



Akademie

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EVALUATION REPORT

Executive summary

Serbia | Western Balkans

Giving young people a voice:
Innovative digital media in the Western Balkans

Background

The evaluated project is a continuation of previous projects undertaken by DW Akademie (2017-2019) in the Western Balkans, aimed at improving access to information and enabling the participation of young people under the age of 30 in decision-making processes. The project was designed in response to declining media freedoms in the region, where access to timely and accurate information has been curtailed as a result of the failed transformation of the public broadcasting system, political and economic pressure on the media, and threats and violence against journalists, including by high level officials—as noted in the EU Progress report for Serbia 2021. Although young people are recognized as particularly vulnerable category, with access to information for youth listed as one of public interest priorities in national government sectoral strategies, youth voices remain widely unrepresented in the mainstream media. Coupled with the absence of a more holistic approach to media literacy, young

people, who are increasingly interested in leaving the region, are usually left to their own devices when seeking credible information that will help them make informed decisions about their future. This is where the DW Akademie project “Young Media—Media for and with Young People” comes in. With three local partners in Serbia, and a network of trainers and mentors, the project team focuses on one, strengthening the capacities of targeted youth media outlets to create innovative, audience-centered content, and two, mobilizing a network of actors determined to create an enabling environment for youth voices and actions. Over the past two years, DW Akademie worked on expanding its regional network by creating opportunities for youth media outlets and their supporters to connect with peers, exchange knowledge and ideas, and inspire each other.

The evaluation was carried out between November 2021 and April 2022, with the

main purpose of collecting lesson learned for a future project. The evaluation was based on the six OECD/DAC criteria—relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability—with a particular focus on efficiency. The evaluation is based on a combination of Outcome Harvesting and Outcome Mapping methodologies, using a variety of methods to collect and analyze results.

This is a well-managed project, deeply embedded in the work of local partners, who managed to achieve significant results despite the pandemic circumstances. For the project to evolve further, several key issues must be addressed, such as an excessive focus on activities instead of results, the differing levels of engagement and commitment by key partners and allies, an excessive administrative burden on partners and the project team, and an insufficient sensitivity to gender issues and possible instances of violence.

Project evaluation results

Relevance: The DW Akademie project in Serbia/Western Balkans continues to address a key developmental problem. Integral to universal human rights, the United Nation’s Sustainable Development Goal 16 targets freedom of expression, media freedom and free access to information. They also feature prominently in the developmental policy of the EU in the region (with an eye on EU integration) and the developmental goals of BMZ, as the German government’s core aim is to support future EU membership. In addition, the project is in line with the developmental agenda of the Serbian government, as defined, for example, in its National Youth Strategy. The project follows the direction of DW Akademie’s strategic model for media development, with activities focused on three of the four key areas of strategic action. The project is highly relevant to the needs of the key target group (young people up to the age of 30), although it lacks a critical sensitivity to gender issues. In addition, its overall relevance continues to be undermined by the ongoing decline in freedom of expression

and independent media and the shrinking space for civil society—particularly in Serbia. In summary, the project’s relevance is rated as “overall fulfilled.”

Coherence: As the project activities are embedded in the wider German development cooperation context of EU integration (the core pillars of which include strengthening of democracy, rule of law and a vibrant civil society), a substantial degree of coherence with actions implemented by other German actors in the field of media freedom and equal rights for children and youth remains guaranteed. The participatory approach in cooperation with the project’s implementing partners ensures a certain level of coordination with the other activities engaged in by these organizations in terms of youth media development. Since the launch of the project, other international developmental cooperation actors have also added youth and youth media components to their media development activities. As DW Akademie remains the dominant actor, and due to

the established formal and informal cooperation with relevant other actors, a certain degree of external coherence can be assured. The project’s coherence can thus be rated as “overall fulfilled.”

Effectiveness: The key project results include increased capacities by youth media to create innovative digital content and enhanced regional networking that facilitates the exchange of knowledge and ideas. DW Akademie gathered 11 media outlets in a Regional Youth Media network and had different levels of engagement with targeted media outlets. While the criteria for choosing partners were unclear, six media outlets interviewed for the evaluation all report a high degree of satisfaction with the support provided. DW Akademie set up a new generation of multipliers who reported an increased understanding of the needs of young audience. KOMS (Serbian youth umbrella organization) established a cooperation with DW Akademie to enable better representation of their members’ interests in the public sphere.

Local Press stated that they now have four media outlets that have established permanent youth sections. The lack of monitoring and evaluation data made a more thorough assessment of results impossible, while the existing results framework provided limited opportunities to capture any key changes made by the project. The COVID-19 pandemic represented the most important external factor influencing the project results, while internal cohesion and the dedication of the various actors in the network had a positive impact on the attainment of results. The Criterion effectiveness is rated “overall fulfilled.”

Efficiency: With an annual operating budget of 450,000 Euro, this complex and multifaceted project seems to be cost-effective. The decentralized project management structure with its highly motivated, dedicated and experienced staff in Bonn and Belgrade forms one of the project’s core assets. At the same time, this highly personality-focused architecture also contains a certain level of risk and presents an obstacle to a more systematic project management approach. In addition, DW Akademie’s external administrative requirements (such as bi-monthly financial reporting for implementing partners), frequent changes in accounting rules and regulations, and the annual budgeting of the program as a whole present a huge burden for efficient project management and the cooperation with implementing partners. Finally, the lack of a system for timely monitoring and evaluation within the project is the most serious impediment to the project’s efficiency. As a consequence, the project’s efficiency is rated as “partially fulfilled.”

Impact: The single most important result of the Young Media program is the (re)introduction of the subject of youth media into the discussions around regional media. At the same time, DW Akademie staff, local partner organizations, multipliers and selected strategic partners now form a network that has the potential to contribute to longer-term changes in the media landscape and society at large. Thus,

in Serbia, a significant shift in perception among local media outlets has occurred, leading to a certain journalistic and institutional opening to young journalists and media content for young people. Cooperation with and support for KOMS has broadened the advocacy base for youth rights in Serbia. In certain project areas, like access to traditional media or the economic sustainability of youth media, no significant results could be achieved thus far, and there is still room for improvement in strengthening the position of youth media formats and newsrooms within public broadcasters. The project’s impact is thus assessed as “overall fulfilled.”

Sustainability: Five years into the Young Media project, which operates in a highly dynamic field and geographic region, it remains challenging to determine the program’s sustainability, especially given the substantial discontinuities that occurred in the project planning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the project’s focus on youth, there is a great deal of staff fluctuation among DW Akademie’s regional media partners, and the intensity and quality of the cooperation with the selected media partners is permanently in flux. On the positive side, the unique regional network of contacts with specific expertise on youth media (including part of the multipliers) established by DW Akademie and the long-term partnerships with the implementing partners, who have taken ownership of the project, significantly contribute to the overall sustainability of the project. Several innovative media formats developed within the project framework will make lasting changes to the media landscape and the broader social environment in which they operate. The extent to which the project’s themes and actions have become embedded in the work of local partners such as KOMS and Local Press and the network of contacts created within the project represent the most important contributions to project’s sustainability. In summary, the project’s sustainability is rated as “partially fulfilled.”

DW Akademie

is Deutsche Welle’s center for international media development, journalism training and knowledge transfer. Our projects strengthen the human right to freedom of expression and unhindered access to information. DW Akademie empowers people worldwide to make independent decisions based on reliable facts and constructive dialogue. DW Akademie is a strategic partner of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development. We also receive funding from the Federal Foreign Office and the European Union and are active in approximately 60 developing countries and emerging economies.

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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.