

Research School

MEDAS 21

**Global Media Assistance:
Applied Research, Improved Practice in the 21 Century**

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Conceptual Background – MEDAS 21

Media development assistance (MDA): A buzzword, an often vague future promise where traditional and digital media are constantly associated with social and democratic progress, with the potential to resolve crises and conflicts and also the idea of promoting economic prosperity. Nevertheless, a completely different attribution of meaning in science and practice becomes clear when, regardless of the financial scope of current media development cooperations MDA-related research in communication and media studies receives only marginal attention (Fengler and Jorch 2012). Very different perspectives on and different self-understandings of media development cooperation in science and practice may be relevant here, especially when a frequently demanded exchange between the fields is not always self-evident (Servaes 2016). But as one of the recent FOME conferences »Media and Media Assistance in Fragile Contexts« (Berlin 2016) has shown it's an extremely important and fruitful endeavor.

Independent, professional and critical media are - according to a Western understanding - indispensable elements of democratically developing societies. The promotion of journalism and the media in transitional societies and restrictive systems is therefore an established field of Western development cooperation. *Transparency Now's* annual ranking of countries' vulnerability to corruption is strikingly in line with the annual press freedom ranking issued by *textitReporters Without Borders* (cf. Russ-Mohl 2011). More than 25 years after the collapse of so-called existing socialism, new journalism cultures have developed in Eastern European transformation societies such as Hungary, Poland and Romania, opposing increasing political influence on the media.

In recent years, the international political and media conditions for development cooperation projects have changed fundamentally. New actors such as China or Iran, with their economic or national-political agenda, are pushing for the international marketplace for MDA in Africa and Asia, and with low-threshold offerings are also abandoning the politically-normatively charged activities of many European players. With the growing importance of »social media« and »citizen journalism«, the focus on promoting journalism and traditional media has been called into question. In a world that is increasingly shaped by phenomena like globalization and mediatization (Hepp and Krotz 2014), and in which international conflicts are increasingly being mediated ¹, the key role of media in transformation societies is becoming increasingly apparent. The related situation of refugees also requires the media in the countries of origin to comprehensively reflect on the topic of migration (cf. Fengler 2016). By cross-border communication, even in restrictive societies, new opportunities of participation in a common global public sphere arise. At the same time, the Islamist attacks on the French editorial staff of *Charlie Hebdo* point to the potential danger of media content communicated to other cultures. Meanwhile, autocratic regimes such as those in Turkey, Egypt or China are trying to restrain the potential of social media in particular to mobilize civil society by massively blocking online communication or to use it for their own purposes.

So where in the context of these conflicting political and economic interests a responsible international media development cooperation in the 21st century should begin? This question is a crucial issue for the whole *MEDAS 21* project. Within its seven PhD projects, *MEDAS 21* will contribute to the basic research on

¹See here the communication strategies of the IS and the debate about the impact of Russian actors on national election campaigns.



Fig. 0.1: Aspects of Media Development Assistance

a field shaped by specific power structures, which has been insufficiently researched so far. On the other hand, it will address current issues of practice scientifically and develop concrete options for action. The mutual influence of traditional, social and international media, especially in transitional countries, demand new research approaches, which should not only include media studies perspectives and findings from interpersonal communication research, but also the reconstruction of the respective action-guiding implicit knowledge patterns of (intercultural) communication practices (Loenhoff 2012, Loenhoff 2014, Loenhoff 2015).

For this concern, a research collaboration of the three institutes of the University Alliance Ruhr (IfJ Dortmund, IfM Bochum, IfK Duisburg-Essen) organized as an international structured PhD-Practice-Program in the field of Journalism and Media and Communication studies seems to be an excellent approach. The research project proposed here will investigate the specific characteristics of *media* development assistance and discuss their practical relevance along recent lines of debates in the field of development cooperation.

As far as international comparative communication and media studies or journalism research and practice is concerned any debate on current dynamics in the field of media development cooperation will have to deal with the trends identified below (see fig. 0.1), to find adequate descriptions, analyses and appropriate conclusions for institutional and individual action and recommendation frameworks for media practitioners.

Impact Skepticism

The huge investments in media development cooperation² currently go along with a controversial debate across disciplines dealing with the effectiveness, meaningfulness and legitimacy of previous development efforts (*Impact Skepticism*). While some authors criticize the major economic and social interventionist development plans via external shock therapy (Easterly 2006) and the paternalistic tyranny of Western

²Cauhapé-Cazaux and Kalathil (2015, p. 7,9) state a global average annual amount of approximately \$ 377 million for the period 2006-2012. For Germany alone, expenditures in 2012 amount to approx. USD 140 million.

technocrats or advocating the cessation of all developmental investment (Easterly 2016) others vehemently urge the need for increasing development cooperation efforts to even begin to adhere to the UN Development Goals (Sachs 2005). However, even in media development cooperation investments do not necessarily correlate with a positive development of media freedom indexes, in addition to other issues such as media and journalism related normative and cultural discrepancies between the actors involved as well as an evident self-interest of a growing number of NGOs in the media sector (Fengler and Jorch 2012). Those issues are often combined with a lack of interest in an independent evaluation, which ultimately can only be achieved by impartial communication study experts. At the moment, such a systematic, comprehensive and transparent discussion, especially in the context of German media and communication studies as well as media practice and policy, is still pending. A detailed and independent evaluation of the empirically proven successes and the analysis of possible fallibility is an essential prerequisite to reach a new level of quality in media development assistance.

Potential partner organizations: tbd

Fragmentation

Especially in the context of the debate on the effectiveness of development cooperation, the concept of *fragmentation* of international cooperation efforts gains renewed importance (Klingbiel et al. 2016, pp. 1-9). Similar to the discussions in other fields such as International Relations, MEDAS 21 attempts to describe the current empirical situation and here the proliferation of media development actors (international: China, Japan, Qatar, Turkey, Russia; regional: Thailand, Indonesia), the growing atomization of objectives, instruments, modalities and activities, but also tries to make the visible frictions and overlaps of complex institutional settings analytically more tangible. From a methodological point of view, especially qualitative studies seem necessary and promising in order to capture the underlying patterns and consequences of a fragmented development landscape in depth (see also Drefs and Thomaß 2016, p. 22). The multifaceted causes and effects are not easy to identify and to evaluate, in particular if a diversified spectrum of actors, methodological approaches and goals can not only be incoherent and possibly unintentionally ineffective, but exactly this pluralism carries innovation and competition stimuli in itself. Hence, in an overall assessment this may also have positive effects on media cooperation projects, as indicated by increasingly more coordinated European media development projects.³

Potential partner organizations: tbd

Securitization

Another aspect that has become increasingly crucial in recent years in the area of development cooperation is that of *Securitization* (Brown and Grävingsholt 2016a, pp. 2f.). According to the mantra »no security without development – no development without security« this describes the phenomenon that lines of development and security considerations are increasingly blurred and conceptually equated with another or totally integrated. In particular, so far security-distant civil-humanitarian areas experience a recognizable respecification due to predominant security aspects – this with a tendency to relegate development-specific topics to a secondary role (Schiller2008). Merging development cooperation with distinct security narratives sets a legitimacy and moral framework that not only increases the likelihood of military interventions, but also

³Following Drefs and Thomaß 2016, p. 18, the media development sector is well aware of the need for increased coordination and closer cooperation, although in practice the stated trend towards fragmentation remains.

indicates the loss of the neutral position of the development sector, which is crucial to its external perception.⁴ All in all, it seems reasonable to understand *securitization* as a multidimensional process that can show different forms depending on context and time and that does not necessarily have to be irreversible or with clearly predictable effects. In order to analyze the deeper implications of prevailing security imperatives and donors' national interests on the logics, priorities, policies and practices of (media) development cooperation, it seems appropriate to examine current discourses, financial flows and institutional structures. On the one hand, this allows to understand media-relevant shifts of meaning and interpretations in the discourse (e.g. the fragile/failed states debate) and, on the other hand, it becomes possible to describe the allocation of development-relevant budgets and organizational innovations in the field of intergovernmental cooperation and coordination in the nexus of security and media development policies. In addition, more complex explanatory approaches are to be identified and discussed, which take into account not only specifics of the international system but also peculiarities of national political cultures and characteristics of institutions or individual actors (Brown et al. 2016, pp. 237-249), that hence contribute to the description of the overall phenomenon in the context of media development cooperation. The urgency of the problem is illustrated by the fact that UN peacekeeping missions, with their special UN radio stations, are increasingly faced with the expectation of fulfilling public service broadcast functions during and after their missions. The conflicting objectives between the journalistic-ethical role definition, a robust security mandate, missing long-term conceptual and organizational resources, a de facto social responsibility and an interventionist behavior are apparent here.

Potential partner organizations: Hironnelle (with strong focus on UN-related project proposals)

Fragility

Another key aspect of global development cooperation has been the discussion about the importance of fragile states or so-called »failed states«, where *fragility* is often associated with questions of peace-building, the effectiveness of state structures or international security. The common assumption that effective development cooperation requires always functioning state structures and a stable economic environment is increasingly challenged by successful local-autonomous microinterventions. Consequently, an awkward sociopolitical context does not negate the effectiveness of development policy efforts per se.⁵ It can be seen, however, that the development budget particularly for fragile states – here e.g. Sudan – is highly volatile, hardly strategically coordinated, rather reactive and comparatively underfunded, and extremely selective and limited to only a small number of states. In order to allow an adequate analysis of fragility issues, the complex relationships between state institutions, civil society organizations, international actors, and the media has to be analyzed beyond the usual good governance or state building approaches. Developmental principles need to be reconsidered taking into account context factors like political economy and global strategic interests, but also to local responsibility and sustainable financing strategies (Ware 2014, pp. 3ff., Ware and Ware 2014, pp. 38ff.). Therefore, approaches and projects of media development cooperation have to face this new insights, should ask for existing alternatives and comprehensively reevaluate their basic assumptions.

Potential partner organizations: Media in Cooperation and Transition (MiCT) | African Media Initiative (AMI)
| Hironnelle

⁴Haasen 2015 here refers to the break-up of the independent journalistic structures in the politically unstable Burundi built in the peace building process with international assistance.

⁵The successful training of Syrian journalists and activists out of Turkey can be mentioned here in order to support at least a minimum level of reporting from the war-torn country.

Public Diplomacy Supremacy

With regard to recent developments a more intensive examination of the phenomenon of an increasing fusion of strategic communication and development communication appears necessary (Waisbord2014). This is particularly the case when efforts of state public diplomacy coincide with genuine media development initiatives and development-specific aspects and discussions increasingly are subordinated to questions of reputation and image or political and economic objectives that predominantly act as a guiding principles (*Public Diplomacy Supremacy*)(Pamment 2016, pp. 7-12). Against the backdrop of new players in the field of development cooperation such as China, particularly the clarification of fundamental priority shifts or the establishment of a completely new understanding of media development assistance is becoming increasingly important (Zhang et al. 2016).

Potential partner organizations: tbd

Digital Transformation

The strategic inclusion of digitization in media development cooperation is one most often discussed aspects, especially with regard to the potential for political, economic and social impulses associated with *digital transformation*.⁶ A series of images is currently used to describe the current developments on the African continent. Once referred to as a »Hopeless Continent«, it is now labeled with the mantra of »Africa Rising« (Economist 2000, Economist 2013) and described as »New Africa« (Johnson 2011) that fulfills a quantum leap »from the premodern to the digital age« (Signer 2014). Despite of great dynamics in digital-media development and media cooperations, it remains to be clarified whether this optimism, also with regard to the media-driven but nevertheless failed Arabellion, needs not be qualified. This is especially true when innovation cycles across hemispheres fail, a one-sided technological diffusion favors partial and asymmetric concentration effects, and the likelihood of continuing North-South discrepancies and patterns of global disparities⁷ increase rather than the chance for a global social convergence. In addition, the double-edged potential of digital media innovations also remains to be analyzed especially in crisis and conflict situations, when they can cause polarization besides possible de-escalating effects, and also can be used as surveillance tools or to manipulate public discourses by fake news.

Potential partner organizations: Deutsche Welle Akademie | African Media Initiative (AMI) | CAMECO | Konrad Adenauer Foundation

Political Economy of Communication

Inevitably, media development assistance as a self-reflective discipline has to deal with the development and (inter- or transnational) interdependencies of social, political and economic conditions and needs to find explanations and media-programmatic solutions for the emergence of specific social structures, power hierarchies and inequalities and their legitimization. Due to the dominance of MDA actors in an additionally highly application-oriented field of MDA research, we are currently facing a lack of unbiased perspectives on the incentives, resources and restrictions of national and international actors involved in the field of media development practice. Here, a new interdisciplinary perspective, including theoretical models from

⁶As an example, we refer to the *Strategic Partnership for a Digital Africa* of the BMZ (Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development).

⁷The term »global disparity« is used here as a general expression to summarize the different dimensions of inequality in politics, economy, culture and media. In context of media terms like »digital divide« or »digital gap« are commonly used (Zillien and Haufs-Brusberg 2014).

political and economic sciences, can lead to a more sophisticated understanding of the motives, interests and restrictions of the actors involved and thus potentially contribute to recommendations for pragmatic and efficiency-oriented actions (*Political Economy of Communication*). Economics or a rational choice approach has been proposed to broaden the theory canon of communication studies (Fengler and Ruß-Mohl 2008a, Fengler and Ruß-Mohl 2008b) and as possible innovative impulses for the theoretical and praxis-oriented analysis of media development cooperation. An application of economic approaches to international and intercultural issues have been so far comparatively rare in Economics and Political Science (Levi 1989, Ockenfels 1999). Hence, results of this project can also be of great interest to other disciplines beyond communication and media studies.

Potential partner organizations: African Media Initiative (AMI)

Evaluation & Methodology Challenges

After initially hesitant efforts to consistently monitor and evaluate media development projects, the field now faces even greater expectations in terms of methodological effectiveness and impact, that often far beyond the single project activities (Mosher 2011, pp. 239f.) (*Evaluation & Methodology Challenges*). Apart from methodological considerations, at the level of evaluation practices the discussion of conceptual assumptions (e.g. media theories of transformation) or organizational or bureaucratic factors remain crucial (institutional agendas and competition, organizational competences) (Waisbord 2011). Moreover, the relationship of qualitative and quantitative methods in MDA evaluations is still contested. Recent evidence-based methods based on randomized study designs have rarely been discussed in media development practice and research so far. In particular, a rather case-related, incremental problem-solving understanding might lead to new ways of effective, context-adequate media development cooperation project beyond common macro analyses and global solution strategies (Banerjee and Duflo 2011, pp. 4ff.). Also the promising integration of context-sensitive qualitative methods and concepts into the canon of mostly Euro-American dominated communication and media studies by including regional studies (Area Studies) that go beyond Western horizons remains a thoroughly controversial field (Richter 2016). Thus, an in-depth analysis and field evaluation appears to be highly relevant for media and communication studies as well as for media development practice – this independently of the challenges and demands of comparative research settings (Stark 2012).

Potential partner organizations: Friedrich Ebert Foundation | Deutsche Welle Akademie | Hirondelle | CAMECO | African Media Initiative (AMI)

Constructive/ Peace Journalism

The role of the media in conflicts and wars and their associated potential for (de-)escalation in peace processes and in the formation of stable, peaceful social formations remains a constantly important aspect of media development cooperation and at the same time a emerging field in Media and Communication Studies (Hoffmann and Hawkins 2016). Digital media innovations and their contribution to social peace processes, as well as their role in the organizational setting of peace actors, such as the United Nations (keyword: digital peace tools), serve alongside of the - still extremely relevant - classical media (e.g. radio) as important starting points for peace-oriented media assistance issues. Nonetheless, interdisciplinary perspectives remain important when it comes to the sociological, cultural or psychological contexts of individual and social negotiation, adjustment and change processes of actors, such as the disarmament and social reintegration

of former conflicting parties (Jacob 2017). In this context, it is also necessary to clarify the perspectives of a solution-oriented and public-interest-oriented »Constructive Journalism« in situations of a profound erosion of confidence between media and citizens, especially in conflict and war contexts that are often subject to manipulation, and in contrast to other concepts like »Mediative Journalism« (Wetzstein2011).

Potential partner organizations: CAMECO | Media in Cooperation and Transition (MiCT)

Communication for Social/Political Change

The German-language term »Medienentwicklungszusammenarbeit« simplifying encompasses the more defined field of development of media organizations and the vast area of media communication that aims to initiate social (cultural, political, economic) change. The latter aspect, in particular, deals with inter- and intra-national inequalities and the significance of communicative processes for the structural transformation of existing (global) social-political hegemonic relations. In the analysis of structures, actors and cultural aspects, especially the dialogical inclusion of subaltern or peripheral perspectives can help to decentralize the current elite-centered discourses of the common good. Moreover, de-centered perspectives can help to redefine the latter in order to equalize power asymmetries in education and healthcare as well as social welfare distribution (Dutta 2011). This is especially true when political or economic interest groups attempt to restructure journalism and media institutions by influencing and occupying those through regulations and ownership – far beyond any sustainable ideas for the common good (political parallelism / media capture). The complex and often dynamic paths of development and impact mechanisms in the field of media development cooperation – especially their national and international interdependencies – are of analytical interest here and require more attention and sophisticated approaches to analysis.

Potential partner organizations: Friedrich Ebert Foundation | Media in Cooperation and Transition (MiCT) | Konrad Adenauer Foundation | African Media Initiative (AMI)

Paradigm Rivalry/Conceptual Ambiguity

The conception and evaluation of media development projects, is still characterized by a continuous competition between different development perspectives (modernization approach, dependency approach) and respective modes of communication (diffusion or participation): using simply combined theorems – quite common in media practice – often leads to a situation of contradictory objectives, incoherent project designs and adversarial or unsustainable effects (*Paradigm Rivalry/Conceptual Ambiguity*)(Lennie and Tacchi 2013, p. 4).⁸ Even seemingly trivial differentiations of the term »media development assistance« – as media mobilization or media communication for development or as communication about respective development projects – have conceptual, methodological and evaluation related consequences, which must be taken into consideration, even if the discussion seems fragmented (Berger 2010). All in all, there are striking discrepancies between communication and media studies and the field of practice, that call for a detailed examination and a dialogical sensitization in order to map differing expectations and horizons in politics, media practice and research.

Potential partner organizations: tbd

⁸Interventions by politicians or financiers in the case of results of strictly participatory projects or possible pro-forma participation processes can be cited here as examples.

Ideas for future dissertation projects

On the basis of the relevant meta aspects identified for media development cooperations, a number of exemplary dissertation projects can be developed, which, however, in their final form are based on the agreements between the doctoral candidates and the respective cooperating practice institution. The following, thematically incomplete table can give an initial impulse for further project ideas.

Tab. 0.1: PhD project ideas *MEDAS 21*

Aspekt	Projekt
Fragmentation	<i>Network analysis and index development for fragmentation in media development cooperation</i> <i>Fragmentation and South-South cooperation - new actors and forms of donor coordination</i> <i>EU/UN-media development policies, fragmented practice and implementation failures</i>
Securitization	<i>Factors and constraints of public media equivalents in international UN peacekeeping missions in (post-)conflict contexts</i> <i>Organizational and conceptual differentiation issues of development and security related policy formations in MDA</i>
Fragility	<i>Media cooperation as context-sensitive micro-interventions beyond state structures</i>
Public Diplomacy Supremacy	<i>New imbalances between state-strategic and development-oriented communication?</i> <i>China, Indonesia, Iran - Global and regional Public Diplomacy strategies of new MDA actors</i>
Digital Transformation	<i>Digital participation and digital rights - driving forces of social transformation?</i> <i>Digitization – Comparison of conditions and limits of nonprofit media sustainability in development contexts</i> <i>Digital media innovations in crises and conflicts: Escalation, polarization or digital peace?</i> <i>Digital Divide - media access, media literacy and global innovation cycles</i> <i>Digital peace: Social media, media intelligence und UN peacekeeping</i>
Int. Political Economy	<i>Factors of successful business models for independent media in developing countries</i> <i>Global market structures and quantification strategies of international media cooperation</i>
Evaluation & Methodology	<i>Potentials of evidence-based media development cooperation through randomized trials</i> <i>New evaluation methods and standards in the field of freedom of expression and media development</i> <i>Alternative approaches to outreach and media use research in MDA</i>
Constructive Journalism/ Peace Journalism	<i>New perspectives of inter-religious media peace work</i> <i>Media, armed conflicts and the process of ethno-confessional reconciliation</i>
Communication and social/political Change	<i>Media, power and transitional justice</i> <i>United Nations development communication: New strategies and methods</i> <i>Social media and development</i> <i>ICT, big data and development</i> <i>Media and mobilization for sustainable political change</i>
Paradigm Rivalry/Ambiguity	<i>Media, dialogue & empowerment: Interventions for human rights and freedom of expression</i> <i>Theoretical coherence vs. practical dissonances: problems of theory and method mashups in media development practice</i> <i>Cultural difference and polarity in media development cooperation</i> <i>Culturally implicit presumptions: actors, organizations and their influence on media development cooperation policies</i> <i>Regional and context-specific models of media development cooperation</i>

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