

Evaluation Report 2026 • Executive Summary

Freedom of Expression and Media Development (MuM)

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Background

Worldwide, the media sector has faced radical challenges in recent years, from increasing authoritarianism and political polarization to captured markets and the collapse of traditional business models to the impact of rapid technological changes, including a proliferation of disinformation and hate speech and the positive and negative implications of artificial intelligence (AI). Developments since early 2025 have brought particularly significant shifts to the sector, as the United States — once the leading supporter of media development — withdrew from the sector and numerous other bilateral donors cut their assistance budgets and increasingly pivot to investing in security. Many media development actors and media outlets themselves now face existential crises, struggling to survive under the shadow of a shrinking civic space and dwindling financial resources.

DW Akademie's project "Freedom of Expression and Media Development" (referred to here by the German acronym MuM for *Meinungsfreiheit und Medienentwicklung*) — currently being implemented over the three-year period 2024–2026 — operates within this complicated context. The project seeks to strengthen the future viability of the media development sector amidst these myriad challenges, aspiring to do so via knowledge generation and sharing, networking and coordination, advocacy, and policy advice. This includes the expansion of DW Akademie's Policy and Learning Department as an independent think tank, DW Freedom, which aims to complement DW Akademie's

operational media development work through strategic research, global analysis, and network building, particularly around the three thematic areas of the financing of journalism, AI for good media, and dialogue against polarization.

The evaluation explores the extent to which the MuM project has contributed to strengthening the media development sector through i) knowledge generation, ii) coordination and networking, and iii) policy advice and advocacy, particularly in the context of digital transformation and democratic backsliding. It assessed how the project aligns with broader media development agendas and how it supports DW Akademie's strategic role as a partner to BMZ. The methodology followed the six evaluation criteria of the OECD-DAC: Relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, and sustainability.

The evaluation reviewed MuM's design, implementation processes, outputs, and emerging outcomes. It paid particular attention to the DW Freedom's three thematic priorities as well as cross-cutting issues including gender and Global South perspectives, and MuM's contribution to sector-wide learning and coordination. The evaluation was conducted between November 2025 and April 2026, including participation in the January 2026 *Breaking the news: Global perspectives on the future of journalism in the age of AI* conference in Berlin.

As with all evaluations, the methodology encountered some limitations. As the evaluation was conducted in year

two of the project, with another full year of implementation remaining, the evaluation team often found that this relatively early stage may not have enabled all aspects of the project and its impact to sufficiently materialize. As a further limitation, the evaluation team found that external stakeholders often demonstrated low awareness of the project or were only able to provide light details about their involvement and impressions. Many did not necessarily distinguish between DW Akademie, its Policy and Learning department, and DW Freedom as a new think tank.

Evaluation results

Relevance

MuM has effectively addressed pressing structural challenges in the media development sector, including media viability, AI-driven transformation, and polarization. Its greatest relevance lies in knowledge brokering and agenda-setting at the policy and sector level, particularly for BMZ and international media development actors. While thematic resonance is strong, operational applicability varies across pillars and stakeholder groups, with media viability less grounded in local contexts and dialogue interventions more conceptually oriented. Internal relevance depends on the degree to which research outputs are linked to field experience and operational uptake. The project's relevance was rated as "overall fulfilled."

Coherence

MuM demonstrates strong coherence within DW Akademie and the broader media development ecosystem. It complements rather than duplicates other actors' efforts, positioning itself as a knowledge broker, convenor, and agenda setter. Coordination with peer organizations, multilateral networks, and donors is generally constructive, while structured South-South and South-North engagement enhances cross-regional alignment. Institutional stability, public funding, and conceptual rigor further reinforce its complementary role, although its institutional location influences expectations regarding innovation and advocacy. Gender and inclusion objectives remain less systematically integrated. The project's coherence was rated as "overall fulfilled."

Effectiveness

MuM is largely on track to achieve its objective as a policy-oriented think tank, shaping debates and contributing analytical insights. Outputs such as the Media Viability Manifesto, conceptualization of AI-related work, and dialogue initiatives demonstrate influence in agenda-setting, normative framing, and sector-level reflection. Effectiveness is ensured by team expertise, institutional credibility, and methodological approaches like sprints, though rapid cycles occasionally limit systematic follow-up. External constraints, including funding cuts by numerous key donors and fragile media ecosystems, have affected the immediate uptake of ideas and programs, highlighting the need to strengthen the translation of research into operational practice. The project's effectiveness was rated as "overall fulfilled."

Efficiency

MuM's efficiency is reflected in its strategic value, credibility, and convening capacity. Resources are generally well aligned with policy-oriented objectives, and the sprint methodology supports responsiveness to emerging topics. However, limited visibility of some outputs and administrative burdens, particularly for Southern partners, suggests the potential for improved resource focus and internal process optimization. Overall, stakeholders perceive MuM as generating meaningful impact relative to its size and scope. The project's efficiency was rated as "overall fulfilled."

Impact

MuM's impact is most visible in shaping discourse, framing structural topics, and enhancing institutional positioning rather than through direct operational change. Stakeholders consistently acknowledge MuM's role in providing analytical guidance, convening space, and normative framing, indicating systemic rather than project-specific influence. Early indicators, such as advisory contributions to BMZ and engagement in the M20 Summit, demonstrate its capacity to influence policy discussions at multiple levels. The project's impact was rated as "overall fulfilled."

Sustainability

MuM is well anchored within DW Akademie, benefiting from structural integration, institutional credibility, and participation in sector networks. Continuity of core staff and forward planning support operational stability, while ongoing engagement in multilateral and thematic platforms reinforces long-term relevance. Key sustainability considerations include financial independence, diversification of funding, and institutionalization of knowledge management. Maintaining strategic prioritization, resource allocation, and core expertise will be essential for ensuring MuM's enduring influence and resilience beyond individual project cycles. The project's sustainability was rated as "partially fulfilled."

Selected lessons learned

1. **Leveraging trust:** MuM's credibility and perceived impartiality constitute its principal comparative advantage, enabling access to diverse stakeholders and politically sensitive spaces. Sustaining this trust is essential for continued influence and for maintaining DW Akademie's policy credibility.
2. **Institutionalizing change:** Ensuring structured exchange with operational units is essential for converting research into actionable guidance. Without deliberate mechanisms, analytical outputs risk remaining conceptual, limiting practical uptake.
3. **Deepening traction:** Visibility and agenda-setting require timely, relevant, and accessible outputs. Impact is maximized when outputs align with policy windows, stakeholder priorities, and languages that broaden reach; otherwise, even high-quality outputs may have limited influence.
4. **Maintaining focus:** Clear strategic focus, defined audiences, and levels of influence increase uptake and policy traction. Expansion into emerging areas like AI governance enhances relevance, but without prioritization, resources and impact may be diluted. Concentrated effort combined with clearly articulated influence pathways strengthens both effectiveness and institutional sustainability.
5. **Sustaining impact:** Knowledge, relationships, and processes must be institutionally embedded rather than dependent on individual initiative. Methodological documentation, structured knowledge exchange, and internal learning strengthen continuity and reduce vulnerability to staff turnover and funding cycles. Effective translation into operational follow-up, deeper co-creation with partners, and long-term orientation determine the durability and scale of influence.

Selected recommendations

1. **Clarify DW Freedom's role as a separate entity:** Reassess the pros and cons of maintaining DW Freedom as a distinct brand within DW Akademie, including a cost-benefit analysis of separate branding and publicity in an era of global funding crises.
2. **Consolidate DW Freedom's identity and theory of change:** Define MuM's comparative advantages, primary audiences, and intended level of influence - whether agenda-setting, regulatory advice, or operational support. Establish a clear theory of change linking research, events, and advisory work to enhance responsiveness to both German/European and Global South stakeholders and align outputs with emerging policy debates.
3. **Prioritize strategically:** Focus resources on areas of core expertise, align research and convenings with key policy moments, and coordinate internally and externally to avoid duplication. Maintain flexibility to respond to emerging issues while ensuring that pivoting does not dilute impact or stretch resources thin.
4. **Introduce systematic outcome tracking:** Develop structured approaches to capture the uptake and influence of knowledge products, including usage data, stakeholder feedback, advisory engagements, and examples of operational or policy impact. This will improve learning, demonstrate return on investment, and strengthen evidence of influence.
5. **Conceive DW Freedom as an action tank:** Emphasize applied research by exploring practical tools, political economy analyses, pilot initiatives, and innovative advocacy strategies. Move beyond conceptual discussion to concrete change, leveraging expertise to address emerging challenges, including AI governance and media sustainability.
6. **Consider a targeted focus within AI:** With many actors and issues in this space, define clear goals for DW Freedom's AI work, e.g.,

whether to support positive AI use in newsrooms, mitigate harmful effects, influence government policy, or engage tech companies. Targeted focus will enhance tangible impact while maintaining cooperation with complementary actors.

7. Expand stakeholder engagement:

Broaden cooperation beyond traditional funders and large organizations to include private funders, wider civil society, academics, smaller tech companies, and diverse Global South actors. This will broaden coalitions, enrich perspectives, ensure underrepresented voices are included, and increase the relevance and legitimacy of convenings and outputs.

8. Strengthen strategic engagement with Global South: Engage regulators, legislators, media councils, and public authorities in selected countries through targeted briefs, advisory exchanges, and regulatory roundtables. Facilitate South-South and South-North exchanges to integrate Global South perspectives into global policy debates and reinforce MuM's credibility and coherence in international discourse.

9. Re-commit to gender and inclusion: Systematically mainstream gender, inclusion, and Global South perspectives across all thematic strands. Potential areas might include minority media viability, technology-facilitated

gender-based risks, access to information for marginalized groups, and structural power dynamics.

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 60 developing countries and emerging economies.

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