit margins increase when journalists feel safe and can freely exercise their duties and outlets can operate independently. Media outlets in Ethiopia are more interested in joining coalition initiatives if the agenda is related to their interests and objectives and can lead to tangible benefits for their media business. The study results show that PRIMED-supported media outlets actively participated in coalition initiatives and established partnerships among themselves to share knowledge, information, and resources.

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However, collaboration between media outlets must be documented as a guide to future media development interventions and to see if partnerships between media outlets could also contribute to the effectiveness of coalitions.

Media Coalition Issues in and about the Ethiopian Media Landscape

Coalition issues presented in this briefing paper are derived by scrutinising major political, economic, and legal events and their influence on the media landscape. These issues generally focus on freedom of expression and the safety of journalists, media viability, journalism professionalism, self-regulation, and public interest content. Based on the study's country context analysis, the following coalition issues are to be considered by existing and future coalition initiatives.

- **Reinforced protection of the safety of journalists:** monitoring, documentation, and disclosure of harassment and killings of journalists are essential to address the safety needs of journalists, particularly regional and community journalists who are prone to deliberate attacks and killings due to communal conflicts.
- **Increased representation of women in media ownership and leadership:** encouraging existing and future coalitions to mainstream gender issues in their objectives is one of the major strategies.
- **Standardisation of civil societies and charity registration processes:** region/ethnic-based journalism associations must collaborate to ensure freedom of association and assembly in all regional states. This could also help the gradual development of a federation of regional associations.
- **Reduced involvement of the government in media regulation:** creating a safe regulatory environment requires engaging law enforcement agencies and regulatory bodies to promote media independence, self-regulation, and the safety of journalists.
- **An enhanced role of the media in agenda-setting and public interest content production:** promoting editorial independence and the right to access information plays a role in amplifying the plight of IDPs and the issue of climate change as newsworthy.
- **Equal access to government advertising opportunities for all media:** this can be done by influencing the government's advertisement policy, as it remains the largest advertiser in the media landscape.

Summary of Lessons Learned from PRIMED-supported Coalition Efforts in Ethiopia

1. Collaboration Between Civil Society Organizations and Journalism Associations

One of the major learnings from the PRIMED-supported coalition initiatives is the importance of establishing a robust national support system by encouraging collaboration between journalism associations and civil society organisations. Involving civil society organisations as lead agencies in these coalitions based on their institutional capacity and commitment to the objectives of coalition interests is vital in advocating for and protecting freedom of expression and media independence in a dynamic political context such as Ethiopia.

2. Characteristics of Successful Coalition Lead Agencies

Lead agencies with the capacity to articulate the need for coalitions and to provide legal, financial, and managerial support can easily create a shared vision and understanding of how the coalition will operate where coalition members are institutionally weak and the media environment is highly volatile. Lead agencies able to facilitate frequent and clear communication between members and those interested in the coalition manage to cultivate trust among coalition members. Media coalition members tend to trust lead agencies with a culture of defending the rights of freedom of expression and media independence through open statements and advocacy campaigns.

3. The Architecture of Effective Media Coalitions

Coalitions that encourage active participation and representation of key actors in the media sector are impactful. For media stakeholders to actively participate, coalition issues and high-priority stakeholders must be identified and clearly defined.

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It is also observed that engaging stakeholders and government authorities who directly impact coalition interests can be possible when coalitions design specific objectives that would respond to stakeholders' needs and expectations.

4. Support from International Media Stakeholders to Local Coalition Building Efforts

The Ethiopian experience shows that the role of international media development partners in supporting local coalition building initiatives is paramount. The analysis of PRIMED-supported coalitions shows that international partners encouraged local institutions to initiate, own, and lead coalitions through technical and financial support.

“ We expect international media development organizations to guide us through this challenging and unpredictable situation... This is why (they) must understand the context, follow up on the trends and act accordingly.

Key Informant

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Technical support to local initiatives can be more productive when international partners understand the country's context and the interests of media actors while also promoting international principles and channelling experience. In that light, adhering to the conventional definition of coalitions and promoting temporary collective advocacy initiatives may not be effective and sustainable in Ethiopia, where a formal coalition structure provides media coalitions with legitimacy, visibility, and acceptance. It is also important to note that coalitions have their birth, growth, and death and may organically grow into a formally structured organisation over time. While local actors appreciate the financial support international partners provide to coalitions, they argued that international partners must introduce merit-based and competitive funding to help advance transparent relationships and promote the inclusion of regional journalism and media associations in the international support system. Study respondents emphasised that interlinked support (the provision of core funding, technical resources, and strategic support) helps coalitions enhance internal capacity and diversify their sources of income.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The dynamic context in Ethiopia calls for strong coalitions that could create space for the media and civil societies to promote and advocate for freedom of expression and media independence. International media development partners have played a significant role in inspiring and supporting local coalition initiatives through knowledge transfer and resources. However, the current situation requires a customised support mechanism aimed at creating an enabling environment that is inclusive, stable, and safe for coalitions to emerge and thrive.

To further strengthen media coalitions and encourage an evidenced approach to future interventions, media and journalism associations, coalitions, and international media development partners need to:

- **Cultivate a culture of collaboration and information sharing among the wider media stakeholders.**

To mitigate duplication of effort and unnecessary competition, media and journalism associations must work closely together and understand who is doing what, with whom, and the scope of coalition interests.

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This can be achieved by frequently assessing the media landscape and developing a database of who is doing what, along with their strengths and weaknesses, to measure effectiveness and sustainability ahead of project planning and funding.

- **Create space for civil society and the media to collaborate in promoting freedom of expression and media independence.**

The collaboration between civil society organisations and the media could effectively respond to emerging rights and democracy issues, taking the case of the CARD-led coalition for the safety of journalists as an example. Such alliances help journalism associations to benefit from coordinated fundraising, experience sharing, and visibility. Therefore, civil society organisations should be actively and purposefully supported to participate in and drive rights and media independence advocacy.

- **Develop a culture of defending the freedom of expression and media independence.**

Both coalitions and individual associations must develop a culture of defending the rights of their members. Defending rights includes promoting media independence through open statements, media campaigns, and holding advocacy meetings with the authorities. This should include efforts to build relationships between media coalitions and the media regulatory bodies. Being vocal, visible, and vibrant in defending the freedom of expression and the safety of journalists helps garner members' trust and acceptability to influence policies.

- **Enhance the capacity of coalitions and associations through unrestricted funding and technical backstopping.**

While supporting the emergence and sustainability of new coalitions is crucial, this should not be at the expense of strengthening existing coalitions to meet their objectives. A comprehensive way of support needs to be adopted by international media development partners to mitigate duplication of efforts and competition among coalitions over scarce resources. This requires treating coalition needs on a case-by-case basis and introducing a merit-based and competitive funding system to advance transparency and enable all media actors to benefit from international support.

Lessons on Media and Civil Society Coalitions in Media Reforms: Case of Sub-Saharan and Southern Africa

By Haron Mwangi, Ph.D.



Introduction

Recent studies on media and civil society coalitions, networks, and alliances in Sub-Saharan Africa have placed a significant premium on their agency in social transformation in Africa. That the history of democratisation in many of the African states in the last three decades is a reflection of media liberalisation and related reforms that have been occasioned by media and civil society coalitions and networks.

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They are social actors who, through their lobbying, engagement, negotiation, and convening power, have caused change in the sociopolitical ecosystem. This briefing paper specifically discusses lessons learnt from the various studies⁴⁵ and experiences on how factors such as structure and architecture of coalitions, operating and intervention models and strategies, funding, solidarity of coalition members, and the sociopolitical context in which they operate interact and play themselves out to determine their success in causing change; in particular the expansion of media and civic spaces including freedom of the media and of expression, human rights and safeguarding the safety and security of journalists.

Understanding Media Coalitions in Sub-Saharan and Southern Africa

Architecture, Operation, and Strategy

This briefing paper defines media stakeholder coalitions as temporary or long-term partnerships between organisations with common goals or interests. However, though they may be made up of organisations with similar missions, they may also be made up of organisations with different missions that are brought together to address a common problem. The briefing paper sees coalitions as open forums or hubs for media professional bodies and associations, civil society, journalism support organisations, and other interested stakeholders that have a stake in the media and whose work impacts journalism and the media sector, including media freedom and freedom of expression. The members of coalition interact and learn, as well as advocate for media reform, including defending and safeguarding media spaces and advancing the safety and security of journalists. These could either take the form of loose and informal structures with ease of entry and exit from the “coalition community” or strictly registered organisations operating under society or limited company laws. In more open and liberal countries characterised by constitutionalism, competitive and more or less free democratic elections, coalitions are more long-term and characterised by the solidity of their members and organised agency. A good example of such a coalition is the Kenya Media Sector Working Group (KMSWG), an offshoot of civil society and media movements associated with democratisation campaigns of the 1980s and 1990s.

⁴⁵ Mwangi. H 2023. <https://3.basecamp.com/3950315/buckets/29270062/uploads/6318907729>, Mwangi and Njiiri, 2021, *CHARM_mapping-coalitions-2021.pdf* (civicus.org). IMS, 2021, *IMS_COALITIONS-FOR-CHANGE_Final.pdf* (mediasupport.org)

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Coalitions can be distinguished from alliances and networks. Alliances are more structured partnerships between parties working toward a common goal. They may also involve a long-term commitment to work together rather than a temporary collaboration. Most collaborations between media and civil society in the struggle for multiparty democracy in the late 1980s and 1990s in Kenya and many states in West Africa took this structure. However, they did not see themselves as long-term associations but rather as nationwide movements for democratic change whose goals were immediate. When a group of individuals or organisations are connected through a common interest, idea, or relationship, they form a network. They are often less structured than coalitions or alliances and may be more decentralised. They may be local, national, regional, or international and often play a catalytic and inspirational role, particularly among coalitions struggling to establish themselves or intervene in difficult situations. They may also involve a wide range of individuals or organisations that are not necessarily working toward a specific goal but are instead sharing information, resources, or ideas. Examples are the East Africa Press Council (EAPC), linking together self-regulatory bodies in Eastern Africa, and the East Africa Press Council (EAPC), bringing together editors' associations in the East and Horn of Africa.⁴⁶

Agency Role of Coalitions in Social Transformation Agenda

A number of interesting lessons have emerged from previous studies in Africa.⁴⁷ First, coalitions and networks have a transformative capacity and play the role of conscientizing other social actors and individuals, raising awareness about the unrealised potential of society. Second, coalitions question the present order of things, including how social and political structures have produced and reproduced media and political ecosystems that constrain the potential of individuals, groups, and societies. Third, coalitions point out possible and potential alternatives and actions and apply communication and networking power to lobby for reforms. Media reform in Kenya through the KMSWG and the Media Alliance of Zimbabwe (MAZ) have played a lead role in the media policy and legislation process and in defending media freedom and freedom of expression. Magamba of Zimbabwe, through creative forms of youth activism and the use of communication power, culture, and innovation, have been able to raise awareness about the need for a more open democratic space and just Zimbabwe.

⁴⁶ Mwangi, H (2023) <https://3.basecamp.com/3950315/buckets/29270062/uploads/6318907729>
In this study, coalitions that are members of network of coalitions and civil society support group that provide technical support, including advisory, research and publicity, have recorded success in Sub-Saharan Africa. Gambia, Sierra Leone, Zimbabwe have coalitions that have made a significant achievement in reforms even in very repressive environment

⁴⁷ Mwangi and Njiiri, 2021, CHARM_mapping-coalitions-2021.pdf (civicus.org)

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Indeed, studies consulted for this briefing paper have suggested that new technology, creative art, data, and content creation distributed on social media and attendant platforms are driving coalition movements between the media and civil society, particularly among youthful civil society leaders who also happen to be tech-savvy. Though not widespread in sub-Saharan Africa, their ability to reach critical numbers of people through digital technology exerts influence among the youth and creates solidarity that can drive reform. The digital sphere players should also be invited to join coalitions. Magamba demonstrated this through its active distribution of online content.

Insights Gained from Coalition Building Efforts in Sub-Saharan and Southern Africa

Solidarity, Leadership, Ownership, and Support of Coalitions

The experiences of media coalitions in Sub-Saharan and Southern Africa show that evidence-based advocacy and demonstrated results by the coalition is a pull factor and a motivator of other associations to join the coalition and in maintaining cohesion among members. Where coalitions have demonstrated their agency to confront challenges dogging the social and political environment, denouncing exploitation, domination, human rights abuse, threats, and intimidation of journalists, there has been more solidarity among coalition members. This is a compelling strategy for building an inclusive media and civil society coalition. Systematic engagement between coalition members and communication of results creates trust and ownership of the reform process.

The presence of one or two credible and influential media associations whose power and influence are reflected through better coordination, facilitating decisions, continuous cross-learning activities, and managed by seasoned individuals is useful at the initial stages of the coalition building process and in sustaining solidarity and motivating coalition members and networks. The Uganda media sector working group steered by the Uganda Editors Guild and the Kenya media sector working group convened by the Kenya Editor Guild and the Kenya Union of Journalists have sustained the momentum of media reforms because of trusted leadership.

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The most resilient and sustainable coalitions are organic as opposed to mechanical, more informal than formal, taking their own life as time goes on. They change their structure, governance, and management system over time in response to the changing media environment. They are agile and take a soft approach as opposed to a hard approach in changing their architecture and operating system. They renew their intervention mechanism, models, and strategy, keep their networks alive, and invite and forge close alliances with other actors and human rights defenders to change their circumstances.

Media development partners, funding, and intervention models

The role of media development support groups can either dictate the survival of coalitions or spell their death knell. Where media development partners take sides in a media landscape that is polarised on contentious issues, it becomes increasingly difficult to form a solid coalition even when there is urgency. This has been one major reason why a country like Zambia has failed to build a coalition even when the situation is so dire, and the media is on the verge of being regulated by the government. Media is polarised, with one faction that is supported by media development partners opting for media self-regulation while the other is in favour of media co-regulation. The Media Alliance of Zambia has not been able to build solidarity among its members because of this binary.

Observations were made among countries in Southern Africa that there is an overwhelming duplication of effort and competition among media support groups and media associations. In Ethiopia, the coalition on the safety and security of journalists is likely to duplicate itself as some donor agencies compete for relevance and recognition and rarely share information regarding new and ongoing coalition initiatives.⁴⁸ Because media support groups work in silos, they tend to create tension between local associations affiliated with them. Media reforms in such countries are slower, and coalitions are not effective institutions of social transformation.

knowledge, values, and skills as success factors of coalition formation and solidarity building.

Coalition studies in Sub-Saharan and Southern Africa indicated that knowledge, skills, and values were considered as important drivers of coalitions, with knowledge of how to form coalitions taking precedence over skills and values. This explains why knowledge gained from regional networks is useful in establishing and inspiring coalitions across the region.

⁴⁸ *Media Coalition Process and Progress in Ethiopia: Study validation workshop, March 23, 2023, Addis Ababa.*

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The Uganda Media Sector Working Group (UMSWG) and the Uganda Editors Guild of Uganda have, for example, been inspired by the KMSWG. However, values skills in working modalities and intervention stately and values of honesty, transparency, and commitment to the course of change are extremely valuable in the success and sustainability of coalitions.

Change through media and civil society alliance

Coalitions that have well-established intervention mechanisms and functional power bases such as the convening power, communication power, lobbying power, engagement, and negotiation power are more successful. Such powers, when applied in a structured and deliberate manner and supported by other actors such as civil society, are able to intervene and bring about change even in highly contested civic and media spaces. In situations where there are alliances and collaborations between the media and civil society on common philosophy and orientation and where they share the view that they have a normative and moral obligation to change the circumstances of their societies, coalitions are effective, long-lasting, and sustainable. The Media Alliance of Zimbabwe and KMSWG have sustained their campaigns because of such alliances, linkages, and support from a wide array of civic actors and constituents.

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Mitigate competition among members

Supporting individual members to achieve their goals and intervening in areas they cannot change on their own, such as policy and lobbying for media legislation (higher goal intervention as opposed to operational issues), creates a compelling sense of belonging and motivation to remain in the coalition. It helps to answer the question: What is there for me? Coalitions should not compete with their members. Competition between coalitions and their members is common where their objectives are narrowly defined and more operational as opposed to broad but specific key themes such as media freedom and freedom of expression, governance, media professionalism, elections and peace-building, gender inclusivity in the media, media self-regulation, and independence.

Cultivate community-driven, inclusive coalitions

In democratising states and nascent ones such as Ethiopia, Zambia, Sierra Leone, Malawi, and Rwanda coalitions are more elite-driven and manned by individuals that view themselves as “all time experts in media issues”. While this leadership should not be challenged as long as it is successful in media reforms, efforts should be made to extend coalition to community-driven movements and collaborations at the grassroots level. In such countries, coalitions eventually become vehicles for the enrichment and building of personal brands as opposed to agency for social transformation. To be lead reform agency coalition should shed off the tendency of elitism, dominance, and exclusion common among the ruling class. Coalitions should practice good governance, including competent leadership and regular change of leadership.

They should set standards for their member associations and the leadership regimes they are focusing to alter. Related to this is that coalitions that have structured engagement, are professionally run, and readily demonstrate achievement and results easily develop “convening power” that earns them respect among the government executives (even as they make them uncomfortable), member associations, media stakeholders, and the international community, including media support group. An ambivalent relationship between the coalitions and governments, policymakers, and state bureaucracies is necessary for the process. Social reforms are not necessarily achieved through confrontation and protest. Mutual respect and decency have also worked in some instances.

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Strong members (media associations, civil society, and human rights defenders) make a strong coalition

A coalition is as strong, vibrant, and effective as its constituent members. Better coalitions emerged where associations are well organised and have structures of governance, regular elections, strategic plans, and good leadership than the “briefcase” associations of a few media leaders that have no constituents, and their agenda is more self-centred than the call for higher ideals of public good. Unfortunately, media associations that form coalitions are marred by leadership and governance challenges. They lack focus and sound structures good enough to achieve their goals.

Collaboration with the diaspora community to sustain coalitions

It is also evident that though locally driven coalitions emerge in media freedom and freedom of expression-constrained environment, it appears that success is hard to come by in the media ownership market dominated by state media. Journalists working in state media are less free to form or be part of coalitions lobbying or advocating for changes in media policy by their employers and the government. This is more apparent in Zambia, Zimbabwe, Uganda and Ethiopia. In Uganda, though private and commercial media are dominant, they control a very small market, and effecting change in such a private, lean media environment faces challenges. Though West African coalitions face the same challenge, they have wriggled out of it by forming collaboration and alliances with friends and support groups in the diaspora from where they receive technical support and an opportunity to amplify their voices of reforms in international media. A good example was the support of lobby groups in Sierra Leone and Gambia by human rights activists in America and Europe during the civil war.

Socio-political context influences coalition architecture

The structure and architecture of coalitions are often dictated by the social-political context in which they operate. Thus, whether the media environment is open, closed, repressive, or obstructed determines the system, model, and approaches employed by coalitions and networks to agitate for media reforms, including democracy and human rights. Kenya, for example, which is considered by the CIVICUS Monitor as obstructed, has more successful coalitions than Uganda, which is categorised as repressive, or Zimbabwe, considered as closed. Thus, any future efforts to support coalitions should focus on strengthening innovative intervention mechanisms and models that work for different countries.

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Coalitions with minimum overhead costs thrive better

Across the board, donors constitute the most important and largest source of funds.⁴⁹ This is followed by a membership and subscription fee, particularly for professional bodies.

⁴⁹ An International Fund for Public Interest Media Feasibility study (2022). The report sponsored by BBC Action was exploring the possibility of establishing of the International Fund for Public Interest journalism to address journalism the sustainability crisis in the world

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The fact that only 3 percent of the total global media support development fund goes to Africa tells how shaky donor reliance is for the survival of coalitions in Africa.⁵⁰ Coalitions with minimal overhead costs, including office rent, electricity, salaries, and allowances relying on voluntary services of their members, have responded to this change more effectively. KMSWG operation for example, is housed at the Kenya Editors Guild offices while the Media Alliance of Zimbabwe (MAZ) is run by one single person; the coordinator substantially keeping its overhead expense to the minimum.

In conclusion, studies conducted in Sub-Saharan Africa on media coalitions and networks suggest that media reforms and development have been most successful where there is solidarity and support for the initiatives by media and civil society coalitions. Indeed, deliberate rather than spontaneous collaboration has produced better results. This is evident in Kenya and the Gambia, where there has been collaboration based on open conversation, deliberate initiative, and formal engagement. The media and civil society create policy and make strategic decisions to collaborate, discuss, and agree on agendas, and results are realised faster. Thus, supporting such collaboration and building intervention capacities in terms of new models, strategies, and systems in Africa will contribute significantly to maintaining momentum for reforms.



⁵⁰ Forum on Information & Democracy. (2021). *A New Deal for Journalism*.
<https://informationdemocracy.org/working-groups/sustainability-of-journalism/>



IMS is a non-profit organisation working to support local media in countries affected by armed conflict, human insecurity and political transition. www.mediasupport.org

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