

EVALUATION REPORT 2023

Executive summary

Kyrgyzstan

Impact study community media support in Kyrgyzstan

Background

When DW Akademie set up its first project in Kyrgyzstan in 2014, the country stood out positively as the only country in Central Asia on the road to a relatively functioning parliamentary democracy. In recent years, the situation has unfortunately deteriorated: pressure on the media—on individual journalists and editors as well as on independent media outlets—has increased, including criminal proceedings against journalists and the detention of media representatives.

DW Akademie has been active in Kyrgyzstan since 2007. It focused its initial activities on providing consulting and training to radio and television stations as well as online media outlets. The BMZ-funded DW Akademie projects in Kyrgyzstan for the years 2014-2017, 2018-2020 as well as 2021-2023 (as part of the Uzbekistan proj-

ect) worked along several parallel project lines, one of which was the development of community media (CM). DW Akademie's implementing partner, the Association of Community Media of Kyrgyzstan (ACM), was founded in 2013 with the continual support of DW Akademie and other donors.

The aim of this evaluation is to gather evidence of the long-term impact of the project line focused on supporting CM in Kyrgyzstan and to identify factors contributing to its positive impact. The lessons learned can be useful for other DW Akademie project collaborations, including in Uzbekistan. The evaluation took place between November 2022 and March 2023, with a field visit to Kyrgyzstan from February 13 to 18, 2023. During the field visit, the evaluators examined two of the 30 CM

outlets (one ACM founding member located in Suusamyr and a new ACM member located in Krasnaja Retchka) in greater detail. The data collection carried out for the impact study also consisted of desk research, two online surveys for CM outlets and for their audience, 24 semi-structured interviews and two validation workshops with ACM and DW Akademie.

Impact study results

The working hypothesis that the (female) rural population contributes issues relevant to them to the programming of their CM is overall confirmed.

The CM sector is dominated by women and gives a voice to women's issues. As part of their editorial policy, CM outlets are open to the active participation of the rural population. In recent years, some CM outlets strengthened their collaboration with local governments and thereby act as a bridge between rural communities and local political decision-makers. Both ACM and donors highlighted the fact that CM outlets are in a unique position to raise awareness about local socio-economic issues and to contribute to problem-solving in the community. Interviewed community members instead highlighted CM reporting on local events, heritage, talents, and role models, which makes residents more aware of positive developments in their community. Local CM news are automatically published on the ACM's website (<https://kyrgyzmedia.kg>). In the past, the most interesting news items were compiled into a weekly 15-minute program broadcast on national radio.

The working hypothesis that CM journalists have improved their journalistic expertise and are able to convey information to their target groups according to basic journalistic standards is partially confirmed.

95 female and 27 male CM journalists are listed in ACM's records. In interviews, CM journalists received very positive feedback, but the expectations were also very low. While the CM managers are relatively professional and many of them have been involved in CM for a longer time, the journalists—who are volunteers—are often high school students between 13 and 18 years of age. This affects the content of the productions and leads to some inherent problems, such as a discontinuity in (trained) volunteers. The CM managers play a crucial role: they recruit, train and guide CM volunteer journalists, and support and quality check their productions. In addition, the CM journalists receive training from ACM and their pool of trainers as well as from different donor projects. There is surprisingly little (digitalized) training and collaboration material available.

The working hypothesis that CM can produce a large quantity of journalistic products and engage in sustained outreach is partially confirmed.

The development of the CM sector in Kyrgyzstan is a success story: at the time of the impact study's completion, ACM encompassed 30 CM members from all across Kyrgyzstan. A few CM have left the association for various reasons. Only three CM outlets broadcast via radio, as the licenses are expensive. The others disseminate their content mainly via their websites and social media. ACM has defined a target for CM outlets of a minimum of eight productions per month and ACM staff make an effort to support underperforming members. It is not clear how the assessment of informational needs and the implementation of CM content programming and strategic plans is done, if at all. The concentration of knowledge in a select number of individuals in a CM outlet is a risk for sustainability. There seems to be little horizontal exchange between the 30 CM members, although they all face similar challenges.

The working hypothesis that the Association of Community Media is institutionally and financially sustainable and can offer support services to the CM sector is overall confirmed.

DW Akademie has closely accompanied ACM from the beginning. Currently, the Association is no longer in the forming stage, and has moved into a consolidating and norming phase. ACM has gained a good reputation, internally and externally. ACM offers a broad range of support to its 30 members, including training, ad hoc expert support, access to contacts and networks, an annual meeting, legal and technical advice, and access to project funds. While this support is available, it is not transparently presented as a service to its members. ACM has a very stable and experienced staff, but the lack of fluctuation and knowledge management bears risks for sustainability and innovation. ACM attracts and channels funding from multiple donors, who see strong (but diverging) potential in CM. There is no independent strategy that lays down concrete priorities and provides guidance to CM outlets and donors. ACM has various ideas for generating revenue, but thus far there has not felt the need to implement them.

The working hypothesis that CM outlets are able to contribute to the development of the media sector and/or civil society is partially confirmed.

The impact on youth development in rural areas was very important for most interview partners. They all highlighted that CM provides an opportunity for young people to develop skills in a region where there are not many options for them and to collect valuable experience for their future careers. Working in CM can also have a positive effect on personal development. CM reports on personalities with special talents or remarkable achievements from the local community who can act as role models for others. ACM had previously set up an alumni network, but this network did not seem to be active at the time of the impact study. There was no direct evidence of CM strengthening of civil society through media work, which might be related to the nature of CM as multimedia centers rather than media branches of NGOs and to CM's reliance on volunteering high school students rather than locally rooted adults.

The working hypothesis that framework conditions for CM have improved is partially confirmed.

At the local level, CM outlets and ACM have established closer relationships with local authorities, who provide contributions in kind (including office space) to CM outlets. It is a continuous challenge for CM to find the right balance between proximity to local political elites and maintaining its independence. At the national level, the political and economic framework for media in Kyrgyzstan has deteriorated in recent years, but this has not yet affected CM. CM received a formally recognized status in the media law in 2017. Further advocacy is needed, especially to gain easier access to licenses. ACM has established working contacts with relevant institutions at the national level. There is little networking with other CM and CM associations in other countries, apart from one working meeting with interested parties in Uzbekistan.

Lessons learned

- The profile of the CM organizations (in Kyrgyzstan mostly multimedia centers) and their volunteers (in Kyrgyzstan, mostly high school students between 13 and 18 years of age) determine the content, impact and sustainability of CM.
- It is a strength of CM that they include and give a voice to female contributors and issues.
- In the current consolidating and norming phase of the Association, it is important to have a strategy for internal and external orientation/guidance on CM priorities.
- To achieve real impact beyond project duration, knowledge management during activities and monitoring of the follow-up after activities is important.
- Demand-oriented and long-term donor support should be aligned with clear objectives and transparent processes within and between the partners.

Selected recommendations

To DW Akademie

- Provide support for journalism, but also beyond journalism (such as organizational development).
- Introduce a systematic approach to knowledge management, including digitalized formats.
- Consider intended and unintended consequences of providing institutional support.

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 more than 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.