

Media development: An evaluation of five capacity- strengthening projects

Rosie Parkyn and Sonia Whitehead

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Executive summary

A strong, independent and plural media underpins all development, enabling people to participate in the debates and decisions that shape their lives. Yet media's potential to play this fundamental role has not been fully realised. In fact, 2014 saw a decline in media freedom globally, with many media sectors across the world remaining weak, poorly resourced and subject to the influence of powerful interests.

The fact that independence is so hard won is all the more reason to try and achieve it: media matters, as much to the powerful as to the average individual on the street. Those involved in media development owe it to the populations they seek to benefit to scrutinise and evaluate their own efforts carefully, ensuring that they continually challenge themselves to improve the work they do.

BBC Media Action has been involved in media development since it was founded in 1999. Over the years, we have designed and deployed a broad range of evaluation approaches and methodologies to assess the impact of and learn from our work. This has generated much internal discussion: Are we measuring the right things? Where can we realistically expect to see change? How much should we spend on evaluation? How can we tell whether that change is sustainable?

This paper is our attempt to bring that discussion to the wider media development community. In it, we set out our working evaluation framework and methodology alongside the findings generated by applying this framework to five different capacity-strengthening interventions. We do so with the hope and expectation of hearing comments and reflections that may help us to improve our evaluation framework and methodology.

The paper takes the following shape. Part one provides a brief history of BBC Media Action's capacity-strengthening work, explaining its evolution over the last 16 years and furnishing the reader with a typology of interventions ranging from low to high intensity. Part two identifies the three key principles underlying our approach: first, that audiences are at the core; second, that embedded mentors are the most effective means through which to deliver capacity strengthening; and third, that all interventions should seek to achieve impact at four levels: audience, practitioner, organisation and system.

Part three begins by explaining how BBC Media Action's evaluation of capacity-strengthening interventions evolved, as the interventions became increasingly integrated and complex. In brief, it became necessary to develop a methodology that could better capture and triangulate impact at these four levels through the perspectives of multiple stakeholders. This requires a mixed-methods approach, with a set of indicators and evaluation activities arranged under each level.

Part four explains the decision to adopt a qualitative case study approach for the research design, and describes how five cases were randomly selected for evaluation from Nigeria, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Nepal and the Palestinian Territories. Part five details these cases, setting out the characteristics of each media partner, the aims of each intervention, the evaluation methodology applied, the main findings and the barriers to change.

Part six offers illustrative examples of impact achieved under each of the levels, while part seven discusses the emerging implications of these findings, linking them to the broader challenges around securing the sustainability of capacity strengthening going forward. We find broad support for the more holistic, embedded mentoring model our organisation has embraced in recent years – one that acknowledges the interdependence between the “four levels” of the audience, the practitioner, the organisation and the wider media system. But our findings also suggest that a number of long-term challenges remain, which will need to be addressed in order to secure sustainable change. These include securing the political will to support independent media, creating a favourable business environment in which media outlets can achieve financial sustainability, and making sure that media development actors can work consistently with the same partners over a multi-year timeframe.

Part eight closes with a series of conclusions and recommendations for the media development sector as a whole. These include that the mentoring model works and thus has great merit for scaling up, that there is great potential for audiences to contribute to sustainability by protecting the media that matters to them, that systems-level factors must be understood and should be addressed where it is possible to do so, and that more time and energy should be invested in co-developing sustainability strategies with capacity-strengthening partners.