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Essay: Media and Development: The Dysfunctional Alliance

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Abstract: This essay looks at the dysfunctional relationship between overall international development assistance and more specific support to the media sector. While the international donor community sees the potential of independent media in developing countries to contribute to societies' economic and social progress, international development policies rarely have a coherent, integrated approach to the media sector, and foreign assistance often fails to achieve its goal of helping countries create a sustainable, independent media that acts in the interests of society as a whole. Indeed, leaders of many countries have decided that media—and especially unfettered, independent media—is more likely to be an obstacle, at least to their political fortunes, than a support.

The author proposes three ways that the international community could improve its work on media development and build stronger political commitment for independent media. First is strengthening country leadership and ownership of media development initiatives. This requires building local knowledge about the role of media in open societies and about how to manage a strong, independent media system. Second is integration of media development work within the broader development agenda, leveraging more of the \$135 billion that donors spend annually on official development assistance. Third is improving data, diagnostics, and learning on the media sector, particularly in developing countries, and creating a better understanding of how country-level media sectors are evolving, and how they can be best supported.

Keywords: Media development, institutional reform, development effectiveness, development assistance, media sector, development policies, open societies, governance

A wide array of evidence suggests that news media can be a powerful force for economic development and for building and sustaining democratic societies. Nobel prizewinning economists Amartya Sen (1999) and Joseph Stiglitz (1999), for example, have both shown empirical links between independent media and stronger economic and social progress.

Yet by most measures, the performance of media in the developing world is clearly failing to reach its full potential. Despite exploding growth in mobile phones and

Internet connectivity across much of the globe, the creation of high quality, independent news media is still a distant prospect for most developing countries.

Only 14% of the world's population lives in countries with a free press, according to Freedom House, and the world, on average, has produced flat or declining media freedom for most of the past two decades. IREX's Media Sustainability Index has also remained generally flat since 2005, when it started tracking the performance of selected countries' media systems.

The erosion of faith in the cleansing and renewing power of a free media has many sources. One of the most prominent is China, which has continued to grow economically—on average more than 9% per annum since 1989—despite escalating limits on citizen voice and media freedom. And if China can do it, why can't Vietnam, Russia, Ethiopia, Venezuela, and now Hungary and many more? But, as many Chinese journalists will tell you, China's growth trajectory, seen over those 25 years, has for the most part been a path of *increasing* information flow at most levels of Chinese society. And few believe that China's success story will continue if its leaders persist in their recent course of Internet censorship, harassment of journalists, and blocking foreign media. How will the world's second-largest economy maintain competitiveness in a global marketplace that requires accurate information, global knowledge exchange, and almost continual innovation if it puts more constraints on the flow of information?

Finding a way to arrest the decline in the role and performance of the media is a major preoccupation for media activists, international donors, and media development practitioners. Buoyed by several successful transformations of media sectors in Central Europe after the fall of the Soviet Union, many media development practitioners are convinced that constructive sector-wide reforms are possible and that external support from donors can be helpful. In particular, they argue that while some governments may be demurring on supporting media development, the developing world has many other governments as well as civil society and media groups that are seeking outside funding, technical expertise, and political backing to create a more diverse, independent, and sustainable news environment.

Engaging politically with countries on media development

To be effective in the increasingly complex world of media support, however, donors and media development practitioners will need to make major changes in the way they engage with countries on the topic of media. In a 2012 review of donor support to media development, the *Media Map Project* found a variety of shortcomings (Nelson 2012). Outside support for media development—which has often focused mainly on training journalists—should also focus more broadly on the overall media environment, that report concluded. And donors should

concentrate more on providing platforms for knowledge exchange and coalition building. Such platforms will allow country stakeholders—from the media industry, civil society organizations, parliamentarians, and government—to build their own understandings of the complex systemic nature of the media environment and its links to effective rule of law, good business regulation, and respect for human rights. Donors can also help facilitate South-South learning among countries going through similar reform processes. Above all is the need to engage politically with countries in defending the value of media as an institution for development.

The good news is that these messages are starting to be heard more clearly among policymakers in the international development arena. The Governance Network (GovNet) of the Development Assistance Committee, the group of donors that provides more than \$135 billion in annual development assistance, has recently included media as a component of its renewed focus on improved accountability and effective institutions. And an impressive number of countries from both the southern and northern hemispheres—including not only OECD members but countries such as Mexico, Guatemala, Timor-Leste, and Benin—have pushed for attention to freedom of expression and access to information, two critical building blocks for effective media systems, as part of the United Nations' post-2015 development agenda. While many countries continue to engage in censorship and other forms of media manipulation, demand for improved media, freedom of expression, and access to information is strong among populations of the developing world, and a large number of governments are under pressure to address these demands.

Integrating media development into broader development plans

Country-level diagnostic processes also must include the media sector as part of country institutional assessments. Donors and partner countries agreed in 2012 at a global conference in Busan, South Korea, to base their development plans on frameworks that would allow the countries receiving assistance to define their own priorities, not only to strengthen ownership but also to reduce duplication and fragmentation of donor assistance. They also agreed to create joint and inclusive diagnostic tools and processes. As part of this global effort, the World Bank is now reforming its often criticized, top-down Country Assistance Strategies into a more country-led and inclusive process for setting priorities. Ignoring the media sector, transparency, access to information, and the overall legal environment for free expression—as has often been the case in the past—would doom these new country strategies to ignoring one of the core impediments to development effectiveness.

Indeed, addressing the weaknesses in media development approaches could be a highly strategic way to address some of the shortcomings of overall development assistance. The Independent Evaluation Group in its 2013 review of the World

Bank's programs, noted a continuing deterioration in the performance of Bank-financed projects, the seventh straight year of such declines (Independent Evaluation Group 2014: xi). For many years, such evaluations have outlined a fairly consistent set of deficiencies in the Bank's country work: failure to understand the political context, insufficient country ownership and leadership not only by governments but by broader swaths of society, and lack of knowledge and capacity among the people whose engagement is critical to sustainability.

The problem is not that the world lacks experts who know how to run a finance ministry or health ministry; it is that local politics, incentives, and poorly understood cultural behaviors conspire against much of what reformers try to achieve. And stronger, more independent debate in countries about development priorities could help deepen knowledge, strengthen consensus, and track progress along the way. That is the reason why a strong, capable, and trusted media is essential.

Stronger integration of media reform into the overall development agenda could also help address the root causes of failed media reform initiatives. Many of the enabling factors that ensure a high-quality, independent media are located outside the media sector *per se* and need to be addressed as part of overall reforms in the public sector, investment climate, and regulatory practices of countries. For example, ensuring that revelations of corruption or misgovernance disclosed in the media are not met with impunity often requires reforms of the judicial system. Ensuring that media are not controlled by monopolistic business interests requires anti-trust legislation and effective implementation of those laws. Thus, a better understanding of the needs of the media sector should be part of the discussions about overall government reforms so that the media is not seen as an isolated, oppositional institution but rather as an important building block of the structures of effective governance.

In successful reformers such as Poland or South Korea, for example, public sector reforms and the creation of a competitive private sector went hand-in-hand with media reforms. In the 1990s, Poland laid the foundations for a strong media sector by ensuring that public sector and legal reforms fostered transparency, fair competition, and a strong rule of law. This helped create an environment in which the media sector could thrive. At the same time, the growing news media helped translate the complex new laws and regulations of a market economy to Polish citizens. It also strengthened accountability among political leaders, bureaucrats, and citizens. The private sector in turn invested enthusiastically in what would become one of Poland's most modern and competitive industrial sectors—media, entertainment, and advertising.

A Three-pronged Strategy for Media Development

Realizing the full promise of the media as a core institution of development will not come easily, particularly in a world where so much of the media not only face challenges to their traditional business model but also threats and suppression from governments. It will require strong leadership from both donors and from developing countries, both of whom will need to build stronger political arguments for why independent media is crucial to development.

At the Center for International Media Assistance, we have identified three broad areas of focus and action:

1. Strengthening developing country leadership and ownership of media sector reforms

One of the lessons of the last 50 years of development work is that few reforms take root without local buy-in and leadership of the reform process. Outsiders can offer advice, financial support, and set an example, but few countries have made sustainable progress without a strong country-led process of change.

Such leadership can come from many parts of a society, and parliamentarians, private sector advocates, and civil society organizations can play an important role in raising awareness of the importance of independent media. But without strong political leadership at the top, real and sustainable change almost never happens.

In the media sector, countries such as Poland, the Czech Republic, South Korea, and most recently Uruguay have gone through such a country-driven process with much success. Tadeusz Mazowiecki (the first Polish prime minister after the fall of communism in 1989) and Nelson Mandela in South Africa are examples of national leaders who made a vigorous, independent media a core focus of their tenures in government. But today, such leadership is in short supply. On the contrary, in countries from Ecuador to Russia, national leaders are in open warfare with independent news media. International donors can help local leaders strengthen their leadership on media development by supporting South-South dialogues, coalition-building, and other collaborative approaches focused on this topic.

2. Integration of media development work with the broader development agenda

Currently, the vast majority of media development initiatives are relatively isolated efforts, with few direct connections to other development work going on within countries. This means that organizations such as the World Bank—which tries to strengthen core institutions responsible for public finance management, the rule of law, or sectors like health or education—rarely see concrete links to needed

reforms in the media sector. Yet much evidence suggests that these links are critical both to the prospects for building a strong sustainable media sector and to the success of the broader development agenda.

Key to this integration is keeping alive the dialogue now underway in the GovNet and in the separate but related discussions about the post-2015 agenda. Even if media does not finally emerge from the negotiations as one of the explicit targets that will be tracked on a global scale, the debate itself has been an important forum for raising awareness of the essential role of media. The global debate is also key to defining ways to improve the effectiveness of the more than \$650 million in annual media development spending and to ensuring that this spending is well planned, executed, and coordinated within the broader development framework.

3. Improving data, diagnostics, research, and learning

Lastly, the global media development community needs to devote more energy to improving our understanding of the media in developing countries by supporting better media sector *diagnostics, data, and research and learning* from the experiences of our partners. The whole media development community needs to expand the tools for better tracking and intelligence on the media sector, particularly at a time when the media business model is being uprooted by new technologies and news delivery methods. Existing indicators such as the Freedom House freedom of the press indicator and the Media Sustainability Index should be supplemented by improved market and country-level data. Media development organizations also need to push for better integration of the media sector into all country-level diagnostic processes that are undertaken by developing countries and their donor partners. Better integration into governance and other diagnostics processes is the first step to a more serious and sustained approach to addressing the media sector's development needs.

We also need to find ways to convince the broader donor community and private sector to invest in helping countries improve audience research and other market mechanisms that can help build more economically sustainable media institutions. The local and international private sector can be a powerful ally in media reforms, yet too little effort is going toward building synergies between official development assistance and private sector investment. Better market diagnostics in emerging markets will help create confidence for stronger investment in the media, and donors should consider audience research in particular as a highly strategic way to improve overall market conditions.

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