Evaluation Report
Executive summary Bolivia

Supporting local media in marginal urban areas: The “Mediator Journalism” approach and public dialogue programs in Bolivia
Background

Bolivia has suffered from a long period of political polarization, a situation made worse by the decision of the current President Evo Morales to opt, anti-constitutionally, for a fourth term. The non-acceptance by the president of the negative result of the referendum on February 21, 2016 has diminished the political trust of large portions of the Bolivian population.

This polarization is reflected in the media. Many media outlets allow themselves a strong bias based on their political position; facts are communicated from a political point of view. While there is freedom of expression in Bolivia, according to analysts it can be described as “controlled and stifled.” The government uses public funds to control the media, for example, by cutting advertising to outlets that convey opinions contrary to those of the government.

The project is carried out in El Alto, the second biggest city in the country with almost a million inhabitants. El Alto is a “young” city on two counts: the city was formally founded in 1985, and 77% of El Alto residents are under 24 years old. The majority of the highly organized population is poor and has Aymara and rural roots. For many reasons El Alto is characterized by a high level of conflict.

The project is executed by the UNIR Foundation, a Bolivian organization dedicated to “education for peace, research and constructive management of conflicts”. The project has been running since 2016 with annual funding from BMZ. The initial objective was “to contribute to the exercise of the Right to Information and Communication (DIC) of the population in the cities of El Alto and La Paz, through the improvement of the journalistic capacities of radio stations of popular character and with weak access to processes of training and professional qualification”.

UNIR carries out the project with 4 to 6 small radio stations in El Alto using the “Mediator Journalism” approach where the journalist is an actor who assumes social responsibility and promotes constructive dialogue in situations of conflict. The project has two main lines of action: training of radio operators and production and chain transmission of a bi-weekly program of Public Dialogue by the participating radio stations. From the first transmission the radios baptized the program by the name of “Aruskipawi” (dialogue).

The objective of the evaluation was to find out more about outcomes following the implementation of the project by its various stakeholders, with the information collected ensuring the continuity and financial sustainability of the project. The evaluation identified lessons learned and recommendations for the parties involved (DW Akademie and UNIR). Fieldwork was conducted between February 5 and 15, 2019 by an evaluation team composed of three independent interviewees as a form of journalism applicable to medium-sized conflict situations. The concept is very well elaborated and concretized in the documentation of the “public dialogue” approach. This approach is potentially relevant for El Alto, where all the preconditions for its successful implementation are met: conflict in neighborhood and municipal spaces, presence of social organizations and presence and use of communication media.

For BMZ and DW Akademie, the topics press freedom and public dialogue, as well as the target group of the project (population of El Alto), are relevant according to their institutional criteria. Due to its trajectory in conflict and communication, UNIR is a relevant organization to execute this project. The communication team has extensive experience in media research and some experience in management of projects directly linked to the media. Therefore the criterion of Relevance is rated as “comprehensively fulfilled”.

Effectiveness: There is no project start-up document in Spanish that clarifies the meaning of the project; from the beginning there was ambiguity about the purpose and integrity of its three components: training, production of radio programs and contribution to conflict resolution. It is an achievement to have established regular contact with the participating radio stations and a bi-weekly chain transmission from different stations with the participation of different social actors. Nine radio stations participated at some point in the project, though only two from the beginning. The stations are small, most with little institutional stability and influence. Two of them are not from El Alto. The radio stations that left the project did so for political reasons, due to institutional instability, or they had reservations against the management of the project (repetitiveness in the training, inequal treatment between stations).

The indicators of the impact matrix (2018) lack precision but allow to confirm: 21 public dialogue programs were produced (indicator: 20); overall, the themes of the programs are rather general and poorly defined; 40% of the issues are “considered a priority for women” (indicator: 20%); men and women participated to the same extent in the open dialogue programs; there was no participation on the part of the audience, with the exception of some likes on Facebook; 66% of the public that listened to the programs was satisfied (indicator 50%); a third had observations about lack of information, little public participation, quality of presenters; the audience considered the programs easy to understand, credible and respectful of others; the number of participatory programs from these radio stations had not increased in comparison to 2016.

In general, the programs ignore basic radio work practices such as journalistic research, triggers or thematic development. The programs deal with issues in a superficial, yet conscientious way regarding the problem, but no specific agreements are sought or achieved in order to resolve the conflicts dealt with. The language is simple and accessible.

Training plays a very important role and is much appreciated by the participants, both the main trainer and the applied methodology. However, apart from the methodological tables per workshop,
The objective of the external evaluation is to provide a constructive assessment of the project results. It does not necessarily align with the perspective and planning of DW Akademie. Nevertheless, all findings were discussed in order to allow lessons learned to be incorporated into the development of future strategies.