

Managing change, rebuilding capacity: Journalism education, community media, public service broadcasting transformation and media accountability in Myanmar

External Evaluation Report | Executive Summary
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Background

After nearly 50 years of military rule, democratic reforms were introduced to Myanmar by its first quasi-civilian president U Thein Sein in 2011. This transformation process was carried out at a remarkable pace in the first few years. It included a reform of the media sector, which had been characterized by a lack of access to professional training as universities had been closed for decades, an obsolete legal framework which enforced severe and disproportionate penalties, as well as a monopolization of state media and so-called crony media businesses. All of this limited people's access to information, especially for those living in rural areas as well as for ethnic and religious minorities. At the same time, Myanmar has been experiencing a rapid digitalization process, giving more than 90% of the population access to the mobile Internet within five years. Today, the internet is increasingly being used to acquire news and information.

This transformation process was accompanied by several international organizations. In order to coordinate these efforts and avoid duplication, the Myanmar government initiated the Media Development Thematic Working Group (MDTWG), which has been co-chaired by UNESCO.

The DW Akademie project (2015-2017) evaluated in this report focuses on three project lines:

1. The establishment of the Myanmar Journalism Institute (MJI) in cooperation with international partners;
2. Providing relevant information to the rural population through the establishment of a community media sector as well as the democratization of the former state broadcaster MRTV; and
3. The establishment of a complaint mechanism and strengthening of the Myanmar Press Council as a self-regulatory body and mediator between the government, the military, journalists, and the general public.

The aim of this evaluation, which was carried out by an external consultant, is to provide a constructive assessment of the project results towards the completion of the first three-year funding phase (2015-2017). The evaluation is based on the OECD/DAC evaluation criteria. In addition, more general aspects were analyzed, so that results could also be applied to other DW Akademie projects. These were: the strategic decision to cooperate closely with the Myanmar government

and its effects on work with other beneficiaries; the coordination with international partners; and the effectiveness of the local office in Yangon, which was the first external office to be set up by DW Akademie.

This evaluation uses various methods, including desktop research and interviews with project managers, project partners, and target groups. The final recommendations do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the project team. Nevertheless, all findings were discussed with the team in order to allow lessons learned to be incorporated into future strategies.

Conclusions of the project evaluation

The approaches used to address the enormous challenges of a young and dynamic Myanmar media landscape are still as relevant as they were at the start of the project. The criteria **relevance** has therefore been rated as “comprehensively fulfilled.” The Myanmar Journalism Institute (MJI) has been established as an independent training institute with a modern curriculum and has trained more than 700 journalists. Until now, it remains the only educational institution in the country with a curricular focus on multimedia journalism. The complaint mechanism of the Myanmar Press Council is increasingly used and thus, acts as an important instrument for media self-regulation. However, in interviews, especially local and ethnic journalists and editors did not always consider MJI or the Press Council as relevant institutions for their profession. This was mainly because of a lack of awareness due to insufficient publicity of the work of these institutions. The decentralization of MRTV is an important step in its transformation to a public service broadcaster (PSB) and offers a practical approach in a process that is otherwise very political. Together with a professionalization of the newsgathering process and a stronger focus on audience needs, it also has the potential to provide more relevant and comprehensive information to rural populations. The online news platform, which is currently being developed by MRTV and a number of ethnic media outlets, has been a relevant response to the growing trend across Myanmar of accessing news via a smartphone. Furthermore, this project presents a great opportunity to enable communication and collaboration between media actors traditionally characterized by mutual distrust. The pilot community radio to be set up in a township outside Yangon offers a suitable mechanism to exchange information amongst local populations, even if the concept of community media had been unknown in the country. Through a collaborative setup including the state broadcaster MRTV as a “technical partner”, it has also been possible to counter initial concerns by the government that community media might be abused for extreme political purposes.

The close cooperation with the government has so far only brought forward positive results. Moreover, it has been confirmed by all stakeholders that there was no alternative to

working with the Ministry of Information (MoI) if project goals were to be met. Within this cooperation DW Akademie is frequently consulted by government actors and clearly regarded as a trusted advisor and facilitator. Initial skepticism raised by some stakeholders could be redressed by working closely with other beneficiaries, i.e. ethnic journalists and media, as well as inhabitants of the township for the community radio project.

The stagnant transformation process in Myanmar particularly affects the effectiveness of project line 2. The implementation of two activities (online news platform, community radio) had to be postponed or changed due to political developments and could therefore not be started until 2016. An assessment of the effectiveness of project line 1 (MJI) could not take place due to insufficient feedback on an alumni survey. However, the obtained answers indicate that the planned outcome has largely been reached. The goals set for the Press Council are also expected to be met by the end of the project period. Without DW Akademie’s local office and its multidisciplinary and highly committed project team, the project would not have been as successful. The very high number of indicators in the logical framework and an extremely challenging number of administrative requirements, as well as an insufficient number of local administrative staff often led to delays in the project’s progress. Overall, the criteria **effectiveness** was rated as “partially fulfilled.”

The efficiency of project line 1 (MJI) is considered only “partially fulfilled” due to inadequate management and workflow processes combined with a large number of international consultants deployed but not always coordinated among international cooperation partners. However, overall, the project was able to make good use of synergies when collaborating with other partners. Expenses of the press council could be kept low due to the fact that board members work as volunteers. Hence, the **efficiency** of the entire project has been rated as “generally fulfilled.”

The project’s impact after just over two years - for the online portal and the community radio less than a year - is difficult to ascertain. Nevertheless, the MJI alumni questioned for this evaluation demonstrated the ability to think critically and showed great affinity for the institute. The increasing number of complaints to the Press Council by military personnel and politicians points to an improved awareness among these groups about the role of the media in a democracy. So far, it has not been possible to sufficiently inform the general public about their rights in regards to how they are depicted in the media, especially in rural areas. Through a close cooperation with MRTV and the MoI, the project made an effective contribution to the PSB transformation. The work carried out so far shows potential to have broad effects. Hence the criteria **impact** has been rated as “comprehensively fulfilled.”

Interviewees from project partners clearly identified DW Akademie as a facilitator that develops its work with the

active participation of its partners. The sustainability of MRTV is strongly dependent on the political will and decisions to be made by the government. The establishment of the MJI as an independent association is a huge success in terms of ownership. However, weak management structures together with a lack of practical involvement by the Board of Directors as well as a heavy dependency on international funders, which have started to withdraw from Myanmar, are endangering MJI's sustainability in the mid- and long-term. Therefore, the sustainability of project line 1 has been rated as "partially fulfilled." An assessment of the sustainability of the community radio and the news site is not yet possible. However, the decision not to set up the community radio in a former conflict area, as was initially planned, but in a township with strong organizational structures outside of Yangon, is a good base for its sustainability. The project's overall **sustainability** has been rated as "generally fulfilled."

Stakeholders in Myanmar appreciate DW Akademie as an organization that builds bridges between groups that traditionally do not cooperate with each other. As a member of the Steering Committee of the MDTWG, DW Akademie plays a leading role in the coordination of local and international stakeholders. It also actively cooperates with German development organizations working in Myanmar. Overall, the **cooperation and coordination** with other stakeholders during the project phase has been rated as "comprehensively fulfilled."

Local stakeholders value DW Akademie's approach to working as equal partners. They appreciate its professionalism and commitment to the development of the Myanmar media sector. Furthermore, the continuity of the work of DW Akademie is regarded as a very positive and important base for a close relationship. This should be seen against the backdrop of recent withdrawals of many of the international organizations and their funds, which had accompanied the country's transformation since the start of the liberalization process. The **quality of management** has thus been rated as "comprehensively fulfilled."

Lessons learned

- Cooperation with the government is possible in Myanmar without having a negative impact on the work with journalists and the general public if a holistic approach with different beneficiaries is pursued and the role as independent facilitator is strictly adhered to. Working with ethnic journalists and members of the community were important activities to counteract initial criticism by some stakeholders. However, it should be noted that this experience cannot automatically be transferred to other countries and needs to be regularly reviewed.
- A local office with an interdisciplinary and committed project team is essential for working in a country, where political and technical processes can happen at a rapid pace. It supports an

effective coordination with local and international stakeholders and enables the project team to develop and carry out innovative projects on the ground. Moreover, it supports DW Akademie's visibility among local and international stakeholders.

- Opportunities for cooperation with partners need to be evaluated thoroughly ahead of starting a joint project, especially in regards to the partners' mission as well as availability of human resources for the implementation. Clear communication channels and regular formal and informal exchange promote trust, an essential aspect for a successful project. It should also be noted that differing administrative requirements of international cooperation partners can be overwhelming for local partners.
- Training in management techniques should go hand in hand with other consulting efforts when establishing a training institute; progress should be closely monitored. Continuous supervision is necessary, but as this requires a rather high budget, it is difficult to implement. Here, DW Akademie made use of cooperating with the Center for International Migration and Development (CIM). Furthermore, the local context and/or local culture must also be taken into account during the organizational setup.
- Professional exchange with international experts during study trips or on-site consultancies abroad were very effective as long as these were thoroughly planned and embedded into other activities.
- New concepts, such as the community radio, can be introduced as useful tools. However, much effort has to go into informing and preparing all sides - lobbying the government and the regulatory authority to reduce skepticism, promoting the necessary legal and political frameworks, as well as establishing necessary structures in the community and an understanding of the role of a community radio. Any developments should be closely monitored to document how the target group develops this concept further and adapts it to local conditions.

Key recommendations

1. Due to the rapid digital transformation in Myanmar, a lack of critical media awareness among large parts of the population, and a rise of hate speech in social media, Media and Information Literacy (MIL) should be included as a new focus when planning future activities.
2. It was noted time and again that people who during the military dictatorship had received training and other support outside of the country, are now making a positive contribution to the democratic transformation of Myanmar. It should therefore be examined to what extent such support for individuals, who have the potential to act as change agents, can be included in future projects.

3. The project's impact on journalists and the general public living outside Yangon should be determined at a later date.
4. A concept should be developed on how young journalists can be more involved in projects, particularly at the MJI and the Myanmar Press Council.
5. In Myanmar, there is a great need for basic training in professional journalism for editors, such as story development, editorial practice or newsroom workflows.
6. Selected private local and regional media houses should be considered as beneficiaries in the next project phase, either of bespoke trainings, possible mentoring programs to support local media and/or as participants in conferences to promote networking and professional exchanges.
7. The term 'ethnic media' should be examined and discussed with stakeholders in relation to the fragile political situation in the country and the historical mistrust between ethnic groups. Where appropriate, the more neutral term 'regional media' might be more beneficial when including different groups living in the area, potentially representing a larger audience and thus providing a better base for advertising revenues. This may also counteract a possible fragmentation and polarization of the media landscape.
8. DW Akademie should continue its consultancy to MJI during the next project phase (2018-2020) while communicating a clear exit strategy from the outset. Moreover, clear criteria for the degree of further cooperation should be elaborated.
9. A concept to strengthen the core group of full-time trainers at MJI should be developed. In addition to their employment at the institute, trainers should continue to be active as journalists in order not to miss out on any developments of their profession. At the same time, the group of trainers affiliated with MJI should be expanded by professionals with a background in broadcast, and if possible, online media.
10. Alumni should be linked to the institute as a way to ensure sustainability and relevance. Ways to do so could include the formal establishment of an alumni group, which will allow them to become a member of the MJI association. Also, an annual alumni meeting, including bespoke training, could be organized.
11. MJI should improve its PR to increase the number of student applications. In addition, an entry exam could enhance the reputation of the institute. Alternatively, or additionally, study fees should be charged. For participants who cannot afford the fees, a fellowship program should be (re)launched, which could be financed through MJI members, the media sector and/or international donors.
12. The curriculum should include English as a foreign language, possibly as a voluntary module, to improve online research skills as well as career opportunities for students.
13. The completion of the Press Council's website and the planned promotional campaign are essential to ensure impact and sustainability and should be a primary focus.
14. The exchange with other press councils in Europe and the region should be encouraged in order to strengthen its network and provide its active members with further methods for mediations. Applied methods and experiences from the mediations should be documented.
15. DW Akademie should continue its support to MRTV's PSB transformation process, but elaborate clear benchmarks for future cooperation.
16. DW Akademie could offer advice to MRTV on youth programs. With more than 3 million Facebook fans, MRTV has a large potential audience. This could also support the aim to be a relevant source of information in the medium term.
17. The community radio project should be implemented as a 'Community Media' project in order to allow participants the necessary space to develop production, content distribution, and interactive programming via smartphones. Overall, legal frameworks should allow community media to work with multi-media.
18. After Htan Tabin has been given the first pilot broadcasting permit for a community radio, the future challenge will be to protect the community and the radio from excessive influence – from potential donors, the government as well as the mainstream media. On the judicial level, community radios as a whole must also be protected from being considered commercial media (and vice versa).
19. In a joint effort by local and international partners, support for media development should be sought from State Counselor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. Even a brief statement on the PSB transformation would give new impetus to the process, which has stalled since the NLD government came to power.

DW Akademie

DW Akademie is Germany's leading organization for media development and Deutsche Welle's center of excellence for education and knowledge transfer. As a strategic partner of Germany's Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development we strengthen the universal human rights of free expression, education, and access to information.

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