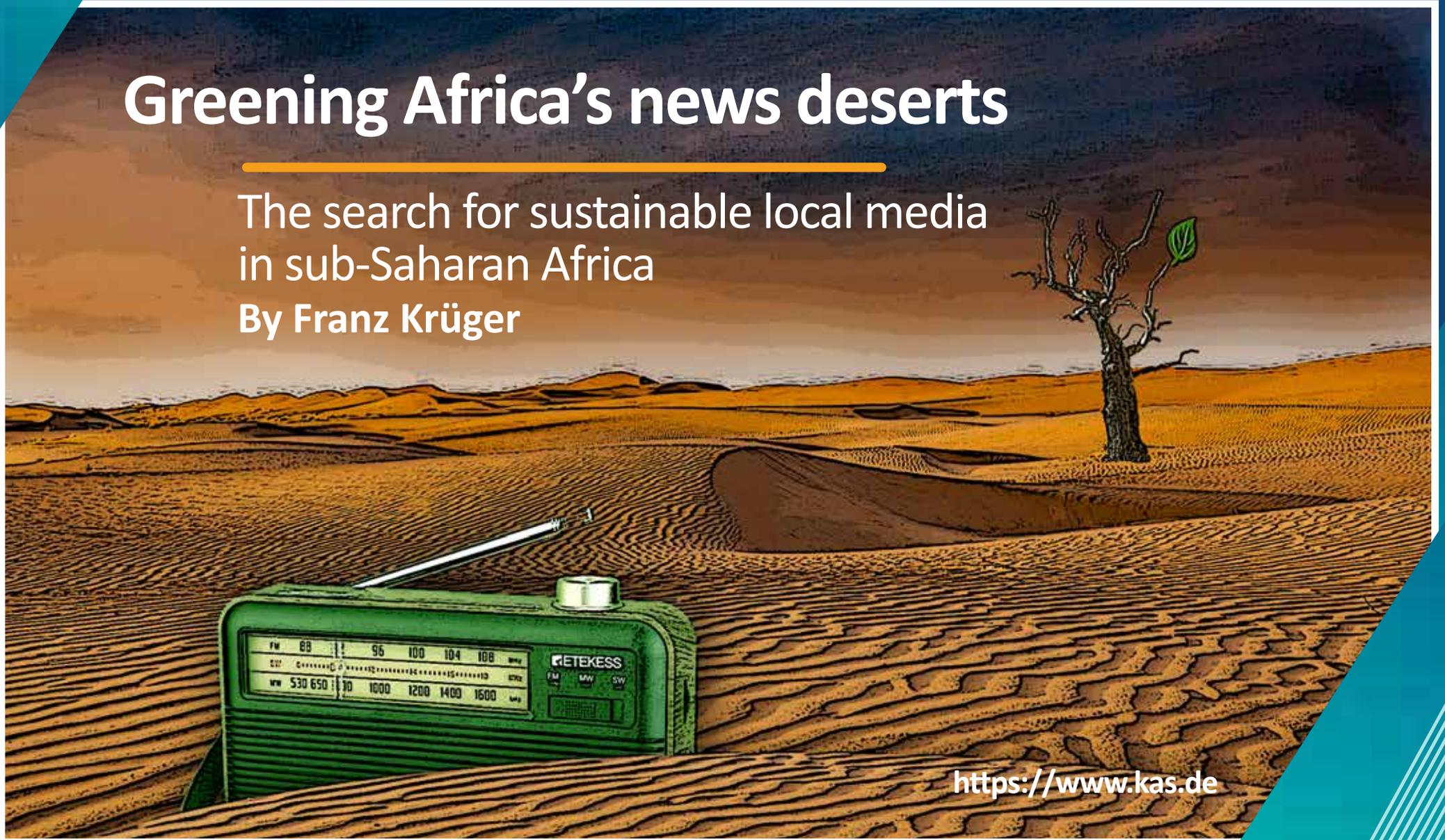


Greening Africa's news deserts

The search for sustainable local media
in sub-Saharan Africa

By Franz Krüger



<https://www.kas.de>

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KAS Media Programme Sub-Sahara Africa

The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) is an independent, non-profit German political foundation that aims to strengthen democratic forces around the world. KAS runs media programmes in Africa, Asia and South East Europe.

KAS Media Programme Sub-Sahara Africa believes that a free and independent media is crucial for democracy. As such, it is committed to the development and maintenance of a diverse media landscape on the continent, the monitoring role of journalism, as well as ethically based political communication.



Summary

Local media play a critical role in information ecosystems, and their weakness in many African countries mirrors and reinforces social inequalities. On the continent, sustainability has been a challenge long before the rise of digital platforms and the resultant change in audience behaviour brought the issue to the fore in the Global North.

The search for solutions needs to start from an understanding of some key characteristics of local media in Africa, particularly in contexts of disadvantage and marginalisation. These include issues of scale, the lack of local resources and the ways in which political dynamics may play out with media being captured by local power-holders.

International experience can be drawn on to

develop policy suggestions that fit African contexts. Among principles that should underpin policy choices are:

- a focus on systemic impact;
- particular attention on the areas where information poverty is greatest;
- platform-neutrality, while preferring platforms used most commonly;
- ongoing monitoring of developments in and around media at local levels to deal with problems that may arise.

Taking these principles into account, areas of possible support for local and community media include:

1. The development of an enabling environment, including legal and regulatory

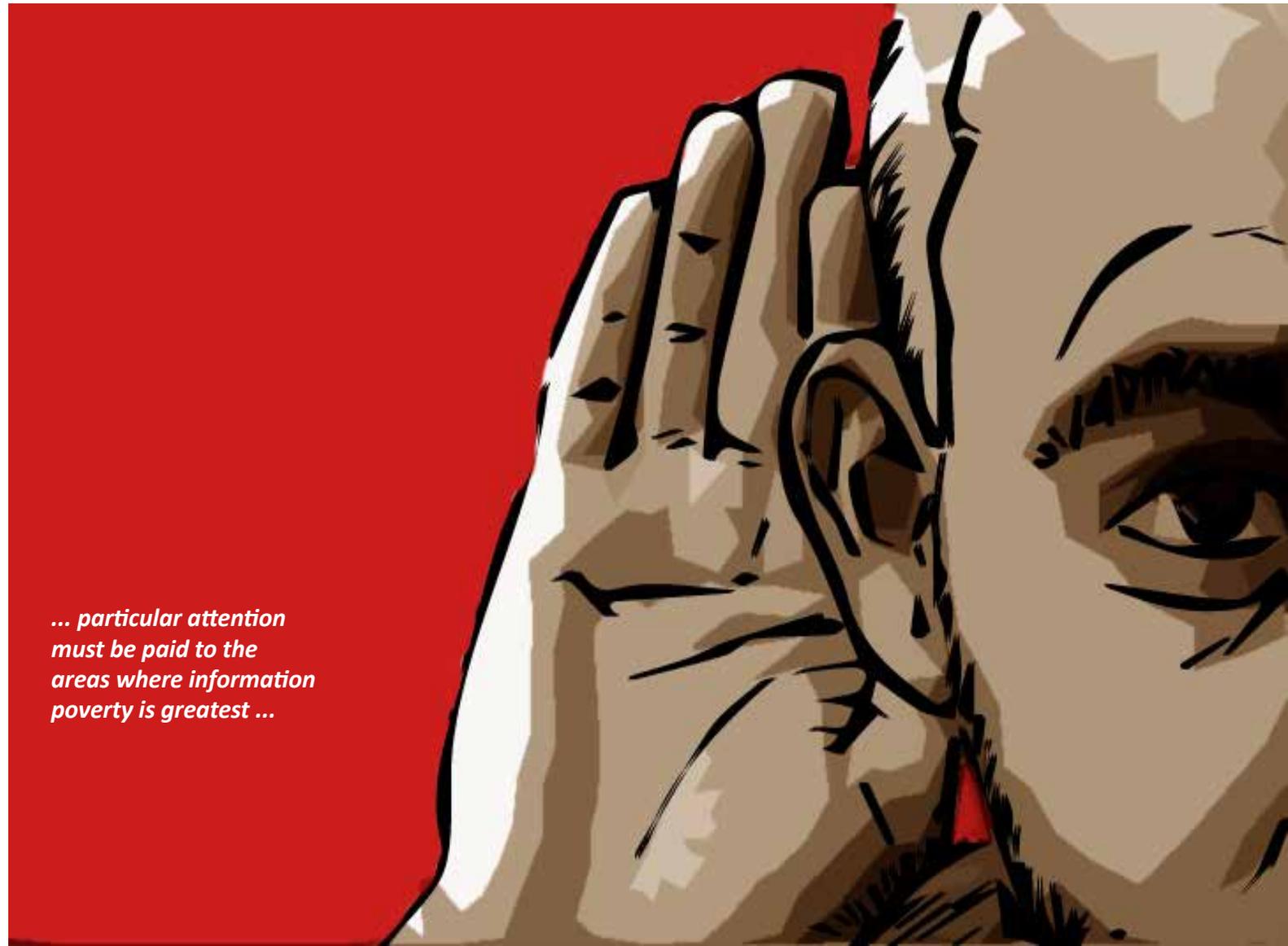
measures and the provision of back-end support in areas such as research, training and others.

2. Strengthening funding mechanisms, including
 - a. indirect subsidy such as tax relief and the zero-rating of news websites;
 - b. direct public funding, as exists for media in several countries;
 - c. the fair use of government advertising, often a major factor in media economies in the Global South;
 - d. commercial income and ways to support the access of local and community media to advertising markets;
 - e. responding to the power of digital platforms, who need to make a fair contribution to local information ecosystems;

- f. improved co-ordination among international donor agencies in order to deliver greater impact, including support for the new International Fund for Public Interest Media; and
- g. the development of new business models that draw on diverse sources of income, with particular focus on direct audience support.

The report ends with a set of specific recommendations directed at the different roleplayers: wider society, including civil society groups; governments and regulators; international donors; media organisations and networks and the digital platform giants.

*... particular attention
must be paid to the
areas where information
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Introduction

The evocative term “news deserts” describes areas where journalistic media are disappearing, leaving citizens with drastically reduced access to information and news. The term was coined in the US in the early 2010s in response to the visible and dramatic decline of local news, particularly newspapers. In the decade leading up to 2014, 664 local newspapers closed according to a study by the University of North Carolina’s Hussman School of Journalism and Media, while ownership became more concentrated and circulations dropped.¹

By now, the causes are well understood: the traditional business model for journalism is in steep decline, as audiences move to satisfy their needs for information on the new technical platforms.

Newspaper sales have plummeted as readers opt for free information, though lately some

media have been successful in building online subscriber numbers. At the same time, the advertising money that paid the biggest portion of journalists’ salaries has moved into the pockets of the platform giants like Google and Meta, owner of Facebook. Their success lies in their global reach, coupled with an ability to use data to target potential consumers more narrowly than traditional media ever could. Simultaneously, the platforms have made it possible for anyone to become a publisher, creating a flood of misinformation which itself has undermined trust in professional journalism. It is a perfect storm, with profound implications for democracy.

The current Covid pandemic has worsened the underlying pressures on news journalism. While the global health crisis demonstrated the importance and value of reliable information

and audiences grew, the economic impact has caused further devastation.

In countries as diverse as the US and Botswana, closures and retrenchments have increased, as Schiffrin notes in a report written for the Konrad Adenauer Foundation.² A number of observers have noted that local media have been affected particularly badly. Britain’s official Cairncross commission of inquiry into sustainability of journalism reported in 2019:

*Not only are local publishers inherently ill-suited to a revenue model that rewards scale; much of what local papers were previously uniquely placed to do is now being done better by others, whether that is providing a focal point for community life, or targeting individuals with advertisements based on location.*³

These trends affect media in sub-Saharan

Africa as much as other parts of the world. In South Africa, the annual State of the Newsroom report published by Wits Journalism has chronicled newspaper closures and retrenchments over several years.⁴ Similar findings have been made in Kenya⁵ and Nigeria⁶.

However, specific features of African media landscapes affect the ways in which these trends play out. Little work has been done thus far to develop a more nuanced understanding of the real impact of platform power on African media systems, and on the access of ordinary Africans to information. “We found comparatively little literature discussing the sustainability of independent media in developing countries,” write Robinson, Grennan and Schiffrin.⁷

African media economies are significantly different to those elsewhere. Newspapers are uncommon outside major cities and the classified ad market whose decline Cairncross noted has never been an important feature. Instead, governments have played a bigger role through direct funding and advertising. In large parts of the continent, the most important formal source of information is radio, which is less affected by platform power. Overall, news deserts

are a much older problem in Africa than in the Global North, for reasons that have little to do with the tech giants.

This report will investigate the sustainability issues and opportunities facing local and community media. The growing literature on the topic will be read from an African perspective, in order to understand how context has shaped success and failure and to identify the ideas that may be most appropriate to African realities. The central question is: what can be learnt from international experience to inform effective support for sustainable, quality local media in Africa?

As Dugmore puts it in his important South African study, the idea is to “think globally, act locally”.⁸ This report will draw on two distinct fields of literature. On the one hand, it will look at the ideas that have emerged in response to the technology-driven crisis facing journalism, mostly from the Global North.

In addition, useful insights can be gleaned from the older tradition of concern with sustainability of community media from the media development sector, particularly in the Global South. Many papers and reports have been

Verbatim

“The (big) media focus a lot on the big things. So they are not able to see that corruption doesn’t just happen with the big things, corruption starts small, at the local level.” – *Carolina Alpírez, cofounder of Ojoncomipisto, Guatemala*

“You know, we don’t even call them the audience. We call them the community. So we talk to them every day. You know, my personal number is in every WhatsApp group we have as 263Chat.” – *Nigel Mugamu, founder of Zimbabwe’s 263Chat.com*

“... during the post-election violence Koch FM tried their level best to make sure there was no conflict in our communities. Most of the presenters were on the streets and were telling people to make peace and not fight” – *Dennis, 18-year-old student from the Nairobi slum Korogocho*

(Quoted in Park, Jacqui (2022) *Local Media Survival Guide 2022*. IPI. pp 64 and 26; Gustafson, Jessica (2012) *Voicing the slum*. Stockholm. p 252)

Verbatim

“If we no longer report on that which holds our community together, if we are no longer present in the communes and districts, don’t report on the impact of local and national politics on the lives of people, then what are we there for?” – *Open letter from staff at Südwestdeutsche Medienholding in Stuttgart, Germany, on management plans to reduce local reporting and jobs*

(Quoted in Grimberg, Steffen (2022) Weniger Lokales im Ländle, *Taz.de*)

written on the topic as donors have grappled with the challenges of putting funded projects onto an independent and self-sufficient footing. The two traditions of writing generally pay little attention to each other, and both are impoverished as a result. Methodologically, therefore, the report will rely primarily on scanning and analysing existing literature, though it will also draw on a few interviews with key informants.

Before going any further, two key terms need definition. Using a common sense approach, “sustainability” is taken to mean the ability to continue operating. It is most obviously a

question of money, but it has often been noted that organisational and social aspects are also important.⁹

The term is not fully satisfactory as it suggests the possibility of attaining a stable state where revenue comfortably covers expenditure. This is probably unattainable for many local media, particularly in poor areas where the struggle to survive is constant. Nevertheless, the term remains in wide use and will be used in this report. The other term needing a line of clarification is “local”, which will be used to refer to media that operate at a sub-national level.

It includes a wide range of forms and categories, including alternative and community media, regardless of platform, ownership or whether they are operated for profit or not. Local is mainly a geographic term, though media serving communities of interest, as well as diasporic media, play a similar role and face similar challenges.

The paper’s main interest is in media that make a positive contribution to civic life. Not all local media do so: some hate media have fomented ethnic division and encouraged violence and even genocide.

The role radio and other media played in fuelling the Rwandan genocide is well known,¹⁰ while local vernacular radio stations owned by politicians were found to have played a major role in fanning ethnic violence in Kenya in 2005 and 2007.¹¹

Others are little more than jukeboxes whose aim is only to make as much profit as possible or wrappers that simply serve to carry advertising inserts.

Often, discussions on sustainability issues are purely technical, assuming that all media have value, missing considerations of how interventions can encourage quality and prevent misuse. This report is concerned with ways to strengthen the provision of useful information that empowers citizens at local level. It is less important whether the media are for profit or not, or use print, broadcast or digital platforms.

3 Understanding and valuing local media

Local media play an important role in information ecosystems. They record and publicise events and processes, acting as a watchdog over the exercise of power. They provide a forum for discussion of important local issues and build a sense of community and often of identity. In these ways, they play much the same role as bigger media, simply with a focus on the local.

Of course, the reality does not always measure up to the expectations, often for economic reasons. But it remains important to set out the ideal in order to measure real media performance and understand why they often fail to meet expectations.

Local media play a particularly important role for poor and marginalised communities, where there is little business incentive for commercial media. They fill gaps left by national and metropolitan media. The community radio movement

and its supporters rely strongly on this role, which has fuelled extensive donor involvement in the sector. AMARC, the international body representing community radio, puts it succinctly: “The main social impact of community radio is (as) voice for the poor and marginalised.”¹²

In addition, it is not always appreciated how important local media are for national information ecosystems. “(I)t is regarded as a truism in journalism that ‘all news starts locally’, which implies that the metaphorical national and global news ecosystems depend in a fundamental sense on local news ecosystems,” write Gulyás and Baines.¹³

Where local media are weak, many important stories and developments remain unnoticed in national media, much like the proverbial tree that falls in the forest without anybody hearing. In addition, local news outlets provide training

in journalism and other skills: many careers begin in local media. Local media also sometimes feed new format ideas into the national media.

The dominant format used in television newscasts around the world, for instance, began in local US television.¹⁴ In a wider sense, local news shapes attitudes to journalism and to media literacy, Dugmore argues: “Around the world, it is clear that exposure to well provisioned local news enhances the sense of what local news can be and what role it does and can play in society.”¹⁵

It would be a mistake to assume that local media are simply smaller versions of national media. There are specific differences that impact on their sustainability. Importantly, additional layers of complexity arise in poor and marginalised communities. Some factors include:

1. Scale

Scale is an important issue, of course. Local media do not have access to the economies of scale that benefit larger media. It is well known that the unit cost of printing 50 000 copies of a newspaper is much lower than printing just a few hundred. Local markets for print media in richer countries have long been dominated by commercial chains that capitalise on the possibility of sharing printing and other back-end costs, as well as elements of content. South Africa's Caxton group publishes 140 titles, with a combined circulation of 3.7m copies a week.¹⁶ One response to the collapse of the traditional business model has been a decline of independent local media and the consolidation of chains, generally with less and less local content. In Britain, "local newspapers are local in name only; the town or city emblazoned on the newspaper's masthead may be one of the few remaining local features of the paper."¹⁷

2. Few local resources

Evidently, local resources in smaller communities are few, particularly in remote towns and villages. Local economies are poor and cannot easily support media, whether through advertising or donation. For broadcast, technical services are unlikely to be available locally. It is common for a broken part to have to be sent far away for repair, leaving a station off air for an extended period.

Local media struggle to find and keep skilled staff, from journalists to managers and technicians. Poor pay and opportunities mean skilled staff tend to migrate to jobs in the bigger centres.

Many stories can be told of projects that experienced problems or collapsed due to a lack of skills. Effective governance of non-profits, too, becomes a problem, as boards need legal, financial and other skills. At the same time, volunteers are usually a plentiful resource. Young people with few other opportunities gravitate to local media in the hopes of gaining some skills and experience.

Though many are motivated by a sense of

The mayor's arsonists

In 2013, Karabo FM, broadcasting in Zamdela, South Africa, was attacked by two masked arsonists and burned to the ground. There had been local protests about the area's incorporation into a different municipality. Allegations later emerged that the arsonists had been hired by the mayor when one of them complained to a newspaper that they had not been paid their full fee. It seemed municipal authorities were unhappy about the way the station covered the protests. Police investigations led nowhere.

(See Patel, Khadija (2013). Burn it up: a Zamdela community radio station feels the political heat, *Daily Maverick*.)

community service, they are also likely to be looking for material opportunities, even if only in the form of a stipend. When job opportunities arise, they leave very suddenly, causing instability. Later in this paper, consideration will be given to ways of managing this dynamic better in order to benefit both young volunteers and the media enterprise itself.

3. Local politics, local pressures

The intimate relationship that local media can have with their communities can be a source of great strength, but can also be a constraint. Where the mayor knows journalists personally, perhaps attends the same place of worship and runs into them in the shop, it becomes that much more difficult to play an independent role. Local media are not often noted for their investigative reporting.

Also, a local media outlet represents a significant source of power, status and income and may spark intense competition, particularly when there is donor or other outside funding. There have been examples where internal conflicts have led to forceful takeovers of radio stations, arson and even murder.

In 2013, a board member of a community radio station in the eastern Free State, South Africa, was shot and killed, allegedly by the station manager who had been fired.¹⁸ The problem of capture of the media by powerful forces in politics and business has drawn increasing concern: at local levels, capture is an ongoing challenge, though rarely noticed in assessments of media

freedom and performance. These are among the conditions under which local and community media operate and which shape their struggle for sustainability. A fixed set of potential income sources are available, each of which brings with it particular issues, relationships and power dynamics. Five “models” can be identified which operate across the world, both in the Global North and in the Global South.¹⁹ However, the specific shapes they take will be significantly different in poor and marginalised settings.

The first model is **commercial**, built around advertising income. The model is dominant in Europe, North America and other parts of the Global North, but media in remote and poor contexts elsewhere also strive for advertising income.

The second relies on **patronage**, where an individual or institution hosts a media outlet and guarantees that its operational needs are met. Research in South Asia found that community radio stations are backed by universities, agricultural colleges and NGOs of various sizes.²⁰ The larger the parent organisation, the more stable the station is – but also the greater

Verbatim

“I prefer being here as a volunteer as a stepping stone. Eventually I want to get into any good Swahili station because I am good in Swahili.” – *Carol, journalist and presenter, Pamoja FM, Nairobi*

“People are not consistent in working. Today they are there tomorrow they are not. You can’t ask them because they are volunteers.” – *Shiko, news editor, Pamoja FM, Nairobi*

(Quoted in Gustafson, Jessica (2012) *Voicing the slum*. Stockholm. p 151)

its dependency, the research found. In many countries, religious organisations also play an important role.

The third involves **state support**, through direct and indirect funding, as well as official advertising. The fourth model involves **donor funding**, which has played a major role in the development of local and community media in the Global South. Private, government and multilateral funders are involved, sometimes because of direct interest in media development and sometimes through paying for services to deliver messages on an issue of concern such as



health or agricultural information.

The final model involves **community support** and is generally held up as the ideal for community media. Support takes the form of membership fees, voluntary labour, payment for short announcements, support for fundraising events, advertising or sponsorship from local businesses and buying services such as the use of outside broadcasting equipment.

In real life, few media will fit neatly into one model. Most local media will strive for diversity in their revenue streams, precisely because it lessens the power any one source of support has over them. This report will consider in more detail some of the issues and possibilities that arise, with particular attention to ways of ensuring that support does not impact on media independence.

4

Local media landscapes in Africa

There are enormous variations in the availability of local media across Africa, and sweeping generalisations should be avoided. Nevertheless, some wider points can be made. For one thing, density of media overall remains low. Writing on Southern Africa, Berger says: “there just isn’t enough mass media ... people do not ‘live’ media here”.²¹

Reasons are primarily economic: national economies are weak and the commercially attractive middle class audiences are comparatively small. A survey of media sustainability indicators was carried out annually between 2007 and 2010 in 40 (later 41) countries by Irex, the International Research and Exchanges Board. Scores for business conditions were low and declined over the period, leading the organisation to comment: “The news is strangled by lack of financing as much as by political

intervention.”²²

A second point is closely related: the wealthier you are, the more media and information you will be able to access. Urban, middle class Africans have wide choice, but the picture changes very quickly as you move into poorer areas or to poorer countries.

Using data from a range of different surveys, the consultancy Balancing Act described the geographic distribution of “media deficits”, as they term news deserts. In the major urban areas of Cote d’Ivoire, over 90% of respondents were found to watch television at least once a week, while the figure for radio was just under 60%. In the province of Northern Bhar el Ghazal in South Sudan, by contrast, only just over a third of respondents had ever listened to radio, while just 10% had ever seen television.²³

Balancing Act uses the percentage of a pop-

ulation that lacks access to radio and mobile – the most widely accessible media - as an indicator of the size of the deficit. In those terms, the continent’s largest economy, Nigeria, has a media deficit of around 20%.²⁴ The deficit for Senegal is in the range of 10 – 13%, for Somalia 16 - 28% and Uganda 15 – 37%.²⁵ Based on surveys with different methodologies, the figures should not be seen as precise indicators, but do show up important patterns.

Landlocked countries are generally poorer and therefore worse off than coastal countries, and conflict makes the situation even worse.²⁶ Within countries, informal settlements on the edges of cities, rural areas and areas away from the coast show the greatest deficits.

Factors influencing the distribution of deficits include literacy, educational level and language. The wealth of different languages spoken on the

continent is not matched by the media on offer, which tend to use the former colonial language and a handful of dominant indigenous languages. Many language communities lack any formal media. The availability of technical infrastructure is another important factor.

Gender plays a significant role: across the board, men are far more likely to use media than women. A survey showed that 44% of men use smartphones or featurephones in both the DRC and Niger, while the figures for women were 30% (DRC) and 33% (Niger). Among the obstacles that affect women disproportionately are cost, network quality and coverage, security and harassment and technical knowledge.²⁷ “Cities with the highest gender gaps in education level such as Nairobi (Kenya), Kampala (Uganda), Maputo (Mozambique), and Jakarta (Indonesia) were also the ones where the highest gender gaps in Internet access were reported,” according to the Web Foundation’s study *Women’s Rights Online*.²⁸

In this context, radio remains of particular importance. Though independent local print and, increasingly, online news services play an important role, radio still reaches further into

African information deserts than other media. The medium’s low cost, the fact that it relies on the spoken word, the ease with which multiple languages can be used, and the extent of transmission infrastructure, sometimes dating to colonial times, makes radio the dominant formal source of information for millions of Africans. Surveys consistently show that radio has the deepest penetration of all media forms. Though Internet usage is undoubtedly growing across the continent, “online alternatives have yet to overtake the time-tested mass medium: local radio”.²⁹ Radio services are provided by state and public broadcasters, commercial players and community radio projects.

Further observations can be made about African media landscapes, such as around the role of the state, vulnerability to capture, media freedom and others,³⁰ but for these purposes, the weakness of media at local levels, disproportionately affecting the most marginalised groups, is most relevant.

The extent and nature of African news deserts have obvious implications for the health of democracies. In evidence to the UK’s Cairncross Commission, academics Moore and Ramsay

Verbatim

“We’re sort of a local watchdog with a feminist lens. We do development reporting, but then in a hyper-local context, development reporting also means politics, right? Because how does public money get spent? What are the kinds of corruption and scandals? ...All of our stories have that core idea of our rural and urban women coming together, an all-women crew coming together, shooting, telling stories with a bottom-up approach.” – *Khabar Lahariya*, India’s “only digital rural news network”, originally a newspaper

(Quoted in Park, Jacqui (2022) *Local Media Survival Guide 2022*. IPI. p51)

write: "...there is evidence that a dearth of public interest news and information, especially reporting of public authorities, can have dire consequences for democracy".³¹ The logic is simple: if citizens do not have access to information through in-depth and independent journalism, their participation in the democratic process is necessarily limited. Where large sections of the population are excluded, they are relegated to the status of second-class citizens.

Reid and McKinley write:

*The segment of society that enjoys the largest representation of mediated voice is but a small section of the citizenry. How then are we to know what is going on in our world when we are presented with such a limited picture? Additionally, when so under-informed about a broader spectrum of realities, how can we realistically initiate national discourse aimed at societal coherence, economic development or meaningful promotion of social justice? In simple terms, how can we solve our own problems when we have very little idea of what is really going on.*³²



5 What can be done?

Before getting into the specific discussion of policy options, it is helpful to consider some of the principles on which support measures and interventions should be based. For one thing, the importance of focusing on systemic impact is increasingly being recognised. Benequista calls for the building of coalitions “focused on media ecosystems”,³³ while Robinson et al argue that media innovations need to be judged at least partly for their impact on the overall ecosystem.

³⁴ Measures that create an environment conducive to quality media at local level go further than direct support for a particular project. The importance of a legal and institutional framework that supports independent journalism has long been recognised, but more attention needs to be paid to the economic issues that hobble the news media. This is particularly true when

focusing on local and community media, who by their nature are many and varied.

Measures should be targeted where they are most needed and should aim to address inequality of information access. Subsidised distribution for urban newspapers may not rate as highly as zero-rating of local news sites or preferential licence fees for rural radio. And measures should support quality independent reporting, while the misuse of media for party political or private purposes should be penalised. Interventions need to be geared not just at encouraging more media, but better journalism also.

An effective set of arrangements will require ongoing monitoring to deal with problems that may arise. Local media can be captured easily, often more easily than national and metropolitan media, often enabled by the fact that

nobody is paying attention to what happens in small towns. At the same time, ongoing research will ensure that systems of support remain able to learn from their mistakes and can be adjusted for maximum impact. In his proposal for a new International Fund for Public Interest Media (IFPIM), Deane includes a “What Works” unit for monitoring and research.³⁵

In a time of rapid technological change, measures should not be tied to particular platforms and innovation should be encouraged. The neighbourhood website or even a WhatsApp group may have more potential than a traditional newspaper.

However, blind technical optimism also needs to be avoided. Media services need to address audiences in the places they use – an exciting new format or vehicle may have no traction with audiences. As noted above, radio remains

Just because it's called community media doesn't mean it is one

During the Presidency of Evo Morales in Bolivia, the state created a network of rural and indigenous radio stations called the Sistema Nacional de Radios de los Pueblos Originarios (RPS). A network of around 31 stations was created around 2006, with complex relationships aimed to ensure community control with state support. However, critics have pointed to shared, centrally controlled newscasts and other arrangements as evidence that the stations are not independent.

(See Martín, Juan Ramos & Matos, Ángel Badillo (2013) Public policy and community radio in Bolivia, in *Journal of Radio & Audio Media*, 20:2)

the medium with widest reach in Africa.

There are several actors with the capacity to exert an impact on local and community media. A set of recommendations drawn up by Unesco in 2015 address themselves in turn to governments and regulators, to the media themselves and their networks, and to international actors including donors and Unesco itself.³⁶ This report will conclude with its own recommendations addressed to the different roleplayers.

In discussions around community media, the important role of governments has long been recognised. In the discussion around the broader business crisis facing mainstream journalism, the idea is less well established, because a commercial base has been seen as a guarantor of independence.

However, the idea is gaining traction, with Unesco using it as the theme for World Press Freedom Day in 2021, which was the 30th anniversary of the Windhoek Declaration.³⁷ The idea is at the heart of a report drafted by a high-level group of experts chaired by Rasmus Nielsen, director of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford. The report calls for a “new deal” for journalism, including for governments to commit 0.1% of GDP to supporting journalism.³⁸ This report starts from the position that a government role is important, even inevitable, and that the important question to address is how to ensure the role is exercised in the interests of independent and plural local media.

Taking these points into account, we now turn to approaches that may help green Africa's news deserts.

An enabling environment

Amarc describes the lack of an appropriate legal framework as “the single principal barrier” facing community radio, linking it directly to challenges of financial sustainability that “hinder the possibility of scaling up good models”.³⁹ An appropriate legal and regulatory framework needs to be based on the right to free expression, as set out in a number of international instruments and treaties. “Without media freedom, journalism cannot be sustainable, because there is no journalism worthy of the name.”⁴⁰

Laws need to recognise the specific role and nature of local and community media as a third sector that is distinct from commercial and public service media. The Unesco recommendations start with the point that legal and regulatory frameworks should “(r)ecognize and legally define community broadcasting in a way that clearly distinguishes it from commercial and public service broadcasters, based on its non-profit nature, its strong links with and its capacity to provide a service to the community, while having its autonomy and editorial inde-

pendence respected and promoted.”⁴¹

The insistence on non-profit status often provides a useful and clear way to distinguish community from other media for purposes of broadcast law and regulation. However, the contribution of local for-profit media should not be forgotten, particularly in print and online.

Certainly, the problems that arise when there is no proper framework are easy to demonstrate. In Argentina, community radio was only recognised in 2009. But implementation has been difficult, with commercial media groups challenging the law.

By 2012, between 300 and 500 community radio stations were estimated to be in operation, but very few of them were operating with legal licences.⁴² In Brazil, long delays in licensing and a wide range of restrictions means that some 10 000 radio stations operate without licence, compared to around 4 500 formally licensed operations.⁴³ Uruguay, on the other hand, has reserved 33% of the frequency spectrum for community radio.⁴⁴

Rules and requirements for broadcast licences are a key element of the legal framework. It is important for administrative requirements to

be simple and that costs do not deter local initiatives. Nigeria, Africa's most populous country, still has few community radio stations, a situation blamed on high official costs. For five-year licences, the National Broadcasting Commission charges fees between NGN 10 and 20 million a year (USD 24 000 and 48 000), as well as 2.5% of turnover. As a result, few entities besides universities have been able to get involved in third sector broadcasting.⁴⁵

The much poorer country Mali, by contrast, is often described as a community media success story, fuelled by free licenses, low fees for spectrum allocation and tax breaks. There are now some 300 stations on air, broadcasting in a range of local languages.⁴⁶

It goes without saying that licensing needs to be in the hands of a politically independent regulator, which needs to work on the basis of transparent rules and processes. Zimbabwe has opened its airwaves grudgingly and accusations persist that the ruling party Zanu-PF uses the licensing regime to benefit its friends and allies. The Broadcasting Services Act was promulgated in 2001, creating the framework for both commercial and community broadcasting. The

country has had extensive and vibrant community radio activism – but no actual broadcasting. By 2015, there were 28 community radio initiatives across the country, grouped into the Zimbabwe Association of Community Radio Stations (Zacras). But in the absence of licences, they have used shortwave, online streaming and other strategies to distribute content.⁴⁷ Some commercial licences were issued to friends of the ruling party in 2011. Broadcast veteran John Masuku, who has made many unsuccessful attempts to get his Voice of the People licenced, writes: “... obtaining a broadcasting licence in Zimbabwe especially as a private player unattached to the ruling establishment is at best described as an impossibility.”⁴⁸ In late 2021, the Broadcast Authority of Zimbabwe finally announced the licensing of eight community radio stations.⁴⁹

An enabling environment is not just a question of having the right legal framework, countries must implement them appropriately. Unesco's Media Development Indicators make the point: “Legal and policy frameworks relating to the media are a matter of both form and substance. A country may have good laws

Pandemic support

“Indonesia announced a journalism stimulus package in July 2020, which included tax credits and direct subsidies. The core policies were abolition of the value-added tax for newsprint, suspension of electricity charges for the media industry, a decrease of 50 percent on corporate tax, and exemption of income tax for employees earning up to 200 million rupiah. In addition, there was a subsidy for news outlets which came in the form of direct payments, on the condition that outlets publish a certain number of stories each month advising Indonesians on how to handle COVID-19... (S)ome credited them with saving the journalism industry during the pandemic, but others saw it as an example of direct government intervention in what content was produced.” – *Schiffrin, Anja, Hannah Clifford & Theodora Dame Adjin-Tetty (2022) Saving Journalism 2. p 17*

relating to freedom of expression and the right to information, but they may not be implemented or enforced.”⁵⁰

There is considerable scope for shared “back-end functions” to enable local and community media by creating economies of scale. One possibility could revolve around support for skills development. Local and community

media often experience challenges in attracting and retaining skilled staff. Young people join as volunteers, with a view to gaining skills and experience. They tend to leave as soon as opportunities for paid employment arise, often in bigger centres. At the same time, training institutions need places where their students can gain practical experience. A discussion is developing in South Africa about mechanisms that could be designed to address the issue in a way that benefits local media as well as young people.

The right model could unlock funding through the country’s Sector Education and Training Authorities (Setas), which are well financed through a “skills development levy” imposed on companies’ payrolls and have a broad mandate to build skills. There has also been interest in the BBC’s Local News Partnership project, which has placed 150 reporters at local media. The project has charted a new kind of co-operation between the BBC as a public service broadcaster and local media. Since its inception in 2017, similar initiatives have been launched in Canada and New Zealand.⁵¹

Many other areas of back-end support can be

identified. Local and community media often lack research data, for instance on audience size, which hampers effective planning and engagement with advertisers. Innovation is another area that should be supported. The Botswana journalist Ntibinyane Ntibinyane has proposed a project to support 20 local newspapers in Southern Africa to manage the shift to digital platforms.⁵² The South African National Editors’ Forum (Sanef) has included a proposal for a public interest wire service in its recommendations on media sustainability. Such a service would help “under-capacitated public interest media organisations” and improve the flow of information from news deserts.⁵³ The development of technical tools to ease production and administration processes can be added to the list of options. More detailed discussion could be held in various national contexts to identify the best and most promising possibilities.

Indirect subsidy

Mechanisms of indirect subsidy for media are common around the world, as part of an enabling environment for media. Even in the US, despite its fierce support for free market principles, newspapers have long benefited from preferential postal rates.⁵⁴ In a digitising age, the measure is of declining importance, but it establishes a useful precedent. What could be equivalent measures that make sense in new circumstances?

Since most distribution of media is now digital, attention has been paid to the possibility of zero-rating news websites. During the course of the Covid pandemic, network service providers in South Africa, which has particularly high data costs, made educational sites available to students at no cost. Certain health-related sites were also made freely available. The South African editors' forum, Sanef, has made the zero-rating of websites carrying public interest journalism a priority in its approach to media sustainability issues, arguing that "data provision ... needs to be seen as part of the 'social infrastructure' which is, in the digital era, as im-

portant to people's wellbeing as access to electricity and other services."⁵⁵ Critics have argued that such a move would impact on the principle of net neutrality (the principle that service providers may not differentiate between different kinds of Internet use by charging different rates) and more practically, that experiences in countries like Philippines, Burma and Jamaica have not shown a significant impact on the reach of news sites.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, the idea seems to have considerable promise as part of a basket of measures, though considerable technical details would need to be ironed out – including how to decide who would be eligible.

A well-established form of indirect support in many jurisdictions involves VAT and other tax concessions and exemptions. Newspapers in Nordic countries are given significant tax breaks, one element in the substantial packages of support they receive. In Norway and Denmark, newspapers are exempt from VAT, while in Finland, Sweden and Iceland the VAT rate ranges between 6% and 10% - far below the general rates of around 25%. Other European countries offer similar support by way of indirect subsidies, amounting to €525 million in Germany,

Verbatim

"Whereas the law suggests that Community Radio will pay lower license fees, in practice this is not law at all. Since 2016, we have unsuccessfully engaged with the Uganda Communications Commission to reduce our license fees and give Mama FM the privileges of a community radio, which it is. Instead, we have been told that Mama Fm is no longer considered community media and so it competes with all other commercial media. The regulation changed. We are now classified as commercial, because the three tier system is now based on strength of signal. Our signal of 1000Watts is for commercial. .. (It's) up to us to give up signal and get a cheaper one - which is then called community media because it serves a smaller geographic community. So Mama FM has been subjected to some fairly difficult conditions. In fact, when government grants adverts, Mama FM is not a beneficiary, it is considered community in those circumstances, but when paying fees, it is commercial." – *Mama FM board member Emilly Maractho, Uganda*

(Email interview, 31 March 2022.)

€560 million in Italy, €748 million in the UK and over €800 million in France.⁵⁷

However, tax relief of this kind has been criticised for benefiting large companies disproportionately: almost half of the Norwegian subsidy ends up with the ten largest newspapers.⁵⁸

Verbatim

Governments should “consider the creation of special funds and/or an appropriate allocation from existing funds including, where appropriate, universal service funds and cross-media funding mechanisms, administered with the involvement of the community media sector, independently from government and in a transparent manner which is consistent with principles of good governance”. - *Unesco (2015), Recommendations on Community Media Sustainability*

And Živković writes that in Croatia, Serbia and other Balkan states, media owners succeeded in securing reductions in the VAT rate in response to the media business crisis. However, the price of newspapers did not drop, journalists continued to be laid off – while profits rose. “(M)edia owners ... get to keep the public funds while they let the market decide on the sort of service they deliver in return.”⁵⁹

Direct public funding

While the possibility of direct public funding for mainstream media is a relatively new idea, funds for public and community media have long been a feature in many countries. Licence fees are central to the funding of public broadcasters in the UK, Europe and elsewhere. However, these arrangements are under pressure, and even some Nordic countries have moved from a licence fee model to funding public service broadcasting from general tax receipts,⁶⁰ while the conservative British government recently announced plans to end the BBC’s licence fee model.⁶¹

South Africa’s licence fee system has never worked well, with low public compliance and commercial income providing the bulk of the SABC’s revenue. In any event, these are large schemes supporting national organisations, not local media. There are few examples of local and community organisations benefiting from publicly enforced levies or licences.

In Norway, the public broadcaster NRK – funded by one of the highest licence fees in the world – runs radio and television services for the Sámi people, the indigenous people who live in the Arctic regions of Sweden, Finland, Russia and Norway. NRK Sápmi, employing

some 80 journalists, represents the largest media organisation for this indigenous minority.⁶² An interesting approach has been taken by the University of Ghana, which funds the campus station Radio Unvers from a small levy of GHS5 (around USD 0.7) imposed on each student – effectively a licence fee implemented at local level.⁶³

More common are publicly administered funds that support local and community media. In Australia, government funds are dispensed through the independent non-profit Community Broadcasting Foundation (CBF). According to its website, the CBF pays out around A\$20m annually to First Nations, ethnic and regional broadcasters. Grants are made, among other purposes, for content development, for infrastructure and to deal with emergency needs.⁶⁴

In Argentina, a new media law in 2009 established Fomeca, the Competitive Development Fund for Audiovisual Media. It was to be funded by a share of taxes on advertising, but it took several years to become operational and has been criticised for being ineffective.⁶⁵ Sweden and the other Nordic countries have large government funds for local newspapers, while

France has the Fonds de Soutien à l'Expression Radiophonique Locale and Canada has the Community Radio Fund of Canada. Funds of this kind are not so common in the Global South, though there is growing interest in a number of countries, particularly in response to the Covid crisis. In Morocco, a fund to support the press was created through agreement between publishers and the government in 2005,⁶⁶ while a 2022 government-sponsored conference in Sierra Leone ended with an action plan that created provision for a fund.⁶⁷

Though it would be a valuable exercise, it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a detailed comparison of different funds. Three areas of importance need to be highlighted, though.

For one thing, the types of grants on offer may vary widely, and may need to be adjusted from time to time. The Swedish Press and Broadcasting Authority's newspaper subsidy scheme includes support for general running costs; for distribution; for local journalism and for innovation. Emergency grants have also been made available during the Covid crisis.⁶⁸ Australia's CBF makes grants for content



development, infrastructure and to deal with emergency needs, among others.⁶⁹ An important distinction is between support for running costs and for specific, short-term purposes like the refurbishment of a studio or the production of a series of programmes. The former provides beneficiaries with a more stable revenue stream, but involves a long-term commitment by the fund. Most prefer to support projects that have a beginning and an end as they are more manageable.

A second important dimension of funds is the source of revenue. Some are funded directly by the government, often by direct allocation from the central budget. Ireland has a slightly different arrangement, with its Sound and Vision fund financed by a percentage of licence fee income. The fund is administered by the broadcast authority and makes grants available for the support of Irish culture and music, as well as local and community broadcast.⁷⁰

In other cases, the fund relies on some kind of levy or tax on the mainstream and commercial media. The French scheme is an example. Governments in poor countries may find it difficult to make money available in national

budgets when there are so many other competing priorities, but extracting money from an often struggling commercial sector is not much easier.

Most important of all, however, is that any fund should be run independently, at arm's length from the government in power as well as from economic interests. The reasons are obvious. Funding must be used in the interests of a diverse, plural and independent media, and there can be no possibility of its being used to serve short-term political or economic interests. For the sake of public trust, it is critical that institutions are seen to be independent, with independent governance structures, clear rules and transparent systems.

A Mauritanian fund operated by the media regulator has been criticised for being too tightly controlled by government.⁷¹ The planned International Fund for Public Interest Media (IFPIM) has identified several core principles for its governance structure.

Its board will be composed of people who are diverse in gender and geographic origin; have suitable expertise and are independent and without conflicts of interest.⁷²

Government advertising

Even the poorest governments allocate money for communication purposes and buy advertising space in the media, making them important roleplayers in the media economy. For instance, in Rwanda up to 90% of advertising spending is estimated to come from the government.⁷³ In Latin America, the use of government advertising has long been an important and controversial part of media landscapes.

A 2014 report by WAN-IFRA catalogues the ways in which Mexican government officials misuse advertising budgets, including excessive spending by state governors promoting their annual reports and the proliferation of media outlets that live on government adspend though they have minimal audiences.⁷⁴ Government advertising is a “common tool to exercise soft censorship”, says WAN-IFRA⁷⁵ and there have been many calls for regulation.

Some 14 bills were introduced to the Mexican Congress on the issue over ten years, but none were passed.⁷⁶ Meanwhile, community media in Argentina see state advertising spending as a legitimate and important source of income,

Verbatim

“Our objective is to bundle many radio stations across the country. From a community listening to local radio hub upcountry up to the audiences of big radio stations in the area of Kampala, with Ears almost the entire population can be reached easily.” – *East African Radio Services, Kampala, Uganda* (www.ears.ug/why-radio-why-ears/)

though in need of regulation to ensure fairness. Fisher writes:

(G)overnment advertising is always a mechanism for development, even among commercial media outlets. It is therefore legitimate to claim government advertising for social radio stations, no matter how small their audience. All the radio broadcasters are clear on this and, leaving aside their ideological views of the state, consider it a legitimate and necessary source of income. 77

There is no question that government advertising plays a major role in African media economies, too, at national, regional and local government levels. It is striking, however, that

there has been little discussion of the implications. Some attention has been paid to the most dramatic cases where governments have withdrawn or diverted advertising income for clearly political purposes.

For instance, the Kenyan government in 2017 decided to redirect its adspend away from commercial media and instead use only its own channel, my.gov, with obvious implications for media freedom and diversity.⁷⁸ “It’s difficult not to characterise the withdrawal of state advertising from commercial media as punitive. Without this revenue stream newspapers are likely to fold,” writes Ogola.⁷⁹ However, hardly any attempt has been made to analyse the systemic consequences, and there is no discussion of possible regulatory interventions. Government communications budgets represent an important tool for the support of local and community media, and means need to be found to ensure they are used for the benefit of media diversity, quality and pluralism.

General commercial income

For local commercial media around the world, advertising and sponsorship income is obviously central. The situation with regard to community media, often defined as non-profit, is a little more complex. Some countries restrict community media’s access to commercial income on the basis that commercial motivations contradict the sector’s ethos of community service. Though less often made explicit, restricting access to advertising markets also serves the interests of commercial media, who want to keep the income stream for themselves. India’s community radios have been hamstrung by strict limitations on commercial income.⁸⁰ In Germany, rules limit advertising income to 20% of the station’s income.⁸¹ In Kenya, limits on advertising on community radio were relaxed a little in 2008, though the law still stipulates that commercials should be relevant to the local community.⁸² Amarc has called for community radio to be able to access income from a full range of sources,⁸³ and Unesco similarly calls for the sector to be allowed to access funding from a wide range of sources, “including advertising and sponsorship, on an equitable basis with other broadcasters”.⁸⁴ In the African context, local and community media face potential advertisers from a position

of considerable weakness. Local business may not need advertising as word of mouth works well enough or may not be able to afford it.

Bigger advertisers like cellphone companies as well as powerful agencies are based in the capital or major metropolitan areas. They find it easy to exploit the vulnerability of smaller media through tactics like delaying payments or pressing for uneconomical rates.⁸⁵

In one case, a radio station in the north east of Zambia sent its programme manager to Lusaka, a 600 km bus ride away, to pick up a cheque from an advertiser.⁸⁶ Advertisers are easily able to influence content, and programming schedules are often changed to accommodate a sponsored talk show, for instance.

Under such circumstances, limiting access to commercial income does not seem to be justified. Local and community media are at such a disadvantage in attracting commercial income in any event that additional restrictions should not be imposed.

On the contrary, the question arises whether there are ways to help local media more effectively access advertising markets, particularly from remote locations. In Uganda, German funding has

supported a new enterprise, the East Africa Radio Service, with the appropriate acronym Ears. Based in Kampala with a team of seven, the service promises to “to connect national and international advertisers to a large, untapped population of rural listeners, while ensuring that local radio stations are given fair and payable rates.”⁸⁷

Importantly, Ears has set up systems to monitor the airing of radio spots reliably through the research company IPSOS. Stations often struggle to prove reliably that the material they were paid to air has actually been broadcast, so the ability to offer advertisers clear evidence of broadcast represents an important advantage. Interestingly, the listing of client references on Ear’s website shows a mix of government agencies, NGOs and international aid organisations, with just a few private companies, highlighting once again the nature of advertising markets in African countries.

A similar but smaller project in Zambia in 2017 drew together 14 community, religious and commercial stations into the Zambia Radio Marketing Network. However, the initiative had to be put on hold when competition authorities deemed it

WhatsApp to the rescue

In 2015, the Burundi government cracked down on independent radio stations, and forced the journalists into exile in neighbouring Rwanda. Without access to their FM frequency, two new radio stations took to a new platform, WhatsApp. Radio Inzamba and Humura Burundi each produce two half-hour current affairs shows per day. They go out in Kirundi and French as long Voicenotes. Audience research shows they are passed on, hand to hand, reaching around 400 000 and 300 000 listeners a day respectively.

(See Krüger, Franz (2017) Radio life without FM: Exiled Burundian journalists broadcast on WhatsApp, *Jamlab magazine*.)

a cartel.⁸⁸ In South Africa, community radio stations have set up “hubs” whose purpose include the sale of airtime packages on groups of radio stations. Success by the hubs has been mixed, but a private company, The Media Connection, has carved out a niche for itself in representing community radio stations to national advertiser. Similarly, small independent newspapers in South Africa have launched several efforts to pool resources for better access to advertising markets

Verbatim

“It’s like a brown paper bag gets stuffed with money, is shoved across the table, and then the platforms can say, ‘Now just shut the fuck up.’” – *Australian media executive, on negotiations with the technical giants on payment for using news items*

(Quoted in Grueskin, Bill (2022) Australia pressured Google and Facebook to pay for Journalism. Is America next?, *Columbia Journalism Review*.)

Digital power and revenue

At the heart of the much-discussed global crisis in journalism is the dominance of digital platforms like Google and Facebook. Their power derives from their position in two markets, offering services to users on the one hand and to advertisers on the other. Though users get access to services for free, they “must share their personal information with the platform, often without realising what they are giving up”. Using the collected data, “platforms are able to outcompete traditional media and other content providers for valuable advertising

income through their ability to provide targeted advertising.”⁹⁰

A variety of responses have been suggested in different parts of the world, as governments begin to “accept the argument that there is an effective market failure in commercial journalism”.⁹¹ Spain, Germany and France tried unsuccessfully to force Google and Facebook to pay for news items. In the most significant move so far, Australia has developed a News Media Bargaining Code which forces platforms to negotiate with publishers and pay for the use of their material.

Schiffrin calls it “an ambitious, unique piece of legislation” which seeks to “address the inequality in bargaining power between news producers and the digital platforms, specifically Facebook and Google”.⁹² Driven by the country’s competition authorities against fierce resistance from the platforms, early results have been positive. News organisations in Australia have extracted an estimated US\$150m from the platforms in the first year of the code’s existence.

The public broadcaster, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, has been able to create

some 50 new jobs for journalists in underserved areas, and operators of local newspapers have also benefited. Other countries are now considering similar approaches.⁹³

The basic argument is that the tech giants profit richly at the expense of the generators and publishers of news. Another way of ensuring some of these profits support journalism is to make the platforms pay more tax. Dugmore calls for “a fairer taxation of profits that are clearly made from local advertising”.⁹⁴ Increased tax revenues could be used for a specific fund for journalism, as argued by the US lobby group Free Press.⁹⁵ However, tax authorities generally prefer not to create earmarked taxes of this kind.

In response to the pressure, the companies themselves have made money available through initiatives like Google’s Local News Initiative, though keeping very tight control over the grant-making process. Though the money can and should be used to support journalism, it should not detract from the need to develop systemic solutions.

Individual media do have the option of selling display ads on their websites or using services

like Google Ads to generate income. Click-bait and disinformation sites have developed methods to generate significant income for themselves, but services that serve a real public interest have struggled to “ride the algorithms” to good effect. “The cat video reaching one million views on YouTube will rake in money, but not the article on the budget speech in Collins Chabane municipality,” according to a position paper written for South Africa’s Association of Independent Publishers.⁹⁶

The report, by small-town editor Anton Van Zyl, estimates that the potential income from digital advertising is no more than 7-8% of turnover. The business disruption caused by the platform giants far outweighs the new possibilities they have created. (Membership and digital subscriber models will be discussed below.)

Several initiatives in the US have tried to use and develop anti-trust legislation to attack the tech platforms’ monopoly position, as well as using privacy laws to limit their data collection power.⁹⁷ However, none have gained any real traction so far.

In any event, governments in Africa and other parts of the Global South have very limited

leverage in dealing with the tech giants. It is also far from clear that benefits will flow specifically to local and community news media. Even in Australia, the bargaining framework has been criticised for mainly benefiting the larger players. Smaller publishers have received little, and some have been left out completely.⁹⁸

It is important for African governments to develop a common response, and for their interests to be taken into account in the international discussion about platform power. Otherwise, they will be left simply waiting to see what arrangements are made between the Global North powers and the tech companies. And it is important to ensure that benefits flow to the local and community media where information needs are greatest.

International donor agencies

International donors include philanthropic foundations like the Open Society Foundations, national agencies like USAID and multilateral agencies like Unesco. They have long played a major role in supporting media in the Global South. According to the Center for International Media Assistance (Cima), some \$454m of international development aid flowed into media projects per annum in the years 2010 – 2015, with Asia receiving the largest share.⁹⁹ Increasingly, they are being seen as part of the solution for journalism in the Global North, too. The non-profit news sector, supported by foundations, has grown dramatically in the US. Between 2005 and 2012, some 308 new non-profit news organisations were launched in 25 states of the US and DC, supported by 279 foundations.¹⁰⁰ However, donor support has been criticised on a number of grounds. Benson writes: “(W)e must acknowledge the possibility that foundations are just as capable of non-democratic ‘media capture’ on behalf of their own interests as they are of fostering civic benefits for society as a whole.”¹⁰¹

Deane has identified several problems with current donor practices. First, he argues that

Profitable numbers

Far north of the Arctic Circle, Guovdageinu Lagasradio, based in the Norwegian town of Kautokeino, broadcasts to the Sámi people, the traditionally reindeer herding ethnic minority in the north of Norway, Finland, Sweden and Russia. The station's biggest income stream is from Radio Bingo: listeners can buy bingo cards from local supermarkets. The winning numbers are read out over the air as people fill in the cards to see whether they have won. The station is also commissioned to dub the soundtracks of Disney and other films into the Northern Sámi language.

(Interview with Nils Martin Kristensen, editor, 17 February 2022)

current capacity among donors prevents the scale of investment the crisis demands. There are just not enough “staff, expertise, legitimacy and/or systems” to increase the amount of support on offer to the levels the crisis demands.¹⁰² Second, support does not sufficiently support public interest media directly, concentrating more on creating enabling environments. There is a tension here: in fact, systemic measures are more likely to have a long-term impact.

While support for media running costs are important and welcome, they do set up a dependence that is unlikely to be easy to escape. The point emerges in Deane's third criticism, which is that donors expect sustainability strategies from media projects when “successful ... business models are not available”.¹⁰³

Fourthly, donors are often accused of interference, and indeed the priorities of governments often mirror their foreign policy concerns. Finally, the sector is “highly fragmented, with poorly developed systems of coordination, lesson learning, impact assessment, strategic clarity and coherence”.¹⁰⁴ Various efforts have been made to improve matters, but have not had much impact, he argues.

The proposal for the new global fund, IFPIM, has been developed in response. The fund has attracted high-level support, including from UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, and its founding co-chairs are Maria Ressa, the Nobel Peace Prize winning editor from the Philippines and Mark Thompson, former BBC Director General and New York Times CEO. US President Joe Biden has pledged \$30 million towards the fund's initial target of \$100m. The longer-term

aim is to raise \$1 billion, and the fund promises to focus on media in “resource-poor and fragile settings” by operating through regional centres.

¹⁰⁵

A first call for applications closed in mid-June 2022. The appeal for a dramatic increase in public money for journalism also comes from the Forum on Information and Democracy, which wants “rights-respecting governments” to commit to 0.1% of GDP annually for a decade. Though this would involve tens of billions of dollars, the forum argues that the scale of existing measures of support such as for public broadcasting and development assistance show the increase is within reach. “(P)ublic expenditure on journalism could perhaps be offset by the revenues raised by global tax agreements related to multinationals and digitalisation”.¹⁰⁶

For local and community media in Africa, donor funding will continue to be an important source of support. Some groups, like South Africa's Association of Independent Publishers (AIP) who have not traditionally drawn on donor funding, are considering a change to non-profit status in order to be able to access philanthropic funds,¹⁰⁷ though it would be important to

be aware of the pitfalls. It is to be hoped that new initiatives like the IFPIM will add additional resources to the pool available, and will deploy the money in smart and effective ways. It will be important to ensure that local and community media are specifically targeted.

Business models

Much has been made of the importance of media organisations developing new business models. Two recent reports from the International Press Institute (IPI) have focused enthusiastically on the ways in which local media around the world are experimenting with business models. The first report, published in 2021, focused largely on experiences in North America and Western Europe, while the second, published in early 2022, set out to capture experiences from Global South countries.¹⁰⁸ The reports offer a rich tapestry of experiences that pay attention to content that earns the trust of local audiences, finding the right platform to reach them and, finally, finding good ways to bring in the resources necessary to operate.

Both reports place the close relationship local media have with their audiences at the centre,



highlighting the way they also fight misinformation:

Successful local media have a clear sense of their mission, editorial vision and audience (or potential audience). This confidence is guiding a re-imagining of journalism to meet the needs of their community. Local media both reflect and create their communities with a journalistic and business understanding of the intricacies of local culture and diversity by embedding themselves in the community, by looking like the community, and by being their community's champion in telling their stories to one another and the world.¹⁰⁹

The emphasis on the creation of social value through close linkages to the community is no different from the long-standing attitude of community media – it could be called the rediscovery of some basic truths about communication. Where audiences value and trust their media, mechanisms of audience support can be built.

Advertising remains an important element for many organisations, but interesting experiments with membership models are receiving considerable attention.

The News Minute addresses local audiences across several states in southern India via a

newsletter and various social media platforms.

The organisation developed a membership model directed both at local audiences as well as expatriates living in wealthier parts of the world, finding more success with locals than with non-residents.

¹¹⁰ The News Minute's Ragamalika Karthikeyan says membership offers a better relationship than subscriptions and paywalls: "A transactional relationship with the reader is not what we want."¹¹¹

Nevertheless, subscriptions and paywalls offer a solution for many. Harber argues that a subscription / membership model is replacing the advertising model: "(I)t costs to filter, edit, select, fact-check, package, distribute and the other tasks of journalism and publishing. Increasingly readers will have to pay for it."¹¹² The most recent Digital News Report from the Reuters Institute reports an increase in the use of subscriptions, though largely in a small number of wealthy countries. The trend is strongest in Norway, with some 45% of respondents reporting that they pay for news. In most countries, a small number of well-known and trusted news brands draw most subscription income.¹¹³

The statistics show up a core difficulty with pay-wall and subscription strategies: they are mainly

viable for audiences who have the resources to pay, which worsens information inequalities. "The risk to society of a mass introduction of 'paywalls' is the creation of a two-tier information system, where in those countries which lack a strong, independent public service media presence, quality information is only available to those who can afford to pay for it."¹¹⁴ Public media, as well as public, donor and government support for media must be part of a mix of solutions, as argued in this report.

Many media also make use of assets to create a revenue stream from activities that are not core - "sweating your assets", as Myers and Harford call it.¹¹⁵ This could include renting out a broadcast mast for advertising or transmission purposes, as is done by Radio Icengelo in the Copperbelt of Zambia.¹¹⁶ Or it could mean offering communications consultancy services, as is done by El Surtidor in Paraguay¹¹⁷ – though care would need to be taken to ensure the additional business does not compromise the journalism being produced. Rental income, farming, music production, Internet cafés and training courses are all activities that have been tried by media to subsidise their core activities with varying degrees of success.

6

In conclusion

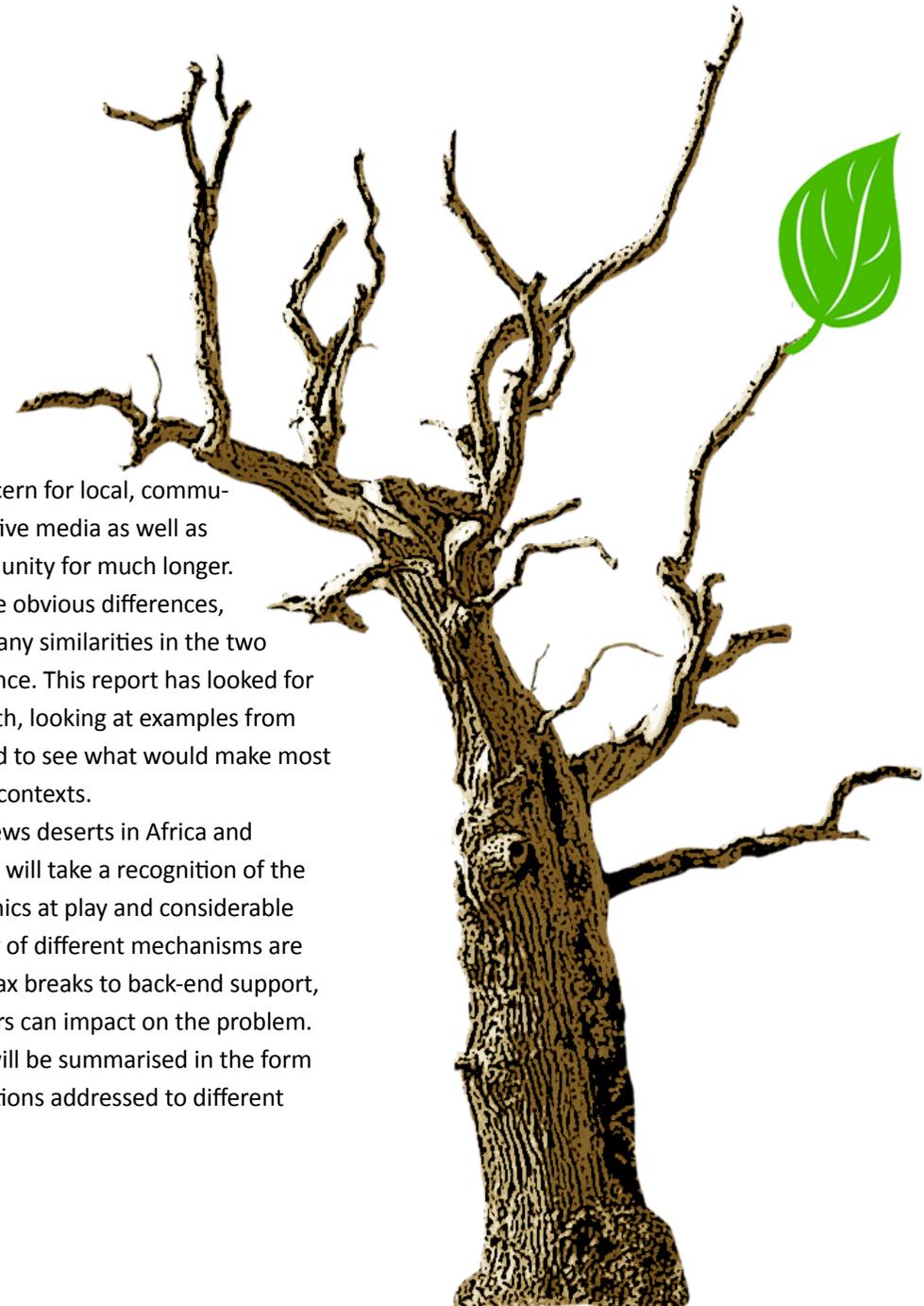
This report has taken up the argument that local news has been hit particularly hard by the international crisis facing the business of journalism, and has tried to understand the ways in which the trend plays out in Africa. It turns out that news deserts in Africa are an older problem than in other parts of the world, with somewhat different causes.

For the people who live there, poor access to information is an obvious problem, leaving them, in effect, second class citizens. But news deserts are a problem for the wider society, including those who have access to a great deal of media, as it cuts them off from important information and views.

The search for sustainability has become an urgent matter for mainstream media in the Global North as technical change has destroyed the journalism business model. But the issue

has been of concern for local, community and alternative media as well as the donor community for much longer. Though there are obvious differences, there are also many similarities in the two types of experience. This report has looked for insights from both, looking at examples from around the world to see what would make most sense in African contexts.

Turning the news deserts in Africa and elsewhere green will take a recognition of the particular dynamics at play and considerable effort. A number of different mechanisms are available, from tax breaks to back-end support, and several actors can impact on the problem. The discussion will be summarised in the form of recommendations addressed to different roleplayers.



Wider society, including civil society groups

There is a need for a much wider discussion and understanding of the importance of journalism, information inequalities, misinformation and related issues. The problem affects everyone. Solutions need to be debated and developed that take into account both global and local realities, aimed at improving the overall health of information ecosystems.

Civil society groups need to set up mechanisms to monitor the behaviour of governments, mainstream media groups and other power holders in and with regard to local and community media, in order to guard against local capture and other misuse.

Universities should develop training programmes aimed at local journalists, and include local media in their research efforts. Research bodies should make audience and other data available to local media.

Governments and regulators

Governments and regulators must place a recognition of principles of media freedom, independence, plurality and equity at the heart of law,

policy and administration.

Legal frameworks must give clear recognition to the special role and status of community-based, non-profit media, while also valuing local for-profit media that play a constructive role.

Support measures should be considered for local and community media, including tax breaks and waived or low broadcast license fees. All support measures must be designed in a way that protects independence.

Regulation must be in the hands of an independent body. Regulatory and administrative processes must follow clear rules, be transparent, fair, simple and consistently applied.

There should be no restrictions on the ability of genuine local and community media to access advertising.

Consideration should be given to the creation of a national fund to support local media and journalism.

A framework should be created to ensure that government advertising is deployed fairly and recognises the particular importance of local and community media.

Consideration should be given to using zero-rating or other mechanisms to remove the cost of

data as an obstacle to access to online news.

Local journalists need to be recognised and protected. Particular attention needs to be paid to ensure that women journalists are protected.

Mechanisms should be created to make use of local and community media to enable journalism students to gain experience.

International donors

Media need to be seen as an important part of development assistance. Overall amounts need to be raised to 0,1% of GDP, as requested by the Forum for Information and Democracy.¹¹⁸ The new International Fund for Public Interest Media should be supported fully.

Donor agencies should improve co-ordination and strategic coherence in order to ensure that existing media development funds achieve the best outcomes.

Donors need to balance long-term systemic interventions with the urgent immediate need to keep media organisations running

Local media and networks

Media organisations themselves need to continue to experiment with different models and

approaches, and share information and learning.

Means should be sought to share back-end functions, such as creating agencies to access advertising markets jointly.

Mainstream media

Mainstream media need to acknowledge that local media are an important part of information ecosystems, filling gaps the mainstream does not reach. They provide models, news, a pipeline for talent and much else that big media benefit from.

Mainstream media should not use unfair methods to compete with local and community media, or to block their access to commercial and other income.

Options should be explored for practical support through the sharing of research, and training, funding and other suitable means.

Digital platforms

The digital platform giants have shown little appetite for contributing fairly and consistently to journalism, least of all at local levels. Though they have made some funding available, they have tended to resist proposals for more systemic change. Accordingly, these recommendations need to be

attended to by governments and other roleplayers who have the muscle to deal with the giants.

The digital platforms need to make a proper contribution to local media and journalism. Existing grant schemes should be extended, but it is more important for them to pay a fair share of tax in the different jurisdictions where they operate. Negotiations around payment for the use of published material need to be conducted transparently and fairly, with particular regard to smaller and local media. Measures to protect privacy and improve the functioning of the markets they dominate should be put in place.

African governments should join civil society groups in developing a common platform to negotiate with the digital platforms for the benefit of the continent's information ecosystems at all levels.

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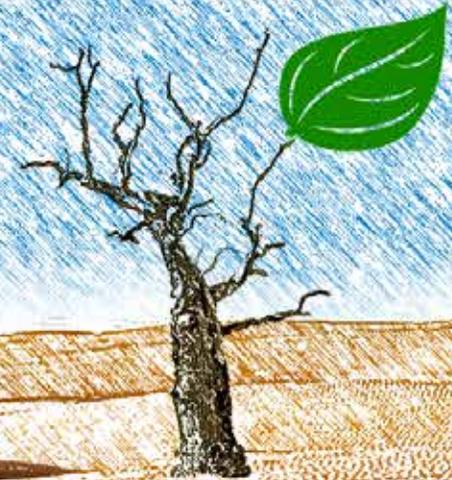
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