

Evaluation Report 2024 | Executive Summary

Namibia and Southern Africa

Regionalization: Insights from Southern Africa
and the Innovation Initiative

Background

The Namibia and Southern Africa program is implemented in Lesotho, Malawi, Namibia, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. The current phase is from January 2022 to December 2024. It is designed to strengthen the resilience of information ecosystems in Southern Africa through improving innovation capacity, building strong and stable institutions that take the lead in finding responses to crises and change and providing comprehensive skills for sustainable journalism, media education and advocacy, as well as strengthening inclusive dialogue.

During the course of the implementation, DW Akademie started an EU-funded project in Namibia: “New Voices, New Narratives in Public Policy Discourse.” The training component of this project is also part of the Southern Africa project funded by the German Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). The EU-funded project was not part of this evaluation.

During the project period, the devastating global COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected media viability (culminating in job losses and closures of media houses), escalated the production and circulation of false and misleading information, and accentuated inequalities related to access to information. This period was also punctuated by systemic freedom of expression violations, heightened insecurity of journalists, the passing of draconian data protection and cybersecurity laws and the shrinkage

of civic space in Southern Africa. Furthermore, the financial vulnerability of media institutions created a fertile ground for media capture.

This evaluation sought to assess the project’s achievements and to inform strategy development for the upcoming project cycle (2024-2026). It was interested in identifying and documenting the strengths and weaknesses of regional approaches in comparison to country-focused approaches. The Innovation Initiative in Southern Africa was the main subject of the evaluation. However, innovation was not only fostered through the Innovation Initiative, but also in other project lines – and the evaluation has also looked at this part of DW Akademie’s work. The Southern Africa projects aim to improve the resilience of the media sector through journalistic skills training and newsroom innovation by strengthening media and journalism training centres in the region. Through its media and information literacy work, DW Akademie is also working with its partner organizations to equip media users, especially young people, to resist misinformation and disinformation. DW Akademie is also supporting a coalition of media NGOs to ensure robust legal frameworks for freedom of expression and solidarity for media freedom activists through a project approach titled “Spaces of Solidarity.” For the purposes of this evaluation, the focus was on the regional Innovation Initiative. The Innovation Initiative seeks to strengthen the ability of media outlets and civil society

to innovate and thereby promote the freedom of expression of disadvantaged groups with a focus on vernacular languages. It consists of two instruments: Idea Development and Innovation Fund. Idea development is concerned with fostering creative exchange. Through idea workshops or processes of user-centered design (human-centered design), approaches and ideas are developed, evaluated, and refined before they are implemented in various contexts. The Innovation Fund is about providing resources for the implementation of prototypes with the help of an application and selection process and driving forward practical trials. Unlike top-down approaches to media development, the Innovation Initiative puts target beneficiaries at the center of the co-creation processes. This is in line with decolonial media development initiatives which privileges knowledge and epistemic frames from the global South.

The Innovation Initiative was designed to achieve the following objective (outcome): “The media and civil society are strengthened in their ability to innovate toward greater freedom of expression for disadvantaged groups.”

The program for Namibia and Southern Africa was designed to achieve the following objective (outcome): “Media and civil society organizations strengthen the resilience of information ecosystems as well as a diverse and inclusive dialogue in Southern Africa.”

The project seeks to achieve these results through the following **outputs** which target the following key areas:

- 1.A: The media professionals from Southern Africa improve their professional skills and capacity for innovation;

1.B: Civil society organizations working for freedom of expression have established structures in Southern Africa to act strategically together;

1.C: Educational and learning materials on media literacy and

freedom of expression are used by educational and civil society organizations.

The evaluation methods included a document analysis of project documents, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with key informants

from project partners, innovation fellows and trainers in Southern Africa. The evaluation applied the OECD/DAC evaluation criteria to formulate the specific research questions and analyze the data gathered, with more emphasis placed on the criteria relevance, coherence and efficiency.

Evaluation results

Innovation Initiative

Relevance

The evaluation confirms that the project’s focus is highly relevant: Capacitating media professionals from Southern Africa to improve their professional skills and capacity for innovation. It is evident that the intervention objectives and design respond to target beneficiaries and partner needs and priorities. Innovative projects related to journalism training, and innovation fellowships were singled out as very relevant interventions by stakeholders including MISA Malawi, CITE and Namibia Media Trust. This is particularly important for creating a pool of highly skilled media professionals who can produce high quality information and reporting in their respective communities. This was confirmed through interviews and focus group discussions in Southern

Africa. The objective of the entire project as stipulated in output 1.B—to assist civil society organizations working for freedom of expression to establish structures in Southern Africa—is also relevant with potential to push back against rising cases of harassment and arrests of human rights defenders, journalists, and bloggers. DW Akademie has strengthened regional collaboration in the areas of advocacy, journalism, and media literacy. The establishment of the “Spaces of Solidarity” is a game changer, which in the long run is likely to promote regional cross-thematic cooperation on issues such as freedom of expression, digital rights, the safety of journalists and shrinkage of the civic space. This initiative is timely given the gap in regional solidarity gap left by the closure of MISA regional office, which was based in Namibia. Although it has since been resuscitated under the leadership of Misa Zimbabwe, the recent creation of “Spaces of Solidarity” provides an organic platform for mobilizing and

galvanizing the people of Southern Africa in response to the threats on free expression in line with the strategic objectives of ensuring and protecting their fundamental right to free expression.

With regards to output 1.C—to ensure that educational and learning materials on media literacy and freedom of expression are used by educational and civil society organizations, there is evidence that the MIL Content hub is already providing educational materials for CSOs in the region. The African MILE initiative is still at an early stage but there is potential that in future it will contribute to more CSOs engaging in MIL and freedom of expression advocacy through MIL content/approaches. It is clear from this evaluation that a strong and relevant MIL ecosystem has been established. For instance, in Namibia, MiLLi* trained or upskilled around 160 facilitators (multipliers) in 2022 and 2023. Through youth projects (facilitated by these multipliers) MiLLi* reached 524 (young) people in Namibia. Thus, this approach to tackling misinformation and disinformation through pre-bunking is highly relevant and commendable, especially in resource-constrained environments. There is cooperation around the African MILE (where DW Akademie is the convener) and MiLLi* is one of the most active participants. The African MILE (MIL Exchange) has brought together 11 organizations from Southern Africa to collaborate and share educational

material on MIL. Although it was mentioned that during the pandemic, MiLLi* ran a specific course on WhatsApp where young people were exposed to fact-checking skills, there is need to continue to ramp up such efforts given that platforms like WhatsApp and Telegram are fertile grounds for false and misleading information. A lot of the skills young people learn with MiLLi* and the Hub apply also to disinformation circulating on WhatsApp. In the next project cycle, more action could be taken to capacitate young people to deal with synthetic content, deep fakes, and AI-powered disinformation. The relevance criterion is rated as “comprehensively fulfilled.”

Efficiency

The regional project is efficient in terms of input-output relations (time, expertise, human and financial resources) when compared to single country projects. The regional approach is efficiently delivering the intended results in comparison to in-country approaches. Through online and hybrid training workshops and conferences, the regional journalism education has managed to enable media professionals from Southern Africa to improve their professional skills and capacity for innovation in a cost-effective manner. This has allowed the project to circumvent the structural impediments brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, such as social distancing and limited travel between countries. The evaluation found that concerns were raised around regional travel logistics, tedious reporting requirements and the short-term (3-6 months) nature of innovation fellowships. Although the project itself takes three years, short-term innovation fellowships were singled out for failing to guarantee project sustainability. More could be done to streamline the processing of time sheets for grant contracts with

long-term partners. Notwithstanding these recommendations, the regional measures have allowed DW Akademie to deliver results in a timely manner. The efficiency criterion is rated as “overall fulfilled.”

Country project and regional components

Effectiveness

The project seeks to achieve progress with regards to the strengthening of the media and civil society in their ability to innovate toward greater freedom of expression for disadvantaged groups. Output 1.A relates to ensuring that media professionals from Southern Africa improve their professional skills and capacity for innovation. This entails providing journalists with a portfolio of needs-based training modules that they need to produce quality media content. This has been largely achieved through the roll-out of innovation fellowships as well as the co-creation of more than 15 training modules on a wide range of topics. The development of training modules has also led to a productive exchange between partner organizations in Malawi, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Lesotho, Zambia, Botswana and South Africa on innovation, and quality standards. The project outputs are highly likely to be achieved by the end of the project. Given the progress registered so far, the planned outcome is likely to be met. Key informants indicate that the regionalized approaches have been highly effective in terms of promoting journalism education, media literacy and advocacy. In the next project cycle, a lot can be done to streamline/incorporate gender, sexual orientation, and other stratification variables in the targeting of

beneficiaries of innovation fellowships. The effectiveness criterion is rated as “comprehensively fulfilled.”

Coherence

Whilst there is evidence of compatibility between the Innovation Initiative and other project lines in Southern Africa, there is a need to reinforce internal and external coherence through addressing the synergies and interlinkages between the regional activities and country-focused approaches. Suffice to say that DW Akademie engages in regional project lines with strong anchors in countries. Apart from the Innovative Initiative, other project lines like advocacy, media information and literacy and journalism education have regional components which are complemented by country-focused implementations. Thus, regional project lines and country-focused approaches complement each other in complex and richer ways through relationship building, sharing of expertise and resources and networking. Overall, synergies and interlinkages between different project lines have the biggest potential for internal and external coherence. More can be done to strengthen links between country-focused approaches and regional project lines. This will foster harmonization and coordination of regional and in-country approaches. In this way, DW Akademie will be able to add value to the media development agenda in the region whilst avoiding duplication of effort. There is a need to ensure the relevance of the regional project for the target groups through increased participation of project partners in the project design, implementation and monitoring and evaluation. The roll-out of innovation fellowships, which is a key component of the Innovation Initiative, could be better aligned with other project lines like journalism education, media literacy and advocacy. This will

ensure that an innovative and resilient information and media ecosystem is nurtured with the potential to withstand political repression. The evaluation concludes that the other project lines are partially coherent with the regional Innovation Initiative. To achieve seamless synergy and

interlinkages between the regional project lines and country-focused approaches, there is a need to adopt an ecosystem approach to media development in Southern Africa. In this case, innovation as a cross-cutting theme can easily be integrated in the journalism, advocacy and media

information and literacy programs. This will ensure that internal and external coherence are prioritized in the design and implementation of projects in the future. The coherence criterion is rated as “overall fulfilled.”

Selected lessons learned

1. The Innovation Initiative is efficient in terms of input-output relations (staff, and other resources) when compared to single country projects.
2. The project has managed to introduce new methodologies to DW Akademie’s portfolio through working with calls for application and fellowships as well as the practice of co-creation.
3. The Innovation Initiative should prioritize local context and cultural dynamics. This entails ensuring that the regional project lines are sensitive to the socio-political and cultural dynamics in the region.
4. Local and regional conferences and workshops should consider digital divide and participation inequalities.
5. An ecosystem approach to the regional Innovation Initiative cannot be overemphasized. This entails approaching media development projects as constitutive of various parts interacting with the broader social environment.
6. Project sustainability should be embedded in DW Akademie’s grant contracts and short-term media support.
7. The project has shown great adaptive capacity through reacting to needs and emerging trends in the ecosystem which is crucial in the current environment.

Selected recommendations

1. The Project Brief of the regional Innovation Initiative could be strengthened through adopting an ecosystem approach where issues like the media viability and sustainability, media law and policy reforms, journalism professionalism, skills development and training, liberalization of the airwaves and community radio stations, safety and security of journalists, digital rights and media literacy are foregrounded.
2. In preparation for the new funding cycle, there is a need to ensure that long-term and short-term partners are consulted extensively with regards to effective and efficient ways of implementing the regional Innovation Initiative. This is particularly important when it comes to innovation fellowships. This could entail consulting the selection panel, trainers, and mentors. This is not to suggest that in the previous project phase there was no consultation. In the current phase, DW Akademie consulted various stakeholders on the topics for the Innovation Initiative. In these discussions, the jury in the innovation labs was also consulted.
3. With regards to the development of training modules in a regional approach, there is also a need to constitute a Program Advisory

Council made up of educators, experienced editors and journalists and media innovators in the target countries.

4. The regional Innovation Initiative could be coherently synchronized with other project lines to ensure efficiency and effectiveness amongst the intended target groups.
5. Consolidating the innovation labs concept so that it goes beyond Idea Development and Innovation Fund is highly recommended. A sustainable mentorship program after the idea

implementation stage needs to be creatively established.

6. Although the African MILE provides the most logical and sustainable vehicle for regionalizing MIL materials in Southern Africa, the usage of the materials has largely been confined to Lesotho, Namibia, and Zambia. There is need to ensure that these materials are popularized in other countries like Botswana, Malawi, and Zimbabwe.
7. More effort is required to ensure that MiLLi* becomes financially sustainable to stand on

its feet without over-relying on DW Akademie for operational expenses.

8. A blended approach to regional workshops and conferences is recommended. However, in-country workshops should emphasize in-person attendance.
9. The Spaces of Solidarity initiative should be reinforced so that leadership development and mentorship become more pronounced.

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 around 70 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.