



PRIMED

PROTECTING INDEPENDENT MEDIA
FOR EFFECTIVE DEVELOPMENT

GLOBAL

Media Viability

LEARNING BRIEF



2024



CONTENTS

About PRIMED	3
Executive Summary	4
The background to this brief	4
Key learnings and recommendations	4
The PRIMED approach to addressing media viability	5
Supporting individual media organisations	5
Learnings covered in this brief	5
The context of the PRIMED programme	6
PRIMED support for media organisations	6
Main findings	7
Audience development	7
Revenue development	9
Organisational management	14
Digital development	17
Conclusions and recommendations	19



About PRIMED

The programme Protecting Independent Media for Effective Development (PRIMED) was designed to support public interest media content provision in three very different media environments –Bangladesh, Ethiopia and Sierra Leone. It also aimed to create and share learning to contribute to a more targeted and impactful global approach to supporting media outlets.

A three-year programme that ran from late 2020, PRIMED was implemented by a consortium of media support organisations with expertise in different aspects of media and development. These were BBC Media Action (consortium lead), Free Press Unlimited (FPU), International Media Support (IMS) and Media Development Investment Fund (MDIF), with further contributions from Global Forum for Media Development (GFMD), and The Communication Initiative (CI).

PRIMED sought to address the challenges facing public interest media at both outlet and environment level. The programme involved working with selected media outlets to increase

resilience to political and economic pressures. At the same time, it supported the development of information ecosystems that enable a better flow of trusted public interest media content. Gender equality and inclusion were integrated across the programme.

To create and share learning about effective media support in different contexts, PRIMED used the insights and data gained during its implementation phase to prepare this series of learning briefs. These attempt to answer key questions in relation to independent media and media support:

- The financial viability of media organisations (led by MDIF)
- The effectiveness of public subsidies to public interest media (led by BBC Media Action)
- Improving gender equality in media workplaces, content and audiences (led by FPU)
- The role of local coalitions in strengthening media ecosystems (led by IMS)



Executive summary

This brief seeks to answer the following learning question:

What strategies and solutions in areas such as revenue generation, audience development, organisational management and digital development are effective in supporting the financial viability of independent media in fragile contexts? Which innovations show the most promise? What have we learned from these strategies?

The background to this brief

Financial viability lies at the heart of public interest media. Financial viability helps to insulate media organisations from political and business actors seeking to influence editorial decisions, and makes organisations more resilient to economic and political changes.

PRIMED worked with a number of media organisations, principally in Ethiopia but also in Sierra Leone and Bangladesh, to support their business development in four key areas: audience development, revenue development, organisational management and digital development.

Each media organisation's needs were assessed, and the organisations were carefully matched with an experienced coach with appropriate expertise. Coaches worked intensively with leaders from each media organisation, identifying and implementing strategies to address areas of business weakness.

Key learnings and recommendations

The learnings identified here are practically focused. This brief briefly describes the strategies and recommendations identified during this process for other media organisations seeking to implement similar approaches in the four focus areas:

- **Audience development:** content production, studio construction, social media
- **Revenue development:** investing in equipment, strengthening the sales team, business

development, sustaining growth, monetising content, improving digital offering

- **Organisational management:** organisational structure, production workflows, strengthening organisational development for content production, organisational management, creating an editorial policy
- **Digital development:** investing in equipment, programme preparation workflows, improving video quality

Assessing the effectiveness of the implemented approaches led to a number of general conclusions and recommendations.

Design tailor-made business development

solutions: Delivering bespoke, context-specific support programmes has proven to be an effective approach with strong chances of building media sustainability. Adopting strategies used by others can inspire and guide media organisations but should not be a cut-and-paste solution.

The relationship between the coach and media

organisation leader is vital: Coaches and media leaders must be carefully matched, not only in terms of expertise but also in relationship terms, so they can build the trust needed for successful interventions, and accurately assess the degree of internal commitment to change.

Small grants tied to business development

plans are effective: Supporting business development plans with small, targeted grants to aid implementation is effective.

Business development support is also important for non-traditional media outlets:

Media development organisations and funders should seek to support non-traditional media, eg production companies, in addition to traditional media outlets.

Viability initiatives should focus on the foundations for long-term business development:

Significant progress can be made by establishing media organisations on the right foundations. In its relatively short duration, PRIMED made many positive steps towards media viability, with initial work often targeted at building foundations on which future growth can be built. Short-term programmes miss out on much bigger potential rewards from extended programmes.

The PRIMED approach to addressing media viability

There is no universally accepted definition of “media viability”. As DW Akademie noted,¹ “So far, there is no common language among media and media development stakeholders to describe the complex challenge of media viability: ‘media sustainability,’ ‘financial sustainability,’ ‘business viability,’ or ‘economic sustainability’ of the media are just some of the labels being used.” However, it is clear that viability operates on at least two levels; the individual media organisation and the environment in which it operates.


Supporting individual media organisations

Work to support media viability under PRIMED was targeted at individual media organisations, based on the understanding that an improved financial position will provide a level of insulation from political and business actors seeking to influence editorial decision-making for their own advantage.² Improving a media organisation’s business capacities and financial position also supports its financial resilience, helping it to weather market downturns, reduce reliance on single revenue sources – whether grant or earned – and allowing it to properly resource journalistic coverage.³

Learnings covered in this brief

This brief addresses learnings from PRIMED initiatives that principally comprised coaching and training in media management, strategy development and implementation, and in some cases content production. These efforts were supported by providing small, targeted grants tied to business development plans.

Learning from the programme centres on identifying practical strategies that worked (and some that did not), particularly drawing out lessons and recommendations for other media organisations seeking to build their viability in challenging markets, and for media development organisations and funders aiming to support media business development.



“Effective business models are necessary to sustain media operations and ensure sufficient revenue streams, to avoid dependencies that can limit diffusion of information and ideas and constrain debate, and to provide reasonable stability in incomes so that fluctuations do not unduly constrain activities.”

Ricard, PG⁴

“For media freedom to become a reality for the sector, the sector must be economically sustainable... economically stable media are less exposed to threats...”

Stefano da Empoli⁵



The context of the PRIMED programme

In many ways the timing of PRIMED could not have been worse. As its work commenced, the Covid-19 pandemic struck, not only causing immense personal trauma, but also devastating many media organisations financially, particularly in the Global South.⁶ Soon afterwards, war broke out in Ethiopia between central government forces and Tigrayan rebels, negatively impacting the economy but also directly affecting media activities, including restrictions on news reporting, social media blackouts and even the jailing of journalists. As the pandemic began to recede in early 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, sparking a global cost-of-living crisis and surging inflation.

Media partners – and PRIMED coaches – responded with adaptability, innovation and resilience, from learning to run (and coach) businesses via video calls to reaching new audiences through new channels. Despite these challenges, PRIMED achieved notable successes, and the programme was able to collect examples of interventions that supported various aspects of media viability, as well as some that did not have the desired outcomes.

While not all media organisations involved in the programme have sharply increased revenues, they have all established stronger business foundations and enhanced their internal capacities. In some cases, their continued existence after three challenging years is in itself a positive result.

PRIMED support for media organisations

Two PRIMED consortium members provided specific support on media viability to partner media organisations: MDIF (Media Development Investment Fund) and BBC Media Action.

As part of the PRIMED consortium, MDIF worked closely with five media organisations in Ethiopia over three years, one of which left the programme early for non-business reasons and was replaced in early 2023. This brief covers the four MDIF media partners still involved at the end of the project, plus learnings from four other organisations that received business development support from BBC Media Action in Ethiopia, Sierra Leone and Bangladesh:

- **Addis Maleda**, initially a weekly newspaper with a small digital site, now a fully digital media outlet that produces news on political, social and economic issues for a general audience.
- **ARTS TV**, a privately owned entertainment and news TV channel, based in Addis Ababa.
- **Ethiopia Insider**, an online media organisation that provides news, in-depth analysis and features on political, social and economic issues to a general audience
- **Wazema Radio**, an independent outlet that produces a mixture of online audio content, programs broadcast on a local radio station and online news stories
- **Mensh Production plc**, a small independent production company based in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, better known for the feminist TV show “Mama Africa”.
- **Classic Radio**, a small commercial radio station based in Bo, Sierra Leone’s second largest city.
- **Voice of Kono**, a small community radio based in Koidu, Sierra Leone.
- **Gramer Kagoj**, a regional daily newspaper based in Jessore, Bangladesh.

At the start of the project, coaches were carefully matched with media organisations to ensure both personal and thematic compatibility. Coaches worked closely with media organisation leaders to devise suitable, context-specific strategies in four key business development areas:

- **Audience development**
- **Revenue development**
- **Organisational management**
- **Digital development**

This brief follows a qualitative, illustrative approach, explaining strategies that were identified, the main components and challenges of implementing them, and their outcomes, supported by data where possible.

This document also identifies wider lessons and considerations for other media organisations working with limited resources in challenging environments. Most strategy learnings cited here have been successful and might serve as inspiration for others, but some unsuccessful approaches are also included as cautionary lessons.

Main findings

Support to develop individual media organisations' viability was structured around the four areas of audience development, revenue development, organisational management and digital development. However, media businesses are complex, interconnected entities and coaches addressed sustainability holistically. This brief organises learnings around the four key areas, though many interventions cut across several business areas.

Audience development

Audience lies at the heart of any media business, in terms of providing a potential source of revenue and also from a mission point of view. The impact of reliable, quality news and information in the public interest is related to the size of the audience that consumes it. But how well media organisations engage with their audiences is another important factor. In financial terms, a larger audience is likely to be important for an advertising-based business model, whereas a smaller, highly-engaged audience may be more valuable for a media outlet that seeks to generate revenues from membership.

The media outlets participating in PRIMED comprised a mix of media types. They experimented with a range of approaches to increase their viability, including using different formats to make content more appealing, using social media to build brand awareness and constructing a studio to improve production quality.

“ Audience lies at the heart of any media business, in terms of providing a potential source of revenue and also from a mission point of view. The impact of reliable, quality news and information in the public interest is related to the size of the audience that consumes it. ”

Content production

(Wazema Radio, Ethiopia)

In 2021, Wazema set a goal to produce reliable content on nationally important issues. This included an ambition to launch new formats and experiment with multimedia content. PRIMED worked with Wazema to craft an editorial strategy based on a clear editorial vision and values, setting out several content pillars and key audience needs (“update me, give me perspective, educate me”).

The Wazema team brainstormed new formats and developed a number of programme briefs. In each case, Wazema planned how these formats would fit with its existing output to optimise re-versioning of existing content. The organisation was also clear about what was feasible with existing staffing.

Within two years, Wazema's content production dramatically grew and improved. It reorganised its YouTube content to post individual stories in themed playlists rather than users having to listen to hour-long programmes. It has redesigned its website, with Google Analytics integrated. In addition, Wazema's social media manager has been trained in understanding website data to support weekly editorial planning.

Learnings and recommendations:

Wazema's approach was successful because it was underpinned by an understanding of existing editorial strengths, so new ventures fitted in with existing workloads.

Before launching new content formats, media organisations should clearly understand their mission and values, who their existing and potential audiences are and what they expect, and their outlet's place in the market.

When trialling new products, ensure you don't neglect existing ones that drive particular value or reach. Have clear roles, responsibilities and workflows that people understand and follow. In planning any new format ask, “How can I make the most of my material?”, and choose the best platforms to do so. Be clear about what you are trying to achieve and the measures of success – reliance on audience reach alone may skew your journalism and editorial decision-making.



Constructing a studio for audience and revenue development

(Addis Maleda, Ethiopia)

At the start of the PRIMED initiative, Addis Maleda was a newspaper with a small digital presence. PRIMED provided support to improve its digital offering. Addis Maleda created a YouTube channel in 2018 but, lacking a studio and suitable equipment, the channel had been dormant since 2020.

Addis Maleda’s viability strategy centred on constructing a production studio. It aimed to expand its audience by producing improved content, and to generate revenues by renting out the studio and equipment as well as monetising its YouTube content.

Constructing a studio provided Addis Maleda with the necessary infrastructure to produce high-quality audiovisual content, allowing it to diversify its audience by engaging with viewers on digital platforms. Using the power of visual storytelling, Addis Maleda increased its YouTube subscribers by a factor of 10 (to 4,500) and increased views of its YouTube content by 30 times (to more than 160,000). The outlet’s followers and audience engagement on other social media channels also increased significantly (see table below).

Addis Maleda audience engagement/followers and subscribers from strategy launch on 1 August 2022 to 15 September 2023

	Aug 2022	Sep 2023
Facebook	130,027	158,000
X/Twitter	25,632	43,000
Telegram	8,560	22,450
YouTube	957	4,500

However, this strategy had a mixed impact on revenues. The outlet only succeeded in monetising YouTube at the end of the PRIMED project as it took until June 2023 to reach the milestone of 1,000 subscribers and 4,000 watch hours. Since then, Addis Maleda has started earning revenue from its output and is optimistic about future YouTube earnings.

The attempt to generate income through renting out the studio and equipment was not successful – by the time construction finished, there was a surplus of local studios for hire.

This strategy had one major unintended consequence – digital development enabled Addis Maleda to survive. Sharp rises in printing costs meant that its management abruptly halted newspaper publication in December 2022. By embracing audiovisual content production, Addis Maleda could continue delivering news to its audience digitally, though developing revenues through this channel remains a priority for the outlet.

Learnings and recommendations:

A few years ago, building a production studio was a viable option in Addis Ababa. Now that numerous media outlets have built their own studios, this is no longer a practical revenue source. Media organisations in similar environments should carefully assess future market developments before initiating this kind of project, and reallocate budget if needed.

The section on Mensch Productions on page 10 outlines a contrasting experience of building revenue by selling production services.



Using social media platforms to drive brand awareness

(Ethiopia Insider, Ethiopia)

The online news outlet Ethiopia Insider and its PRIMED coach devised a plan to improve the outlet's video content, in terms of its quality and posting frequency. The objective was to increase public awareness of Ethiopia Insider, not to generate revenue directly.

Ethiopia Insider began creating videos for a younger audience, overlaid with music and infographics, and the impact was almost instant. The outlet crossed the milestone of having more than 200,000 Facebook followers within a fortnight of the revamp. Its YouTube channel followers increased by 52% in one month (July 2023). Most importantly, user visits to Ethiopia Insider's website more than tripled to 17,000 in four months – driven by sharing it on social media and increased use of video content on social media channels.

Learnings and recommendations:

While the outlet's website traffic is increasing strongly, continued growth depends on a post going viral each month. Although more people visiting the Facebook page increases awareness of the outlet's offer, this can't be monetised.

Other media organisations considering this strategy should have clear objectives when starting to publish content on a social media platform. They should find out what kinds of topic and format attract greater levels of engagement. And they must figure out what they want to achieve – just brand awareness and reach, or to monetise content?

Revenue development

A robust revenue model not only allows a media organisation to produce quality content, invest in technology and attract and retain talent, but also enables it to adapt to evolving consumer preferences and industry trends. Additionally, diverse revenue streams, such as advertising, subscriptions and events, can provide the financial stability needed to weather economic uncertainties, supporting long-term sustainability and growth.

PRIMED worked with its media partners to build new revenue streams and strengthen existing ones. The objective was not to build fully viable media organisations in challenging markets in such a short space of time, but to make media leaders aware of the possibilities of creating self-sustaining income, and to encourage them to take concrete steps towards viability.

Investing in equipment for enhanced production and a new revenue stream

(Mensh Production plc, Ethiopia)

When the PRIMED programme began, Mensh Productions was a small independent production company producing valuable public interest content in its gender-focused show, "Mama Africa". However, it had an unsustainable business model – equipment rental accounted for nearly 60% of its total costs and it had very modest revenues.

PRIMED acquired some production equipment and loaned it to Mensh, agreeing to make the loan permanent if Mensh Productions met certain agreed objectives.

Reducing the outlet's fixed costs had an immediate impact. The equipment also enabled a new income stream – selling video production services to third parties. This was enhanced by further work with PRIMED on Mensh Productions' business development, organisational management, digital development and audience understanding.

The impact was transformative. Within two years, Mensh Productions grew from a struggling production company largely sustained by the work of its five founders into a professionally managed



organisation with twice as many staff and an average monthly turnover almost 12 times its original size. During this process, it also became an independent producer of digital content under the Mensh Media brand.

Learnings and recommendations:

With careful management, cutting fixed costs by acquiring equipment can pay strong dividends. Continuing to invest in quality studio space and improving organisational management was important for Mensch Productions, as was developing the production of digital content under the Mensh Media brand.

This example also provides a wider lesson on how the media ecosystem can benefit from strong independent content producers that don't operate as fully-fledged media outlets, and which might be easier to strengthen.

Strengthening the sales team

(Addis Maleda, Ethiopia)

Addis Maleda had not been maximising potential revenue from either its newspaper or digital advertising platforms. Its strategy to increase revenues included hiring a business development manager to strategise revenue growth, and recruiting digital sales officers to capitalise on income potential from its digital platforms.

Though well-conceived as an approach, this strategy did not yield the desired results despite the team's best efforts because of the sudden decision to close the newspaper due to financial pressures, transitioning the organisation to a fully digital platform. This sudden shift negatively affected revenue generation as the company was still in the early stages of monetising its digital outlets.

Furthermore, Addis Maleda lost long-term print advertisers as they were not accustomed to digital advertising. In turn, this fall in revenue made it more challenging for the sales team to achieve their targets.

Learnings and recommendations:

Having an effective and incentivised sales team is essential for media organisations wishing to diversify revenue streams and build financial sustainability. Most revenue strategies and organisational changes take time to produce results which, may not be possible in cases of extreme financial pressures or sudden transitions. Even well-crafted business development strategies can be overtaken by events.

“ A robust revenue model not only allows a media organisation to produce quality content, invest in technology and attract and retain talent, but also enables it to adapt to evolving consumer preferences and industry trends. ”

Business development and revenue strategy

(Wazema, Ethiopia)

Wazema was entirely donor-funded but wished to explore covering some of its costs through commercial income. It created a part-time business development officer post and appointed a strong candidate. PRIMED provided initial mentoring and helped shape the outlet's revenue strategy.

It became clear that customer acquisition was a major issue – repeated contacts are required to build relationships and there is no culture of business pitching in Ethiopia. This made the cost of individual customer acquisition very high and therefore unlikely to be viable. Consequently, Wazema concluded that its strongest connection was with NGOs, so it pursued the grant funding route and sought production funding.

For media organisations, the ideal form of donor funding is core funding. Production funding runs two main risks:

- Staffing needs to be set aside to deliver the production – any new staff bought in increase costs and may undermine the purpose of the grant. However, diverting in-house staffing can detract from core output.
- Content needs to be well-integrated to avoid skewing the outlet's editorial values.

The challenges of revenue generation were exacerbated by a government announcement that it would take 35–55% of income in taxation, a serious disincentive to self-sustainability. Wazema concluded that grant funding from abroad would be easier to handle and would avoid the risk of double taxation. Subsequently, Wazema has successfully attracted donor funding and is cautiously considering a donation strategy.

Learnings and recommendations:

Business development is not always the answer. If donor funding is already in place, earning revenue can become a risk. In retrospect, the coach and Wazema management could have had a more explicit discussion about whether commercial revenue was genuinely a priority for the outlet.

Media organisations considering prioritising business development should be very clear from the outset about what they are trying to achieve, and the likely gains versus the cost of customer acquisition. Whichever option is preferred, it is worth scenario planning to work through the likely resource implications.

“ Media organisations considering prioritising business development should be very clear from the outset about what they are trying to achieve, and the likely gains versus the cost of customer acquisition. ”

Sustaining business growth

(Classic Radio and Voice of Kono, Sierra Leone)

Classic Radio is a small commercial station in Sierra Leone's second biggest city, Bo. And Voice of Kono is a small community radio station in the remote but diamond-rich district of Kono. After a period of content development, PRIMED took almost identical approaches to supporting the business development of these two organisations over a relatively short period. The different outcomes are informative.

After increasing its commercial revenues by 140% since the beginning of the programme, Classic Radio continues to experience revenue growth. The organisation largely attributes this growth to improvements in its production and editorial standards, and increasing business opportunities in the NGO sector through a stronger commitment to gender balance, inclusivity and editorial independence.

In contrast, Voice of Kono saw revenue grow in the first year of the PRIMED project but fears it might now decrease.

The contrasting outcomes may be explained by Classic Radio being ready and willing to absorb the PRIMED coaching, which Voice of Kono was less able to do. This may in part be because Classic Radio was a commercial station whereas Voice of Kono is a community-based outlet. The different opportunities available in Bo and Kono may also contribute to these outlets' difference in fortunes.

Learnings and recommendations:

Even similar media organisations in similar contexts have important differences, both in terms of internal capacities/mindsets and external market environments. These should all be considered in any business development process.

Monetising content

(Ethiopia Insider, Ethiopia)

Though it only joined the programme for the final six months, PRIMED supported Ethiopia Insider's digital development, including efforts to monetise its online content.

The PRIMED coach had hoped to help identify an ad-tech solution to enable Ethiopia Insider to run programmatic advertising (the automated buying and selling of online advertising) on its website. However, progress stalled because the most common solution, Google AdSense, does not support Amharic-only websites, and other tech solutions were not pragmatic.

However, Ethiopia Insider made advances towards other digital goals, particularly putting in place fundamental tools and structures for future monetisation. These included recording traffic numbers across the outlet's website and social media channels, and creating a slide deck for advertisers. The outlet is now seeking support to monetise its strong website and social media presence.

Learnings and recommendations:

Tech solutions from developed markets may not be implementable in other contexts, particularly in countries where media outlets operate in non-mainstream languages. Again, this underscores the importance of tailored interventions when supporting media organisations' viability.





Structuring the sales department

(ARTS TV, Ethiopia)

Having an effective sales department is vital for a media organisation to build its commercial side, though hiring and maintaining a stable and sustainable sales and marketing team is a challenge. The PRIMED coach and ARTS TV management worked to identify the best possible structure for the outlet’s sales department, including its organisation and pay and bonus structures.

Covid-19 meant that this process had to begin via video conferences, which was challenging as building trust with managers and sales personnel is critical. When the coach could join management on site the team significantly advanced this process, which was evolving well at the end of the PRIMED programme.

ARTS TV digital engagement during the PRIMED intervention (February 2021-September 2023)

ARTS TV’s significant reorganisation streamlined its workflows and production, leading to a significant increase in audience

-  **YouTube subscribers:**
436,000 > **1,270,000** ▲ 191%
-  **X/Twitter followers:**
3,400 > **34,601** ▲ 917%
-  **Instagram followers:**
14,000 > **20,300** ▲ 45%
-  **Telegram subscribers:**
1,800 > **2,445** ▲ 36%
-  **Facebook followers:**
309,000 > **382,000** ▲ 19%

Learnings and recommendations:

Establishing a strong, loyal and reliable sales department is an ongoing task for media organisation managers. It is essential for media organisations to assess the current growth context of their outlet and prioritise what kinds of team members will enable further growth.

Improving the digital offer for audiences and revenues

(Gramer Kagoj, Bangladesh)

Gramer Kagoj is a small regional newspaper with a limited digital presence that produces only nominal income. PRIMED sought to improve its digital offering to increase its reach and income, with an ambitious target of generating enough revenue to cover the costs of the revamped digital operation, as well as spurring a transition to digital.

The digital development work was successful, though efforts to increase revenue generation were less so. The Gramer Kagoj website was revamped after extensive user testing, resulting in users nearly doubling to 50,800 per month. However, the strategy focus was on using social media so this was not properly monetisable. This was partly due to capacity issues, but primarily because Gramer Kagoj was banned from Facebook and YouTube for violating community standards, mostly as a result of publishing graphic content and copyright infringement.

This problem was resolved on Facebook, which meant that the outlet’s Facebook followers grew from 19,100 to 305,000, with revenue also growing significantly. But the outlet lost its YouTube channel (which had 43,000 subscribers) and had to create a new one from scratch. These challenges were particularly painful because the outlet had put a lot of work into producing better video content, which resulted in several Facebook videos going viral and exceeding 1 million viewers.

At the end of the project period, Gramer Kagoj’s digital platforms had steadily grown to generate roughly half of the costs of an 11-person digital operation, largely thanks to revenue generated via Facebook. The operation could become fully self-sufficient (and start contributing to overall costs) in just under a year if Gramer Kagoj maintains the same level of growth, thanks to improved monetisation of its website and new YouTube channel.



Learnings and recommendations:

A holistic approach to business development in which all work strands take place simultaneously is the best way to maximise impact. All areas of business development, including monetisation, should be dynamic and tailored to the media organisation's capacities and operating context. In particular, revenue development can't be approached as a by-product of other areas of work (in this case, digital development) – it demands specific skills and requires focused attention.

Media organisations should remember that social media monetisation is not necessarily a reliable and stable source of revenue. From changes to algorithms to modifications to community standards, the rules of the game can change unexpectedly. Acquainting partners with those rules should be a priority for any media organisation focusing on digital development.

Organisational management

Good organisational management provides media organisations with the structural framework necessary for efficient and effective operations. For any media organisation, content creation, distribution and audience engagement are key. Effective management, processes and systems ensure that resources are allocated optimally to underpin these areas of work, ensuring that deadlines are met and outputs are aligned with strategic goals.

Effective management also allows media organisations to adapt to changing technologies and audience behaviours, and capitalise on emerging opportunities. A well-managed media organisation cultivates a collaborative, innovative and inclusive work culture, fostering creativity while maintaining a focus on productivity and accountability.

Organisational structure

(ARTS TV, Ethiopia)

While the basic structure of TV stations is similar, the detail of how TV stations operate depends on many factors including available personnel, the workflow of the organisation and the local business culture – what works for one TV station might not work for another. It is also important to bear in mind that a TV station's organisational structure will change over time as the business grows, develops or adapts to changing audience needs.

Support for ARTS TV under the PRIMED initiative began with numerous meetings and video calls, discussions with management, initial and revised proposals, and identifying a desired organisational structure.

Unfortunately, ARTS TV had insufficient funds to hire the most highly qualified staff so was only able to hire candidates with slightly lower wage demands. Even so, the organisation achieved a noticeable improvement through an organisational structure that is effective for the current situation and sufficiently flexible to meet future needs.

Learnings and recommendations:

In prioritising slow and steady change, getting senior management buy-in to working towards an agreed structure is a critical first step for a media organisation. Having a coach physically present and involved in day-to-day activities is also useful in devising solutions. Interventions should allow sufficient time for the coach to work with the media outlet to identify organisational priorities and establish buy-in across the workforce.

Production workflows

(ARTS TV, Ethiopia)

Like many smaller TV stations, the production process at ARTS TV was not developed through long-term planning, but as a day-by-day or week-by-week approach. This is because of production process challenges and a perception that constant production changes make a long-term production plan impossible.

However, media organisations should always have a long-term production plan as that is the basis for preparing programme schedules (long-term and weekly). This gives the production and programme managers a better overview of what to put into the production pipeline (and when), when to schedule shows and what replacements could be used in the case of production delays on other shows. If needed, long-term production plans can always be changed.

This level of advance planning is also important for organisational revenue. Many shows include product placement, and sales departments must know when they need to sell shows and when they can guarantee advertisers that the shows will air. As advertisers usually need time to make decisions, the sales team needs to have production information months before production starts.

Furthermore, efficiencies in production workflow reduce costs, which is essential. Additional human resource needs cause additional overheads, which can quickly become unsustainable.

Learnings and recommendations:

Media organisations should always prioritise effective use of company resources. Most production crew want the best equipment and the latest gear to produce great content. But it is just as important to have production workflows operating at peak efficiency to grow a media business.

Strengthening organisational development for professional content production

(Addis Maleda, Ethiopia)

The Addis Maleda needs assessment identified a significant requirement for more staff, policies and procedures. Content production staff noted a decline in the outlet's story quality as a result of an understaffed newsroom. And the newspaper lacked an editorial policy.

PRIMED worked with Addis Maleda to hire key editorial staff, including an editor-in-chief and senior reporters, to improve its content production capabilities. The outlet established an effective editorial system (incorporating planning, follow-up and wrap-up meetings), designed an editorial policy and guidelines to support consistency and professionalism, and implemented an organogram to define the organisational structure, reporting lines, and staff roles and responsibilities.

Learnings and recommendations:

Strengthening a media outlet's organisational development is crucial for successful content production. It helps to ensure a more professional and consistent approach to journalism, and provides a solid foundation on which a company can build both audiences and revenues.

Organisational management

(Wazema, Ethiopia)

At the start of the PRIMED project, Wazema was an international NGO based in Sweden. Its main donor offered funding to move its institutional base to Ethiopia and set up a commercial company there. Previously, Wazema's only presence in Ethiopia was freelance journalists. All editorial decisions were taken overseas, and workflows were complex and spanned different time zones.

With support from PRIMED, the Wazema team broke down the problem into practical challenges, including acquiring a commercial licence, finding an office and devising a company structure. Several board and management structures were considered before deciding on a commercial body in Addis Ababa, and a fallback NGO outside Ethiopia to mitigate political risks.

This strategy prioritised clear structures and processes. Wazema drew up job descriptions, appointed an editor-in-chief in Addis Ababa and created a formal meeting structure to drive decision-making. The team reviewed every single decision in the planning, commissioning and production process and identified the person responsible for each one. They also addressed cultural issues, particularly in training junior staff. At a formal launch meeting, the managing editor and coach set out Wazema's vision and values, and ran a training session in editorial working practices.

Wazema now has a local commercial media registration, and an office and studio in Addis Ababa. It has seven members of staff, with only one based outside Ethiopia, and 21 freelancers. Daily editorial decisions are taken in Ethiopia, with sensitive issues escalated to the overseas managing editor.

Learnings and recommendations:

The main drivers of Wazema's success were considering its culture and strengths alongside logistical actions. Goals were broken down into small steps backed with detailed thinking, and Wazema appointed the right people based on their attitude as well as their skills.

Media organisations looking to achieve this level of business development should differentiate between what they can achieve internally and what depends on outside forces. When trying to implement change in an unstable environment, media outlets should have a clear vision. They should also survey the horizon, keep their plans flexible, take small steps and constantly review what works and what does not.

Creating an editorial policy

(Ethiopia Insider, Ethiopia)

At the beginning of the PRIMED project, Ethiopia Insider did not have an editorial policy. The outlet looked to other news organisations' templates for inspiration, before working with the coach to draft a comprehensive policy from scratch. The final document is designed for both internal and external use, clearly setting out the organisation's values and its corrections policy.

Learnings and recommendations:

When drafting an editorial policy from scratch, it is better to develop short, easy-to-follow documents rather than the kind of overly detailed documents that are used by large, well-established media organisations in the Global North.





Digital development

Digital development is crucial for media businesses to stay relevant, competitive and responsive to the evolving needs of their audiences. Technology shapes consumption patterns and media organisations must embrace digital platforms (particularly social media) and sector innovations in order to reach and engage wider audiences.

A digitally developed media organisation will be better able to adapt its content for various platforms and channels, leverage data analytics for audience insights, and implement targeted strategies for content distribution and possible monetisation.

Investing in technical equipment

(ARTS TV, Ethiopia)

ARTS TV required better technical equipment in order to produce more attractive, monetisable content. In cooperation with BBC Media Action, MDIF managed to identify priorities for tech investment and also the most cost-efficient functional solutions, purchase them and start using them. Even though the outlet only required a few essential items, the import process was time-consuming.

The equipment not only enabled ARTS TV to produce better quality content but also to make huge efficiency gains. Workflow that was previously handled by up to 10 people spanning multiple hours or days can now be handled by a much smaller team in less than one hour.

Learnings and recommendations:

As technology continues to advance rapidly, media organisations should carefully assess current technologies when deciding to purchase equipment. It generally makes sense for organisations to invest in the cheapest ways that increase the efficiency of their producers and technical crew. Organisations should resist complacency and rigid thinking around which technical solutions are seen as the standard or best way to achieve tasks.

Programme preparation workflows

(ARTS TV, Ethiopia)

Programme preparation workflows are integral to every TV station. They connect all departments, including production, marketing, sales, news, digital and finance. However, in small and/or new TV stations these workflows are often overlooked as they demand a significant amount of bureaucracy and maintenance by dedicated administrators (editors and traffic managers), positions that may not be filled because of tight budgets or staff churn.

The programme manager alone can't maintain long-term and weekly scheduling plans while also overseeing production. Consequently, these workflows – instead of being structured to include all departments – may become sporadic and improvised processes that only manage the work of the programming department.

After careful analysis of ARTS TV and its workflows, the team used a tried and tested methodology to establish efficiencies in managing various productions. As ARTS TV has various productions that stretches its capacity, strictly adhering to the new system was very fruitful and created production efficiencies.

Learnings and recommendations:

Media organisations should ensure they understand and appreciate the dynamic nature of organisational development and structures. This requires embracing revised strategies in developing structures. For every small or emerging TV station, an early step should be to analyse existing programme preparation workflows, identify their benefits and shortcomings, and prioritise improved workflows with a detailed action plan to implement them.

Improving video quality, hiring editors / graphics and purchasing equipment

(Ethiopia Insider, Ethiopia)

Enhancing Ethiopia Insider's digital development required a multi-pronged strategy. This involved recruiting new staff, acquiring video equipment, and learning and using video formats that work on different social media platforms. For example, creating a single video that complies with the format requirements of both YouTube and TikTok and appeals to both audiences.

This approach was effective – the videos produced after the coaching and equipment purchases had a big impact on the outlet's followers across all platforms.

The company restarted its TikTok channel video production and aimed to reach 50,000 followers by the end of July 2023. Impressively, it exceeded this goal and attracted more than 65,000 followers. One TikTok video of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed being asked to temporarily hand over power to a civil administration gained 1.4 million views in less than 24 hours, rising to 2.6 million views over three months.

Learnings and recommendations:

Small grants, for example for equipment purchases or hiring staff, are an important tool in business development. But they must be integrated into a strategic plan, with a clear pathway for implementation and expected outcomes.

Conclusions and recommendations

The PRIMED programme helped to identify and implement a range of strategies to support the financial viability of public interest media organisations through improved revenue generation, audience development, organisational management and digital development.

These included both broad principles and specific strategies, many of which have had a tangible impact on media organisations' capacities to build their financial sustainability in challenging environments. They also include useful lessons for media organisations seeking inspiration and advice.

This brief also identified several unsuccessful approaches and explains their shortcomings, in the hope that they will help other media outlets to avoid the same wrong turns and give them a better understanding of all the factors to consider when embarking on a course of action.

Five conclusions emerge from considering the strategies used as part of this initiative, as outlined below.

- Design tailor-made business development solutions
- The relationship between the coach and media organisation leader is vital
- Small grants tied to business development plans are effective
- Business development support is also important for non-traditional media outlets
- Viability initiatives should focus on the foundations for long-term development

Design tailor-made business development solutions

Delivering bespoke, context-specific support programmes has proven to be an effective approach with a strong likelihood of building business sustainability. Despite superficial similarities, every media organisation is different. This means that any business viability strategy must be tailored to the specific needs of the media organisation and its individual capacities. Other organisations' experiences can inspire and may suggest a path towards viability, but they are not an off-the-peg solution.

The relationship between the coach and media organisation leader is vital

Coaches and media organisation leaders should be carefully matched from the outset, not only in terms of subject expertise but also in interpersonal terms. Quickly developing trust is vital, as the media leader will be sharing highly confidential business information as well as opening themselves up personally, and this trust should spread into the wider team.

Internal factors over which media organisations have some control will influence success. These include the team's capacities and their desire to learn, organisational workflows and management, and the media organisation's commitment to the proposed business development strategies. While these may not be obvious externally, the coach must fully consider them from the outset and revisit them throughout. Embedding coaches in media organisations helps them to identify these factors and navigate any related challenges.



Small grants tied to business development plans are effective

Supporting business development via small grants is an important tool and should be integrated into strategic plans. Sustainability plans – planning for the media organisation to take over responsibility for ongoing costs – must be embedded into grant funding. For example, a grant could pay 50% of the salary of a new sales position for three months, reducing that to 25% for another three months, and then stopping the subsidy altogether at a point when the position should be self-funding.

Business development support is also important for non-traditional media outlets

Although the PRIMED programme only supported one non-traditional media outlet (a video production company), the results were positive and suggest that this approach should be further explored by media development organisations and funders. Other non-traditional media outlets, such as podcast production companies, information apps or citizen-government platforms, should be considered for development support as the media environment continues to expand and diversify.

Viability initiatives should focus on business foundations for long-term business development

Significant progress can be made by setting media organisations on the right foundations. In its relatively short duration, PRIMED made many positive steps towards viability of media organisations, with initial work often targeted at building foundations on which future revenue and audience growth can be built.

“ Creating and embedding processes and systems, sourcing and learning to use new technologies, and recruiting and training new staff all take time. Short-term programmes miss out on achieving the much bigger rewards possible from extended support. Longer-term viability support for media organisations can make more visible gains and enable support to be withdrawn gradually, which better supports business sustainability. ”

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PRIMED

PROTECTING INDEPENDENT MEDIA
FOR EFFECTIVE DEVELOPMENT



Public interest media are vital to open, just societies – they provide trusted news and information, hold the powerful to account and create a platform for debate. Yet truly public interest media are in crisis.

PRIMED (Protecting Independent Media for Effective Development) is a three-year programme to support public interest media in Bangladesh, Ethiopia and Sierra Leone – addressing critical challenges, building resilience, and sharing research and insight about what works.

Led by BBC Media Action, PRIMED partners include Free Press Unlimited, International Media Support and Media Development Investment Fund, with additional support from Global Forum for Media Development and The Communication Initiative.

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