

## Media viability: the global versus the local

*Market reforms, rebuilding trust, and digital regulation and innovation were key themes to emerge from a series of consultations on media viability in Namibia, Tunisia, and Lebanon organised early this year. **GFMD has released three country reports that bring together policy recommendations for supporting journalism and independent media in these countries.***

The consultations built upon the previous UNESCO policy brief titled [Finding the funds for journalism to thrive: policy options to support media viability](#), along with [other relevant reports and literature](#). The goal was to stress-test and contextualise global policy recommendations.

Stakeholders and representatives from local media, media development organisations, policymakers and donors came together in each country to identify which of the policy options were most applicable in their circumstances as well as how the wider media support sector could collaborate to advocate or jointly work towards them.

The locally-led consultations were facilitated by Global Forum for Media Development (GFMD) in partnership with UNESCO's [International Programme for the Development of Communication \(IPDC\)](#) and local implementing partners:

- Lebanon: Maharat Foundation and Samir Kassir Foundation
- Namibia: Editors' Forum of Namibia and Namibia Media Trust
- Tunisia: Al Khatt, Pam2 and Pencils Consulting

### **[READ THE FULL SUMMARY HERE](#)**

The national-level consultations facilitated by this project have provided valuable bottom-up insights into 'lived experiences'. The process of working with local partners to determine the prioritisation of recommendations from recent research and policy papers for comprehensive national consultations underscores the effectiveness of this approach in guiding discussions on local media viability.

These collaborative meetings play a crucial role in empowering local policy knowledge networks and expertise, thereby supporting media viability policies that are grounded in the local context and incorporate the perspectives of all stakeholders.

The process of working with local partners to decide which recommendations from recent research and policy papers should be prioritised for in-depth national consultations demonstrates that this format provides a clear framework from which consultations on local media viability can be led.

Considering the implications of political context is also essential when developing locally driven approaches to media viability. In many instances, meaningful and supportive legislative reforms are unlikely to materialise in the near to medium term. Moreover, opportunities for diversified commercial revenue, online payment systems, or paid subscriptions are severely limited in certain cases. Therefore, media stakeholders need to be realistic about incorporating normative actions into their strategies for supporting local media viability, prior to designing and implementing them.

That is not to say that long-term goals are not needed. Policymakers, both local and international, have a role to play in providing sustained support for media viability. Nonetheless, if locally driven consultations aim to define practical actions, they must also clarify how and when these actions can lead to tangible change.

[READ THE FULL REPORT ON THE LEBANON CONSULTATIONS HERE](#)

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## **Key recommendations**

- In Tunisia, five key recommendations were made to improve the media industry. The first recommendation is to reform the media market by collecting data, developing new public policies, regulating economically and rebuilding trust with the public. The second recommendation is to restructure the advertising market by better measuring the audience, reassessing the advertising value chain, reconsidering the relationship between media and advertisers and reusing public advertising as the first lever. The third recommendation is to support digital transformation by helping existing media to digitally transform, as well as by supporting the investment in technological infrastructures. The fourth recommendation is to align donor funding with local issues to ensure that the media support the interests of their local community. Finally, the fifth recommendation is to incentivise talent retention, capacities and skills related to economic and managerial issues, in particular to media management and the challenge of existing business models.
- One of the key recommendations coming from the roundtable and mentioned in the discussion paper in Namibia is the importance of developing regional solutions to address new challenges posed by emerging technologies and digitisation to both legacy and independent media and in line with wider efforts to promote democracy and economic development across the African continent. The Namibian state is asked to

consider relevant measures and regulations for big tech companies in collaboration with the Communications Regulatory Authority of Namibia, the Ministry of Information and Communication Technology, CRAN, and other government stakeholders, at the very least to ensure revenue sharing. It should look into revising the Communications Amendment Act, 2020 (Act No. 6 of 2020) which makes provision for the imposition of a universal service levy that will operationalise a Universal Service Fund for the media and designate the media as a public service to encourage the promotion of the viability of journalism and the media industry. Donors are asked to support an active dialogue around the role of Big Tech at a sub-regional, continental, or even international level and invest in the development of a model for community media which can be transferred to national, traditional mainstream media where a synergised ecosystem between the media and its audiences exists.

- A set of recommendations is proposed for stakeholders who wish to support media viability in Lebanon, including those urging the Lebanese state to bring media laws in line with international standards including decriminalising defamation and blasphemy in collaboration with international organisations and civil society actors and immediately take steps to ensure the physical, digital, and psychological safety as well as the protection of journalists. It should also aim to create a favourable regulatory, legal and taxation environment which can provide financial incentives for media organisations. Donors and media development agencies should provide small, independent, and alternative media with long-term and stable, pluriannual funding. They should engage with international actors to exert international pressure on the Lebanese state to adopt the necessary reforms needed to foster an enabling environment for independent journalism and freedom of expression.

In all cases, the need for better coordination and collaboration across the sector was emphasised. The challenges brought about by an unregulated approach to the advertising market and private sector were also shared across the three countries. There was a demonstrable need to develop responses to digital innovation and change and its effect on the media industry. It is clear from the three country studies that local mainstream and traditional media are less than sophisticated in terms of digital advancements and platform convergence. In addition, big tech is unmistakably seen as an aggressive competitor in these reports. They are seen to dominate local markets with little by way of regulation to ensure a fair, transparent, and more stable business and content environment for the media. In these three cases, while digital and platform regulation was seen as essential. A discussion about the lack of public awareness of the current challenges facing the media also took place in all three countries. The Afrobarometer has indicated that journalists are viewed with as much suspicion as politicians, something that needs to be addressed by regaining the trust of the public. It was argued that this can only be done through sustainable delivery of quality and ethical journalism. Developing national public policies that can support and enable the media to fulfil its role in democracy and be sustainable in rapidly evolving and in some cases restrictive ecosystems was at the core of each set of recommendations and actions which emerged from the consultations.

**[READ THE FULL SUMMARY HERE](#)**

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## Related GFMD IMPACT briefings and activities

### **[How to invest in independent media \(Sept. 2022\)](#)**

In partnership with the [International Press Institute \(IPI\)](#) and [Media Impact Funders](#), GFMD IMPACT organised a roundtable to discuss investing in independent media: its importance to democracy and ways to ensure its long-term financial viability, in light of growing threats to press freedom around the world. The roundtable was organised on the sidelines of the [IPI's 2022 World Congress](#), which ran from September 8 to 10 at Columbia University.

### **[Media independence and sustainability \(Nov. 2020\)](#)**

In the lead-up to the second Global Conference for Media Freedom, [Canada commissioned a set of independent policy papers on media freedom](#). The aim of these policy papers was to engage in a broader discussion with experts on challenges facing media freedom; stimulate debate and discussion on policy recommendations; and help inform the Media Freedom Coalition's future work. GFMD Executive Director, Mira Milosevic, wrote a policy paper on [Media Independence and Sustainability](#).

### **[Media viability in crisis \(March 2023\)](#)**

GFMD IMPACT and Unesco's partners from the [national consultations in Namibia, Tunisia, and Lebanon](#) presented some of the recommendations to policymakers, donors, and other stakeholders at a panel ["Media Viability in Crisis"](#) on the sidelines of the Second Summit for Democracy in The Hague.

**– ENDS –**

**Add links embeds to social media posts about the event at the end of the briefing.**

**We might add this stuff later but for now let's get the newsletter and briefing ready.**

## **Lebanon**

Ayman Mhanna, Executive Director of the Samir Kassir Foundation, emphasised the importance of demonstrating goodwill and credibility by designing projects that address the real needs of the communities being served. Local journalists and media support organisations stressed the need for coordination and building trusted relationships among all actors as a solution to the sector's structural problems. Donors should cooperate and pool their efforts to avoid project duplication, while local actors must effectively communicate the overall needs of the media sector to their international partners.

One recommendation arising from the consultations was for local media outlets to present a clear and actionable "menu" of their priorities to enable donors to better understand the on-the-ground needs. By rallying around shared objectives, local media actors who may not always see eye to eye can come together. Advocacy efforts focused on media law reform serve as an example of a common cause that can unite various stakeholders, including Lebanese media, lawyers, and academics. The Maharat Foundation, in partnership with the EU, is working on legislative reforms through a regional grant to the Southern Partnership countries.

**[READ THE FULL REPORT ON THE LEBANON CONSULTATIONS HERE](#)**

## **Tunisia**

During a consultation in Tunisia, journalists emphasised the importance of a holistic approach to viability, considering economic, sociopolitical, and legal aspects. Tunisian journalists have faced challenges in a politically difficult environment, with new media laws enacted by the Kais Saied government perceived as attempts to control election coverage. The Tunisian media sector remains highly politicised.

In North Africa, the situation is even more complex, according to Khadija Maalej, Project Manager at BBC Media Action-North Africa. Collaboration between media, governments, and civil society organisations is crucial, along with a context-sensitive approach to media development. BBC Media Action-North Africa has been working to establish networks of civil society organisations, media professionals, and state broadcasters to support local community radio in Tunisia and Algeria, advocating for a multistakeholder approach to foster a healthier ecosystem for independent media.

Ahmed Azouzi, Managing Director of the Pencils Consulting highlighted the need for media outlets to rework their business models and rebuild public trust, including cultivating audiences. Recommendations from the consultation included supporting the development of a "national barometer" to measure public trust in media, integrating management skills in newsrooms, transforming business models, and establishing an independent body for media market and audience research. The report also called for the creation of a special legal status for journalists and media professionals in Tunisia to ensure that sector-wide revenues translate into

meaningful income. Donors are encouraged to support innovation that enables Tunisian media to achieve economic viability while maintaining their independence.

[READ THE FULL REPORT ON THE TUNISIA CONSULTATIONS HERE](#)

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During a consultation in Namibia, stakeholders expressed concerns about big tech and the challenges of the digital transition. Participants called for support from donors and the international community to help Namibian media outlets adapt to the digital landscape, addressing issues such as the spread of disinformation on social media and the dominance of large online platforms that have taken advertising revenues from traditional media.

Namibia's small media market exacerbates the problem, with an estimated N\$400 million going to big tech companies annually in advertising revenues alone. Zoe Titus, director of the Namibia Media Trust, emphasised the difficulty faced by smaller media markets in engaging with tech platforms regarding revenue sharing. The need to restructure Namibia's advertising market was also highlighted in the consultation report, describing tense relations between advertisers and media in a hyper-competitive, small market with limited regulatory support.

The report stressed the importance of supporting Namibian media organisations to engage with national regulators and big tech companies, ensuring adequate taxation of the latter with redirected funds benefiting African media. Recommendations included collective bargaining by African media outlets through regional mechanisms like the African Union and multilateral instruments such as the Africa Free Trade Agreement. The authors emphasised the need for greater coordination and synergies among media stakeholders across the African continent, extending beyond Namibia.

[READ THE FULL REPORT ON THE NAMIBIA CONSULTATIONS HERE](#)

## **Next steps**

Although debate about media viability has become a more recent fixture in the media development agenda, the issues that were raised in the consultations were not new to the media and key stakeholders involved in the development of media. Questions around sustainability, legislative and regulatory reform, safety and security of journalists and their rights, audience engagement and technology have informed the industry for decades. Bringing these issues together, under the auspices of media viability, in order to understand how different sectors can contribute to building media and organisational resilience is important to developing relevant strategies and action plans.

The question now is how to move from dialogue to action. Developing action plans which include timelines, the assignment of tasks, and outputs should be considered as the next steps.

Deciding on priorities is key and ideally a systematic methodology to prioritising recommendations can be developed. The multidisciplinary approach to developing recommendations which began with the consultations needs to be sustained in order that holistic solutions can be actioned, collaboration continues to be fostered and trust and respect between stakeholders is embedded.

## Media viability: Supporting independent journalism in uncertain times

(OR : Thriving through uncertain times: supporting the viability of independent journalism)

***Subheading: Coordination, communication, credibility, and innovation were key themes to emerge from a series of consultations on media viability in Namibia, Tunisia, and Lebanon organised early this year. GFMD has released three country reports that bring together policy recommendations for supporting independent media in these countries.***

Coordination, communication, credibility, and innovation were among the key themes to come out of the consultations on media viability organised in [Namibia, Tunisia, and Lebanon early this year](#).

The consultations brought together a range of stakeholders – donors, media support organisations, diplomats, local journalists, and other media professionals -- with the aim of drafting policy recommendations to support the viability of media in these countries. [The consultations were organised by GFMD early this year](#) in partnership with [UNESCO's International Programme for the Development of Communication \(IPDC\)](#), [Deutsche Welle-Akademie](#), and [local partners](#).

Three reports synthesising the policy recommendations produced out of the consultations have been published on [GFMD's IMPACT website](#).

Participants from all three consultations underscored systemic issues that media outlets and their supporters have been repeating for years. Among other issues, the reticence of donors to invest in media organisations through stable, multi-year funding schemes – as opposed to short-term, project-based grants -- to support their core operational needs.

For independent journalism to thrive, donors should take a holistic approach to supporting media organisations operating in often difficult political and socio-economic environments.

The question of coordination was another cross-cutting theme to come out of the consultations. A sustained dialogue is necessary between actors across the media development landscape: donors, media professionals, and their supporters should develop joint mechanisms to enable better cooperation between themselves.

Local media outlets also need to better communicate their needs to donors while thinking creatively about their business strategies to ensure their financial autonomy.

In March, local partners from Lebanon, Namibia, and Tunisia presented some of these recommendations to policymakers, donors, and other stakeholders at a panel on the sidelines of the Second Summit for Democracy at the Hague ([“Media Viability in Crisis”](#)).

**Highlights from that exchange:**



CAPTION TBC. From left to right:

Saorla McCabe (Deputy Secretary of the International Programme for the Development of Communication at UNESCO); Fatemah Farag (Founder and Director, Welad ElBalad Egypt / Board Member, WAN IFRA), and Khadija Maalej (BBC Media Action Tunisia) ?

***[\\*The three country reports are available here.](#)***

### **Lebanon: on coordination and aid effectiveness**

Amid the political and socio-economic crises that have battered the country for decades, the challenges faced by independent journalism in Lebanon are numerous. Economic precarity, political capture of state

media outlets by rival factions, brain drain, and the exodus of Lebanese media professionals are but a handful of examples of the systemic problems faced by the Lebanese media sector.

Despite this, independent media have shown great resilience, with innovative media outlets blossoming, especially online. A phenomenon that owes largely to grants from international donors.

“It’s the Lebanese paradox”, said Ayman Mhanna, Executive Director of [Samir Kassir Foundation](#), one of the co-organisers, with the Maharat Foundation, of the consultation in Beirut.

But it’s also symptomatic of structural biases in the way aid is distributed, and received, in Lebanon. The Lebanese media sector is a highly fragmented one, with countless media outlets, large and small, competing for limited funding from overseas.

“This is not sustainable”, said Mhanna, pointing to the misuse of aid by local politicians and other vested interests: “political money from abroad came back”.

The international grants flowing in have also tended to favour smaller, alternative media outlets, perhaps at the expense of a more integrated approach that would support a diversity of Lebanese media actors.

The [report from the roundtables in Beirut](#) likewise pointed to a persistent “donor bias” toward certain alternative media outlets over others. This is hardly surprising, according to the report’s authors, given widespread perceptions of mainstream media outlets as corrupt and politically compromised.

Mhanna stressed that local players need to demonstrate “goodwill” and reinforce their own credibility by proving that they have the “capacity to design projects (aligned with) the real needs of the communities that we are trying to serve”.

Local journalists and media support organisations at the consultation repeatedly stressed the importance of [coordination](#) -- building and sustaining relationships of trust between all actors -- as one solution to the structural problems in the Lebanese media sector.

Donors need to demonstrate willingness to cooperate and pool their efforts to avoid duplication of projects. But local actors also need to better communicate the needs of the sector as a whole to their international partners.

One of the recommendations from the consultation was the need for local media outlets to put together a clear, actionable “menu” of their priorities to allow donors to understand exactly what their needs are on the ground.

For Roula Mikhael, from the Maharat Foundation, working around a common cause can bring together local media actors that don’t always get along.

Mikhael cited advocacy efforts around reforming media laws as one example.

“(This should be done through) a multi-stakeholder approach that engages all actors – including Lebanese media, but also lawyers and academics to contribute to the discussion”, added Mikhael at the Summit. The Maharat Foundation has entered into a recent partnership with the EU on legislative reforms through a regional grant to the Southern Partnership countries.

### **Tunisia: a holistic approach to viability**

At the consultation in Tunis, journalists and media organisations underscored the importance of approaching viability from a holistic perspective, covering economic, but also sociopolitical and legal questions. Over the past year, Tunisian journalists have been working in an increasingly challenging political environment. The Kais Saied government has enacted [new media laws](#) perceived by many as a tactic to censor or control the way journalists cover elections. The Tunisian media sector remains heavily politicised.

Elsewhere in North Africa – Libya, for example – the situation is even more complex, said Khadija Maalej, Project Manager at BBC Media Action-North Africa at the Summit.

“Media, governments, and civil society organisations need to find ways to better collaborate (in these environments)”, she added, stressing the importance of adopting a context-sensitive approach to media development in her region. In Tunisia and Algeria, her organisation has been working to build a network of civil society organisations, media professionals, and state broadcasters in support of local community radio. A multistakeholder approach, she argued, is essential to supporting a healthier ecosystem for independent media to thrive.

“Some of the structural, endemic obstacles (to viability) are obvious but media outlets also need to work to rework their business models and rebuild public trust,” said Ahmed Azouzi, from Pencils Consulting.

Azouzi underscored something that is often overlooked in media development strategies - cultivating audiences.

One of the recommendations to come out of the consultation was to support the development of a “national barometer” to measure public trust in media, building on examples like the [Journalism Trust Initiative](#) and the London-based firm [Kantar](#) that have been pioneering the development of trust indicators.

Having this data would allow media outlets to assess the quality of their journalism and better target their audiences.

At the consultation in Tunis, several stakeholders emphasised the need to integrate management skills in newsrooms and for the latter to transform their business models.

[Inkyfada](#), an independent platform established by the [Al Khatt Foundation](#), is one of the few examples of a media outlet that has managed to wean itself off dependence on donor funding, or on traditional advertising and audience-based revenues.

But for most small Tunisian media outlets, finding the resources to transform their business strategies is an investment in itself. Donors can support innovation in ways that would allow Tunisian media to become economically viable while protecting their independence.

Another recommendation **highlighted in the report** is the establishment of an independent public body to conduct media market and audience research – an institution that media organisations, donors, and advertisers can turn to for advice.

In a media ecosystem characterised by a heavy reliance on the entertainment market for advertising revenues, the report’s authors called on donors to support efforts to “establish an independent regulatory agency to monitor Tunisia’s advertising market”.

Another interesting idea is the creation of a special legal status for journalists and other media professionals in Tunisia so that sector-wide revenues translate into meaningful income. The EU-funded *Programme d’appui aux médias tunisiens*, one of the co-organisers of the consultation, has been supporting work along these lines.

## **Namibia: meeting the challenges of the digital transition**

Big tech came up at the top of the list of concerns by stakeholders at the consultation in Namibia. Participants urged donors and the international community to support Namibian media outlets adapt to the digital transition, with all its attendant challenges: from the spread of disinformation on social media to the fact that large online platforms have vacuumed up advertising revenues from traditional media outlets.

The problem is a particularly thorny one in Namibia’s tiny media market. An estimated N\$400 million goes to big tech companies each year in advertising revenues alone. This is partly based “on the monies they have appropriated over the years from the content of news publishers”, argued Zoe Titus, director of the Namibia Media Trust and chairperson of GFMD’s executive committee.

“Smaller media markets like Namibia have little or no ability to engage with tech platforms to address issues such as revenue sharing if these companies are monetising content that has been produced locally”, said Titus.

As in Tunisia and Lebanon, the need to restructure Namibia's advertising market was another key theme highlighted in the report from the consultation. The report's authors describe tense relations between advertisers and media in a reality defined by "hyper-competition in an incredibly small market" ... with limited support from national regulators.

Titus added that the recent investments made by companies like Google and Facebook to support African media hardly address the scale of the challenge. And while the problem is one faced by media companies across the African continent, big tech companies have tended to concentrate their efforts on larger players like South Africa.

Namibian media organisations, the report from the consultation stressed, need support to engage with national regulators and big tech companies to ensure the latter are adequately taxed, with the funds then redirected to African media. One recommendation is for African media outlets to bargain collectively through regional mechanisms like the African Union and multilateral instruments like the Africa Free Trade Agreement.

The report's authors concluded that coordination between media stakeholders across the African continent have so far been quite limited, and that more work is needed to develop greater synergies with editors beyond Namibia.



(CAPTION TBC ... From left to right: "Tom Law (GFMD Deputy director), Saorla McCabe (UNESCO-IPDC), (Maha Taki, BBC Nick Benequista (CIMA), (Ruth de Vries FPU), Laura Moore (DWA)

- CJ Chanco

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