

## A summary of evidence on independent media and free flow of information





## Understanding independent media

Independent media are expected to support democracy, human rights and sustainable development (Puddephat 2010). They do this by holding the government accountable and providing access to information to the public (Kumar 2006; Freedom House 2019). Media freedom is severely challenged in most regions of the world (UNESCO 2017). The independence of media organizations and media workers has been under attack and deteriorated over the past decade, including in multiple democracies (Benequista 2019; Freedom House 2019). Depending on the metrics used, approximately 13 per cent (Deane 2016) and half of the world's population (Reporters Without Borders 2016) have access to independent media.

Given these challenges, interventions to strengthen independent media are frequent and common in L&MICs. Although the proportion of funding as a total of ODA funds may be small (0.3%), in absolute numbers a good significant amount of funding is dedicated to interventions supporting independent media (Cauhapé-Cazaux and Kalathil 2015). There is an ethical imperative to ensure that these limited resources are used effectively through evidence-informed policies and programming. Thus, decisions about the types of interventions funders support should be informed by evidence on interventions effects, and where such evidence is not available it should be generated through rigorous evaluation as part of program implementation.

To support evidence informing interventions to strengthen independent media, the USAID commissioned 3ie to develop this Evidence Gap Map (EGM) with the aims to a) identify and describe the evidence on the effects of media development interventions to strengthen independent media, and media for development interventions on democratization and peacebuilding in L&MICs, and b) identify potential primary evidence and synthesis gaps. The EGM was created through a systematic search and screening process in which we identified all relevant quantitative and qualitative impact evaluations and systematic reviews evaluating media interventions in L&MICs.

### Highlights



- We found 92 eligible studies implemented in L&MICs. Of these, 88 were quantitative impact evaluations (IEs), two qualitative IEs, and two systematic reviews.
- Dissemination for democratization and peacebuilding interventions were the most frequently studied interventions with 61 and 16 studies each, while the remaining categories had few studies.
- Despite a comprehensive search we only identified two qualitative IEs of independent media interventions, although this may be partially explained by a lack of standardized terminology.
- Findings from one of the high-confidence systematic reviews (Waddington et al. 2019) suggest that interventions which provide information on the performance of public servants to citizens do not improve intermediate and final outcomes. The second review (Sonnenfeld et al. 2021) suggests that media for peace interventions.
- The majority of studies focused on contexts with 'difficult' or 'very serious' constraints on press freedom (74%), but there is more limited evidence from contexts where press freedom is characterized as 'very serious'.





## Conceptualizing and categorizing independent media interventions and outcomes

This EGM considers evaluations of two broad categories of interventions: media development interventions (i.e., independent media as an end in itself) and media for development interventions (i.e., independent media as a means to achieving development outcomes), defined as follows:

- **Media development interventions:** ‘activities aimed at strengthening the media to be independent, pluralistic, and professional’ (Kaplan 2012: p.6).
- **Media for development interventions:** media and communication activities that aim to initiate behavior change. It is ‘the strategic employment of media and communication as facilities for informing, educating and sensitizing about development and pertinent social issues’ (Manyozo 2012: p.54).

Media development and media for development interventions in service of peacebuilding and democratization are conceptually interlinked and often share a focus on providing information access. Indeed, some media for development (sometimes referred to as social and behavior change communication or SBCC) can be delivered

under a media development initiative and vice versa. The two endeavors of media development and media for development interventions both share the goals of supporting good governance and government accountability, and counteracting the internal dilemmas (Lynch and McGoldrick 2007; Staub 2013).

To capture studies relevant to the two broad categories explained above, we disaggregated them in sub-categories as Table 1 displays. In particular, the media development interventions oriented were those which aims to strengthen independent media through policies and laws that facilitate their existence and function, initiatives to create coalitions among independent media organizations to increase their engagement, capacity building, support and protections for media workers and their organizations. Finally, the interventions aiming to disseminate information about democracy and peacebuilding are more media for development oriented. Only studies considering outcomes related to strengthening independent media, peacebuilding, or democratization were included.

**Figure 1:** Conceptual framework for the EGM



Source: This table includes illustrative examples only. For the full list of interventions and outcomes studied, please see the Berretta et al. (2021, forthcoming)



## Main findings

We conducted an extensive search of peer-reviewed and grey literature which returned a total of 62,475 records. After removing the duplicates and screening 36,643 records, we included a total of 92 studies in the EGM: 88 quantitative impact evaluations (IEs), two qualitative IEs, and two systematic reviews. For more information on which study designs were included in this EGM, please consult Appendix B. The field rapidly expanded in the early 2000s, but in recent years the publication rate stabilized with an average of 13 studies per year since 2018. Research is mainly focused on Sub-Saharan Africa, where 51 per cent of studies are implemented.

**Over half of the countries represented in the EGM have substantial constraints on press freedom.** 74 per cent of the countries covered by IEs are in context characterized as having “difficult” or “very serious” press freedom situations, as rated by the Press Freedom Index. At the same time, we only identify studies from three of 18 L&MICs with the least press freedom: China, the Islamic Republic of Iran, and Vietnam.

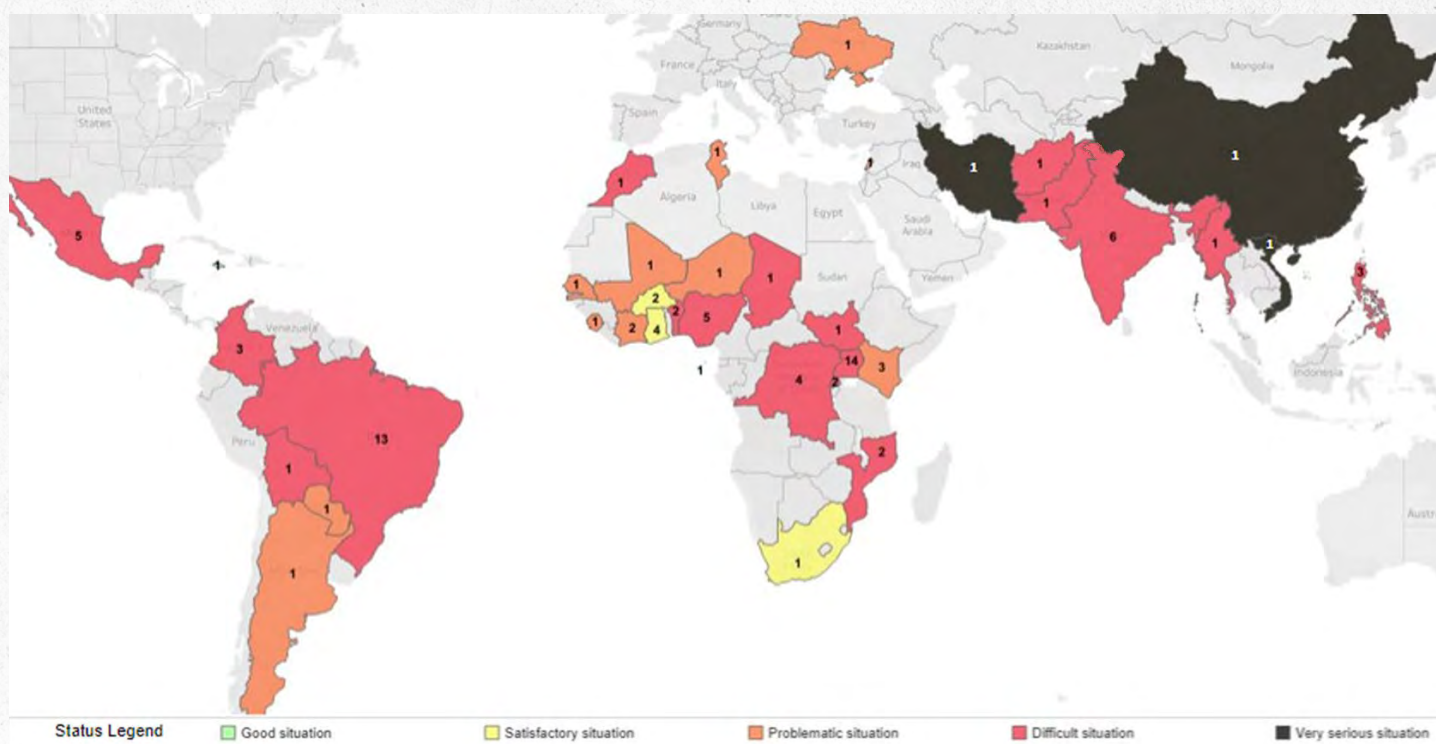
**The evidence base on the effects of media development and media for development interventions is very limited and unevenly distributed.** Over 80 per cent of the studies are related

to information dissemination for democratic/peacebuilding messaging interventions. For 18 out of 26 interventions we identify ‘absolute evidence gaps’ as no impact evaluations are available. Given the sensitive nature of work in this field, it is possible that more evaluations have been carried out, but not made public.

**Outcome measures mainly focus on governance and democratization,** in particular changes in democratic beliefs and attitudes (n=39), civic engagement in democracy and governance (n=37), government transparency and accountability (n=32). Only one study reported measures of investigative journalism and journalism skills, and no study measured access to media and information.

**Over 70 per cent of the included studies used a randomization approach** to identify their counterfactual, while 25 per cent used quasi-experimental methods, and 2 per cent qualitative impact evaluations designs. A limited portion of the studies, 30 per cent, considered equity, mostly by targeting vulnerable population (n=12), followed by heterogeneity analysis (other than subgroup) (n=7), sub-group analysis (other than sex) (n=7) and sub-group analysis by sex (n=4; SR n=1).

**Figure 2: Geographical evidence base and the World Press Freedom Index in 2021**





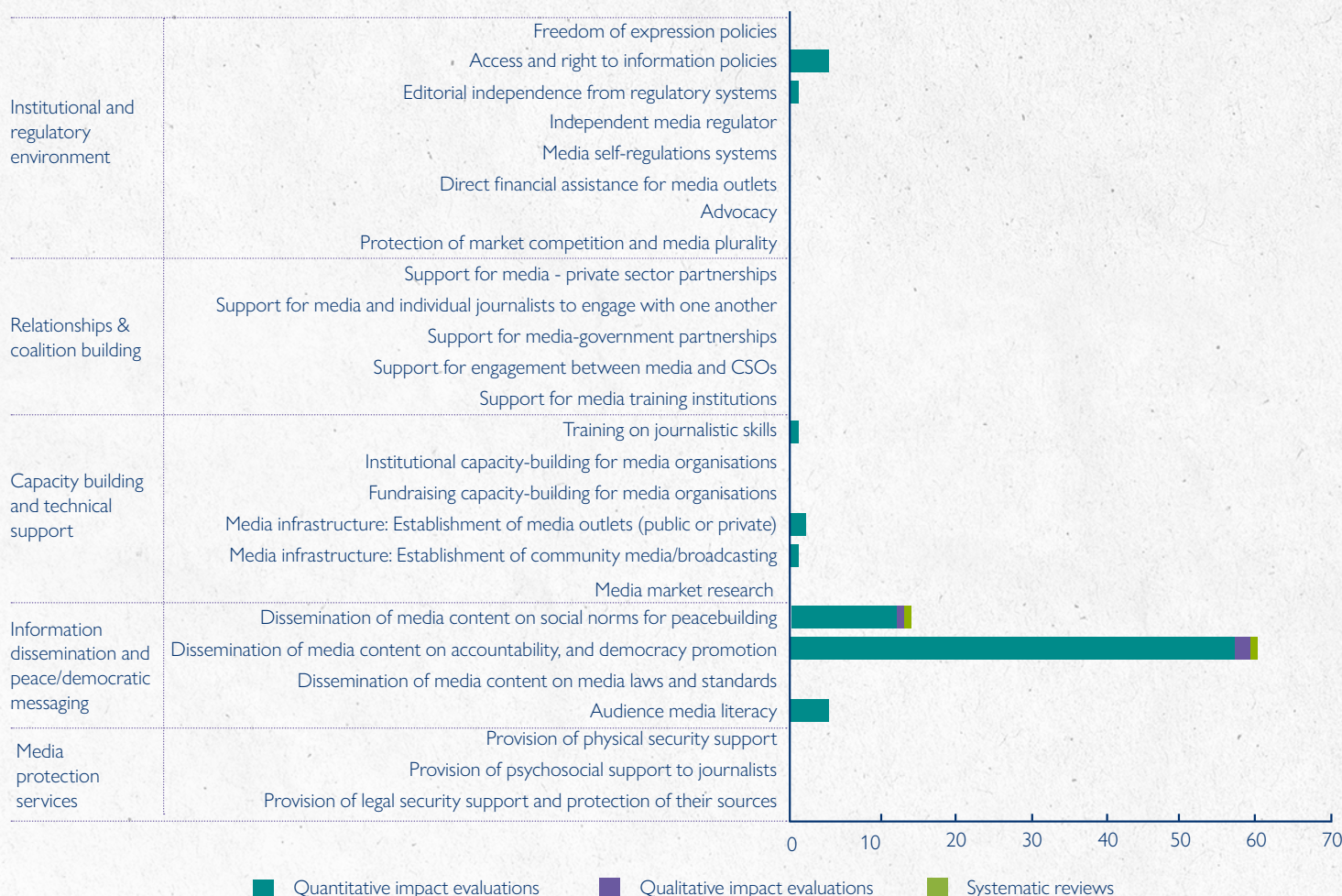
## Main findings

**Methodological gaps: a low number of quasi-experimental studies, qualitative impact evaluations, and studies consider equity.** We found at least one study for almost all the quantitative study designs, except for synthetic controls, however, quasi-experimental studies are less than 30 per cent. The use of these methods might allow conducting impact evaluation whenever it is not possible randomize the intervention and control group. We found only two qualitative IEs and none that use outcome harvesting, qualitative comparative analysis, general elimination methodology, or process tracing, which may be driven by the recent shift in language to clearly articulate and name methods used. Previous work may have used these methods without naming them; we only included articles that stated that one of the included study designs was formally employed. Finally, 70 per cent of the studies did not consider equity when designing and implementing the evaluations.

**There is a lack of meaningful integration of cost evidence (4%) and mixed-methods (17%) in the existing evidence base.** Both types of evidence are important for improving the usefulness of research findings for policy and practice. Cost evidence is necessary to determine if effects are actually worth the resources required to achieve them. Mixed-methods evaluations can help to understand beneficiary perceptions of interventions and the mechanisms through which interventions work (or not) and to highlight implementation considerations for example. To improve the usefulness of new impact evaluations for developing more effective interventions future studies should adopt mixed-methods approach, and cost analysis.

We have included two systematic reviews in the EGM (Waddington et al. 2019, Sonnenfeld et al. 2021), both rated as of high confidence.

**Figure 3:** Frequency of interventions reported in included studies by study design



Source: 3ie. Descriptive analysis of data extracted from all impact evaluations and systematic reviews included in the map.



## Main findings

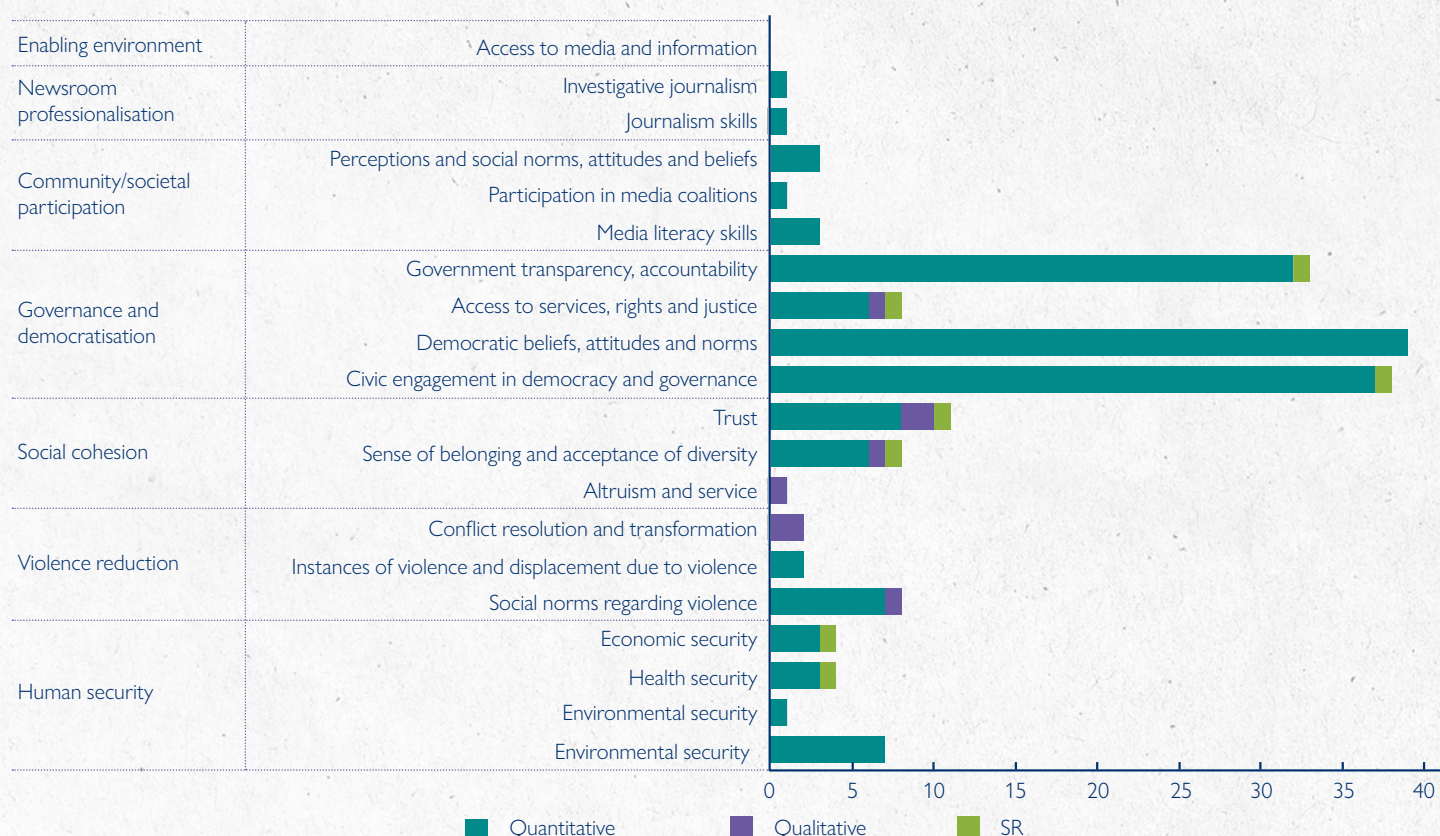
**Findings from the systematic review Waddington and colleagues (2019) suggest that interventions which provide information on performance of public servants to citizens do not improve intermediate and final outcomes.** Results are not statistically significant, except in one study of the six. Only some improvements in politicians' performance were detected, however, the short-term effects on service delivery were difficult to identify as they might be the results of multiple people's decisions rather than single politicians. The aim of these interventions was to cut the distance between politicians and citizens who were engaged in these projects. Overall, these interventions seem to work better when there is willingness to support and facilitate the intervention by those actors whose performance are analyzed and disseminated.

**Interventions that provide information to citizens about their rights** seem to improve active participation (SMD=0.25, 95%CI 0.18, 0.31; 2 studies), as well as knowledge about services (SMD=0.13, 95%CI=0.07, 0.18; 2 studies). Some key factors included the possibility for citizens to access the service through front-line service providers,

the creation of common knowledge among citizens and providers on people's rights, and the creation of an appropriate level of social sanction risk for providers.

**The work by Sonnenfeld and colleagues (2021) suggests that media per peace interventions impact trust outcomes by activating the 'seeing the other' mechanism, through which people better understand and respect differences and similarities with others.** However, the evidence is limited as it was found a small, positive, and significant effect on trust outcomes ( $g = 0.10$ , [0.02, 0.18], 3 studies), with two of the three studies synthesized having been rated as having a high risk of bias. No significant effects were found on any of the four measures on 'acceptance of diversity' synthesized by the authors (intergroup tolerance, rejection of multiple perspectives, feelings of exclusive victimhood, feelings of inclusive victimhood).

**Figure 4:** Frequency of outcomes reported in included studies by study type



Source: 3ie. Descriptive analysis of data extracted from all impact evaluations and systematic reviews included in the map.



## Promising areas for future research

In addition to helping stakeholders identify relevant literature, the EGM also serves as a starting point in discussing how to build the evidence base. There is a significant opportunity for future impact evaluations and systematic reviews based on the gaps identified here. Although we acknowledge that practicality and the use of

alternate research approaches may explain some of these gaps, we advocate for the use of innovative forms of impact evaluation to supplement these other approaches. We suggest several key areas where future work could be useful and also encourage stakeholders to consider their own priorities and interests when reviewing the EGM (Table 1).

**Table 1:** Gaps in the rule of law evidence base

Type of gap	Suggested area of research
Intervention where no or a few impact evaluations were found	■ All interventions but dissemination of information for democratic/peacebuilding
Outcome Intervention where no or a few impact evaluations were found	■ Measures of an enabling environment ■ Measures of newsroom professionalization
Geography and Press Freedom Index (RWB)	■ Research on interventions implemented in 18 L&MICs rated as having the worst press freedom, such as Eritrea, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Turkmenistan, and Djibouti
Study design	■ Quantitative IEs on interventions less studied; Rigorous qualitative IE studies for interventions where quantitative approaches are not possible.
Synthesis gaps	■ Dissemination of media content related to social norms for peacebuilding on governance and democratization, and social cohesion outcomes



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## Using the evidence patterns in the EGM

Evidence Gap Maps are tools for decision-making and can be used to:

**1. Inform research agenda-setting.** The EGM can help identify priority areas for future research investment, particularly when combined with expertise from diverse stakeholders to effectively interpret the gaps, some of which have been suggested above.

1. Investments in new impact evaluations may be particularly beneficial where they target interventions for which limited evidence exists, or where there is limited evidence for the effects of the intervention on a population or context of interest. In the case of this map, all categories except two lack evidence. However, there are some good examples of impact evaluations, please see section 3 below for more examples.

2. Overall, the evidence is scarce across all the intervention categories except the dissemination of information and there is a need for more evidence in most of the interventions categories. Many interventions in this space are ‘small n’ in the sense that the units of allocation are few and the quantitative methodologies typically associated with impact evaluation are not feasible. For such interventions qualitative impact evaluation methodologies may be the most appropriate approach. Our targeted search for such studies identified a very limited literature of two studies meeting our inclusion criteria.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, there is a need for careful consideration of the qualitative methodological approaches that may be considered more credible in convincingly establishing causality. While there has been some conceptual work to explore qualitative approaches that may be applicable within a counterfactual framework (eg: White and Philips, 2012) the extent to which such approaches have been adopted in practice appear limited, as well as a consensus on what is a robust qualitative IE. The studies identified in this EGM can provide a starting point for reviewing and drawing lessons from practice, to inform future studies.

3. Where large concentrations of primary evidence already exist, such as dissemination of democratic/peacebuilding messages, investments in additional impact evaluations may not be necessary. It would be useful commission a systematic review where there is a concentration of evidence but not high-confidence systematic reviews, such as for the interventions on dissemination of peacebuilding messages.

4. Given the sometimes-sensitive nature of interventions in this field relevant impact evaluations not in the public domain might exist. Sharing knowledge about what works and what does not is essential for the whole community, but sometimes certain information might be sensitive. In these cases, redacted versions with details identifying location and participants removed could still be published to share important information with colleagues in the field.

**2. Support policy and program design.** Stakeholders considering the adoption of specific interventions may reference evaluations in the relevant row to understand the likely impacts of their intervention. Conversely, stakeholders interested in influencing a specific outcome may reference evaluations in the corresponding column to understand which interventions affect that outcome. The links to the articles are provided in the online EGM. Stakeholders can use the filters in the EGM to identify interventions relevant to their geographies and populations of interest. For instance, we found only two studies implemented in North Africa so stakeholders could easily filter out irrelevant studies and find what they are looking for.

**4. Provide examples of impact evaluations undertaken in a particular context or utilizing a particular method.** This can be useful for identifying potential challenges and strategies applied to address challenges that may strengthen the quality of future research. For example, one evaluation leveraged variation in radio signals to understand the impacts of media on access to government services (Keefer and Khemani 2016). Another study used time series data to understand the impacts of freedom of information laws on a governmental bureaucratic efficiency index (Vadlamannati and Cooray 2016). As a final example, researchers compared the impacts of bribery and the application of a freedom of information law on access to services by randomly assigning people to two approaches to getting a ration card (Peisakhin and Pinto 2010).



## Accessing and engaging with the evidence gap map

We present the results of the evidence gap map graphically on an interactive online platform.<sup>2</sup> The main framework is a matrix of interventions and outcomes, with grey and colored circles representing impact evaluations and systematic reviews. The systematic reviews follow a traffic-light system to indicate confidence in their findings: green for high, orange for medium, red for low. The color blue indicates that the

study is ongoing. The size of the bubble indicates the relative size of the evidence base for that intersection of intervention and outcome. The interactive aspect of the EGM allows users to filter the results based on key variables, thereby facilitating efficient, user-friendly identification of relevant evidence. The evidence can be filtered by region, country, population, country income level, and study design.

## Independent Media Evidence Gap Map

Total unique studies: 92		Outcomes												
Interventions		Enabling Environment					Newsroom professionalization				Community/societal participation			
		Media competition, plurality and diversity	Media freedom and government censorship	Media fairness and impartiality	Access to media and information	Violence against journalists	Journalism skills	Capacity to maintain industry standards	Investigative journalism	Financial sustainability	Media literacy skills	Media trust and audience perception	Participation in media coalitions	Perceptions and social norms, attitudes and beliefs
	Media market research													
Information dissemination and peace/democratic messaging	Dissemination of media content on social norms for peacebuilding													
	Dissemination of media content on accountability and democracy promotion													
	Dissemination of media content on media laws and standards													
	Audience media literacy													
Media protection service	Provision of physical security and digital safety support													
	Provision of psychosocial support to journalists													
	Provision of legal security support and protection of their sources													
Multi-component interventions	Multicomponent interventions													

● High confidence reviews 
 ● Impact evaluations 
 ● Ongoing evaluations 
 ● Qualitative evaluations 
 ● No records found



## What is an EGM?

3ie evidence gap maps are collections of evidence from impact evaluations and systematic reviews for a given sector or policy issue, organized according to the types of program evaluated and the outcomes measured. They include an interactive online visualization of the evidence base, displayed in a framework of relevant interventions and outcomes. They

highlight where there are sufficient impact evaluations to support systematic reviews and where more studies are needed. These maps help decision makers target their resources to fill these important evidence gaps and avoid duplication. They also facilitate evidence-informed decision-making by making existing research more accessible.

## About the summary report

The studies on which this brief is based were identified through the Independent Media Evidence Gap Map (EGM), by Miriam Berretta and colleagues (forthcoming). The authors systematically searched for published and unpublished impact evaluations and systematic reviews through the second quarter of 2021 and then identified, mapped, and described the evidence base of interventions that aim to strengthen independent media. The map contains 1 systematic review and 93 impact evaluations. The evidence's characteristics are described and mapped according to a framework of 26 interventions and 28 outcomes, with 5 cross-cutting themes.

The EGM can be viewed at <https://developmentevidence.3ieimpact.org/egm/independent-media-egm>

This is a summary report of a longer technical report “Berretta, M, Lane, C, Garcia, K, Storhaug, I, Lee, S, Hammaker, J, Glandon, D, Tomiak, K, and Eysers, J, (forthcoming). Independent media and free flow of information: an evidence gap map final report. New Delhi: International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie)”. It was designed and produced by Akarsh Gupta, and Tanvi Lal.



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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The included qualitative study designs are described in Appendix B. As we only included studies that explicitly stated which qualitative evaluation study design was used to ensure consistency in inclusion decisions. There is a chance that this approach would have led to the exclusion of some

older papers when terminology was less clearly defined. But as the concept of qualitative impact evaluations is relatively recent we do not think this is very likely.

<sup>2</sup> The map can be found here: <https://developmentevidence.3ieimpact.org/egm/independent-media-egm>



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## Appendix A:

Types of studies included in the EGM (section extracted from Berretta et al. 2021)

We included impact evaluations and systematic reviews that measure the effects of a relevant intervention on outcomes of interest, including both selected quantitative and qualitative study designs. The followings are quantitative study designs, which were selected because they are widely used to evaluate intervention effectiveness (Aloe et al. 2017; Reeves et al. 2017).

### Quantitative study designs:

#### Impact evaluations (IEs)

- Randomized controlled trials (RCTs) with assignment at the individual, household, community or other cluster level, and quasi-RCTs using prospective methods of assignment such as alternation.
- Non-randomized designs with either a known assignment variable(s) or a seemingly random assignment process:
  - Regression discontinuity designs, where assignment is based on a threshold measured before intervention, and the study uses prospective or retrospective approaches of analysis to control for unobservable confounding.
  - Natural experiments with clearly defined intervention and comparison groups which exploit apparently random natural variation in assignment (such as a lottery) or random errors in implementation, etc.
- Non-randomized studies with pre-intervention and post-intervention outcome data for both intervention and comparison groups, where data are individual level panel or pseudo-panels (repeated cross-sections), which use the following methods to control for confounding:
  - Studies controlling for time-invariant unobservable confounding, including difference-in-differences, fixed-effects models, or models with an interaction term between time and intervention for pre-intervention and post-intervention observations.
  - Studies assessing changes in trends in outcomes over a series of time points with a contemporaneous comparison (controlled interrupted time series (ITS)), and with sufficient observations to establish a trend and control for effects on outcomes due to factors other than the intervention (such as seasonality).
- Non-randomized studies with a similar comparison group that control for observable confounding, including statistical matching, covariate matching, coarsened-exact matching, propensity score matching, and multiple regression analysis.
- Non-randomized studies that control for confounding using instrumental variable (IV) approaches such as two-stage least squares procedures.
- Synthetic control

#### Systematic reviews (SRs):

We included systematic effectiveness reviews that describe the search, inclusion criteria, data collection and synthesis methods used (Snilstveit et al. 2016). Any evidence reviews, such as literature reviews, that do not adopt these methods will be excluded. We will exclude systematic reviews that are not effectiveness reviews (i.e. that do not aim to synthesise the evidence of the effects of a relevant intervention on priority outcomes of interest), such as systematic reviews of the barriers and facilitators to implementation of a media development intervention. For reviews that include multiple research methods, we will include them if over 50 % of the primary studies include at least one impact evaluation design specified above, or where the effectiveness component of the review was empty (i.e. no eligible studies were identified) and thus no findings on effectiveness are reported.

We will exclude before-after studies or cross-sectional studies that do not attempt to control for selection bias or confounding in any way. Studies that

only examine willingness-to-pay for goods, services, process and business models will be excluded.

Experiments conducted in tightly-controlled settings, like those of a laboratory, and studies that measure immediate reactions to a short-term exposure, i.e. studies where implementation and data collection is started and completed within a single day, will be excluded.

### Qualitative study designs

We recognize that quantitative impact evaluations can be difficult to perform for some of the interventions we have included in the framework. Therefore, we included a limited number of qualitative impact evaluation methods that clearly try to identify the causal relationship between the interventions and outcomes. This list is based on White and Phillips (2012) and the Magenta Book on evaluation published by the UK government (HM Treasury 2020). The definitions have been developed by using two additional sources (Remnant and Avarad 2016; INTRAC 2017a; b; c; d). We only included studies that state, in the title, abstract, or full text, that they used one of the methodologies listed below. We excluded all those studies where it is not clearly stated which analysis has been used.

#### ■ Realist evaluation

Realist evaluations assume that projects and programmes work under certain conditions and are heavily influenced by the way that different stakeholders respond to them. Authors must clearly state a theory tested through an intervention indicating how and for whom a program would work. They compare contexts, mechanisms, and outcomes within a program (not with a control). There is a strong emphasis on the social and historical context and comparison of those who benefited from the program and those who did not benefit (White and Philip 2012). A realist evaluation is therefore not just designed to assess whether a development intervention worked or not. It is designed to address questions such as “What works (or doesn’t work)?”; “for whom (and to what extent)?”; “in which circumstances does it work?”; “How and why does it work?” (INTRAC 2017a).

#### ■ Process tracing

Develop a set of (competing) hypotheses lining an intervention to an outcome including how these hypotheses could be (in)validated. Gather relevant evidence to determine which hypothesis most closely matches observed data. In its pure form, process tracing is based around a set of formal tests. These are designed to assess causation. They are applied to all the different possible explanations for how a particular change might have come about in order to confirm some and/or eliminate others. Within the process tracing these different explanations are known as hypotheses (INTRAC 2017b).

#### ■ Contribution analysis

Contribution analysis is a methodology used to identify the contribution a development intervention has made to a change or set of changes. The aim is to produce a credible, evidence-based narrative based on a theory of change that a reasonable person would be likely to agree with, rather than to produce conclusive proof. Contribution analysis can be used during a development intervention, at the end, or afterwards (INTRAC 2017c).

#### ■ Contribution tracing

Contribution tracing is a participatory mixed-method (qual-quant) to establish the validity of contribution claims with explicit criteria to guide evaluators in data collection and Bayesian updating to quantify the level of confidence in a claim. Includes a contribution ‘trial’ with all stakeholders to establish what will prove/disprove the claim (HM Treasury 2020).



## Appendix A:

### ■ The qualitative impact assessment protocol (QulP)

QulP studies serve to provide an independent reality check of a predetermined theory of change which helps stakeholders to assess, learn from, and demonstrate the social impact of their work. The QulP gathers evidence of a project's impact through narrative causal statements collected directly from intended project beneficiaries. Respondents are asked to talk about the main changes in their lives over a pre-defined recall period and prompted to share what they perceive to be the main drivers of these changes, and to whom or what they attribute any change - which may well be from multiple sources (Remnant and Averd 2016).

### ■ General elimination methodology (GEM)

Scriven's GEM (2008) builds upon his earlier Modus Operandi Method (1976) to provide an approach specifically geared towards substantiating causal claims. The methodology entails systematically identifying and then ruling out alternative causal explanations of observed results. It is based on the idea that for any event it is possible to draw up Lists of Possible Causes (LOPCs) or alternative hypothetical explanations for an outcome of interest. Each putative cause will have its own set of "footprints", or Modus

Operandi (MO) – "a sequence of intermediate or concurrent events, a set of conditions or a chain of events that has to be present when the cause is effective (Scriven 2008)" (White and Phillips 2012: p. 38).

### ■ Qualitative comparative analysis (QCA)

Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) is a methodology that enables the analysis of multiple cases in complex situations. It can help explain why change happens in some cases but not others. QCA is designed for use with an intermediate number of cases, typically between 10 and 50. It can be used in situations where there are too few cases to apply conventional statistical analysis (INTRAC 2017d).

### ■ Outcome harvesting

Outcome harvesting is designed to collect evidence of change (the 'outcomes') and then work backwards to assess whether or how an organization, program or project contributed to that change. Outcomes are defined as changes in the "behaviour writ large" (such as actions, relationships, policies, practices) of one or more social actors influenced by an intervention (Wilson-Grau 2015)



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