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# Independent media and free flow of information

## An evidence gap map

May 2023

Evidence  
Gap Map  
Report 21

Public Administration



International  
Initiative for  
Impact Evaluation

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## About this evidence gap map report

This report presents the findings of a systematic search to identify and map the evidence base of impact evaluations and systematic reviews of interventions that aim to strengthen independent media. The EGM was developed by 3ie and made possible with generous support from the United States Agency of International Development (USAID)'s Center for Democracy, Human Rights and Governance via a partnership with National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago. All of the content of this report is the sole responsibility of the authors and does not represent the opinions of 3ie, its donors or its Board of Commissioners. Any errors and omissions are also the sole responsibility of the authors. Please direct any comments or queries to the corresponding author, Miriam Berretta, at [mberretta@3ieimpact.org](mailto:mberretta@3ieimpact.org).

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## **Evidence Gap Map Report 21**

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# Executive Summary

## Background and scope

Independent media is expected to support democracy, human rights, and sustainable development (Puddephat 2010). It may accomplish this by holding the government accountable, providing the public with access to information, making it more responsive to citizen needs, and building resilience to disinformation (Kumar 2006; Freedom House 2019; Humprecht 2020). Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 views independent media as a public good and values the role of media in improving government accountability, debate, dialogue, and tolerance. SDG 16 assumes that media can be a means of shifting behaviors and norms to increase political participation and reduce corruption and conflict (Dean et al. 2014).

However, media freedom is severely challenged in most regions of the world (UNESCO 2017). The independence of media organizations and its employees have been under attack and deteriorating over the past decade, including in multiple democracies (Benequista 2019; Freedom House 2019). Depending on the metrics used, approximately 13 per cent (Deane 2016) to half (Reporters Without Borders 2016) of the world's population have access to independent media.

Given these challenges, interventions aimed at strengthening independent media are common in low- and middle-income countries (L&MICs). Media interventions can be conceptualized in two interrelated categories: media development interventions and media *for* development interventions. The two endeavors share the goals of supporting good governance and government accountability and counteracting internal dilemmas (Lynch and McGoldrick 2007; Staub 2013). Some media for development can be delivered under media development initiatives and vice versa.

Media development interventions consider the media as an intrinsic good and are defined as 'activities aimed at strengthening the media to be independent, pluralistic, and professional' (Kaplan 2012: p.6). In our framework, media development interventions aim to strengthen independent media by supporting a positive institutional and regulatory environment, creating coalitions and relationships, building capacity and providing technical support, and providing media protection services.

Media for development interventions view media as a means of achieving development and aim to initiate social and behavioral change. They leverage 'the strategic employment of media and communication as facilities for informing, educating and sensitizing about development and pertinent social issues' (Manyozo 2012: p.54). Many of the same approaches used by media development interventions can be used by media *for* development interventions. However, our framework includes information dissemination and peacebuilding/democratic messaging in this category.

Although the proportion of funding as a total of Official Development Assistance is small (0.3% in 2015 and 1.8% in 2020), in absolute numbers, a significant amount of funding is dedicated to interventions supporting independent media (Cauhapé-Cazaux and Kalathil 2015' OECD 2020). Therefore, there is an ethical imperative to ensure that these limited resources are used effectively through evidence-informed policies and programming.

Where such evidence is unavailable, it should be generated through rigorous evaluation as part of program implementation.

To support evidence-informed decision-making, this evidence gap map (EGM) report presents the findings of a systematic search to identify and map the evidence base of impact evaluations (IEs) and systematic reviews (SRs) on the effects of media development interventions to strengthen independent media. Media for development interventions to support democratization and peacebuilding in L&MICs. The studies we have included are limited to those measuring outcomes related to the enabling environment, newsroom professionalization, violence reduction, community engagement and societal participation, governance and democratization, social cohesion, and human security and resilience. This work aims to map and describe the available evidence on the effectiveness of media development and media for development interventions and summarize the findings for medium- and high-confidence systematic reviews.

## **Methods**

We implemented a broad search and systematic screening process to identify all potentially relevant studies, drawing on evidence from 11 academic databases and 40 grey literature sources. We included quantitative and qualitative impact evaluations and systematic reviews published from 2000 onwards that evaluated the effects of interventions aiming to strengthen independent media or support democratic and peaceful values through media. We extracted descriptive and bibliographic data from all included studies. For systematic reviews, we critically appraised the methods. For medium- and high-confidence systematic reviews, we removed the implications for policy and practice.

Using 3ie's EGM software, we created an online, interactive map of all included studies displayed according to the interventions and outcomes assessed in each study. The platform provides additional filters so that users can further explore the available evidence. For example, users can search for evidence by global regions, country income levels, or population. The EGM can be viewed at:

<https://developmentevidence.3ieimpact.org/egm/independent-media-egm>.

## **Main findings**

Our extensive search of peer-reviewed and grey literature returned 62,475 records. After removing duplicates, 36,643 documents remained for screening at the title and abstract level. Of these, 489 full text studies were reviewed. We ultimately included 92 studies in the EGM: 88 quantitative impact evaluations, two qualitative IEs, and two systematic reviews.

The field rapidly expanded in the early 2000s, but in recent years the publication rate has stabilized with an average of 13 studies per year since 2018. The identified studies mainly focused on sub-Saharan Africa, where 51 per cent of studies were implemented. Over half of the 38 countries represented in the EGM experienced substantial constraints on press freedom; 74 per cent of the countries covered by IEs experienced “difficult” or “very serious” press freedom situations. At the same time, we only identified studies from three of the 18 L&MICs - China, the Islamic Republic of Iran, and Vietnam - with the least press freedoms.

The evidence base on the effects of media development and media for development interventions needs to be more balanced and distributed. Over 80 per cent of the studies focused on disseminating media content on social norms for peacebuilding. For 18 out of 26 intervention categories, broadly falling under media protection services and coalition building and media protective services domains, we identified no impact evaluations.

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

A higher number of quasi-experimental studies and qualitative impact evaluations would be desirable. Furthermore, cost data and mixed methods could be better represented in the literature. Over 73 per cent of the included studies used randomization to identify their counterfactuals, 25 per cent used quasi-experimental methods, and 2 per cent used qualitative impact evaluation designs. There is a lack of meaningful integration of cost evidence (4%) and mixed methods (17%) in the existing evidence base.

A limited portion of the studies, 30 per cent, considered equity, primarily by targeting a 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).

We identified two SRs, both rated as being of high confidence<sup>1</sup>.

Sonnenfeld and colleagues (2021) find that media for peace interventions impact trust outcomes by activating the ‘seeing the other’ mechanism, through which people better understand and respect differences and similarities. However, the evidence is limited, with two of the three synthesized studies rated as having a high risk of bias. No significant effects were found on any of the four measures of acceptance of diversity synthesized by the authors (intergroup tolerance, rejection of multiple perspectives, feelings of exclusive victimhood, feelings of inclusive victimhood).

The SR by Waddington and colleagues (2019) looked at interventions promoting citizen engagement in public service management, which involved participation, inclusion, transparency, and accountability (PITA) mechanisms. The findings suggested that interventions providing information on the performance of public servants to citizens through media (e.g., budget monitoring or citizen scorecard interventions) might have had some effects on politicians’ performance. There is no evidence of improving access to services and service uptake. These interventions seem to work better when there is a willingness to support and facilitate the intervention by actors whose performance is analyzed and disseminated through media and social media. Interventions that promote citizen engagement in public service management by providing information to citizens about their rights seem to improve active participation and knowledge about services and meeting attendance. Some critical factors for success included the opportunity for

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<sup>1</sup> We define as of high, medium, or low confidence the SRs based on the process they adopted to conduct the search, screening the studies, analyse the data, and assess the quality of the studies included. We do that using an assessment template available in Appendix B.3.

citizens to access the service through front-line service providers, the creation of shared knowledge among citizens and providers on people's rights, and the creation of an appropriate level of social sanction risk for providers. While the findings from the systematic reviews do not readily speak to the importance of independent media, they are suggestive of the importance of providing access to information in public settings (e.g., scaling citizen monitoring efforts to create 'common knowledge') and the media's potential to impose sanctions on powerholders.

## **Conclusions and implications**

Overall, the EGM identified a relatively small body of unevenly distributed evidence. Evidence clustered in two intervention categories: information dissemination and peace/democratic messaging and dissemination of media content on social norms for peacebuilding. Evidence is needed to fill gaps in support of media regulation and self-regulation, coalitions, media market research, capacity building of media outlets, financial sustainability, psycho-social support, physical security for journalists, and direct financial assistance or alternative methods of sustaining journalism.

Given the sensitive nature of work in this field, more evaluations may have been carried out but have not been made public. Many qualitative studies may also have been excluded because they did not use an included impact evaluation approach. However, previous work may have used these methods without naming them, which is a requirement for inclusion in qualitative research in our map. We are aware of research underway using qualitative methods, so there might be more in the future.

Cost evidence and mixed-methods research may be needed to provide a holistic view of what works, for whom, and at what cost. Cost evidence is necessary to determine if the effects are worth the resources required to achieve them. Mixed-methods evaluations can determine beneficiary perceptions of interventions, the mechanisms through which interventions work (or not), and implementation considerations, for example. Future studies should adopt mixed-methods approaches and include cost analysis to improve the usefulness of new impact evaluations for developing more effective interventions.

Policymakers and implementers during program design can use the evidence identified in this EGM. They can leverage rigorous evidence from IEs and SRs on interventions related to the dissemination of information for democratic/peacebuilding. Policymakers might also consider commissioning systematic reviews to fill in the synthesis gap on the dissemination of media content on social norms for peacebuilding interventions. They could fill primary evidence gaps through rigorous impact evaluations, mainly focusing on evaluations that use mixed (qualitative and quantitative) research methods, sub-group analysis, and cost analysis. These approaches can improve future understanding of what works, for whom, at what cost, and under what conditions to strengthen independent media.

## **Structure of this report**

In Section 1, we present the background, objectives, and justification for this EGM. In Section 2, we describe the conceptual framework adopted for the EGM and define the scope of included studies. In Section 3, we describe the methods applied in the systematic search, screening, data extraction, and analysis of the identified studies. In Section 4, we present the findings from the map, including the gap analysis. Finally, in Section 5, we outline implications for policy and future research.

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# 1. Background

## 1.1 Development problem being addressed

An independent media is expected to support democracy, human rights, and sustainable development (Puddephat 2010). It may do this by holding the government accountable and providing access to information (Kumar 2006; Freedom House 2019). Through government accountability and transparency, free and independent media can decrease corruption (Haider, Mcloughlin and Scott 2011; DFID 2015). The favorable effects of media are grounded in what Habermas (1974) described as the public sphere: a place where people can come together, be informed, and organize to demand public goods and good governance from their governments.

Despite - or maybe because of - this, media freedom is severely challenged in most regions of the world (UNESCO 2017). The independence of media organizations and workers is under attack and has deteriorated in the last decade, including in multiple democracies (Benequista 2019; Freedom House 2019). Depending on the metrics used, between 13 per cent (Deane 2016) and half of the world's population (Reporters Without Borders 2016) have access to independent media. The Freedom House's press freedom scores have declined by 9% in Eurasia, 11% in the Middle East and North Africa, and 8% in Europe since 2014. There has been no change in the Freedom House's press freedom scores for America and Asia-Pacific since 2014, and there has been a 3 per cent increase in Sub-Saharan Africa (Freedom House 2019).

Threats to media freedom include political, legal, and economic forces that undermine the media's capacity to become or remain independent (Deane 2016). In fragile states, organizations that want to avoid accountability invest heavily in ensuring that the media reflects and protects their interests, thereby threatening the independence of the media (ibid.). Many leaders and governments attempt to silence critical media voices and strengthen outlets that produce coverage they favor (Freedom House 2019). For example, in India, the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party has supported campaigns to discourage speech that is 'anti-national', and government-aligned thugs have raided critical journalists' homes and offices. The media has become increasingly flattering of the Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, as the government has become particular regarding whom they provide television licenses to, excluding unfriendly outlets (ibid.). These practices threaten democracy by silencing and manipulating critical information and result in unfair elections.

Further challenges to independent media include a need for more funding and consequent conceptualization of the issue. In low- and middle-income countries (L&MICs), media often depend on grant income from donor organizations (Ismail 2018). Media organizations that receive significant donor funding may be viewed by their audience as non-independent. However, if these grants are not leveraged, funding shortages can force media organizations to close. This challenge is even more significant in fragile states (Ismail 2018). A recent study proposed the establishment of an International Fund for Public Interest Media to support the sustainability of independent media, democracy, and development where the market cannot sustain independent media (Deane et al. 2020).

## 1.2 The funding landscape

Media assistance dates back to the post-Second World War period. Interest in media assistance and funding increased during the third wave of democratization during the late 1980s (Kumar 2006; Noske-Turner 2015). Most of the focus was on independent media in Latin America (Cauhapé-Cazaux and Kalathil 2015). The funded media assistance programs promoted civil society development, economic and political decentralization, free and fair elections, and the rule of law (Kumar 2006).

After the fall of the Soviet Union and the tragic events in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, there was another increase in media assistance (Kumar 2006; Cauhapé-Cazaux and Kalathil 2015). The civil wars showed that the media could play a role in instigating and directing violence, demonstrating the power of independent media and increasing funding for media assistance (Susman-Peña 2012). The newly funded programs mainly focused on legal reforms, journalism training, and fostering the economic stability of the independent media (Cauhapé-Cazaux and Kalathil 2015). In recent years, there has been another push for media assistance spurred by the post-2015 Sustainable Development Goal 16. This goal aims to increase public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms (Myers and Juma 2018).

From 2010-2015, bilateral and multilateral donors provided USD 2.7 billion for media development. Official funding flows to media came primarily from bilateral donors (92.5%), while multilateral donors covered the remaining 6.5 per cent (Myers and Juma 2018). The top donors between 2010-2015 were Germany with USD 893 million, the United States spending USD 440 million, and Japan spending USD 196 million (Myers and Juma 2018). However, some donors, notably Germany and the Netherlands, and to a lesser extent France and the United Kingdom, included large subsidies for their international state broadcasters (i.e. Deutsche Welle) in calculating their official development assistance (ODA). Many other countries, such as the United States, include these funds in the bucket of public diplomacy and not media development, resulting in data which are not comparable (Myers and Juma 2018).

Despite the increased interest in assistance to the independent media, ODA allocated to media support (USD 441 million) only represented around 0.45 per cent (around USD 650 million) of the total sector allocable ODA in 2014. This figure decreased to 0.3 per cent (USD 487 million) in 2015 (Cauhapé-Cazaux and Kalathil 2015; Myers and Juma 2018; Benequista 2019). Of the original 0.45 per cent, 45 per cent (or roughly USD 198 million) was allocated to media development, and only 8 per cent was allocated to communication for development (Cauhapé-Cazaux and Kalathil 2015). Since 2015, ODA for independent media has fluctuated, with another drop in 2018 but a steady increase in 2019 and 2020, reaching USD 680 million in 2020 (OECD 2020) (around 1.5% more than in 2015)<sup>2</sup>.

These numbers imply that donors continue to be marginally committed to funding media. Funding to support knowledge creation (including research), building coalitions, and opening the spaces needed for dialogue and discussion on media systems is required to guarantee the free flow of information and a pluralist media sector (Cauhapé-Cazaux

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<sup>2</sup> Source: <https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=crs1#>

and Kalathil 2015; Myers and Juma 2018). Consequently, the International Fund for Public Interest Media (IFPM) was established.

Additional funding to support media is available. For instance, the Media Development Investment Fund (MDIF) has supported independent media since 1995. It have provided USD 125 million, financing 91 independent news businesses in 31 countries with a history of media oppression (Escalera et al. 2013). The Gates Foundation supported international media with more than USD11 million from 2010-2015 (Myers and Juma 2018). In 2016, the Gates Foundation reported to the Center for International Media Assistance that they spent USD 23 million on support for media development. Other foundations have contributed significantly to media support such as the Knight Foundation, which spent nearly USD 25 million and the Open Society Foundation which spent around USD 11 million in 2016. However, most of this was directed at US-based recipients (ibid.).

Sometimes, media projects are quite extensive in scope. For example, the United Kingdom funded a project to sustain the media in Iraq in 2015. The project aimed to enable a legal and regulatory environment allowing the Iraqi media to operate safely, freely and effectively. This was aimed at improving transparency and accountability, thereby strengthening the independent media. Another example was a project funded by Norway in 2012 that targeted Ukrainian journalists. This project, called 'Shining a Light on Corruption,' trained journalists to establish a virtual platform that aimed to increase the electorate's corruption knowledge and strengthen their means to combat it during parliamentary elections (Myers and Juma 2018).

A major shortcoming of many efforts to support independent media is that organizations and donors often see it as a technical endeavor with a focus on closing assumed knowledge gaps. The media's political function and how it is connected to a certain form of government are sometimes omitted. International experts value technical expertise over local knowledge and construct the intervened-in spaces according to outsider's expectations and expertise. Local expectations are not given enough attention (see, for example, Autesserre 2014; Koddenbrock 2015; Smirl 2015; Perera 2017). Important factors that might shape local expectations towards media include former media uses, expectations towards leadership and an understanding of rights and duties. For example, in many L&MICs, colonial powers have used the media, and this past usage shapes the expectations of local audiences and governments. Local expectations can differ significantly from those of international experts and donors engaging in media interventions, making newly built media foreign in the country of intervention (Tomiak 2021).

### **1.3 Why is it important to do this EGM?**

Given the threats to independent media, interventions to strengthen independent media are common in L&MICs and building momentum. Although the proportion of funding as a total of ODA funds may be small (0.3% in 2015) (Cauhapé-Cazaux and Kalathil 2015) in absolute numbers, a considerable amount of resources are spent supporting independent media.<sup>3</sup> Funding is expected to grow with new global initiatives to fund support for public interest journalism, such as the International Fund for Public Interest

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<sup>3</sup> <https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=crs1#>

Media. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance that these resources are used effectively. However, their complexity and sensitivity to the local context make media interventions incredibly challenging to study.

The publication of systematic reviews, literature reviews and landscape analysis on independent media interventions is scarce but not completely absent. There are some literature reviews on interventions to strengthen the financial independence or viability of independent media organizations (Ismail 2018) and the impact of media development projects (Arsenault and Powers 2010). A meta-analytic review explored the effects of media literacy interventions (Jeong, Cho and Hwang 2012). Additionally, a report commissioned by BBC Media Action summarized how experimental designs have been used to assess the effectiveness of governance interventions and to understand the effects of the media on political opinion and behavior (Moehler 2014). BBC Media Action also carried out an evaluation of five capacity-strengthening projects (Parkyn and Whitehead 2016). These studies represent key contributions to the relatively sparse area of independent media intervention research. However, due to the sparse landscape, policy makers, implementers, and researchers may have difficulty understanding where evidence exists, how to access existing evidence, and where more research is needed.

Systematically collecting, describing, and presenting the existing literature will help to ensure that it is used and built upon more effectively. By identifying existing evidence and making it readily available, this EGM aims to provide a resource for policymakers and researchers to navigate the evidence landscape, including existing efforts to synthesize the effects of these interventions.

## 1.4 Study objectives and questions

This project aimed to improve access to evidence on the effects of media development and media for development interventions in L&MICs among policy makers, researchers and the development community. This was achieved by identifying and describing the available evidence in a clear and structured way. The project aimed to facilitate the use of evidence to inform research and policy decisions. To meet this aim, the specific objectives of this EGM were twofold:

- Identify and describe the evidence on the effects of media development interventions on independent media strengthening outcomes, and media *for* development interventions on democratization and peacebuilding outcomes in L&MICs;
- Identify potential primary evidence and synthesis gaps.

To achieve these objectives, we addressed the research questions shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: EGM research questions**

No.	Research Question	Type
RQ1	What is the extent and what are the characteristics of empirical evidence on the effects of media development and media for development interventions in L&MICs?	Coverage
RQ2	What are the major primary and synthesis evidence gaps in the literature?	Gaps
RQ3	What intervention/outcome areas could be prioritized for primary research and/or evidence synthesis?	Research needs

## 2. Scope

### 2.1 Definitions

The 'media' can be defined as every device and institution that distributes messages on current or past issues to a wide audience and enables consumers to engage in discussions and public life. This includes electronic media (e.g. TV and radio), print products (e.g. newspapers and magazines) and social media (e.g. Facebook and Twitter). According to USAID's Standardized Program Structure and Definitions for the Independent media program area, *"The Independent Media and Free Flow of Information area encompasses interventions that promote or strengthen mediums for citizens to access information on issues of public interest across a variety of sectors, conduct free and open communication, engage with government and civil society, and increase constituency mobilization, and/or oversight of government functions to increase transparency and accountability. Interventions also work with media professionals, content creators, and other practitioners to improve their editorial, business, and technical skills while advancing the integrity of the sector. Finally, these interventions help build a supportive legal and regulatory environment to protect and promote press freedom"*— (USAID 2018).

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) states that there are two aspects that need to be fulfilled for the media to be defined as independent. First, a media regulator needs to be independent from governmental influence and commercial interests. Second, the media and journalists need to remain free from political, governmental or commercial control (UNESCO 2017). Here, the media's political function is salient. The media scrutinizes those in power and thus contributes to good governance and government accountability (Kumar 2006; Coronel 2010; Kalathil 2011). However, development journalism as a counterpart to independent media has a focus on utilizing the media for social and economic growth. In this case, the media is understood to serve a country's development. However, in this role, media has been criticized as a mouthpiece of government (Biagi 2007). Nonetheless, UNESCO has emerged as a proponent of the practice (Ogan 1980). The organization recommended 'to include development journalism as an elective course in journalism programs for emerging democracies' (Skjerdal 2011; p.58).

Media development aims to create and support a 'commercial, public service or community media that works largely in the public interest and is reasonably free of influence from government, political, commercial, factional or other interests' (Deane 2014; p.4). Kaplan defines media development as 'activities aimed at strengthening the media to be independent, pluralistic and professional' (Kaplan 2012; p.6) and Moheler says that 'these activities include increasing citizen engagement with the media, training media professionals, improving journalism schools, financing independent new organizations, supporting professional associations, teaching business and management skills, building a supportive legal and regulatory environment, protecting press freedom and reforming state broadcasters' (Moehler 2014; p.9). A similar point is made by Kumar (2006).

Media *for* development, on the other hand, leverages media and communication and often seeks to initiate social or behavioral change; 'the strategic employment of media and communication as facilities for informing, educating and sensitizing about

development and pertinent social issues' (Manyozo 2012; p.54). While the media can be utilized as a means of achieving a variety of outcomes, including encouraging children to go to school or increasing the use of health services, this EGM only considers interventions that use the media to promote democracy or peacebuilding (La Ferrera 2016). These types of interventions generally focus on dissemination information through media. They may also include the convening of inclusive discussions, respectful debates, and role modelling activities.

## **2.2 Media interventions: the theories behind the idea**

The foundational idea underpinning media interventions is that media can be used to inform and educate populations on pressing and important issues and thus engage them in society and governance. The media can be considered the fourth estate, a means to control governments and counter authoritarian, illiberal or patrimonial regimes. In this way, an independent media is an end in itself; it represents a cornerstone of a functioning democracy. However, much of the development system and development journalism expands upon this by claiming that the media, which is concerned with social, cultural and political aspects of a society, follows an educational agenda that aims to deliver the information needed for human development and society's prosperity (Biagi 2007; Skjerdal 2011; Chattopadhyay 2019). According to modernization theory, the media's ability to distribute information contributes to peace and democratization, and, through this, stability and economic prosperity. This results in two philosophies around the media in the development community: one that views the development of an independent media as an end in itself and another that views independent media as a means for development. However, these goals are not mutually exclusive and can, in many cases, be synergistic.

## **2.3 The public sphere: media development**

Habermasian's theory of the public sphere argues that independent media is an end in itself (Habermas 1974). If the media is independent and journalists are able and permitted to examine and inform those in power, the media provides the foundation for the population's engagement in governance. This theory posits that the free flow of information will inform populations, empower them to phrase their demands, and, thus, participate in governance (ibid.). The public sphere is described as a space to discuss issues of social and societal importance, independent from institutions such as the government and church. It is located between the state and the domestic sphere (Boyd-Barrett 2001).

Habermas described the public sphere as emerging from the 18th century coffeehouse: a place where citizens shared information and discussed issues (Habermas 1974; Cowan 2004). Of particular importance were the newly emerging newspapers that were on display in coffeehouses. Visitors were thus informed on everyday issues of interest: politics, business, culture, and sport (Habermas 1974). With this information came the wish of visitors to have a say in how the money they paid as taxes was spent by their rulers. In this way, the public sphere was a counterpart to royalty and aristocracy: an elite not elected but born into their position. With information available and the opportunity for discussion and organization (i.e. an "open room"), demand for more participatory government increased. The public sphere thus re-shaped the relationship between the

classes and, with its focus on participatory governance, played a role in the development of new forms of government.

The most apparent flaw in this theory is that the open room described by Habermas, to which everyone has access, is in practice an enclosed space, open just to the few people who had enough time and money for leisurely visits to the coffeehouse. The working class, as well as women, were excluded (Thompson 2001). In media interventions today, the problem of exclusion can also be spotted, for example in the exclusion of some people from media production and the introduction of professional 'serial-callers': people who claim to represent public opinion and engage regularly in call-in shows on the radio (Brisset-Foucault 2018). In general, media interventions change power structures in host countries, sometimes in unexpected and unintended ways (see, for one example, Brisset-Foucault 2011).

Further concern about the public sphere mostly surrounds its connection to and destruction by mass media. Boyd-Barret (2001) explains how the acquisition of mass audience media was commodified, and eventually bound to a consumerist ideology. Through the mass media and consuming different types of information, people are now encouraged to search for private solutions to problems. This point is taken further by Garnham (2001), who states that, with the emergence of mass media, public problems are presented to people as individuals, instead of being presented to people as a social group. Whereas in the coffeehouses the focus was on the discussion between members of a group, with the media supporting this discussion by providing information and opinion, modern mass media address people as individuals. As a solution to this problem, a re-making of the public sphere has been proposed: a return to a model of public broadcasts with fixed access to broadcasting for civil society organizations, human rights groups, and the like (Elliott 2001; Garnham 2001). This, however, would bring the public sphere conceptually further away from the idea of being independent and closer to the ideas of development journalism by producing and distributing information that promotes certain causes.

## **2.4 Modernization theory: media for development**

The use of media to distribute information that promotes causes is supported by modernization theory, which aims to answer questions about how societies develop. Modernization theory emerged as the main theoretical framework for international development by US-American policymakers during the 1950s and 1960s, when the focus was on winning the de-colonized and newly independent states of the global South as allies in the Cold War. This meant helping them achieve economic growth and prosperity and, eventually, democracy. Modernization theory states that economic growth inevitably leads to liberal democratic capitalism and stable polities, modeled on Western examples (So 1990). A condition for modernization was a 'modern mindset' in the population of developing countries. This 'modern mindset' was to be achieved by overcoming "traditional" beliefs (Lerner 1958), something that was thought to be possible using mass media as a distributor of educational messages. UNESCO adopted the idea to use mass media to alter attitudes, change belief systems, and thus promote "modernity" (Sreberny 2000). Modernizing society by mass media emerged as the dominant paradigm, with the belief being that educating media's audiences and subjecting them to so-called modern attitudes and approaches would inevitably lead them to adopt modern ideas about, for example, health, education, and political behavior (Sreberny 2000).



The most profound criticism of modernization theory is that, despite mass media programs, attitudes and behaviors have not changed on a significant scale: "After many decades of employing the modern mass media as tools for development, the records in many African countries show that very little has been achieved in such critical areas as political mobilization, national unity, civic education, and the diffusion of new agricultural techniques and products" (Okigbo 1995). One problem is that, in communication campaigns – when media is used as a means - a linear cause-effect trajectory is assumed and removed from human behavior. However, it has been argued that there are three primary conditions for people to change their behavior and attitudes. In brief, (1) people make up their minds about the consequences of a certain way of action, (2) they seek the approval of significant others, and (3) factor in how easy a new behavior can be implemented or how hard it might be to overcome obstacles (Fishbein and Ajzen 2010). These processes are not taken into consideration in the linear cause-effect trajectory theorized in communication campaigns. Further, the importance of group membership and a tendency to agree with a group can be drivers of behavior and attitude change (Tajfel and Turner 1979; Tomiak 2021).

Another criticism of modernization theory is related to an oversimplified view of the so-called developed countries in the global South (Abrahams 1974). Thussu (2010) criticized the early modernization theorists for their ethnocentrism, indicating that they were too strong in their assumption that traditional societies wanted a modern way of life and that 'modern' equals 'western'. Beltran (1974, in Sparks 2007) pointed out that the concept of modernity, and the - mostly US-American - experts who communicated it, were alien to the societies in the developing countries. Consequently, those experts were unaware of underlying social structures, which needed to be addressed and acknowledged to initiate change. Some adjustments to the theory were made in response to these critiques; however, modernization theory continues to underpin many media campaigns. For example, in the Malaysian media, the influence of the theory and a tendency to Americanization could be traced as late as the 1990s (Postill 2006) and is still observed today (Susman-Peña 2012; pp.13-14).

## **2.5 Combining theories**

The conceptual difference between media development - supporting an independent media - and media *for* development - understanding media as a distributor of educational messages, broadly conceptualized - is clear-cut in theory. There are considerable differences in the philosophy and practice of these media interventions (see, for example, Manyozo 2012; Deane 2014). However, the approaches of media development and media for peacebuilding and democratization development are interlinked and tied to access to information. Media cannot be used as a means of development if media has not yet been built. The justification for media development itself is that it will support good governance, peace, and eventually contribute to democratization, making it a means for achieving these outcomes. With this, it has features of media for development: the independent media is used to contribute to the development of a society. The two endeavors of media development and media for development share aims: supporting good governance, establishing government accountability, overcoming old enmities and counteracting internal security dilemmas (Lynch and McGoldrick 2007; Staub 2013).

## 2.6 Conceptual framework

Because of the overlap between interventions to support media development and interventions that use media *for* development, we consider both. However, we limit the outcomes to those related to (1) the strength of independent media itself or (2) democratization and peacebuilding.

The decision to include interventions that consider media development and media for democratization and peacebuilding development is justified because the distinction, while philosophically clear, is practically ambiguous. Although some activities are unique to each category, there is considerable overlap between interventions that take these two different approaches. For example, funding media houses to support independent media in their countries (media development) allows them to broadcast peacebuilding programs (media for development). In practice, media houses that are supported under the heading of media development often produce public interest media that seeks to inform or educate, making it a challenge to distinguish between the two endeavors. Internews' Eye Radio in South Sudan is an example of this (Eye Radio n.d.). Using media and communication to promote peace and democracy by facilitating changes in behavior and shifts in social norms is also beneficial to society's development. The existence of a considerable grey area at the intersection of media development and media for development gives rise to a holistic approach to examine media interventions.

## 3. Methods

### 3.1 Overall methodological approach

EGMs are tools to help policymakers and researchers working in a sector to make evidence-informed decisions. They make existing evidence more accessible and ease the prioritization of research by mapping existing studies in a sector to a framework of interventions and outcomes. We followed the standards and methods for EGMs developed by 3ie (Snijlsteit et al., 2016; Snijlsteit et al., 2017).

The map was populated by systematically searching and screening all relevant completed, and ongoing, impact evaluations and systematic reviews. An impact evaluation measures the effects on targeted outcomes that can be attributed to a particular intervention. Systematic reviews extract and synthesize data from multiple impact evaluations of similar interventions to generate more robust conclusions about their effectiveness than could be provided by a single study.

Using 3ie's EGM software, we created an online, interactive matrix that mapped all included studies according to the interventions evaluated and the outcomes reported. This provides a visual display of the volume of evidence for intervention-outcome combinations, the type of evidence (impact evaluation, systematic reviews, completed or ongoing), and a confidence rating for the results of systematic reviews. The platform provides additional filters so that users can further explore the available evidence, for example by global regions, income levels, or population. The EGM can be viewed at <https://developmentevidence.3ieimpact.org/egm/independent-media-egm>

This report serves as an accompaniment to the interactive map. In this report, we address our research questions through analysis of the characteristics of the available

evidence and key trends (i.e. number of impact evaluations published over time, geography, focus on interventions and outcomes, targeted audiences).

Evidence gap maps highlight both primary evidence gaps, which should be filled with new impact evaluation studies, and synthesis gaps, wherein a cluster of impact evaluations are ready for systematic review and meta-analyses. EGMs are envisioned as a global public good as they facilitate access to high-quality research.

### 3.2 Criteria for including and excluding studies in the EGM

In the table below we summarized the inclusion/exclusion criteria we adopted. When building the interventions/outcomes framework, we aimed to be comprehensive while also setting a manageable scope so that we could present results in a clear and interpretable manner. We report the whole interventions/outcomes framework in Appendix A.1.

**Table 2: Summary criteria for studies to be included in the IM EGM**

Criteria	Definition
Population	We included studies targeting any population type, implemented in any L&MICs.
Interventions	We included interventions that aimed to strengthen media as an end and media as a means. The specific interventions categories were organized under seven interventions groups in Table 1 of Appendix A.1. We included studies that evaluated the impact of at least one of the following intervention categories: the institutional and regulatory environment to allow the existence of independent media, relationships & coalition building among media and private/public organizations, capacity building and technical support of media workers, information dissemination of peace/democratic messaging through media, media protection service for media workers. In cases where the studies evaluated multi-component interventions, if at least one of the subcomponents matched one of the intervention categories, the study was included.
Outcomes	We included both intermediate and final outcomes sub-divided into seven categories, reported in Table 2 of Appendix A.1. We included studies which measured at least one of the following outcomes: the enabling environment that allows the existence of independent media, the level of newsroom professionalization of media workers, the level of violence against media workers, the level of communities engaged in news production and similar, the level of democratic and peace values and participation in civic life, and social cohesion, and human security outcomes.
Study designs	We included impact evaluations and systematic reviews that measured the effects of a relevant intervention on outcomes of interest. For impact evaluations, we included counterfactual study designs that used an experimental, quasi-experimental or qualitative design and/or analysis method to measure the net change in outcomes that were attributed to an intervention (i.e. policy, program, project). We included randomized and non-randomized studies that were able to take into account confounding and selection bias. For systematic reviews, we included effectiveness reviews that synthesized the effects of an intervention on

Criteria	Definition
	outcomes of interest. We excluded reviews that only described programmatic approaches or synthesized findings on barriers and facilitators to implementation.
Language	Studies published in any language were included, although the search terms used were in English only.
Publication date	All studies published from 1990 onwards were eligible, provided the intervention itself occurred after 1950.
Status of studies	We included ongoing and completed impact evaluations and systematic reviews. For on-going studies, we included prospective study records, protocols and trial registries.

### 3.3 Conceptual framework development

We developed the framework by consulting the literature cited in the paragraphs above. We received feedback on the proposed framework from stakeholders within USAID and an external Advisory Group (see Appendix C). Kerstin Tomiak, the subject matter expert for this project, provided essential inputs to develop the intervention categories and the theory behind the interventions we included.

### 3.4 Search strategy

We implemented a sensitive search strategy<sup>4</sup> primarily constructed by a combination of intervention and study design terms. The strategy was developed by an information specialist and was translated<sup>5</sup> according to the requirements and functionalities of each database. An example of the strategy developed for EBSCO is provided in Appendix B.2. The search for evidence was conducted using a range of different sources of academic and grey literature, including bibliographic databases, repositories of impact evaluations and systematic reviews, specialist organizational databases and websites of bilateral and multilateral agencies. We further conducted forward citation searches of all included studies to identify additional, potentially relevant impact evaluations and systematic reviews. The review team contacted key experts and organizations through our external advisory group (presented in Appendix D) and published a blog post soliciting the input of relevant studies to identify additional studies that met the inclusion criteria. A full list of sources searched, and the detailed process followed can be found in Appendix B.1.

### 3.5 Screening

The selection of studies for data extraction as part of the review was managed using EPPI-Reviewer 4 software (Thomas et al. 2020). Studies were imported into EPPI-Reviewer and, following the removal of duplicates, the titles and abstracts were screened independently by two team members. We utilized EPPI-Reviewer's machine learning 'Classifier' tool to

<sup>4</sup> Sensitive search strategy: sensitive is here a synonym of comprehensiveness in relation to the types of studies that can be captured in a search strategy. An increase of sensitivity of a search will reduce its precision and will retrieve more non-relevant articles (Higgings et al 2011).

<sup>5</sup> The search strategy run in different databases are made up of strings of key words, often truncated and wildcards variations of the same terms, linked between them with Boolean operators (AND, OR, NOT or proximity operator (N3, N5 etc.). These operators are different for each database so they needed to be 'translated'.

identify studies that were likely to be included, and prioritized them for screening and streamlining the review process. All studies were screened at title and abstract level. The studies included at the title and abstract stage were then screened by two independent reviewers at full text stage. Details of each step can be found in Appendix A.2.

### **3.6 Data Extraction and critical appraisal**

We systematically extracted data from all included studies using the data extraction tools available in Appendix B, and a core team member checked the data extracted. We converted the tools into XLSForms for use in KoBo Toolbox to facilitate data extraction. Extracted data were related to the following broad areas:

- Basic study and publication information including authors, publication date and status, study location, intervention type, outcomes reported, definition of outcome measures, population of interest, study and program funders, time periods for delivery and analysis
- Topical cross-cutting issues such as gender, equity focus, and cost-effectiveness information

We also critically appraised systematic reviews with regards to how the search, screening, data extraction and synthesis were conducted, covering the most common areas where biases in the study design and analysis were introduced (see Appendix B3). Based on the appraisal, each review was rated as high-, medium-, or low-confidence, indicating the level of confidence we had in the findings of the review based on the methods the authors used. A review classified as high-confidence used methods that aligned with best practices: the search process was sufficient to identify all potentially relevant studies, bias was avoided in the selection of studies, and appropriate methods were applied to assess risks of bias in included impact evaluations and to synthesize the findings on effects. We extracted and summarized the findings of available high- or medium-confidence systematic reviews in section 4.2.

### **3.7 Presentation of the map**

We present the results graphically on an interactive online platform<sup>6</sup> The main framework is a matrix of interventions and outcomes, with grey, light red, blue and traffic-light coloured circles representing quantitative IEs, ongoing IEs, qualitative IEs, and SRs with their confidence level respectively. The SRs follow a traffic-light system to indicate confidence in their findings: green for high-, orange for medium-, red for low-confidence. The bubbles within each box of the matrix represent studies reporting effects for that intervention / outcome combination. The size of the bubble indicates the relative size of the evidence base for that intersection of intervention and outcome. Clicking on any bubble will display a list of the studies with hyperlinks to the full text.<sup>7</sup>

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 filters and their definitions are provided in Table 4.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://gapmaps.3ieimpact.org/evidence-maps/strengthening-civil-society-egm>

<sup>7</sup> Where possible, we have linked to the full text directly; however, for studies behind paywalls, the hyperlink goes to the study landing page that typically, at a minimum, provides the abstract and references.

**Table 3: Definition of EGM filters**

<b>Filter</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Region	This filter allows users to identify the evidence base according to the geographic region in which the interventions were implemented, using the regions as defined by the World Bank.
Country	This filter allows users to identify the evidence base from a specific country.
Income Level	This filter allows users to identify the evidence base from a particular country income group, as classified by the World Bank, and to identify evidence from LICs, L&MICs or MICs. The income level is based on the status of the country in the first year of intervention, or if not available, then the publication year.
Electoral Democracy	This filter allows users to identify the evidence base from a particular country electoral democracy categorization. It uses categories from the V-Dem Electoral Democracy Index ordinal (D) (e_v2x_polyarchy) based on the status of the country in the first year of intervention, or if not available, then the publication year.
FCV Status	This filter allows users to identify the evidence base from countries that are affected by fragility and conflict, as defined by the World Bank's list of fragile and conflict-affected situations from 2006-2021. It is based on the status of the country in the first year of intervention, or if not available, then the publication year.
Population	This filter enables users to identify studies that contain specific results for a range of key population groups: LGBTQI+ <sup>8</sup> sexual and gender minorities; ethnic, racial, caste-based, and religious groups; survivors of large-scale violence/displacement (includes refugees and internally displaced populations); survivors of gender-based violence; survivors of trafficking; people living with disabilities and chronic health conditions; people with substance use issues; incarcerated people and those re-entering society; sex workers; and dissidents. In case this information was not explicitly specified, the 'unspecified' option was chosen; when the population of any ethnic group, caste, religious group was specified, the option ethnic, racial, caste-based, religious groups-whole population was chosen, the same for LGBTQI+-whole population.
Age	This filter enables users to identify studies that target children, adolescents, youth, adults, older adults, or the whole population (in case there were no restrictions on the age of the participants)
Sex	This filter enables users to identify studies that target females, males, or the whole population
Setting	This filter enables users to identify studies that target residents of urban, peri-urban, or rural settings, or consider the whole population
Study Design	This filter enables users to identify studies that employed a particular study design, using the list of study designs in Appendix A.1.e.
Cost Evidence	This filter enables users to identify studies that incorporated cost evidence into their analysis.
Theme	This filter enables users to identify studies that are included in EGMs from other DRG Center Program Areas: Rule of Law, Civil Society, Independent Media, Governance, Political competition, and consensus building.

<sup>8</sup> LGBTQI+ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (persons) or other sexual and gender identities affected by the issues faced by the LGBTQI community.

### 3.8 Analysis and reporting

To answer Research Question 1, regarding the extent and characteristics of the evidence base, we present the distribution of studies by date of publication, intervention(s) studied, outcomes reported, and population considered, including regions, countries, and specific population groups. For the two high-confidence SRs included, we further extracted summaries of the key findings for policy implications.

To answer Research Question 2, regarding the gaps, the evidence distribution across interventions, outcomes, and other characteristics of the evidence are used to determine meaningful primary evidence gaps, where no IEs exist, and synthesis gaps, where no up-to-date or high-confidence SRs exist despite a cluster of IEs.

To answer Research Question 3, regarding which intervention/outcome areas can be prioritized for primary research and/or evidence synthesis, we shared the findings with stakeholders at USAID and the external advisory group and solicited input regarding policymakers' and practitioners' priorities for future research.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1 What is the extent of the evidence?

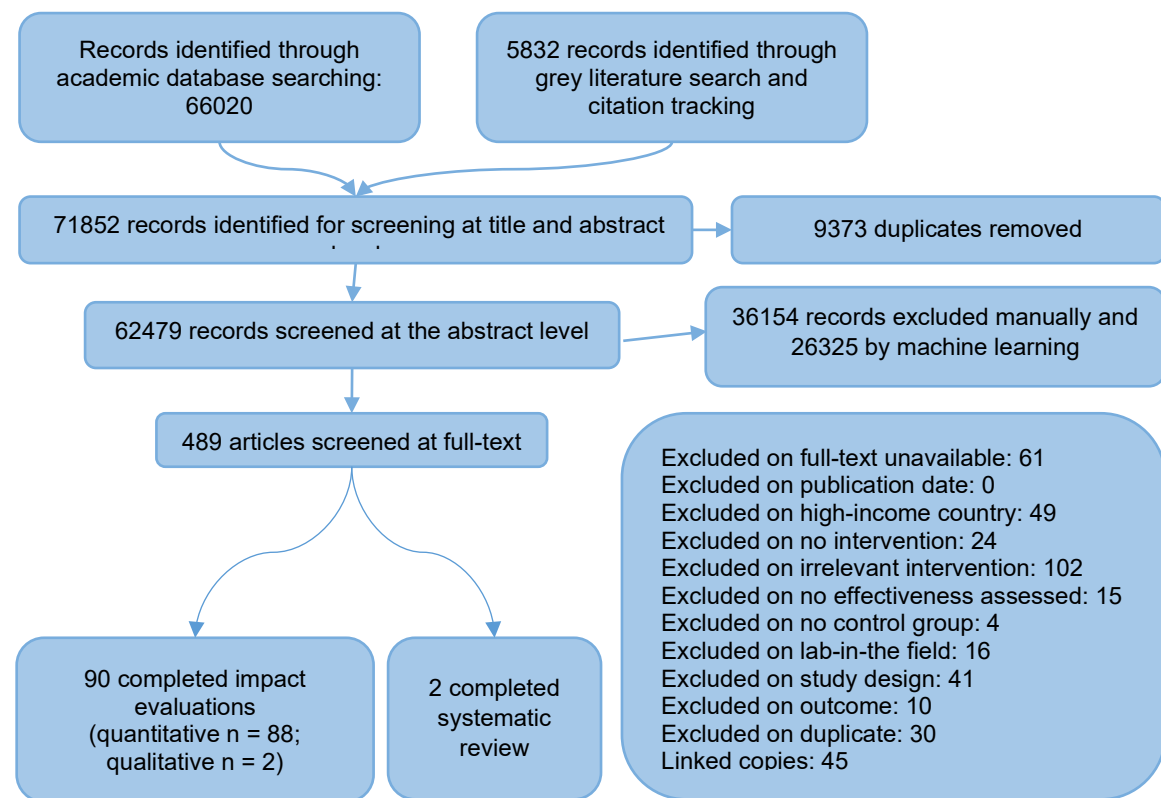
As the PRISMA9 diagram (Figure 1) illustrates, the systematic search process returned 62,475 records, reduced to 36,643 records after the de-duplication. Applying a combination of machine learning and manual screening at the title and abstract screening level, we identified 489 studies for screening at the full-text level. Of these, 90 completed IEs (quantitative  $n = 88$ ; qualitative  $n = 2$ ) and two completed SRs were included. Searches of academic databases for quantitative and qualitative studies and grey literature were completed in March 2021, and the backward and forward citation tracking was conducted in June 2021. In July 2021, we published a blog calling for additional relevant papers through which we retrieved two new eligible studies.

The main reasons for study exclusion at full-text screening were that the evaluated interventions were irrelevant to the scope of this EGM ( $n = 102$ ) or implemented in HICs ( $n = 49$ ). The 45 linked studies in the PRISMA diagram indicate publications which used the same study population of the main paper (e.g. a working paper later published as a journal article).

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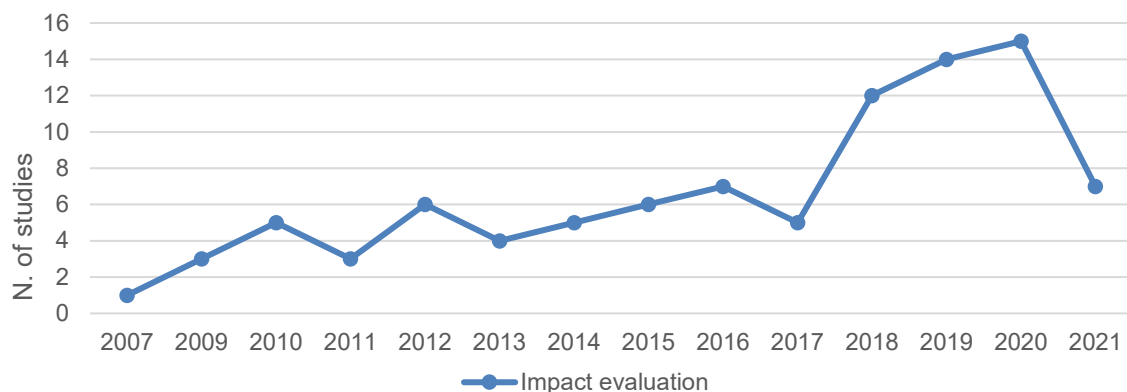
<sup>9</sup> PRISMA stands for Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses. For more details, visit the website: <http://prisma-statement.org/PRISMAStatement/PRISMAStatement.aspx>

**Figure 1: PRISMA diagram of systematic search and screening**



The earliest publication year of an included impact evaluation is 2007, and since then, after showing a fluctuation for the next ten years, the number of impact evaluation papers has steadily risen since 2017 (Figure 2). In recent years, the publication rate stabilized with an average of 13 studies per year since 2018. The number of studies in 2021 is low because we ran the search strategy at the beginning of 2021 (March), meaning that most of the studies published in 2021 were not captured. However, some papers published after March 2021 were identified through forward citation tracking and the call for additional papers we launched in July 2021. The two included SRs were published in 2019 and 2021.

**Figure 2: Publication trend of impact evaluations and systematic reviews over time**



Note 1: The number of studies (y-axis) in 2021 is low likely because we ran the search strategy at the beginning of 2021 (March), thus missing most of the studies published in the remainder of the year (though some papers published after March 2021 were identified through citation tracking).



## 4.2 What are the characteristics of the evidence base?

### 4.2.1 How is the evidence geographically distributed?

Half of the studies (51%) of the IE were conducted in sub-Saharan Africa (n = 48) with Uganda (n = 13) having the largest evidence base (Figure 3)<sup>10</sup>. This is followed by Latin America and the Caribbean (n = 25), with the most frequently studied country being Brazil (n = 13). The remaining studies covered South Asia (n = 8), East Asia and Pacific (n = 6), Middle East and North Africa (n = 4), and Europe and Central Asia (n = 1). Among the IEs included in the two SRs of the map (Waddington et al. 2019, Sonnenfeld et al. 2021), most studies are concentrated in the region of sub-Saharan Africa, with Uganda again having the largest evidence base (Waddington et al. 2019). Three multi-country impact evaluations covered 132 countries. While one study focused on seven L&MICs in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia (Scavo and Snow 2016), the remaining two covered both HICs and L&MICs, with separate analyses by country income status (Escaleras, Lin and Register 2010; Vadlamannati and Cooray 2017). Most of the studies were implemented in low-income countries<sup>11</sup> (n = 34), followed by lower-middle income (n = 30); and upper-middle income (n = 28) countries.

Figure 3 shows the countries identified in the EGM with their 2021 World Press Freedom Index (Reporters without Borders 2021).<sup>12, 13</sup> There is an inconsistent linkage between the countries with the lowest level of press freedom index and those covered by the IEs. Of the countries categorized as having a “very serious situation,” we found one study per country implemented in China, the Islamic Republic of Iran, and Vietnam. Countries where we found a good number of studies such as Uganda (n = 13) and Brazil (n = 13) had a slightly better levels of press freedom but were still classified as having a ‘difficult situation’ by the Reporters without Borders.

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<sup>10</sup> If a study was implemented in more than one country, that study was coded under all the relevant countries, up to four countries. In the other cases, we coded it as a multi-country evaluation paper, which is further described below.

<sup>11</sup> Country income status defined by the World Bank as per 2020, reported here: <https://datahelpdesk.worldbank.org/knowledgebase/articles/906519-world-bank-country-and-lending-groups>.

<sup>12</sup> The latest Press Freedom Index is reported here: [https://rsf.org/en/ranking\\_table](https://rsf.org/en/ranking_table) [Accessed August 24, 2021]

<sup>13</sup> The index annually assesses 180 countries to report the degree of freedom available to journalists in the nations by evaluating key indicators such as pluralism, media independence and transparency (ibid.). Each country is rated in one of five categories: good situation, satisfactory situation, problematic situation, difficult situation, and very serious situation. These categories range from the highest press freedom to the lowest freedom existing in a country.

**Status Legend**

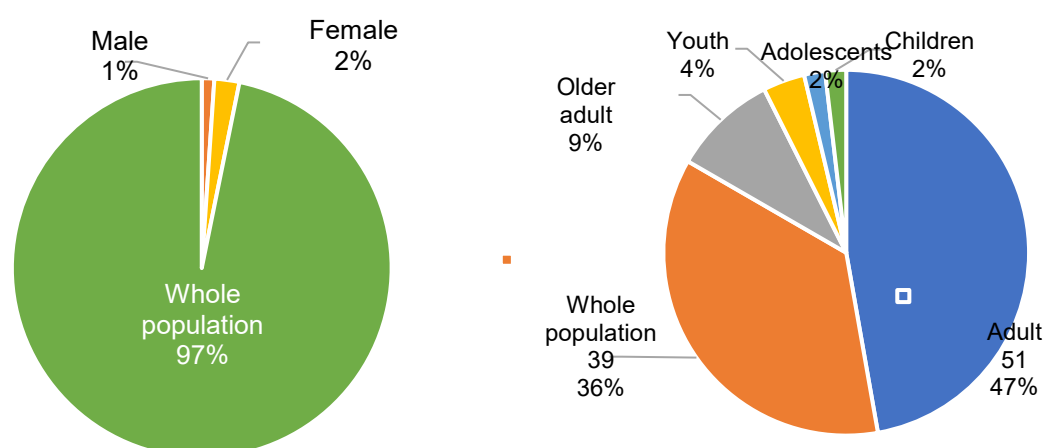
- Good situation
- Satisfactory situation
- Problematic situation
- Difficult situation
- Very serious situation

Note: Overlaid numbers refer to the number of studies per country identified in the EGM. Colors on the map specify the degree of press freedom available to journalists in a country, according to the Press Freedom Index in 2021.

### 4.2.2 What populations and settings are targeted?

The included IEs mostly targeted adult males and females (n = 51; 47%), followed by the whole population (all ages of any sex) (n = 38; 36%), older adults (n = 10; 9%), and youth (n = 4; 4%). Adolescents and children were the least studied (n = 2, 2%). Most evaluations were set in both rural and urban areas (n = 77; 83%), and only a few in urban (n = 9; 10%) or rural areas (n = 7; 7%).

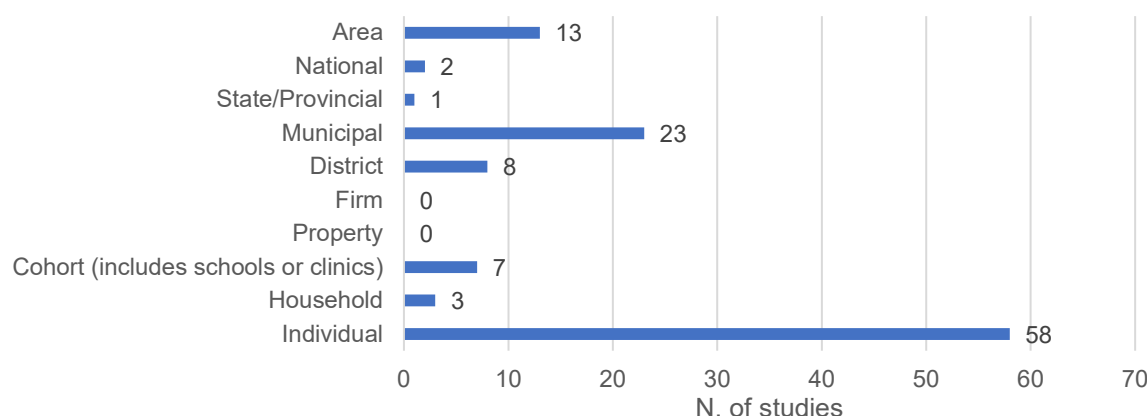
**Figure 4: Distribution of study population by age and sex group**



In 89 per cent of studies (n = 85), targeting based on ethnicity, race, caste, religion, and sexual orientation was not mentioned. However, six papers explicitly stated that their interventions targeted survivors of large-scale violence and displacements (n = 3) and religious groups (n = 3).

The most common unit of observation of the studies are individuals (n = 58; 50%) followed by municipals (n = 24, 21%), areas (n = 13, 11%), districts (n = 8, 7%) and cohorts (e.g. schools or clinics) (n = 7, 6%) levels.

**Figure 5: Distribution of study population unit of observation**



### 4.2.3 What are the most studied interventions?

Only eight out of the 26 intervention categories in the framework were evaluated by the included studies (Figure 6) (more information on the intervention categories and their descriptions can be found in Appendix A). Nearly all evaluated interventions fell within the information dissemination and peace/democratic messaging group (n = 82), including

the two systematic reviews. More specifically, most of these studies evaluated dissemination of media content on accountability, transparency, and democracy promotion interventions (n = 61), or the dissemination of media content on social norms for peacebuilding (n = 16).

A few studies evaluated interventions in the institutional and regulatory environment intervention group (n = 6), and the capacity building and technical support group (n = 4). The most frequently evaluated intervention within the first group was access and right to information policies (n = 5). A few other interventions were evaluated in one or two studies: the establishment of community media/broadcasting (n = 1), the establishment of media outlets (public or private) (n = 2), training on journalistic skills (n = 1), and editorial independence from regulatory systems interventions (n = 1). None of the interventions that fall within the media protection services or the relationships & coalition building groups were evaluated by any studies.

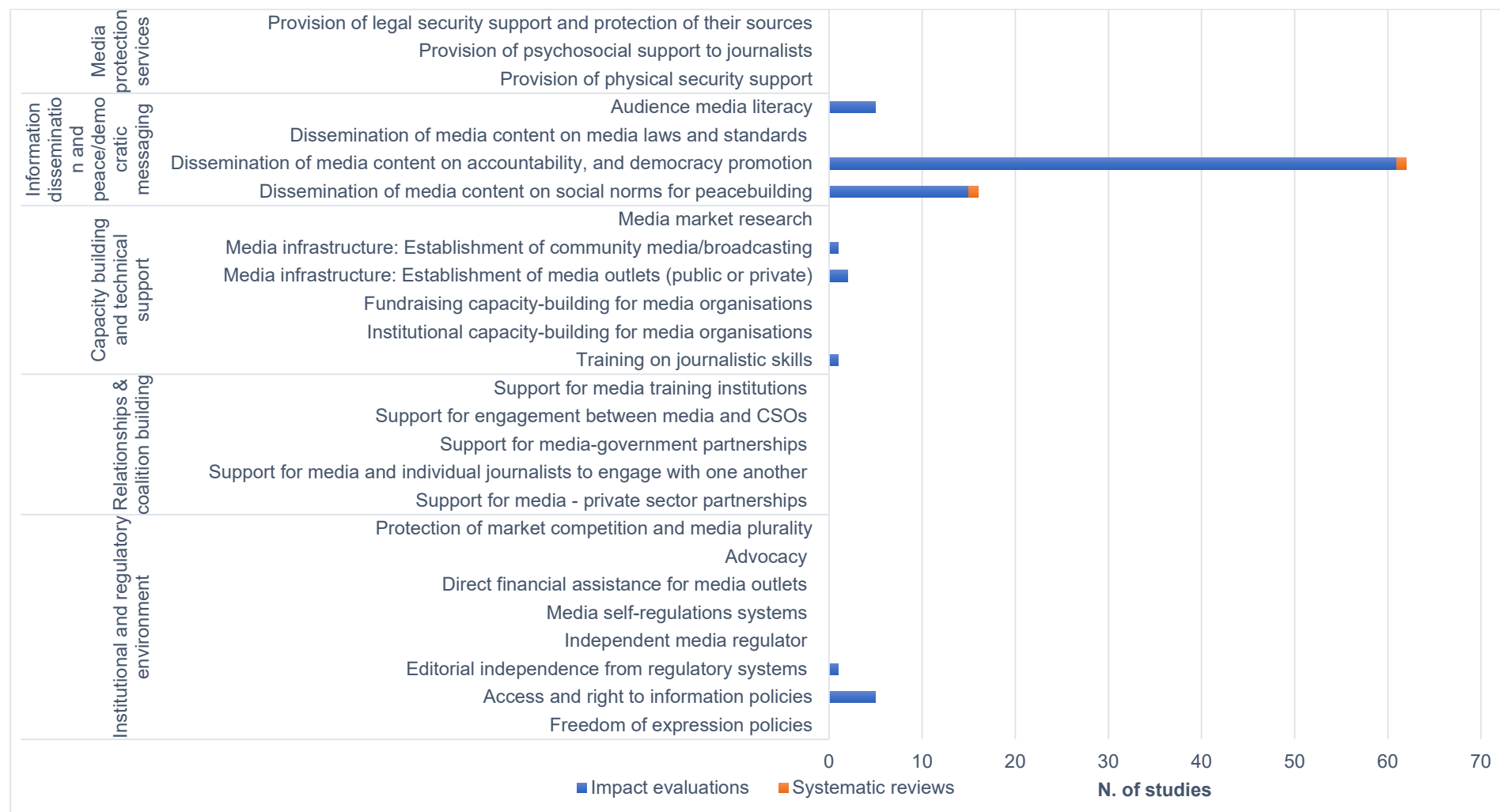
#### **4.2.4 Multi-component interventions**

We identified three multi-component intervention studies, defined as those in which an intervention had two or more components which fell into different intervention categories and were implemented and evaluated together. These studies have been coded under the category 'multi-component' in the online map. In case only one component was evaluated through one of the accepted impact evaluation designs, those studies were categorized as single component. Table 1 presents the intervention groups and components belonging to each multi-component study.

**Table 4: Multi components studies**

<b>Study</b>	<b>Intervention Group 1</b>	<b>Intervention component 1</b>	<b>Intervention Group 2</b>	<b>Intervention component 2</b>
James et al. (2019) Evaluation of community-centered radio initiative for health and development [Philippines]	Information dissemination	Dissemination of media content on social norms for peacebuilding	Information dissemination	Dissemination of media content on accountability, and democracy promotion
Larreguy et al. (2014) Political Advertising in Consolidating Democracies [Mexico]	Institutional and regulatory environment	Protection of market competition and media plurality	Capacity building and technical support	Media infrastructure: Establishment of media outlets (public or private)
Rundlett (2018) Revealed corruption on voter attitudes and participation [Brazil]	Information dissemination	Dissemination of media content on accountability, and democracy promotion	Capacity building and technical support	Media infrastructure: Establishment of media outlets (public or private)

**Figure 6: Frequency of interventions reported in included studies by study type**



Note 2: the total number reported is higher than the total number of studies because multi-arms studies were coded as separate ones.

#### **4.2.5 What were the most studied outcomes?**

Over two thirds of the reported outcomes focused on the governance and democratization group (IEs n = 115; SRs n = 4) (Figure 8)<sup>14</sup>. The most common outcomes within this group were democratic beliefs, attitudes and norms (n = 39); civic engagement in democracy and governance (n = 39); and government transparency, accountability and performance (n = 33). Following this, the most common groups were social cohesion (IEs n = 18; SRs n = 4) and human security (IEs n = 14; SRs n = 2).

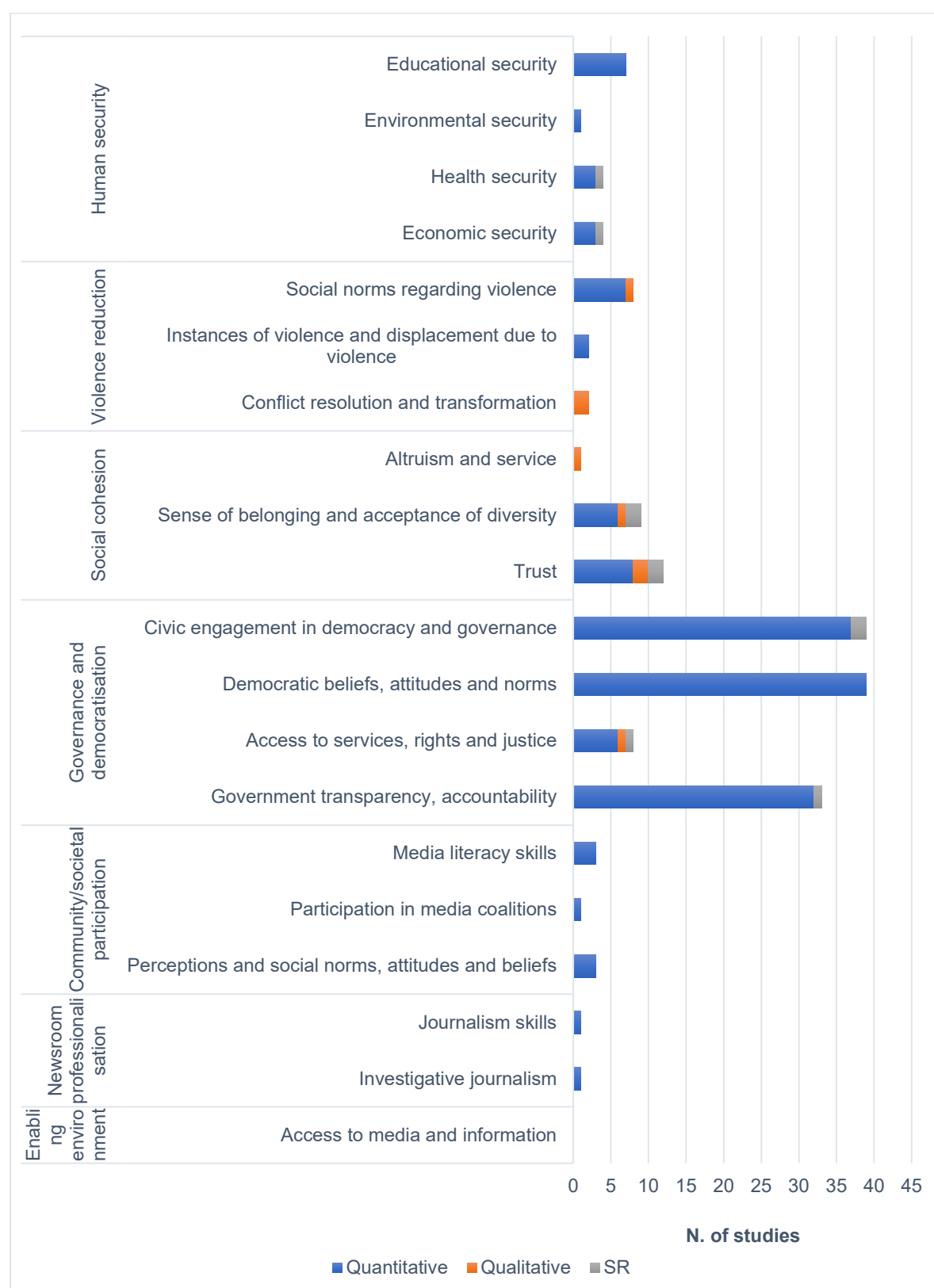
The newsroom professionalization group had two outcomes measured only once each: journalism skills and investigative journalism. We did not find any study reporting measures of access to media and information or on the enabling environment.

The two included systematic reviews measured 10 outcomes related to human security, social cohesion, and governance and democratization. Specifically, they considered health security; economic security; sense of belonging and acceptance of diversity; trust; civic engagement in democracy and governance; access to services, rights and justice; and government transparency, accountability and performance.

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<sup>14</sup> The total number of outcomes were larger than the number of included studies as many studies reported multiple outcomes.

**Figure 7: Frequency of outcomes reported in included studies by study type**

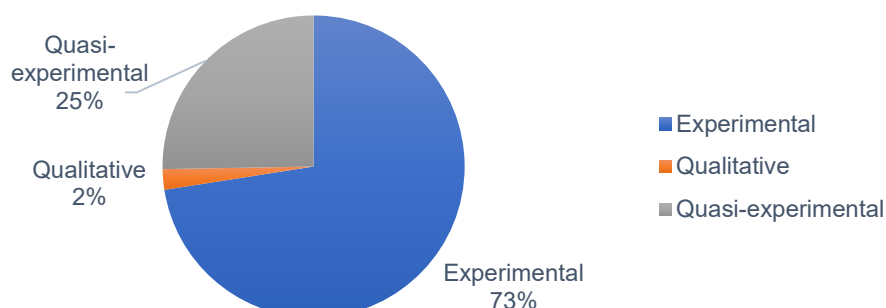


Note 3: the total number reported is higher than the total number of studies because more than one outcome was reported in most of the studies.

#### 4.2.6 Which study designs were adopted by the included studies?

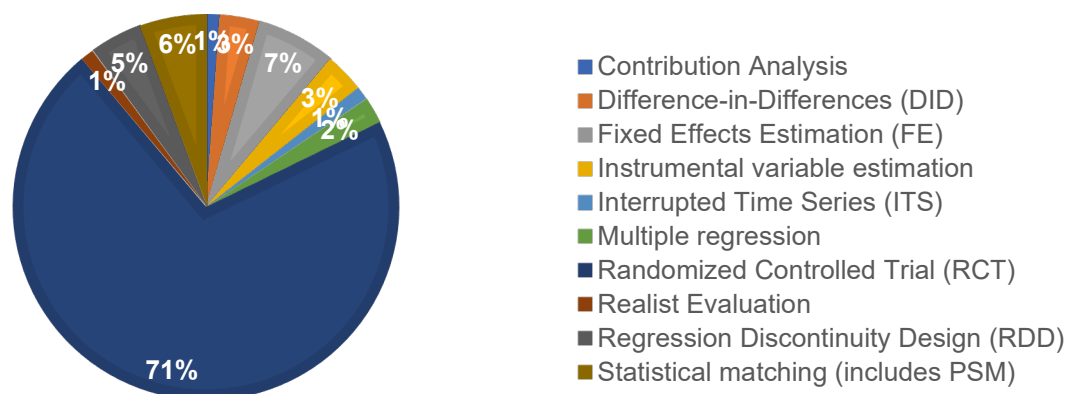
Ten different study designs were used among the included studies; 73 per cent (n = 66) were randomized control trials, while 25 per cent (n = 23) used quasi-experimental methods, and two per cent (n = 2) employed qualitative evaluation methods (Figure 9).

**Figure 8: Distribution of the IEs study designs**



Among the studies which used quasi-experimental methods, the most common design was fixed effects estimation (n = 6), followed by statistical matching (n = 5) and regression discontinuity design (n = 9; Figure 10). Synthetic control was the only method not used in any of the included studies. Among the qualitative studies, one used contribution analysis and the other was a realist evaluation. No studies used any other of the other five qualitative designs. The two systematic reviews both synthesized the results through meta-analysis and narrative synthesis.

**Figure 9: Distribution of IEs study designs**



Note: Multiple coding was allowed whenever more than one method was used in a study.

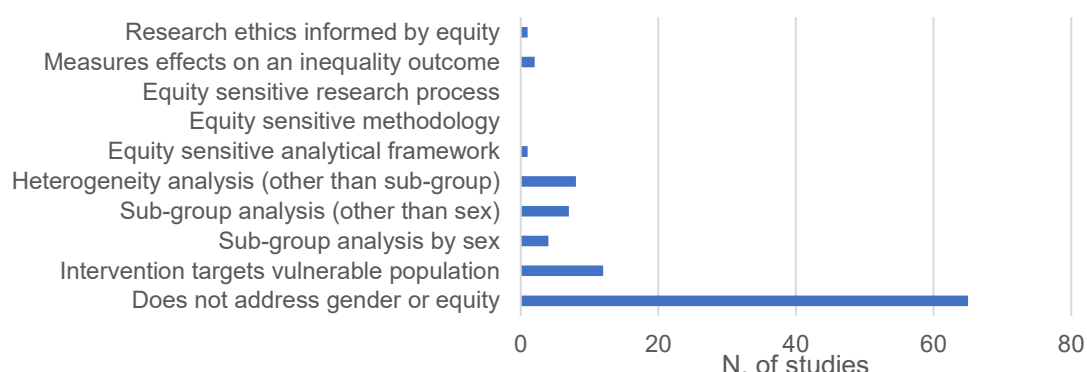
Only four out of the 90 impact evaluations reported cost data: two carried out cost-benefit analysis, one cost-effectiveness analysis, and one reported about the costs of the interventions.

#### 4.2.7 To what extent do studies address equity?

We extracted data on whether and how the impact evaluations addressed equity considerations, in terms of focus and dimension (Figure 11 and 12). Most IEs did not address gender or equity (n = 69). Among the studies that considered equity, the most common approach targeted a 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).



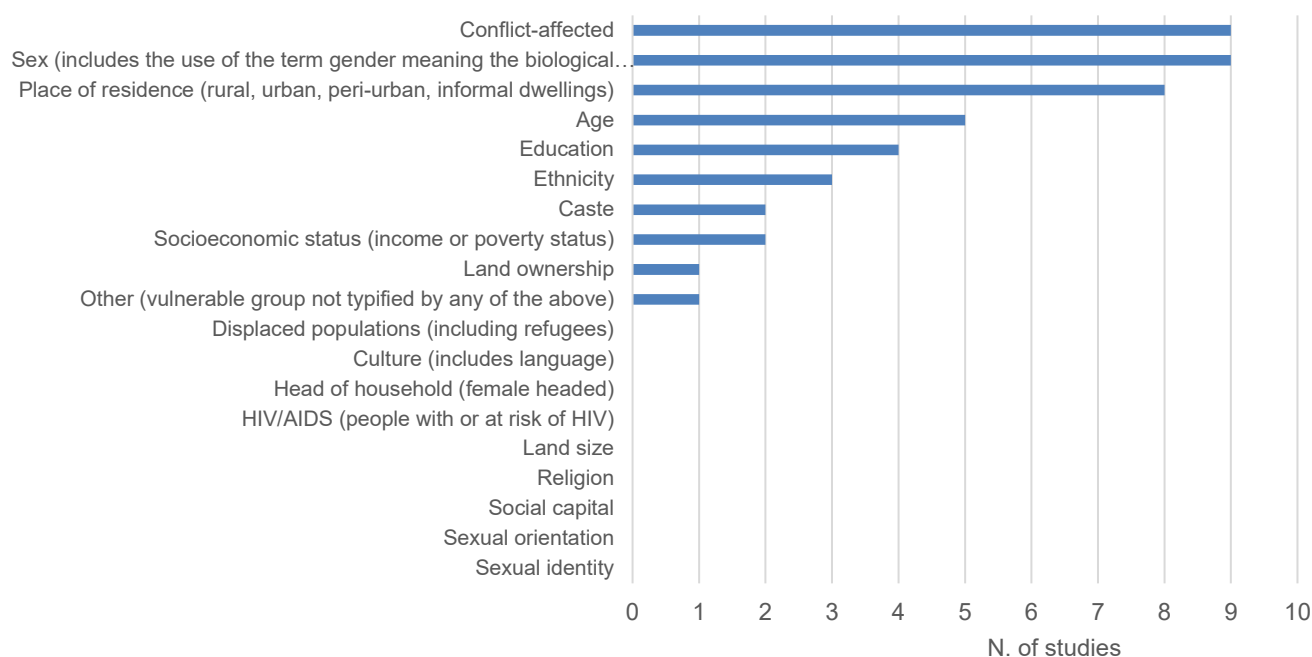
**Figure 10: Included studies by equity focus**



Note: Multiple focuses were selected for a study, if applicable.

The studies that addressed gender or equity mainly considered dimensions related to conflict-affected populations ( $n = 9$ ), the place of residence ( $n = 8$ ), or sex ( $n = 8$ ), (Figure 12). Others reported on education ( $n = 4$ ), ethnicity ( $n = 3$ ), age ( $n = 4$ ), caste ( $n = 2$ ), and socioeconomic status ( $n = 2$ ).

**Figure 11: Included studies by equity dimension**



Note: Multiple dimensions were coded from a study, if applicable.

#### **4.2.8 Who funds programs and research for media interventions? Who implements these interventions?**

We collected data on the program agency funding, the research funders, and the implementer agencies.

Most of the included studies (70%) had no program funding agency specified. Among the 55 agencies which funded the interventions of the included studies, the following funded more than one study: Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-Pal), The World Bank, Evidence in Governance and Politics (EGAP), and the National Science Foundation. The

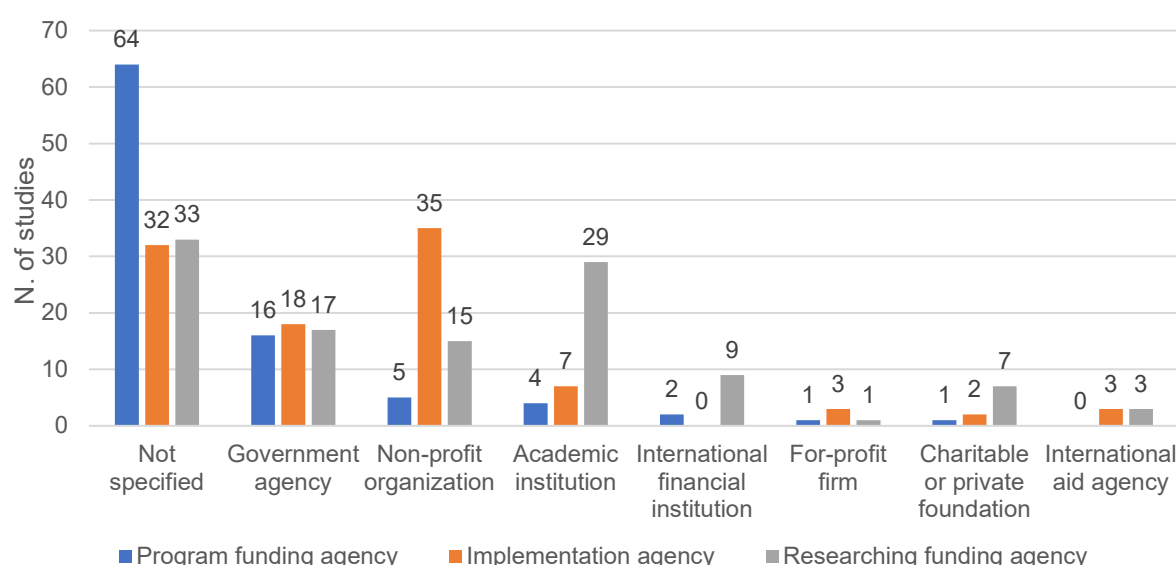
most common type of funder were government agencies (17%), followed by non-profit organizations (5%), academic institutions (4%) and international financial institutions (2%). Charitable or private foundation and for-profit firm types of funders appeared only once each. No study reported an international aid agency as the program funder.

Similarly, only 30 per cent of the studies (n = 36) had specified a research funding agency. We identified 22 different agencies funding the programs evaluated, with the Brazilian and Ugandan Governments funding more than one study (three and two respectively). The most common type of research funder reported were academic institutions (25 per cent), followed by government agencies (15 per cent), non-profit organizations (13 per cent), international financial institutions (8 per cent) and charitable or private foundations (6 per cent).

The 35 per cent of the interventions were implemented by non-profit organizations and the 18 per cent by governments. The other types of implementing agencies were rare.

The two systematic reviews were funded by the German Corporation for International Cooperation (GIZ) and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) (Sonnenfeld et al. 2021) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) (Waddington et al. 2019).

**Figure 12: Program and research funder categories for impact evaluations**



Note: Where more than one funding/implementation agency category was applicable, multiple coding was allowed. If the study was funded by multiple agencies within the same category, it was only counted once.

### 4.3 Findings from high- and medium-confidence SRs

We found only two systematic reviews eligible for our framework, both rated as high-confidence (Waddington et al. 2019, Sonnenfeld et al. 2021).

Waddington and colleagues' review (2019) focused on PITA (participation, inclusion, transparency, and accountability) interventions which involve citizens in L&MICs. Below are summarized the main findings relevant to the scope of this EGM.

**Performance information provision interventions (six studies) – a key factor of success seems to be the willingness to support and facilitate the intervention by those actors whose performance was analyzed and disseminated.** If implementers were able to secure the support of those who were being evaluated, they could ensure those actors would not undermine the credibility of the information disseminated or prevent the implementation of the intervention as planned. The aim of these interventions was to cut the distance between politicians and citizens engaged in these projects. They showed some improvements in politicians' performance. 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.

**Rights information provision (five studies) – informing people about their rights related to a service has more effect when citizens can directly access the service from front-line service providers.** Overall, the provision of information on people's rights appeared to improve active participation in the community (SMD=0.25, 95%CI 0.18, 0.31; 2 studies), and knowledge about services (SMD=0.13, 95%CI=0.07, 0.18; 2 studies). Additional positive factors included the creation of a common knowledge among citizens and providers on people's rights, and the creation of a social sanction risk level for the providers.

Sonnenfeld and colleagues' review (2021) looked at interventions in fragile countries to strengthen social cohesion in L&MICs.

**Media for peace interventions (five studies) – seem to have an effect on trust because they activate the 'seeing the other' mechanism which allow people to become familiar and welcome others' perspectives, recognizing similarities and respecting differences; however, the results are limited.** Overall, media for peace interventions appeared to have a small positive and significant effect on trust outcomes ( $g = 0.10$ , [0.02, 0.18], 3 studies), but no significant effects on any of the four acceptance of diversity measures the authors examined (intergroup tolerance, rejection of multiple perspectives, feelings of exclusive victimhood, feelings of inclusive victimhood). In addition, two of the three studies looking at trust outcomes were rated as having high risk of bias, so the results should be treated with caution.

## **4.4 Gap and cluster analysis**

### **4.4.1 Interpreting evidence gaps and clusters**

Primary evidence gaps are areas in evidence gap maps where no impact evaluations have been conducted. Synthesis evidence gaps are areas where there are several impact evaluations, but no (or no up to date) high- or medium-confidence systematic reviews. Evidence clusters are those combinations with a large number of studies.

Although the EGM can help identify gaps and clusters, it does not explain the reason for these patterns. Not all evidence gaps must be filled. Clusters of evidence do not indicate that the intervention evaluated is effective. In fact, the opposite may be true: the evaluations may conclusively show that an intervention is ineffective. Findings from the high-confidence systematic reviews are presented in the section above. Beyond this though, an EGM does not present results regarding the findings of included studies.

Evidence gaps can exist for three reasons:

1. There is limited underlying theory suggesting a causal relationship. Most interventions are not expected to affect all outcomes within an EGM. So, blank squares may represent areas where there is no reason to expect a relationship and no need to investigate one. Examining the strength of the theory for each intervention-outcome combination on the map is unfortunately beyond the scope of an EGM.
2. There are methodological considerations that limit the utility of quantitative impact evaluations or ethical considerations that prevent the use of such methods. For example, measuring outcomes related to media competition, plurality and diversity, and media freedom and government censorship might be challenging through counterfactual impact evaluations. It could be more feasible with long-term analysis or qualitative evaluations. In such cases, alternative methods may be utilized, such as qualitative theory-based impact evaluations. However, we only found two of them in this map.
3. Other meaningful gaps in the evidence base which should be filled in to inform future research agendas might be those corresponding to an intervention that has been widely implemented with the aim of achieving a particular outcome, despite a lack of rigorous impact evidence to support the causal claim.

There are two potential explanations for why concentrations of evidence may exist for a intervention-outcome combination:

1. There is a commonly recognized link between an intervention and the outcome, which is of theoretical and practical significance.
2. The intervention is easy to evaluate, making it more likely to be evaluated.

Users may draw on the patterns identified in the EGM to support future work. EGMs can be used to:

1. **Inform the research agenda-setting processes.** EGM findings can help identify priority areas for future research investment, particularly when combined with expertise from diverse stakeholders in order to interpret the gaps effectively.
  - a. 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.
  - b. Where large concentrations of primary evidence already exist, investments in additional impact evaluations may not provide as much value as investments in evaluations of interventions and outcomes for which little or no effectiveness evidence exists.
  - c. Where there are concentrations of impact evaluation evidence, and systematic reviews do not exist, are out of date, or do not cover populations of interest, new systematic reviews may help ensure policymaking and programming is informed by the best available evidence.
2. **Support policy and program design.** Stakeholders can utilize the hyperlinks within the online EGM to easily access rigorous evidence regarding specific interventions and outcomes of interest. The filters in the EGM help stakeholders identify evaluations relevant to their specific interest, such as certain sub-populations and evidence types. This impact evidence should be consulted when designing new policies and programs. However, the results from individual impact

evaluations should be interpreted cautiously and contextualized within the larger body of literature.

3. **Identify potential challenges.** Using examples of impact evaluations undertaken in a particular context or utilizing a particular method can be useful for identifying potential challenges and strategies to address these challenges that may strengthen the quality of future research.

#### **4.4.2 Primary study evidence gaps**

**For most of the other interventions we found few or no studies, representing a substantial evidence gap.** This pattern results in an almost empty map which might be due to the fact that evaluations have been completed but not made publicly available due to political sensitivity, or on account of publication bias (i.e. studies with null findings are less published), despite efforts to overcome this issue by searching for grey literature. It might also be due to funders' priorities focused on other areas such as peacebuilding after conflict which are considered to be more desirable areas to work on rather than, for instance, sustainability of community media outlets.

**The majority of outcomes are undermeasured** – Except for the outcomes on governance and democratization, the remainder were reported by ten or less studies. None of the studies measured outcomes related to the enabling environment.

**There are few studies in places with low press freedom** – we found only a few studies implemented in countries with a low press freedom index (according to the 2021 World Press Freedom RFS index<sup>15</sup>), such as China, Vietnam and the Islamic Republic of Iran. Except for these three countries, no studies were found in other countries with the lowest press freedom index such as Eritrea, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Turkmenistan, and Djibouti.

#### **4.4.3 Synthesis gaps**

**We did not identify any synthesis gap because for the two evidence clusters identified there was a high-confidence systematic review.** However, the diversity of interventions covered under the two categories with clusters might not be completely covered within the two SRs. In addition, in a few years' time (usually five years since the publication), the SRs may need updating.

#### **4.4.4 Methodological gaps and clusters**

**Most impact evaluations rely on randomization** – with over 73 per cent of studies using randomization, this is the dominant method of evaluation. The reliance on randomization may drive the types of interventions evaluated. The vast majority of the studies in this map evaluated the dissemination of media content on social norms for peacebuilding, which seem to be easier to evaluate than for most other interventions. These interventions are common and have a well-defined set of activities, which make rigorous evaluation methods relatively easy to employ.

**There is a dearth of qualitative studies** – we only found two eligible qualitative impact evaluations in this map. This low number was unexpected, as qualitative studies are perceived to be common in this field. The lack of representation of qualitative work might be due to the fact that these qualitative evaluations methods are relatively new, therefore

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<sup>15</sup> 2021 World Press Freedom Index: <https://rsf.org/en/ranking/2021>

not particularly widespread among the research community. However, this apparent gap may also be due to the 'methodology' evidence bar. Only studies that explicitly named one of our eligible qualitative designs were included. Studies implemented before these naming conventions were adopted, or that simply omitted the formal name of their approach, were excluded. Our strict inclusion criteria was adopted due to a lack of consensus on what is a robust qualitative IE. The lack of consensus is itself a methodological gap which calls for the establishment of clear guidance on qualitative impact evaluation processes. More qualitative impact evaluations might help to better understand factors of success and failures of certain interventions which might not be captured in quantitative studies.

**A small number of studies addressed gender and equity issues, use cost evidence, or adopt mixed-methods approaches** – 69 out of 90 studies did not report any kind of gender and/or equity approach in the design, collection of data, or analysis phase. Just four per cent of studies present cost data and only 17 per cent use mixed-methods. An expansion of the types of approaches could provide valuable insight into which interventions work for whom, how, and at what cost.

## **5. Conclusions and implications**

### **5.1 Implications for policymakers**

**Policymakers and practitioners are limited in the evidence that they can reference** when trying to make evidence informed decisions regarding media development and media for development interventions. We found that the evidence base is severely limited with few studies outside of information dissemination and peace/democratization messaging.

**One possible reason for the limited availability of evidence is the politically sensitive nature of this work.** It is likely that many evaluations have been conducted but not made publicly available. Stakeholders should consider early discussions on evaluation and publication to ensure that evaluations can be made public at a later date. This will allow for the global community to learn and build better practices in this field. Unpublished findings lead to the possibility of repeating mistakes and the inefficient allocation of valuable resources. Other reasons might be publication bias (despite searching for grey literature), and funders' priorities focused on other areas rather than interventions such as financial sustainability of community media outlets.

**Policymakers interested in supporting equity will find the evidence base further limited with only 24 studies focusing on equity.** Although we strongly urge stakeholders to reference the included studies where relevant, in many cases, appropriate evidence may not be available.

**We recommend that policymakers and practitioners support the evaluation of their own interventions** in order to make evidence-informed decisions. The increase in evaluations in the field in recent years indicates that there is a trend in this direction. In order for such evaluations to be plausible, evaluability should be considered from the outset; however, this does not mean that randomization is necessary. Sound quasi-experimental and qualitative approaches have been applied to determine the impacts of traditionally difficult to study interventions in this field.

## 5.2 Implications for future research

**Research on the effectiveness of independent media interventions is severely limited.** As such, there is a lot of room for future work in the field. Most intervention groups represent important primary research gaps that should be filled. Studies that consider outcomes related to the enabling environment, newsroom professionalization, and community participation are needed to understand the overall impact of these interventions.

**Interventions which are widely implemented, affect a lot of people, are resource intensive, or are policy relevant should be prioritized for evaluation to ensure the efficient and ethical use of limited resources.** Some examples include the direct support to media, coalition building, self-regulation, protection of journalists, media financial sustainability and coalition building, studies where media can bring scale to other accountability or peacebuilding interventions.

**More cost evidence should be generated** to allow decision makers to achieve the maximum impact within their resource limitations.

**Mixed-methods designs should be adopted** to understand perceptions and mechanisms of action of interventions. This information can be integral to making future programs more effective.

**In addition to the sensitive nature of this work, a driver in the limited evidence base may be an over-reliance on randomized controlled trials.** Information dissemination interventions easily lend themselves to cluster randomized designs. Other types of interventions, such as media protection services, are challenging to randomize for practical and ethical reasons and may, therefore, be less studied. Although 73 per cent of studies used randomization, this was skewed with 77 per cent of studies on information dissemination interventions using RCTs as compared to 50 per cent of studies outside of this field using RCTs. Three intervention groups, protection of market competition and media plurality, establishment of community media/broadcasting, and establishment of media outlets, were only evaluated using quasi-experimental approaches. This indicates that certain fields may be more suited to quasi-experimental designs.

**Some evaluations used innovative evaluation designs** in order to establish the impacts of interventions that may be traditionally considered difficult to evaluate. 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). In another 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). These innovative evaluations may provide insights into how similar but difficult to evaluate interventions can be studied.

**Prioritize studies in countries with a low world press of freedom index (RFS 2021<sup>16</sup>).** We found only a few studies conducted in settings rated as having a low press of freedom index. These settings should be prioritized, if possible, to understand which are the effective interventions in such challenging locations.

**There is a limited focus on equity.** Researchers should consider integrating gender and equity approaches into their design or analytical approaches. This might help, for instance, taking into consideration the different effects an intervention may have on different vulnerable groups, or take into account gender norms which might affect the implementation and the outcomes.

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<sup>16</sup> 2021 World Press Freedom Index: <https://rsf.org/en/ranking/2021>



## **Online appendixes**

### **Online appendix A:**

<https://3ieimpact.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/IM-EGM-Report-Online-appendix-A.pdf>

### **Online appendix B: Coding tool summary**

<https://3ieimpact.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/IM-EGM-Report-Online-appendix-B.pdf>

### **Online appendix C: EGM advisory group**

<https://3ieimpact.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/IM-EGM-Report-Online-appendix-C.pdf>

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Independent media can help provide access to information, and hold governments accountable. However, media freedom is severely challenged in most regions of the world. Several interventions exist to support and strengthen independent media in low-and middle-income countries, but there is limited information on what interventions are effective. Authors of this report present findings of an evidence gap map, which provides an overview of impact evaluations and systematic reviews of interventions that strengthen independent media.

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