



# Partnership Approaches for Press Freedom

## Best Practices for 'Localisation' and 'In-Country Ownership'

A self-reflection report by Free Press Unlimited

August 2024

**FREE  
PRESS  
UNLIMITED**

People deserve to know

## **Colophon**

### **Text**

Free Press Unlimited

### **DTP and design**

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# Index

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| <b>Foreword</b>  | <b>4</b>  |
| <b>Executive Summary</b>   | <b>6</b>  |
| <b>Introduction to this report</b>   | <b>8</b>  |
| <b>Free Press Unlimited core values and standing practices in view of localisation</b> | <b>10</b> |
| Tailor-made - in-country approaches and the issue of autonomy                          | 10        |
| Independent - Ethical journalism in a context of repression                            | 14        |
| Inspiration - Building on solidarity and mission                                       | 18        |
| Inventive - Going out of the box without harm  | 25        |
| Dedication - Changing dynamics and roles in practice                                   | 29        |
| <b>Recommendations for a healthy partnership</b>                                       | <b>32</b> |
| Lessons learned  | 33        |
| <b>Understanding barriers to collaboration and localisation</b>                        | <b>34</b> |
| Positive reflection on the intermediary role   | 34        |
| Problematic aspects of the intermediary role - challenges of donor demand              | 35        |
| Caution against self-congratulation  | 36        |
| <b>In conclusion recommendations for FPU's partnership approach</b>                    | <b>38</b> |
| <b>Appendix</b>  | <b>40</b> |

# Foreword

Today we are discussing how to best support independent journalism in a world that has become multipolar. Media organisations in the majority of countries worldwide are sometimes struggling with their own governments who blame them for being instruments and agents of Western policies. Dependencies on - western - donor money have led to a new realisation and an increased debate on how to best support and protect media freedom.

At the same time there is a trend to find solutions to the challenges of nurturing and progressing in-country ownership rather than dependency of international organisations. Power imbalances in collaborations with in-country organisations in support of policies and practices to protect press freedom need to be discussed and reviewed in equality.

Free Press Unlimited is proud to discuss these trends with international, in-country and in-house experts and to debate the way forward for our organisation. In our new Multi-Annual Strategic Plan we show that we have ambitions to develop ourselves to be an international go-to organisation for press freedom.

For that we aim to be the trusted knowledge partner in solidarity and equality with our partner organisations in the Majority World based on the strategic long term objective of the organisation: *“Media and journalists, as independent players in civil society, constitute a diverse and professional media landscape and act as change agents on behalf of citizens.”* We distinguish three intermediate outcomes in our theory of change:

- An enabling environment for media is established, conducive to freedom of expression, pluralism and diversity;
- Media serve the interests of the public and act as a watchdog on their behalf;
- Journalists and media actors work professionally, are effective and sustainable.

One of the pre-conditions for this to happen (amongst others) is to prevent harm, to protect independent journalists and media and prosecute those that violate

the rights of journalists. This has made us venture into the terrains of advocacy, investigations and emergency support, also discussed in a chapter of this partnership report. That is needed because we see the trends in the world towards autocracy and using resentment against free and independent media as a tool for re-election.

We have also seen that the positive reception of social media and new distribution channels spiked press freedom initially. However, in the hands of autocrats and technologists without ethics, these platforms have turned into platforms of hate and desinformation over time, denying many people in the world their right to express themselves freely and safely. Independent media are banned by the same platforms and their news is used and distributed for free, attracting the advertisers away from the media.

We worry about the advent of Artificial Intelligence as the next technological opportunity for press freedom which could very well become an actual threat to press freedom. These are not threats far away and remote from democratic countries. Also there we witness backsliding for media freedom. We are not negligent about threats to Press Freedom at home and have progressively started working closer to home and we think we can learn from our partners in repressive countries also. Thus, the contemplation about our relationship with in-country organisations is not a one-sided process, we should both benefit.

True to its core belief that change happens locally, Free Press Unlimited sought advice for this report from a council of experts from around the world, former partners with experience of dealing with Free Press Unlimited and staff in the organisation with expertise on trends and analysis in the field of media freedom and freedom of expression and international relations in the digital age.

The stories gathered in this best practices report were presented to its international advisory council that delivered feedback. Free Press Unlimited also conducted a thorough review of its partners satisfaction surveys followed by internal discussions on Free Press Unlimited's vision and standing practices on working with partners.

This best practices report does not intend to show how great we are, but rather showcase how Free Press Unlimited has developed sensitivity and approaches to counter negative power imbalances in some of these programmes.

Specifically in the way in which Free Press Unlimited cooperates within-country partners, and how it deals with the trend towards localisation and the challenges of collaboration in a world that is rapidly demanding decolonisation of the international aid architecture.

We do believe international NGO's have a role to play in international solidarity and joined programming with in-country partners. This remains critically needed in times when human rights are so intertwined with pressures against freedom of expression and challenges against independent media.

The question remains, can we win this battle? How do we achieve this and what is our added value in a time of decolonisation and localisation? In order to support our partners in solidarity, FPU carries out programmes and projects, funded by donors.

We need to debate how we can invigorate our values of true partnership, local ownership and collaboration with our partners in the Majority World. We invite you as partners and experts to help us navigate how we can do a better job.

This partnership report aims to contribute to the ongoing discussions between donors and investors in media freedom, freedom of expressions and media freedom about localisation and collaboration. It is also a reference point for discussions between Free Press Unlimited and its in-country, regional and international partners about the shifting roles of international organisations in the solidarity movement for free and independent media.



Photographer: Graciela Rossetto

**Ruth Kronenburg**  
**August 2024**  
**Executive Director Free Press Unlimited**

# Executive Summary

**Can international press freedom organisations such as FPU find new recipes to avoid power imbalances with its partners? And what can it do better also in view of transferring ownership and sharing responsibilities and learning with and from its partners in countries of repression and conflict? These questions are relevant and need renewal in the light of discussions about 'localisation' and genuine collaboration. Free Press Unlimited's mission and vision roots strongly in activism in solidarity with professional independent media and journalists. Its DNA originates from solidarity with independent journalists during apartheid and it also stepped in when independent journalists in former Yugoslavia encountered violence and hatred by the various polarising fragments of their society during the break-up war there.**

Free Press Unlimited sees it as its mission to keep independent fact based and relevant information available to people during conflict and repression. The organisation sources its legitimacy in internationally agreed standards of human rights, freedom of expression and media freedom.

In its approach to working with partners, Free Press Unlimited uses an issue driven collaborative response methodology. And it chooses its partners based on solidarity with partners that base themselves on the codes of ethics that are enshrined in professional journalism. This is demonstrated through examples of its programmes that are underpinned by the core values of Free Press Unlimited: Tailor-made, Independent, Innovative, Inventive and Dedicated.

By reviewing these larger long-term programme examples and by taking on board comments and critical remarks, we tried to identify lessons learned and provide recommendations to answer two questions: what is the added value of FPU in the light of the discussions on 'localisation' and genuine collaboration? And how should FPU engage with international actors to ensure policies of donors and decision makers become more favourable to real In-Country ownership, empowerment and strategic autonomy?

FPU aims to contribute to bring these discussions, approaches and experiences to the international

discussion tables, especially because it has access to donor agencies and policy decision makers where these discussions are taking place.

We summarise here the most important recommendations for 'localisation' in partnership approaches and developing in-country ownership:

- **The power dynamics of funding streams**

Partners in fragile countries struggling for (economic) survival sometimes feel compelled to agree to projects designs that do not match their needs. Funding streams from international implementers of projects and donor requirements by country donors and private foundations create power imbalances that need to be constantly reviewed and mitigated against.

In an era of shrinking civic space, international organisations often become focused on the competition for donor funding too much. Accepting donor's views and its language can be a spoiler of trust between international organisations and in-country organisations if it does not match local needs. Saying 'no' can be healthy to contest ill-conceived funding.

Power dynamics are not always about money, but also about (un)healthy relationships, shared knowledge and genuine interest in each other's skills, capacity and knowledge. We need to stay sensitive regarding cultural norms and views on the role of journalists in fragile countries. Within programmes there is space for sharing responsibility more. Co-design and co-ownership requires constant attention.

- **Words matter in relationships with partners, be sensitive and self-reflective**

This is exemplified by the frequent use of words as 'local', 'southern', 'poor countries' which are perceived by in-country organisations as belittling and discriminatory. Even the word 'localisation' itself is contested but we use it here as the international discussion frames it in the current discussions about Aid Infrastructure. Toxic and/or colonial vocabulary is mentioned repeatedly by partners and colleagues as a risk for an equal relationship.

By contrast Free Press Unlimited should be conscious of such mechanisms, and continuously

develop a glossary which radiates equity and equality and keep discussing it as language evolves.

- **Long term investment is needed for leadership and in-country ownership**

Local ownership and autonomy requires investment in in-country organisations and its key staff. But 'localisation' is not an end in itself. It is a means to make credible trusted information available in various contexts as delivered by professional in-country media actors. Sometimes a local set-up is required to facilitate growth of country organisations and fostering local leadership. In the discussion about 'localisation' there is a trend visible where international organisations are setting up local offices to follow the 'money going south'. This is not a positive trend and also not a solution to empower in-country organisations, and Free Press Unlimited tries to stay away from copying it.

- **Address global issues within the partnerships, it has added value for partners.**

In-country organisations in conflict prone and repressive societies are busy with survival. International organisations such as Free Press Unlimited can bring in expertise and perspectives from other regions and countries to overcome such divisional aspects of various in-country contexts. Free Press Unlimited is able to convene, help bridge divides and build coalitions, by bringing in counterparts in the same situation. But it is not just about learning and project design but also about the reflective nature of advocacy rooted in in-country contexts. Free Press Unlimited's advocacy strategy sources its legitimacy in partners and their context and entertains a do-no-harm policy towards her partners.

- **Use the relationships with donors to ensure better value for partners.**

Free Press Unlimited's positive experiences with seed money and finding donors for it, is an important contribution to partners and allies. It is often more challenging for in-country organisations to find a seat at the table of donors, and they often lack the multifaceted access to donors. Money is important, but belief in a free press

and free access to information is more critical in reaching the goals of FPU. FPU must never replace "propagating" its ethos with looking for money for partners.

- **Articulate your powers better and do not shy away from using them for public good.**

International press freedom organisations have power and they should use it for the benefit of the global press- and media freedom community. Relinquishing that power in the face of shrinking space, also towards donors can help Free Press Unlimited to remain bold, ambitious and table the discussion about the positive power for good that international organisations have and can put to use for the benefit of all.

Change takes time and requires sensitivity and discussion of roles. In reviewing its best practices FPU acknowledges that reflection, introspection and willingness to adapt in the relationship with in-country organisations, can be a real strength but it needs constant vigilance from its staff.



# Introduction

## **Localisation and collaboration in the DNA of Free Press Unlimited**

The DNA of Free Press Unlimited originates from a number of international events and transitions of power that shaped optimism for democracy and freedom of expression. After the fall of the Berlin wall, Eastern Europe opened up with a myriad of initiatives for independent journalism. A strong popular movement for fundamental freedoms was shaped, also inspired by the end of apartheid in South Africa and a deeply felt need for the support for independent media in Africa and the new democracies in Eastern Europe. Support for independent media in countries in transition became a cornerstone of Free Press Unlimited, rooted in the belief that change ultimately happens in countries themselves, but can be supported through international solidarity.

The quest to support independent journalism as a key asset for creating public accountability in a democracy became even more relevant after the outbreak of war that made the former Yugoslavia fall apart into separate geographical entities. Independent journalists were attacked if they criticised the propaganda of the separatist politicians and armed militias. This shaped the solidarity movement in The Netherlands with independent journalists around the world and created the spirit, mission and ambition of Free Press Unlimited: pragmatic hands-on support for independent journalists at risk and assisting media with their job to provide access to independent information.

At that time, Free Press Unlimited was specialised in demand driven technical assistance and known for its capacity to bring financial support to journalists and media that suffer from repression or are unable to reach their audiences due to conflict and lack of enabling environment. This is how Free Press Unlimited grew to the organisation it is today, an organisation that contributes to freedom of expression, independent journalism and social development. FPU builds on its experience with providing support to independent media partners in fragile and repressive countries, as well as in transitioning and developing democracies.

Free Press Unlimited formulated core values for the organisation very early on. The organisation is deeply

rooted in the belief that true change happens locally but can be supported through international solidarity, supporting independent journalism with demand driven tailor made approaches for a human rights-based perspective in countries suffering from repression and conflict. These core values of FPU are visible in the development and structure of its programmes and its progress as an organisation.

In the past 15 years, Free Press Unlimited has evolved to an organisation with convening power, finding its foundation in the trust generated from partners all over the world. Working with journalists on the basis of equality and by staying truthful to their needs in programmes that allow for flexibility. This results consistently in joint capacities to learn across divides. Together with in-country organisations, our partners, Free Press Unlimited, tries to think out of the box, look at what is missing and develop creative solutions. All the while being agile and adaptive along the way.

But the organisation should not close its eyes to the power dimensions of donor funding and their report mechanisms, the inequality in access to knowledge and resources that can spoil the broth of equality between international and in-country organisations. And one should never stop thinking about whether we are still on the right track, how do we change, what could be better in our approach, how do we ensure partners are true owners of work, including in design. This is the objective of the report in front of you.

In its Multi-Annual Strategic Plan of 2023-2026 Free Press Unlimited describes its core values as Independent, Inspiration, Inventive, Dedication and Tailor-made. Projects and activities detailed in the following report demonstrate one or more of these values with an eye to localisation and collaboration.

This report digs into the practice related to the core values of Free Press Unlimited and how that translated into projects, activities and new areas of expertise and involvement. Followed by a chapter on recommendations and conclusions around the main pinnacles of decolonisation, localisation and collaboration.



It should be noted that this report is authored by Free Press Unlimited. In the current discussion around decolonisation, words that are often used, such as the word 'local' can nowadays be perceived as diminishing or discriminatory. The report has made an attempt to refrain from that where possible, but it is an on-going effort in which the organisation is learning. But of course, Free Press Unlimited remains solely responsible for the content of the report which will also be reviewed internally.

# FPU core values and standing practices in view of localisation

## Tailor-made - in-country approaches and the issue of autonomy

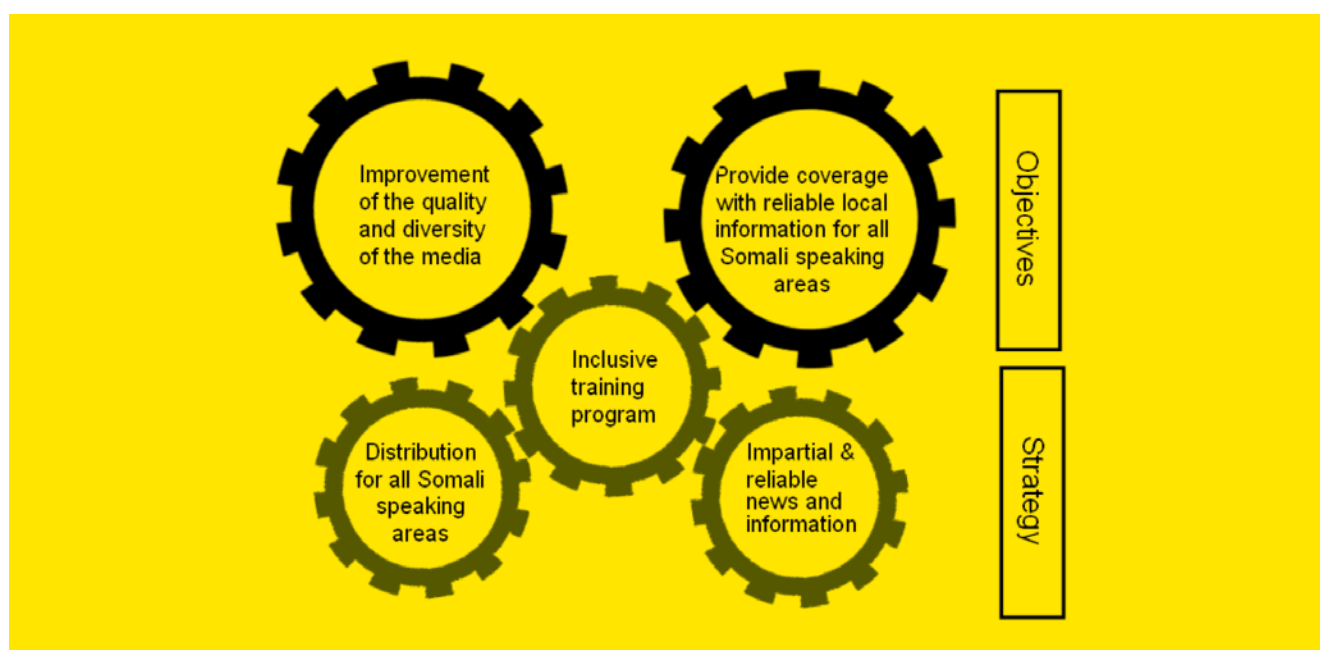
**The local situation and culture are the starting point for Free Press Unlimited. We take into account the capacity of those in the media and their organisations. We are aware of contextual opportunities for growth as well as constraints such as the level of technological development or effects of (post-)colonialism.<sup>1</sup>**

In 2009, Somalia was a fragmented and tormented country. International organisations declined to be active there due to clear and present danger for

anyone daring to challenge the need for improved human rights, accountability of war lords and public information. Civil society organisations were fragmented geographically and politically. Mutual animosity dominated the discussion between actors with like-minded ideas about press freedom and independent information. Media were weak and distrusted by the public with non-state actors (war lords) challenging their independence.

At this point Free Press Unlimited organised a three-day meeting in Kenya with over sixty representatives of media as well as journalists and their unions, aiming to find common ground and develop an agreed and Somali-owned program to develop capacity and increase the distribution of fact based, relevant and timely information. The present journalists and FPU developed the following project scheme:

<sup>1</sup> Page 5 - "Fight for Press Freedom" - Core values in Free Press Unlimited's Multi Annual Strategy 2023-2026



Graphic representation of the Initial project proposal to donors NED and Doen Foundation

The set up for the project was to work from Hargeisa in Somaliland. Because it was a relatively secure location. In spite of rivalries, Somali journalists could travel there without complicated and costly travel abroad. It was also a place where FPU could travel to. FPU was asked to set up an in-country office from which the project would be deployed.

Its international status served as protection from government interference and at the same time was a solution that convinced donors to engage in the project activities, hesitant as they were to trust the standards of administration and accountability in Somalia at the time.

This situation was not a perfect solution as Free Press Unlimited believes that local offices of international organisations syphon capacity away from in-country organisations and can disrupt local ownership. This was mitigated by training Somali trainers, developing in-country expertise and recruiting Somali staff in the first

year. Meanwhile, the activities served the sector well by creating improved content through its trainees for many radio stations operating in the different Somali territories. Public trust increased and some media saw advertisement revenue increase. The concept worked and even government actors started asking for assistance in the set-up of curricula for journalism training. The office by then was a trusted actor as it was operated entirely by Somali staff.

In 2016, a Somali director of the organisation was appointed with the objective of transferring the FPU satellite office to local ownership and it became independent and registered as Media Ink Somaliland, serving as a civil society organisation promoting press freedom in all the Somali territories. This achievement opened the door to higher appreciation by the respective government authorities, as the organisation was now seen as a home grown civil society organisation.



Training camera operators, challenging in Somalia, is possible in Hargeisa



In house training of radio presenters and editors at Media-Ink



### Challenges to localisation with donors

The biggest challenge for the new director was to get a seat at the table of the donor circles that decide on investments in Somalia. This was achieved by a deliberate transition of roles, bringing the director to meetings with decision makers in Nairobi and the EU in order to gain familiarity and trust. In one of these meetings the director challenged the donors at the table who had formulated a funding mechanism for specific content development, asking them: "Who are you to tell us what is good for my country and what needs to happen in my country? That constitutes colonialism."

The director holds the view that saying "no" to a donor does not necessarily end the relationship but give space for discussion. Gradually these discussions resulted in a shift where donors would ask an in-country organisation to lead consortia and ask organisations like FPU to partner with them. By now, Media Ink has become a trusted address for donors involved in media capacity building. While it still is a partner of Free Press Unlimited, it also works with several other international organisations and their embassies.

### What to learn from this program

Free Press Unlimited set up an accelerator start-up, provided seed money, set up leadership and gave long term support. But it takes time and starts with the intrinsic goal of *not having your own in-country offices*. Then be adaptive around the context as you go along. This is a model maybe for other media organisations in other countries.

### Reactions of the IAC to the Somali example:

**"Donor agencies can be led by individuals who sometimes dictate rather than cooperate... As in any relation, you need to invest in it."**

**"Donors should not decide on content, the media know themselves. FPU should work on strengthening media for them to be able to grow."**

**"Stop working on project objectives and framing that don't answer the needs of the media but those of donors."**

### Lessons on in-country autonomy:

- Develop after in-country consultation.
- Enter for long-term commitment.
- Be adaptive along the way.
- Foster local leadership.

## Independent - Ethical journalism in a context of repression

Free Press Unlimited has its own independent strategy aimed at providing a variety of services to independent (media)partners and supporting the development of an enabling environment within which they can function. Free Press Unlimited does not accept assignments from financial pressure groups or political groups.<sup>2</sup>

This is a core value and missionary foundation of Free Press Unlimited, deeply rooted in the belief that only independent journalism can be a service to and resource for public trust.

<sup>2</sup> Page 5 - "Fight for Press Freedom" - Core values in Free Press Unlimited's Multi Annual Strategy 2023-2026

In 2011 and 2012 the dignity revolutions in the Middle East were cause for great enthusiasm, especially in Syria, where decades of authoritarian rule had subjected the population to deeply repressive state control. Media were dominated by government actors, censored against any form of dissent as can be seen here:

Free Press Unlimited was approached by several independent actors from the dignity movement to support the start of new, independent media and support their journalists. And indeed, dozens of new initiatives had started, all trying to do more or less the same, but mostly in competition with each other. Sometimes three journalists launched a joint proposal to us, only to find out that each of them was also involved in several other projects. Syria had no experience of professional journalism, its media outlets lacked editorial ethics. Lack of trust between individuals, augmented by decades of repression, activists wanted to become journalists but were lacking capacity to collaborate and build publicly trusted independent media.



Drawing 1: State of media in Syria 2011 before the dignity revolution

### The Donor challenge

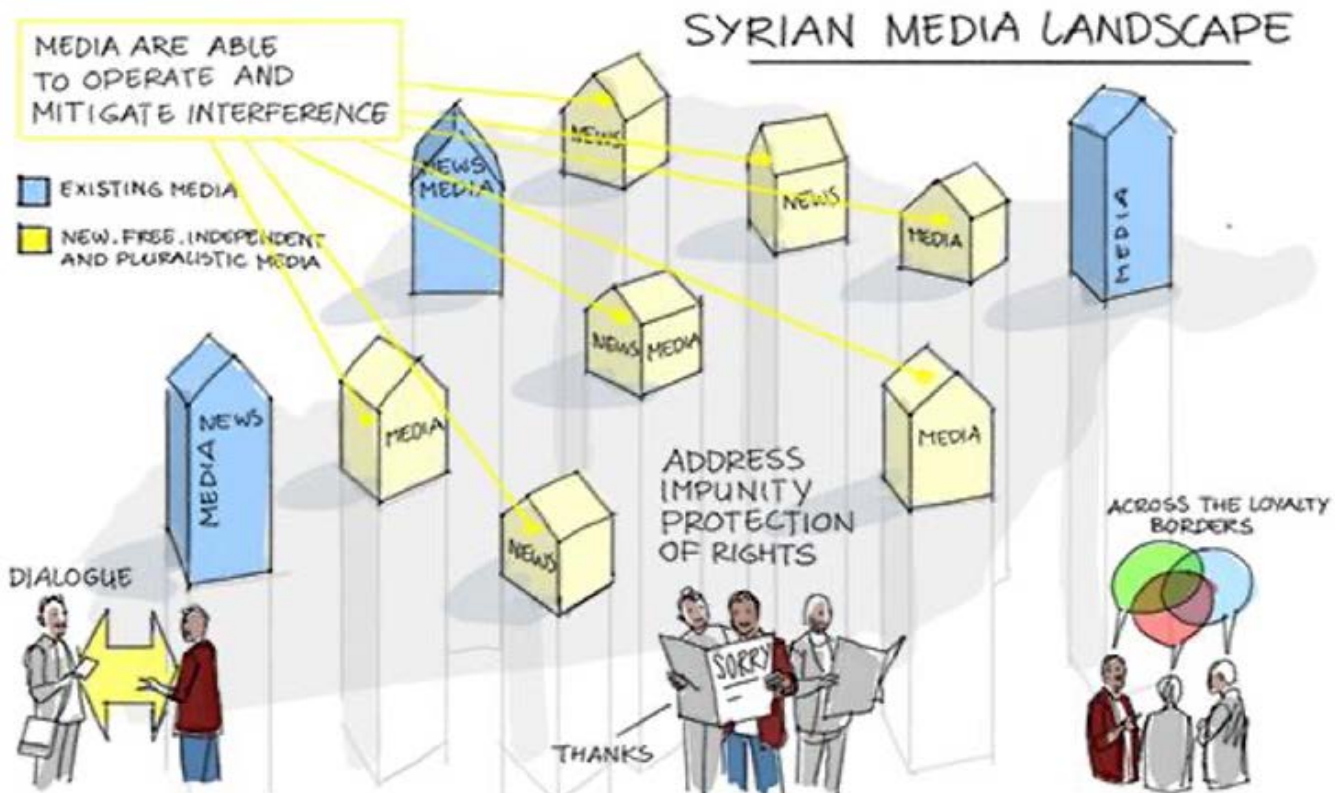
One of the aspects of the dignity revolution is that it started with massive interest from donors. Whether based in the US, EU, or the UK, private foundations from everywhere were pouring money into the media scene, creating a highly competitive environment. There was massive duplication of efforts and much less interest in independent media development. With the increased conflict in the country, many actors were forced to flee creating yet another burden for development. And no incentive for collaboration. This only happened when international organisations under the umbrella of the GFMD started working jointly to inform donors what was needed. This improved the situation somewhat.

Nevertheless, huge amounts of money went into the opposition media office, which was a communications

office for opponents to the Syrian Government, and not an independent media office. This presented competition to the nascent independent media for staff. In spite of several exchanges with donors this did not stop.

The staff of Free Press Unlimited, informed by several individual training sessions with journalists and round table sessions between actors led by FPU, at that point decided to work explicitly on collaboration, gathering actors in combined initiatives, rather than starting to fund dozens of individual projects.

It developed a media landscape approach to set up foundational structures for the independent media sector to counter these malfunctions under the title: Ethical Journalism for Syria. The objectives stated in drawing 2. This approach convinced Swedish SIDA to partner with Free Press Unlimited for an astonishing ten years.



Drawing 2: Objectives and (partial) results in review

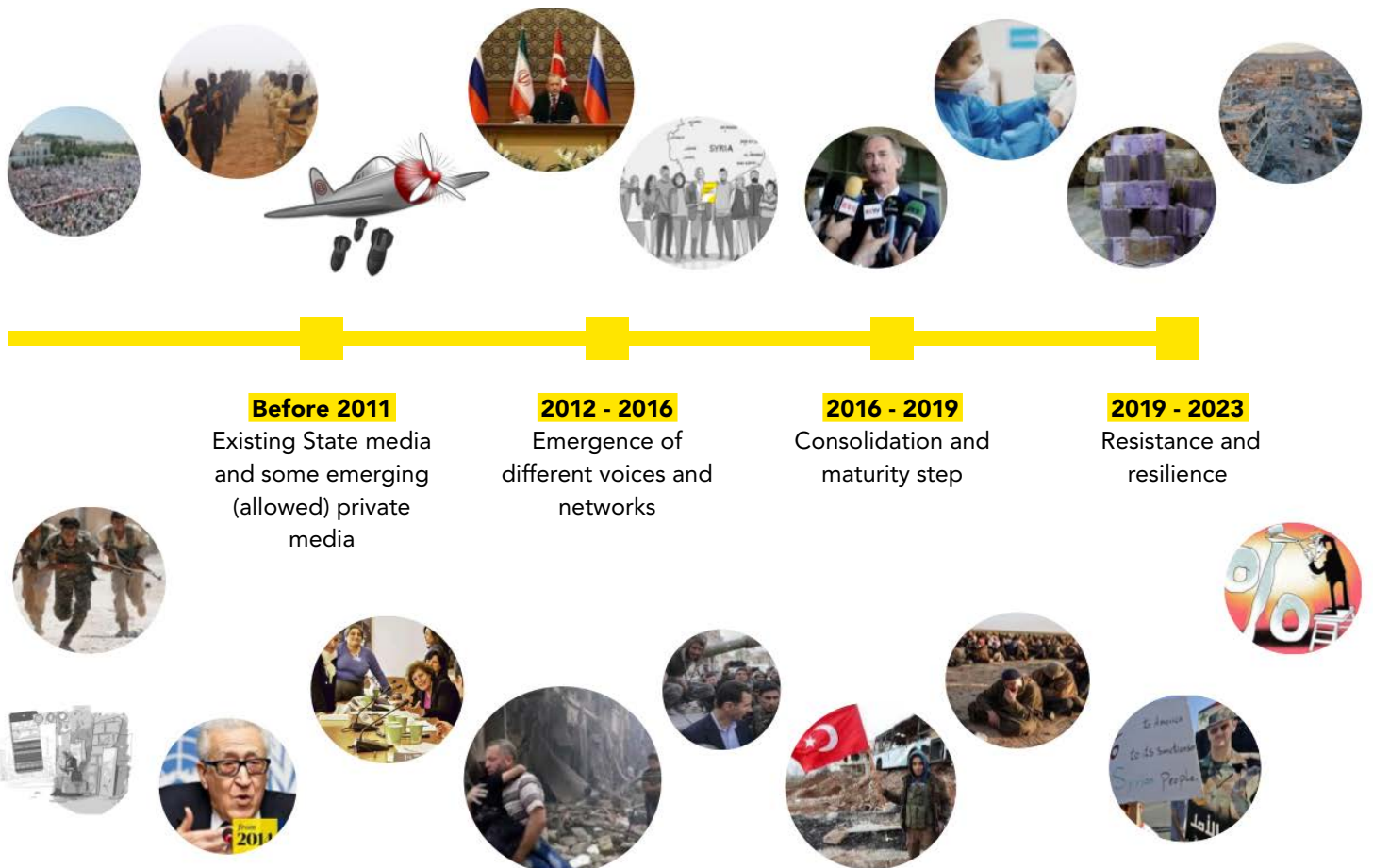


Key factors towards achieving the envisioned results and the gradual creation of local institutions were unearthed by a comprehensive review of the programme in 2022. For example, the Ethical Charter developed by Syrian independent media with support of FPU, stands as a beacon of fostering normative standards in journalism in a repressive context. The Syrian Journalist Association was assisted to become recognised by the International Federation of Journalists. Dialogue processes, though complex, have connected audiences across the separately governed regions. Syria is divided and remains unstable after years of war, but it has developed a professional media landscape with independent journalism as visualised below:

The results can be attributed to the intrinsic involvement of a team of actors from the region with passionate dedicated staff at the side of Free Press Unlimited, a holistic gender lens in the programme from the start and conceptualisation of the programme.

**What to learn from this program?**

Free Press Unlimited is one of a few organisations that really support independent media and that is even more important and necessary than ever. Years of systematic development aid has created dependency, and some international organisations don't even know why they are there for. Many donors support media outlets, but have an agenda, using media to disseminate their message or



political preference. Free Press Unlimited should keep protecting and supporting media professionalism. Donors need to comply with their political framework, it often comes down to the individual persons having a real interest in the topic. Also, most embassies are understaffed during this crisis which formed right after the civil war broke out, an extra challenge. Embassy staff themselves are also struggling with the policy and bureaucratic burden from their head offices. But Free Press Unlimited cannot change the policy of donors that are controlled by parliaments and/or priority setting of Private Foundations. But it can advocate by sampling voices from in-country organisations and bring them to the table of donors. So, the lesson for FPU is that it should advocate to the system from within.

**Reaction of the International Advisory Council to "the Syria journey":**

**"Exemplify voices, organise meetings with donors & partners to bring them together."**

**"You developed models for local autonomy and also provided core support including overhead costs."**

**"You should not act like a victim in your interaction with donors; you can find donors and advocate to them."**

**Lessons on local ownership:**

- Develop models for local autonomy.
- Use and develop local expertise.
- Have a media landscape approach.
- Avoid politicised content funding.
- Work inside the donor system.

## Inspiration - Building on solidarity and mission

**“Free Press Unlimited aims to inspire global and local media professionals and organisations to use their diverse talents and opportunities to the fullest by sharing knowledge and ideas for cross-functional collaboration among equal partnerships. We are results-oriented, we make a difference, and we want to achieve social impact”.<sup>3</sup>**

This is how Free Press Unlimited describes the value in its Multi-Annual Strategy. Our work in six countries

of Central America once started with a collaborative workshop for protection of journalists in Mexico in 2012. From more than 200 attending journalists we heard that more and more journalists were leaving the profession due to the pressures and risks. Life was even more risky for them if they reported about public demands for accountability of drugs related crimes and corporate or government corruption.

This initial workshop of a week developed intense relationships with journalists and their outlets in all regions of Central America and kick-started our ideas and goals. It led to the formulation of a groundbreaking programme for psychosocial support which saved journalists for the profession.

<sup>3</sup> Page 5 - “Fight for Press Freedom” - Core values in Free Press Unlimited’s Multi Annual Strategy 2023-2026



Workshop Mexico City in cooperation with Periodistas de a Pie 2012

### **Dealing with the survival of journalists**

We started a programme with a centre in El Salvador in 2016 to train individual journalists from across Central America. A programme aimed to set up peer-to-peer warning systems and to start role switching workshops between journalists and police officers, helping to improve mutual understanding and the security of journalists during protests for example. To date, the programme has engaged with more than 800 journalists.

More recently we started a pilot project in Venezuela, financed by the Royal Dutch Embassy in Caracas. The project was shaped in collaboration with a Venezuelan journalist that faced the psychological challenges resulting from the exercise of her profession first-hand. Five years later, the programme has been able to support more than 900 journalists, from different states, including remote areas in Venezuela, and has now become a transversal element in all projects of Free Press Unlimited in Latin America. Over the years, Free Press Unlimited has developed expertise and a network of professionals and civil society organisations specialised in providing psychosocial support to journalists.

Last December 2023, Free Press Unlimited organised a gathering of this network of specialised professionals in the region, journalists and media support organisations. The aim of the gathering was to look at the work done over the past years in collaboration with FPU, the challenges, lessons learned and to strengthen the network and the collaboration between different specialists and journalist organisations, as well as media outlets. A total of 25 participants from all across the region have participated. This enabled us to compare psychosocial trends in different areas of Latin America, to analyse the ailments in relation to geo-political and cultural changes, to map good practices and to generate new alliances for a more efficient and holistic support. It has also been the opportunity to identify various routes to raise awareness amongst media support organisations and media houses, on the importance of psychosocial support for the exercise of journalism.



Yoga exercise during psychosocial workshop



**Dealing with the survival of journalism**

The investigative journalism outlets in central America are all struggling with the question of sustainability. How to finance its operations, where to find revenue and how to be resilient against political threats? This concerns all independent media outlets and publishers in countries like El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua. It concerns especially their editors and investigative journalists. Media capture in Latin America is a huge problem in Latin America, with television stations supporting different political actors or captured by corporate interests influencing the agenda of the media networks.

Most of the independent outlets are digital publications, led by independent journalists who refuse to participate in the captured mainstream media. These journalists and outlets, almost without exception, struggle to survive as they are neglected

by state advertising revenues for example. Many of those outlets survive with mixed funding models, living of foreign donor money, crowdfunding, experimental shareholders and subscription models. The outlets were not comparing notes and re-inventing the wheel.

This is when Free Press Unlimited started a deep search programme. It started undertaking audience research and developed and funded business management positions for the willing outlets that were experimenting with new revenue models. The research and experiments were carefully documented and led to a better mix of funding for some of the outlets. Joint advocacy started to highlight their political marginalisation to the outside world, increasing interest in the shrinking space in Central America and their visibility.

What was especially appreciated by the media was the fact that bosses, editors and freelancers



experimented and developed in exchange with other journalists and media outlets that found themselves in the same situation across borders.. Valuable lessons were learned and developed in format development, experimentation with funding models and audience engagement to increase income.

This cooperation also shaped media solidarity and investigative exchange across the divides during the intense period of the Covid-19 pandemic. Free Press Unlimited handed out personal protection gear to journalists in Venezuela so they could work on the streets reporting and investigating abuses of funds for Covid-19 resilience. This prompted cross-border investigations.

A similar programme for improved viability in the face of repression was started in Eastern Europe by Free Press Unlimited after Russia's occupation of Crimea.

The programme design was developed at a conference of media specialists on disinformation and the influence of disruptive framing of narratives by the Kremlin. These narratives were spurring confusion and dissent amongst populations of the former republics of the Soviet Union, by now independent nations. Setting up an exchange between media and civil society actors from those countries directly, bypassing the Moscow channels, resonated well in the region.

This model proved successful as a way to work on sharing relevant content between actors that are not in direct competition with each other. Although they serve different audiences, they do share contextual similarities (language, culture, history). Over the years, the media actors started learning jointly about using new formats, developing ways to avoid censorship and other relevant skills such as reaching subnational



Outcome document of the network meeting in 2023

language groups. In 2020 the exchange successfully worked on a joint response to health disinformation, sharing access to scientists, expertise on digital trolling narratives and health knowledge. So, in the case of the work of Free Press in Eastern Europe, the basis for the exchange practice was kick-started by a conference of media specialists, enhanced by a study carried out by the EU and then supported by a pledging conference organised by high ranking human rights officials. It engaged the support of the EU, The Netherlands and several other EU member states. The Exchange is owned by the participating media, which is also an innovative approach to governance.

As an experiment, we decided to also set up a cross-continental exchange between the two partner groups in Eastern Europe and Latin America. This proved to be so inspiring that a joined website was set up to learn from each other, showing that cross continental learning can work better than piecemeal revenue development training in the local or individual context. People from media landscapes that are not in competition with each other lead to innovation and out-of-the-box thinking.

It is important to mention that Free Press Unlimited was enabled to engage in such an inspirational programme through the willing engagement of Dutch embassies and several donor agencies.



Working session of the cross continental media exchange during Covid



Unfortunately increasing repression and foreign agent laws have made it more difficult to support our partners in Eastern Europe and Central America in their own countries, prompting us to engage in a new terrain, looking at the sustainability of exiled media in places where independent media are forced to live in exile. Whether that is in Costa Rica for Central America, in Kenya in East Africa or in places in Asia and Europe where such reception and continuation of independent media and journalists can take place. Ensuring the distribution of valuable information to populations in countries of origin and that access to relevant and reliable fact-based information can be continuously provided.

To date, Free Press Unlimited is one of the leading organisations in practical assistance to exiled media and their resilience to continue operations. Jointly with other organisations in this domain we are developing a learning circle for media viability and resilience.

#### **What to learn from the Latin America programme**

Experimentation and south-south collaboration is a very good aspect of FPU's current work. New collaborations between actors from different continents is an inspiration for others. Involving the people in situations you aim to address in the design also increases the likelihood of usable solutions that people can implement after programmes, it creates links that cannot be unlearned.

#### **Lessons on inspired implementation:**

- South-South Learning goes faster.
- Experiment new approaches.
- Involve different layers of partners.
- Co-design improves impact.

# Theory of Change: Media Resilience & Viability



## Long-term Goal

Viable, independent, and resilient media organizations effectively serve the public interest, maintain journalistic independence, and adapt to changing environments.



## Preconditions for Achieving the Long-term Goal

**Journalistic Quality and Integrity**

**Audience Engagement and Trust**

**Economic Viability**

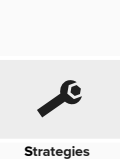
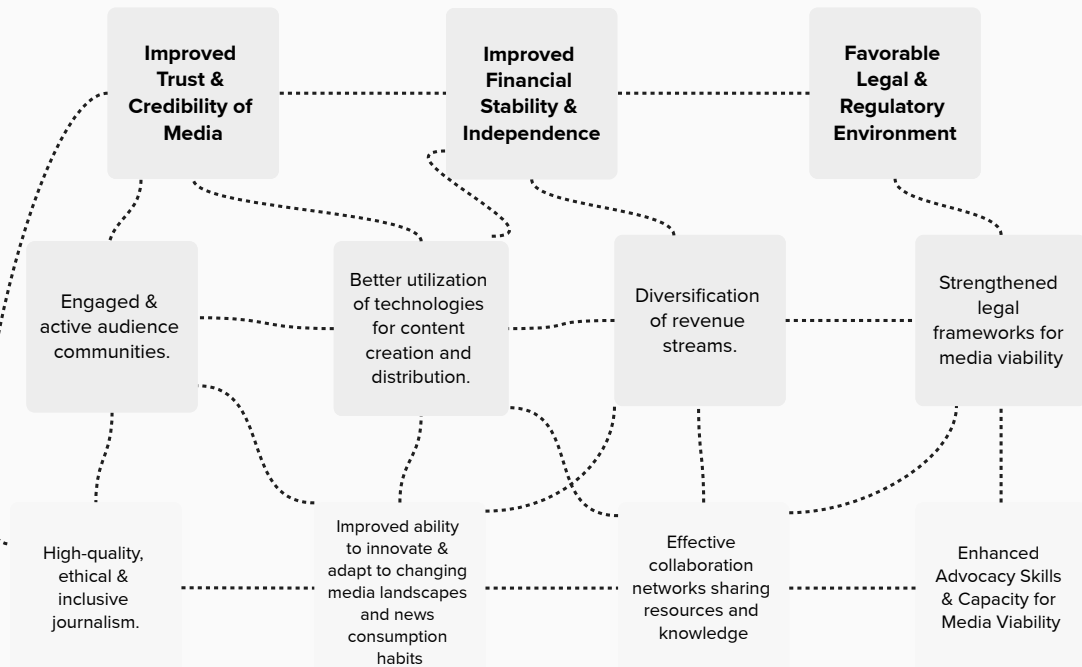
**Technological Adaptation**

**Operational Resilience**

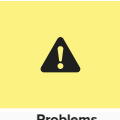
**Enforcement of Laws & Regulations for Media Viability**



## Outcomes



Media organizations engaging with diverse audiences will increase media relevance and public support.  
 Collaboration and knowledge-sharing will enhance media resilience and adaptability.  
 Collective advocacy will create a supportive environment for independent journalism.



Declining public trust and engagement in independent media, and news avoidance by the public.  
 Limited knowledge of & access to innovative tools and practices, including a lack of resilience in adapting to changing environments, and ineffective business models.  
 Lack of supportive legal, political & digital environments for independent journalism, and disruptive challenges created by new tech, incl. issues like misinformation and disinformation, increased competition, and regulatory and ethical concerns.

## Inventive - going 'out of the box' without harm

**"Free Press Unlimited looks for smart and creative solutions, to enable free access to information, regardless of obstacles or barriers."<sup>4</sup>**

The most important barrier to access information is when journalists are not safe or protected to carry out their public duties. This is fundamental to

<sup>4</sup> Page 5 - "Fight for Press Freedom" - Core values in Free Press Unlimited's Multi Annual Strategy 2023-2026

Independent Media Freedom; it can only flourish when there is protection, priority and support. This is a comprehensive, yet abstract logic which sets out the need for an enabling environment for media freedom. Governments and legislature have a role to play in order to provide for independent media in terms of regulation.

Free Press Unlimited has always looked at the issue of safety from a pragmatic but holistic and inventive perspective. Help to protect people in need and provide technical support to journalists and media in order to prevent harm from happening to them. Another pragmatic approach is developed in our Policy and Advocacy team, that promotes improved regulation and risk reduction through policy actions and lobby to governments. It is well summarised in our "3P approach":

## Our approach

### The 3 Pillars of our Safety Programme

We use an **all-embracing concept of safety that FPU employs**, which also includes the physical, psycho-social, legal and digital domains. This work is listed in our **ToC Intermediate Outcome 1**: promote enabling environments voor media.

Reduce risks related to socio-political or legal contextual factors

**Prevention**

Provide relief when emergencies happen, diminish harm, and ensure legal defense

**Protection**

Enable access to justice for affected journalists and their families

**Prosecution**

How does this connect to localisation? The most popular form of advocacy is signing a statement or letter to governments, asking for action to address threats to the enabling environment for independent media, against legal restrictions or against safety threats that ask for immediate intervention with aid, diplomacy and/or lobby. Our most important for lobby actions is the consideration whether we have the legitimacy to speak out on a topic or case that affects a local partner and whether we believe the statement or letter can have an effect and lead to actual change.

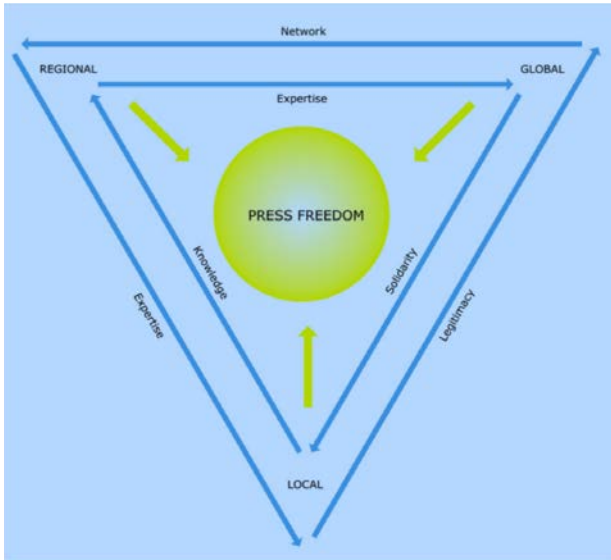
FPU advocacy is based on both of these principles, we constantly consult with and engage with local partners, civil society actors for press freedom, using an advocacy matrix that ensures our advocacy does not cause or increase harm to local partners or actors. We do not have the ambition to sign everything that crosses our path just for visibility. That is why our advocacy is also based on a power analysis determining and focusing on where we can achieve change; meaning an improvement or to prevent a bad thing from happening. Increasingly over the years we have learned the need for being inventive and thinking outside the box, in order to address the growing issue of safety at the enabling level and to develop innovative approaches to improve safety and resilience of journalists. We worked with UNESCO to engage in cross sectoral exchanges between the judiciary and media actors, trying to

improve the mutual understanding of each other's role in upholding the Rule of Law and the international obligations to protect journalists and journalism. We tried forming new coalitions to create a higher impact on the member states that say they are friendly to independent journalism, but lack inspiration, resolution and ambition to really set diplomatic pressure and other actions in motion. These efforts were partly successful as they gave civil society the tools to shape the agenda for states to respond to. Collective power has more effect and brings FPU to the multilateral tables. But that still did not change the feeling that nothing can be done about impunity for all sorts of violence against journalists and the lack of real prosecution of perpetrators of journalist' murder.

Our biggest creative ambitious and inventive programme is A Safer World for the Truth, where we tested if we could bring about change to that perception of impunity as unsolvable. Free Press Unlimited brainstormed with global advocacy groups and partners about organising a People's Court. A place where real judges and media experts would hold state perpetrators of journalist killings accountable. The Permanent People's Tribunal in Rome joined the effort and gave a 'sentence' that convicted three cases of states responsible for murder of journalists: Mexico, Syria and Sri Lanka with recommendations to improve.

Manifesting the pictures of murdered journalists at the People's Tribunal in The Hague





Legitimacy Diagram and Persuasion Approach of FPU's Policy and Advocacy Unit

**position towards decision maker**

| Position towards decision maker             |                                |   |   |
|---|--------------------------------|---|---|
| Outsider                                    | Advocacy                       |   | Insider                                       |
| Weaken decision maker                       | Force change on decision maker | Convince decision maker through constructive argument | Process of joint learning with decision maker |
| Options for behavior towards decision maker |                                |   |   |

We also started investigations into cold cases of journalist murders. In close cooperation with local press freedom groups and lawyers and with an eye for developing and strengthening local capacity, legacy cases of journalist murder were investigated. The results of this project show it is important not to resign to the widely held conviction that impunity for the killing of journalists cannot be addressed. Some cases were re-opened, some cases led to public pressure and new protection task forces. The power of research, evidence and local engagement is well documented in policy papers that are widely circulated in the multilateral arena. They have produced advice to governments on building investigative task forces and on providing emergency visas for journalists under death threats. The pendulum of impunity has been moved for the better.

This success also informs newer aspects of our enabling environment thinking. A recent aspect that we are coping with is to protect the growing number of exiled journalists. The growing trend of autocracy has resulted in more and more countries engaging in pressure against independent media. In the new multipolar world, we also see that external action from international actors can work counterproductively and can be seen as foreign intervention (by state

governments) or colonising (by in-country civil society). At the same time, it is necessary to look into the new digital threats of surveillance, artificial intelligence and social media platforms that increasingly perfect their algorithms to become channels of hate mongering whilst suppressing fact-based journalism content from their channels. It requires new strategies beyond traditional media development.

Pragmatic support for journalists at risk means dedicated, quick and non-bureaucratic access to immediate support. This has shaped our global Reporters Respond programme that provides assistance to journalists at immediate risk. The non-bureaucratic character is demonstrated in the ambition to help people out of harm's way within 48 hours, using the network of partners of Free Press Unlimited to vet and cross reference with other international press freedom organisations on a 24-7 basis.

We are lucky to have the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs Human Rights department to back this approach and allow us to operate in this non-bureaucratic way; saving on average 1000 journalists per annum. Other governments also have stepped up their assistance to the safety of journalists. Yet we see more reluctance in the creation of these new ties, especially where the development of local resilience





Launch of the Pakistan Task Force for journalist murder, a result of joint advocacy

and combative capacity in the defence of media freedom is needed.

To us, it indicates a need to go beyond a defensive strategy of providing relief and to engage more and more in the new terrain of preparedness in solidarity. Ensuring that local organisations are better empowered to protect the media landscape and fundamental media freedoms, and iCSO's to be more rapid in response.

For this we will need to redefine relationships with in-country press freedom actors and work even more closely with local civil society to be even better prepared. Proactive, innovative approaches are required. We hope to be able to find donors entrusting us with the capacity to build new approaches for that.

#### Lessons on innovative advocacy:

- Think out of the box.
- Involve different stakeholders.
- Be ambitious.
- Think about local follow-up.

#### **What to learn from the advocacy and safety programmes**

It is difficult for media actors in a single African country to address all the new problems, especially of they arrive from the global north such as digital technologies and repressive influences. Independent media in Africa face threats from Russia and China, influencing government's attitude to the press negatively and increasing disinformation.

Free Press Unlimited can build coalitions. This convening power is needed to bring the right people to the table and to address the real problems.

The usage of an advocacy matrix to determine whether Free Press Unlimited has local legitimacy to engage with a topic, is something that is really progressive and gives strength and power to in-country organisations when possible and amplifies its priorities and needs when the situation demands. Adding value to local press freedom activists is often overlooked and the cause of many frictions between local and international organisations.

**"Seeking local legitimacy for advocacy is an impressive feature of your work."**

**"Your ambition to develop movement in static situations is an example to others."**

**"Your decision matrix and method provide added value to local Press Freedom Activists."**

## **Dedication** - changing dynamics and roles in practice

**“We are an intersectional team of dedicated and intrinsically motivated people, passionate about contributing to the mission of the organisation.”<sup>5</sup>**

This value has inspired us early on to focus on gender inequality and increase representation in all our programs, initiated by our own staff. Free Press Unlimited is currently mostly women led. Programs in Africa, the MENA and Asia executed successful programs to increase representation in media outlets and improved the international awareness around gender-based discrimination in the media sector through advocacy.

From 2020 onwards, more emphasis on diversity and inclusive approaches are needed, also inspired by the

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<sup>5</sup> Page 5 - “Fight for Press Freedom” - Core values in Free Press Unlimited’s Multi Annual Strategy 2023-2026

new movement for decolonization of the international aid infrastructure in favour of more local ownership and a shift to power for local organisations in design and development of needs assessments and execution of projects.

A donor challenged us to develop a gender equity program for media newsrooms in French speaking Africa, while reversing the traditional role of the iNGO as grant manager and administrative lead, transferring that to an in-country organisation. This organisation would be designing the program and funds would be directly transferred by the donor to them. This pretty much means that they would be in the leading role and FPU would be following their leadership.

True to our creed, the French Africa team in Free Press Unlimited gladly accepted to take on the challenge - but with a lot of introspection. What would this mean for us? What would this mean for our partners? How do they see us? How do we see ourselves? How do we see our partners and how do they see themselves? What does gender mean for our partner? What does gender mean in their context? We can challenge them, but we also need to respect their understanding of these notions. All these questions emerged.

## **Rethinking FPO’s added value**

## **Rethinking how we see one another**





We invited four of our partners from Senegal, Mali, Cameroon and DRC to start working on co-creating this project together, but also on extending this conversation about power balance. We shared with them the intention of the donor, and we all agreed to already shift the power balance in the process of co-creating the proposal together.

We think the power dynamic can also impact our approach to a certain concept. International donors and intermediary organisations often have clear ideas about what inclusivity and diversity mean. This can result in the tendency to impose these definitions on our partners without questioning how it translates in their context. We can challenge them, but we also need to respect their understanding of these notions.

During the process of co-creation we found there are many assumptions that are existing in the relationship between local and international NGOs. Our Malian partner was taking the lead, in agreement by all, as they had conceptualised digital solutions for monitoring and improving gender equality in the media and therefore seemed logical to be the lead. Nevertheless, they expected that Free Press Unlimited would organise the meetings, initiate the proposal writing and build the relationship with the donor. Also, the partners mostly communicated through Free Press Unlimited, rather than to each other initially, showing they still felt it was a Free Press Unlimited led process. They did not see FPU as one of the partners of the West African coalition that was growing between us.

These things informed us about how deeply entrenched perceptions are regarding the division of roles in the relationships. It's more than just a money transfer. Our staff pushed back on these assumptions and noted these role expectations in dialogue with the partners, after which they started communicating more to each other. This is partly why the process of working on this proposal took a much longer time than expected and had emotional moments regarding unfulfilled expectations.

A French study session that was attended by our Africa team confirmed these experiences. The study session concluded that every iNGO should include at least two moments of self-reflection on its role and added value in each project. And that it is a common practice that iNGO's take credit for work that was executed by local partners, which stirs deep emotions in the local organisations. Do not advertise your partner's achievements as your own and talk about solidarity rather than development is another piece of advice. The experiment in the end did result in a good proposal that was delivered to the donor. Unfortunately, by that time donor staff had changed and there was no record of the idea. Nevertheless, the effort has proved to be a lesson of what is involved in shifting the power relations between international and local NGOs and local / national civil society organisations.



## Emotional Shift

Shifting the power also has emotional aspects regarding mutual expectations.



Co-design and joint ownership takes time

**What could be learned from this design effort as it remains unfunded to date)**

The biggest lesson learned was that 'Shifting the Power' takes time and leads to much more discussion about roles and responsibilities than the simple question 'Who holds the money and manage this'. But it is rewarding to start inclusion from the 'South'.

**"Do not worry when a well-designed project is not funded. Rewards will come over time."**

**"Acknowledge each other's capacity or lack of it."**

**"Shifting the power takes time and involves emotions and process."**

**Lessons on collaboration:**

- Ensure time for self-reflection on roles.
- Co-design improves ownership.
- Advertise achievements of partners.
- Acknowledge areas of real need.

# Recommendations for a healthy partnership

**Words matter in the relationships with partners and allies.** The advice from the French speaking Africa network partners is not to talk about 'development' but to use 'solidarity' for example. Terms used often without further thinking like 'southern' or 'local' can have a potential to create feelings of diminished importance from 'northern' or 'international'. That is not in conformity with the values and requires a new glossary.

Rethink terms used as 'capacity' and 'technical assistance', similarly. They are terms frequently used by donors and international organisations. FPU has approaches and methodology where it co-creates and builds on what partners and allies bring to the table too; skills and experiences, contextual opportunities and challenges. Add value to this by bringing your experience and other perspectives to the table.

## **Address global issues within the partnerships.**

Partners and allies see an important asset of Free Press Unlimited – and international cross border networks initiated or nurtured by it – for new problems. How to deal with disinformation or bring best practices on digital security to their table is an example. However, issues and trends that appear on the horizon of the global media ecosystem often become dominated by solutions built by 'western' media actors relevant in their context.

Free Press Unlimited knows from its collaboration efforts that solutions shaped by people with their feet on the ground in conflict prone societies can often produce creative and less capital-intensive solutions. Free Press Unlimited has a good track record of working in an adequate way to the challenges in repressive societies and it is something that is in demand by many of its partners.

**Relationships with donors are an asset.** As the International Advisory Council already discussed at the section on donors, it is important for Free Press Unlimited to understand that its positive experiences with seed money and finding donors for it, is an important contribution to partners and allies. It is often more challenging for them to find a seat at the

table of donors, and they often lack the multifaceted access to donors.

In the relationships with donors, it is important to realise who holds power to make money decisions. Free Press Unlimited needs to campaign to donors for the space to be flexible and adaptive in its approaches and implementation modalities on behalf of partners and allies. It is an item for advocacy towards donors in that sense. While donors deserve to be confronted with criticism, when necessary, it is also important for Free Press Unlimited to seek positive engagement with donors, based on its 25 years of experience with using donor money smartly. This experience should be articulated better and should also be used for engaging unusual suspects: private foundations, humanitarian actors and philanthropy.

## **Invest in people**

In the end localisation is about trust in people. FPU has recognised that that is an important factor. Keep nurturing the leadership of partners and allies. Make sure you keep being sensitive enough regarding cultural norms and views on the role of journalists in fragile countries. How do you decide on proprietary designs and how do you choose your partners? Within programmes there is space for sharing responsibility more.

But also invest in your own people. The diversity of staff at Free Press Unlimited has increased tremendously over the years. International organisations should include in every project at least two moments of self-reflection. Seeking feed-back from others in the organisation will also help review if you are still on the right track.

# Lessons learned

**The following lessons learned can be extracted relevant to partnership and collaboration**

## **Lessons on commitment to localisation:**

- Develop after in-country consultation.
- Enter for long-term commitment and be adaptive along the way.
- Foster in-country leadership.

## **Lessons on in-country ownership:**

- Develop models for in-country autonomy.
- Use and develop in-country expertise.
- Have a media landscape approach.

## **Lessons on inspired implementation:**

- Cross border learning between similar organisations goes faster.
- Experiment with new approaches.
- Involve different layers of partners.

## **Lessons on innovative advocacy:**

- Think out of the box and be ambitious.
- Involve different stakeholders.
- Think about in-country follow-up.

## **Lessons on collaboration:**

- Ensure time for self-reflection on roles.
- Co-design improves ownership and improves impact.
- Advertise achievements of partners and acknowledge areas of real need.

## **Lessons on donor funding:**

- Do not create your own in-country office to follow 'money going south'.
- Bring your partners to the table of decision makers.
- Avoid content funding streams that favour donor's politicised

# Understanding barriers to collaboration and localisation

preferences.

**The programme examples were presented and discussed in three tiers. They were discussed with the international advisory council of Free Press Unlimited. A consultation of in-country partners was organised through a satisfaction survey and a number of qualitative interviews on aspects of the partnership relation around crucial aspects of power dynamics. And the programme examples and lessons learned were also discussed internally in team meetings that led to useful advice.**

## Positive reflection on the intermediary role

### Lacking Resources

The experts that we consulted for this report see that there is a need for Free Press Unlimited to highlight gaps in assistance. Many countries and regions of the world are underserved. They mention the departure of donors in recent years from parts of Africa has left a huge gap. In Southern Africa initial gains have been lost by lack of funding. Civil society organisations are weakened, disabling local press freedom fighters to support the improvement of public interest media and the enabling environment for good media. International Press Freedom organisations like FPU should highlight these issues through their relationships with head offices of donor agencies.

### Politicisation and capture of media

Political polarisation produces bad media, a problem also manifested in Latin America. Governments have become more repressive which has eroded trust in state subsidised public broadcasting for example. But digital and commercial media struggle in the market and funding is difficult, also because of lacking relationships with donors. In Latin America, political

polarisation of the media is an aspect of political instability. This is also true in other regions where media associations are politically organised rather than issue based and media landscape oriented. An international press freedom organisation can be a much-needed mediator in sometimes divided media landscapes.

### Global challenges translate locally

Africa has so many problems that cannot be handled at the country level alone. The new invasion of media investments from China and Russia, creating politically dependent media rather than stimulating fact based and independent media is difficult to address at the country level. That is a new kind of (Sino-Russian) colonialism that has increased fake news, hate speech and the erosion of public trust in the media. Free Press Unlimited can bring in expertise and perspectives from other regions and countries to overcome such divisional aspects of various in-country contexts.

### Convening power

Free Press Unlimited is able to build coalitions, bring in counterparts in the same situation. Working with in-country organisations does not make international organisations colonial. The convening power of international organisations to bring the right people to the table, address the real problems and underlying transnational trends and factors to determine how to cope with such challenges, is helpful and an asset to local organisations.

### Long term commitment

Free Press Unlimited demonstrated some examples how it can function as an accelerator, a global long-term investor in change. In its approaches it can find organisations who can be a linking pin and remain sensitive not to build proprietary networks, but be sensitive and adaptive to foster in-country capacity. Donors always tell in-country organisations to be sustainable, but they don't say how and where to go to. Often donor engagements are short-term. FPU can be a facilitator in this, like a knowledge and relationships broker. The organisation should not stop communicating with their partners after the funding



of a project stops, but remain a friend for joint project development and collaborative learning to re-engage with donors.

#### **Added value**

Free Press Unlimited should feel encouraged not to become an administrator of grants, even if there is acknowledgement that in-country civil society organisations struggle to comply with (administrative) donor requirements. FPU's south-south cross border learning about viability strategies of independent media and the exchange between media actors from different countries are examples of good facilitation. Free Press Unlimited's asset is that it stands with the media organisations, and growth happens jointly. Being involved in media is the added value of FPU not just as an interlocutor between donors and media, but as an enabler for civic space. "Journalism is a significant value for democracy, not just for journalism's sake but to emphasise why it's so important to enable the media to do their work for the public space and public accountability", several experts said.

These aspects of a positive intermediary role indicate that Free Press Unlimited is one of the organisations that really support independent media. There are not that many in the perception of partners and in-country experts. This enhance the importance and necessity of international organisations taking up such a role:

*"FPU protects and supports media professionalism.*

*FPU should not tell media organisations on content, the media know themselves how to produce content. FPU must never replace 'propagating' its ethos with looking for money for partners. Your added value is how you can strengthen them for growth."*

FPU should not trouble itself too much about negative aspects of the aid architecture. The organisation is flexible, learns from experience and has a contextual orientation. FPU found methods to engage with partners and allies and to organise collectiveness.

## **Problematic aspects of the intermediary role - challenges of donor demand**

### **Project Colonialism**

Representatives from in-country civil society organisations and independent media mention that in their experience, willing staff of donor agencies based in their target country are sometimes overruled by the guidelines and rules of their bosses and headquarters. It occurs that some expat donor staff can have a habit of telling in-country organisations what is best for their country.

This leads to deep negative sentiments. One media representative said: *"You come to a donor table and the donor starts explaining what the best approach is. Who are you to tell us what is best for my country is my question to them? That is colonialism."* Donor individuals and donor strategies can dictate rather than cooperate. And private donors are not excluded from this behaviour and act sometimes worse than government donors.

Provide space for local leadership at the donor table  
It needs a dedicated strategy to enable local actors to really make the change on the ground, it is not for donors or international organisations to take that role, change happens locally. There is an assumption that in-country organisations don't speak the language needed for donors, but when probed, this is usually not the case. A key element is building the leadership of partners. "You need to be introduced. I was fortunate enough to be accompanied by Free Press Unlimited to these donor exchanges." That provided the space to persuade donors and become partners with an in-country organisation.

### **Mission slide**

Years of systematic development aid have created a pattern of dependency. In the opinion of in-country partners, some donor staff seem to forget their original mission, impact and dynamics on the ground but rather push out what they need to tick the box. This can even negatively influence in-country organisations to copy this attitude to finding donor funding, instead of being relevant for their society.

“A lot of organisations started as an activist but after so many years in development, they are now a property administrator”, commented a local media professional. Free Press Unlimited should not fall in the trap of focusing on the project administrator role but keep its mission central in its approaches and project ideas with local organisations.

### **Media support as an external agenda**

There is often a problem with competitive calls for proposals organised by multilateral and country donors. Many support the notion of independent media, but have an agenda that is compliant to the donor’s strategic communication agenda. They carry objectives in log frames that do not answer the needs or problems of local media.

So Free Press Unlimited should itself resist calls for proposals that do not answer needs indicated by local organisations and should disengage from goals not fitting to what is needed. *“Saying ‘no’ to a donor does not end a relationship but gives space for discussion.”* Sometimes the local organisations are forced to accept these out of need for resources for survival. Free Press Unlimited can be pro-actively engaged in preventing this by organising collaborative in-country need assessments. In consultation and co-design with the relevant organisations and outlets.

### **Understanding the donor arena**

There is an ever remaining need to understand how and why staff of donor agencies sometimes get it wrong. Research indicates this: they are usually understaffed and overloaded with new policies by their headquarters. They also struggle with the bureaucratic requirements enforced by the constant request for more detailed and more elaborate accountability mechanisms.

One of the donor representatives confided to us: *“I heard these complaints all my life working at these*

*agencies. No matter how upfront these exchanges were, I was bound by other ties. You need to play the system from the inside.”* For FPU, it comes down to finding the right people who are motivated and build relationships. FPU also needs to have insight in when and where one can influence. This is where international NGOs have a role to play, shape the designs and influence decision makers and bring partners to the table.

### **Un-earmarked funding**

The International Advisory Council was interested in the fact that some larger projects, like the Syria programme, Safer World for the Truth and Media Lifeline Ukraine were started with smaller amounts of un-earmarked funding or funding with limited restrictions. *“You exemplified how funding of the Dutch Postcode Lottery, and sometimes NED or smaller private foundations, can start something big.”*

These are stories that other donors need to hear. As any relation you need to invest in the trust of donors and showcase that you can perform magic with unearmarked funding. You recognise the local partners in those efforts and use it to bring space and ideas to the arena and that is good. Articulate them better and document the approach to that.

## **Caution against self-congratulation**

As mentioned already in the foreword, showcasing successful examples of projects does not mean that Free Press Unlimited thinks of itself beyond criticism and self-reflection. Examples of long term consistency of engagement and a careful and deliberate shared decision making does not mean that Free Press Unlimited is not facing the same challenges as its in-country partners. Sometimes because of strict regulation by donors, it faces the same implications for its work as many of its partners.

This is why this report also went through anonymous consultation of partners through a survey, added by qualitative interviews of the willing and team discussions and joint sessions internally on where we are not doing well and could improve.



### **Downside of integration of international management standards**

Over the past fifteen years Free Press Unlimited has adopted standard procedures required by donors, implemented its own management accountability and quality review mechanisms. As a result some of the financial manuals and staff regulations are phonebook size. (if that still means anything to the digital age brackets).

Partners complain of power imbalances as a result of repetitive administrative procedures and recurrent assessment, short term funding cycles, even when partners are with us for five years or more. They also ask for longer term funding cycles with prevention of periods without support in a continuing partnership which is now happening. A review of its manuals to rescale procedures more towards the 'appropriate and necessary' is recommended by the partners.

### **Staff replacement and continuity**

Free Press Unlimited is proud of its capacity to provide opportunities for growth of its staff, who can build a career inside the organisation. But this dynamic internally also has consequences for staff continuity for partners. While this also provides its partners with a fresh opportunity to re-discuss new ideas, partners also notice that the inception of new staff at the FPU side often results in lengthy discussions re-stating the obvious.

In the internal review by FPU staff people recognise this and suggest that FPU further improves its onboarding of new staff and organise more frequent reflection moments with partners, and involve staff from different teams to be involved in partnership relations to ensure continuity for partners.

# In conclusion recommendations for FPU's partnership approach

**Press Freedom and independent media are the cornerstone of any democracy. Yet, the organisation of the work of Free Press Unlimited and independent journalists globally, depend more and more on development assistance, philanthropy and foundations money. The realisation that donors remain vital for the continuation of the organisation requires the organisation to invest in relationships with donors and emphasise more the role of bringing needs and requirements of its in-country partners to the attention of donors.**

While recognising the intermediary role and having access to the international network of donors is an asset for local organisations, what other roles are there? And what does it require for the organisation in terms of network, growth and connections?

For further investigation, Free Press Unlimited should articulate its powers better. There are different sources of legitimacy for international organisations. The capability to access state and corporate actors in the Global North, monitor challenges and solutions and organise connections is an asset. With a coaching leadership philosophy, one can act as an honest broker and investor for enhancing press freedom.

## **Enhancing autonomy**

In-country autonomy starts with understanding and thinking of global connectedness in solidarity. We all have a role to play by starting the discussion with partners and allies. Another principle point is that it starts with the intrinsic goal of international organisations not having local offices to follow donor money and compete with partners. If for reasons of repression or conflict the set-up of an in-country local implementation structure is needed, it should be made independent as soon as possible. FPU has very clear ideas and practical evidence of how this can be done. Approach is also very important. FPU needs to reconfirm and continue what it has successfully been doing as real or true partners. Not telling partner organisations what to do but rather engage, assist, convene with them and on demand coach them

and, if needed, to engage them with donors and deliver projects. This can be called an issue driven collaborative resilience approach where both can learn and benefit from each other's experiences, ensuring that problems identified are addressed with added value different per country and region but using the same methodology.

## **Build relationships for collaboration and learning**

Power dynamics are not always about money, but about healthy relationships, shared knowledge and genuine interest in each other's skills, capacity and knowledge. Bigger international support organisations should join forces and come up together with evidence and case studies.

In the current discussion about 'localisation', Free Press Unlimited could also decide to write a paper about the risks and barriers of unhealthy relationships. Can an in-country organisation do something against it? FPU has the network to rethink risks and look in a different way at the effectiveness of collaboration and develop ways to hold each other mutually accountable. Such a paper could present those experiences to donors and convince them to change.

## **Sourcing advocacy at the global stage from in-country actors and issues**

Another aspect of Free Press Unlimited added value is its advocacy around all aspects of the safety of journalists. FPU developed an engagement matrix, ensuring actions target areas where the legitimacy is based and rooted in the problems that in-country partners face. FPU facilitates their stories to get a global stage. The strength of relationships and connections to in-country partners can tell and show policy actors and decision makers the real problem, not just to donors. An added value FPU has is the 25 years of experience in the funding of media development. This area of policy and advocacy needs to be nurtured more, it's necessary. Develop policy papers, to also address others than usual country donors. Think of human rights donors, democracy actors, disinformation actors. FPU's approach is rather unique and an example of how FPU organises advocacy around localisation.

### **Global impact investor**

In its programme presentation Free Press Unlimited has set up accelerator models with seed money and set up local leadership in efforts that continued long term support. This perhaps presents a model for media organisations in other countries. But it takes time.

Imagine if you have 10 Media Ink's, this would form a strong network of organisations.

Free Press Unlimited does not have the history of general development organisations. It is flexible, looks at the context and looks at which marginal and long-term gains matter. It shows the ability to convince donors to invest in it. It would be an additional asset for Free Press Unlimited if it could articulate better how it is smart with money and how it can work miracles starting from un-earmarked money.

### **Articulation of power and network strategy**

The power to build networks and capitalise that for common good does require something from Free Press Unlimited. It needs to develop more and better its in-country networks and bring them together. Diminish its problems of projectitis and be a service to its partners. This will allow for FPU to remain audacious enough to re-emphasize solidarity and articulate the need for Free Press Unlimited as an international press freedom organisation. In a rapidly more repressive world where civic space is shrinking there is a need for a courageous, ambitious and status quo challenging organisation. An FPU that pushes government actors, donors, partners and itself to do a better job and that stands shoulder to shoulder with partners who fight for freedom of expression and citizens access to trusted, independently verified and relevant information, an organisation that fights for press freedom.

# Appendix

## **International and in-country experts consulted for this report**

Lionel Veer – Chairperson Interational Advisory Council  
Ruth Kronenburg – Executive Director Free Press Unlimited  
Abdelgadir Musa – Director Media Ink Somalia  
Daniel Simons – Legal expert Executive Board Article 19  
Dapo Olorunyomi – Director Premium Times Investigative journalism Center Nigeria  
Eni Mulia – Executive Director Indonesian Network for Investigative Journalism  
Jennifer Avila Reyes – Editor-in-Chief Contracorrientes Honduras  
Laura Miti – Executive director Alliance for Community Action Zambia  
Margit van Wessel – Strategic Communications Chair group Wageningen University  
Mira Milosevic – Executive director Global Forum for Media Development  
Paige Alexander – Executive Director Carter Foundation

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Jens Kiesheyer, Director of Programme Development  
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## **Relevant documents consulted**

- IFEX - Collaboration Code - draft advice on equity and accountability in partnerships for adoption at the IFEX conference in 2024.
- WACSI/Robert Bosch Stiftung - Decolonising aid, perspectives from sub-saharan francophone Afric.
- Oxford University and Save the Children - iNGO and the long humanitarian century,
- Leadership survey report.
- Margit van Wessel, Tiina Kontinen and Justice Nyigmah Bawole - re-imagining civil society collaborations starting from the south
- Femke Mulder - The paradox of externally driven localisation, a case study on how local actors manage the contradictory legitimacy requirements of top-down bottom-up aid
- Partos - dream paper shift the power.
- The Broker - Future Briefs series no. 2 - Shift the Power
- Free Press Unlimited - Multi Annual Strategy Paper



Members of the International Advisory Council





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If you want to go far, go together.**

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