

Annual Report  
2020

Good  
journalism  
Better  
societies



IMS 

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*A journalist is seen wearing a personal protective equipment suit at Nigam Bodh Ghat Crematorium, in New Delhi, India, April 2021.  
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IMS (International Media Support) is a non-profit organisation supporting local media in countries affected by armed conflict, human insecurity and political transition. We push for quality journalism, challenge repressive laws and keep media workers of all genders safe so they can do their jobs. Peaceful, stable societies based on democratic values rely on ethical and critical journalism that aims to include, not divide.

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# Contents



Page 12      Training in investigative journalism helped Sudanese reporter to document abuse in 23 schools.



Page 44      IMS gender advisor Laura Gil has seen up close how journalists, often unknowingly, transform women social leaders' strong, active narratives into stereotypical, victimizing portraits.



Page 48      While trust in the media is challenged, independent documentary film has become one of the most influential ways of telling stories.

4	Foreword
6	Where we work
8	How we work
10	<b>Push for quality journalism</b>
16	Interview: Sustainable media improves society
20	Interview: Access to reliable information is (also) a question of inequality
24	<b>Keep media workers safe</b>
30	The Safety Fund
32	Rapid Response
34	<b>Challenge repressive laws</b>
40	Interview: When media strengthens human rights – and vice versa
44	Interview: The good and the ugly side of media
48	Documentary
52	IMS Hows
53	IMS Board 2020
54	Financial overview 2020
56	Donors

# A BIG SALUTE

In these turbulent times, people the world over are turning to the media for information they can rely on; quality media coverage that contributes to positive social, political and cultural change, which advances human rights and democracy in the digital age.

# TO CORONA WARRIORS



A view of street art adorning a public wall depicting and honoring front line corona warriors which includes, health care workers, police personnel, journalists, and sanitary workers on July 11, 2020, New Delhi, India.

IMS 

International Media Support

# Defending societies with good journalism

Along with the climate crisis, the decline of freedom and basic rights are currently the biggest global issues we face. Instead of cherishing free media as sources of critical, life-saving public information during the Covid-19 pandemic, many leaders around the world responded with crackdowns and restrictions, creating further challenges for public interest media in 2020

The global decline of democracy looks less like a temporary fluctuation and more like a permanent state. Covid-19 has only deepened the crisis by giving authoritarians and autocrats a pretext for further limiting civil society and media.

Around the world, IMS partners have had to adjust to audiences' increased needs for trustworthy information, especially regarding the pandemic. Paradoxically, independent media outlets have found it more difficult to operate, whether because their staff faced arrests, targeted online harassment, lawsuits, shrinking revenues or the threat posed by Covid-19.

The global political climate has changed dramatically during the three decades I have worked with freedoms of the press and expression in developing countries and conflict areas. The balance of power between liberal democracy's standard bearers and illiberal and authoritarian forces has shifted in favour of the latter. In 2020, this development was thoroughly underlined, as seen during the elections in Belarus, violations of the human rights of journalists in Zimbabwe and the limitations placed on independent media (but not state controlled media) ahead of national elections

in Myanmar.

Different internal developments in Europe and the USA over the last decade have influenced the political atmosphere and led to a waning commitment to global democratic development. The underlying reasons for this shift are many and complex, but as a result, other influences are filling the void left by the historic advocates of democracy.

The consequences for the state of democracy are clear: the world has become less free and less democratic every year for the past 15 years – and the negative trajectory continues. Within the last year, 75 percent of the global population has had their basic rights restricted or limited in some way, to which the Covid-19 crisis has only contributed further.

## Popular protests call for change

However, the people have not stayed silent. The pandemic has weakened governments' images of benevolent but firm authority, leading to popular uprisings calling for more participation, representation and accountability. Throughout 2020, decentralised

popular protest movements around the world showed their dissatisfaction with the political leadership in countries such as Belarus, India, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Peru and Kyrgyzstan, while protesters continued their on-going struggles in Sudan and Hong Kong – to name just a few examples.

The common denominator of these movements has been that they are taking place in regions where democratic rights and basic freedoms have been limited. And, most importantly, these movements are proof that democracy and human rights are still valued and still resonate, despite developments in the world in general.

In this context, journalism has an important role to play – and an equally big responsibility. Trust in national governments and the international community has plummeted, but in many places the media have experienced a different movement. Throughout the pandemic, the media have contributed to and enabled populations' rightful demands by distributing trustworthy information, practicing what we know as public interest journalism. And it has resonated widely with news consumers.

Our partners around the world have reported massive increases in readership – especially in the early phases of the pandemic – illustrating how public interest journalism provides real value that state-controlled media in many places simply cannot provide. This is indicative of the essential function media have in societies and the trust many people still have in journalism as a source of accurate information. A well-informed public is able to actively participate in society, which is the core of any democracy. And the distribution of factual information through the media supports that agency.

## New approaches

In light of developments of the last few years, where the people have protested authorities' threats to democracy, new approaches are needed to both safeguard and promote democratic values. 2020 has seen IMS partners come up with new, innovative solutions, such as online media outlet Lok Sujag in Pakistan setting up pop-up newsrooms outside urban centres to cover a wider range of stories and include more diverse voices, or our fact-checking partner in Zimbabwe, ZimFact, making sure reliable information about the pandemic was made accessible, despite many political actors' disregard of facts. Looking at the bigger picture, however, we have been forced to accept that merely defending democracy is at least as important as promoting and developing democracy.

I do not see this change of tactic as an abdication of a core value or an acceptance of the tide of authoritarianism. It is more of a pragmatic approach, and an acknowledgement of the reality that many of IMS' partners already operate in, where civic spaces are increasingly restricted. Our contribution is first and foremost to ensure that an organised civil society still exists when the tide hopefully turns again.

## Democratic values in practice

An example of both the long-term perspective and the importance of civil society's involvement in democratic development is Tunisia. It was not civil society that deposed dictators across the entire region as part of the Arab Spring – but it is to a great extent to civil society's credit that democratic development is still in progress in Tunisia more than 10 years later, despite various bumps in the road and regressions.

A comparable dynamic could be seen in Myanmar at the beginning of 2021 – though with the opposite outcome. After more than 10 years of largely positive democratic development, Burmese civil society is now playing an essential role in organising peaceful protests, securing broad, popular support and attracting international attention. All of this is an effort to protect the progress that had been made now that the democratic space is closing to an unheard



Jesper Højberg, IMS Executive Director.

of extent and human rights violations are piling up.

But it is in this interplay of progress and setbacks that civil society comes into its own everywhere in the world: on the one hand, as advocates for rights and popular involvement when society becomes more open, and on the other, as a bulwark against restrictions on freedoms and democracy when the grip on civil space is tightened.

Civil society is perhaps the closest we come to democracy in practice. This is why it is essential that IMS' work takes a holistic approach to strengthening free media, supporting civil society organisations and ensuring that they have the necessary capacities to withstand autocratic pressure and operate in a way that truly represents the diversity and entirety of their communities. Civil society and public interest media play a key role in ensuring long-term democratic development and short-term defence. It is a priority for IMS to ensure that individuals and organisations are in the best possible position when sudden shifts occur and the civic space either opens or closes.

## A question of priorities

Part of the pragmatic work needed to keep the democratic ball rolling requires engaging in topics that are less controversial in

the eyes of autocrats. This can then lead to feasible development projects such as support for digital development and regulation, collaboration between educational institutions and universities, environmental protections, anticorruption measures, media literacy or networking between local, national and regional organisations. These are areas which can help promote – if not directly, then indirectly – a pro-democracy agenda, and can slowly push the tectonic plates of society towards a democratic rupture.

If we don't do our utmost to support the calls for democracy and freedom – which in recent years can be heard louder and louder from around the world – it will not only be a moral failing but will also do long-term damage to basic human rights and democratic values. We must set the course of action using the developments and lessons learned from 2020.

We will not be able to turn back the tide of authoritarianism with a flick of a wrist. But it is our choice to either stand idly by or stand up and unequivocally support democratic forces around the world, so that more people in the future can live their lives in better and freer societies founded on democratic values.

**Jesper Højberg**  
IMS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

# Where we work

IMS works where the need for reliable, fact-based media content is greatest and the risks to independent media are most perilous: In countries experiencing armed conflicts, humanitarian crises, rapid political change or authoritarian rule



## Programme countries

In 2020 IMS worked long term with partners in 24 programme countries. Engagement over long periods of time enables the organisation to build up relations as well as react to opening and closing spaces.

- |                |                |
|----------------|----------------|
| 1 Afghanistan  | 13 Pakistan    |
| 2 Algeria      | 14 Palestine   |
| 3 Cambodia     | 15 Phillipines |
| 4 Burkina Faso | 16 Somalia     |
| 5 Egypt        | 17 Sri Lanka   |
| 6 Iraq         | 18 Belarus     |
| 7 Morocco      | 19 Syria       |
| 8 Libya        | 20 Tanzania    |
| 9 Jordan       | 21 Tunesia     |
| 10 Mali        | 22 Ukraine     |
| 11 Myanmar     | 23 Yemen       |
| 12 Niger       | 24 Zimbabwe    |



## Thematic interventions, regional programmes and short-term engagements

In addition to long-term country programmes, IMS engages in global and regional programmes, thematic interventions and short-term projects, as well as responds to crises through IMS' rapid response mechanism. In 2020 these engagements were expanded to provide urgent Covid-19 support to local independent media.



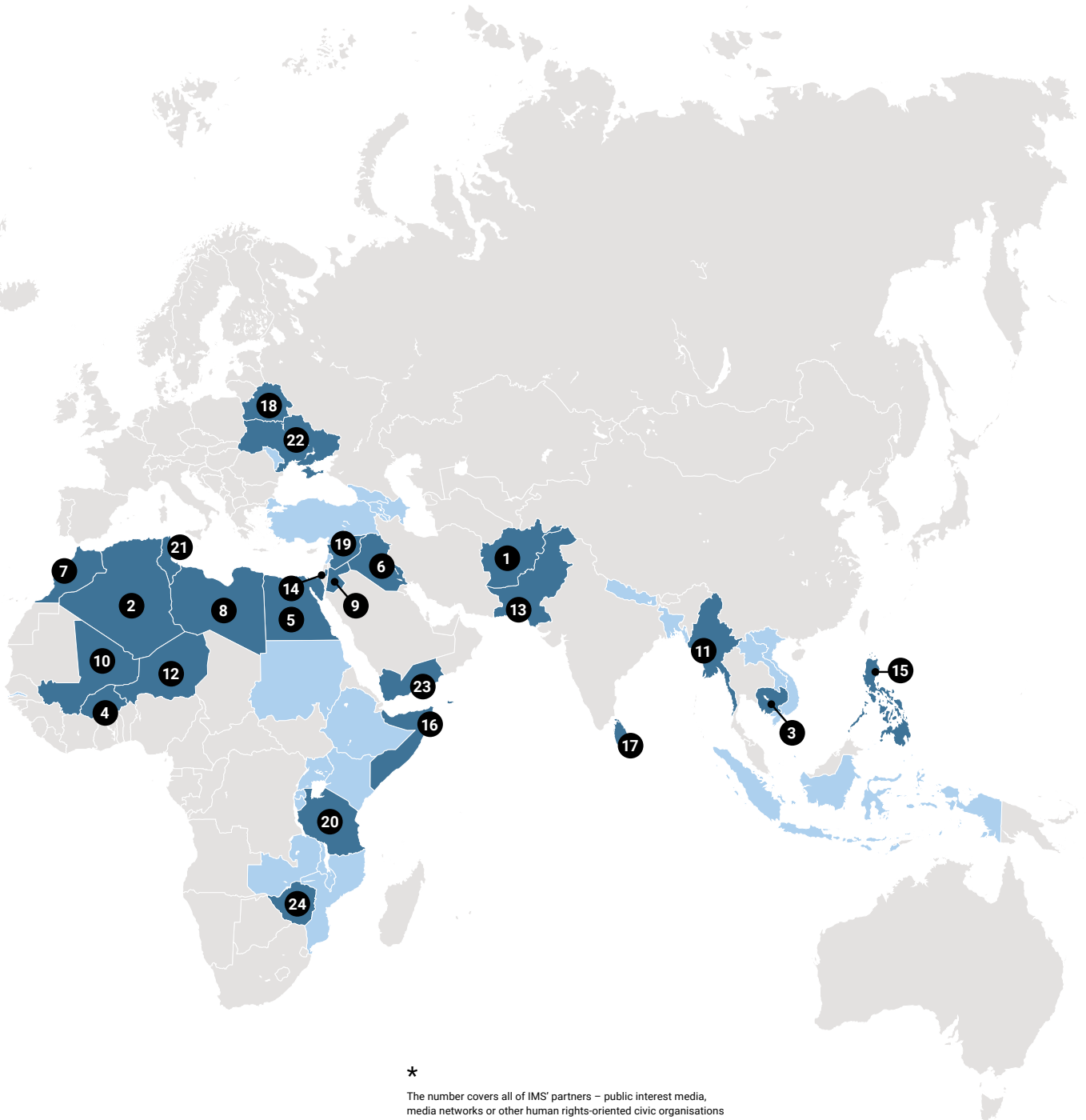


# 126

PARTNERS RECEIVED SUPPORT FROM IMS IN 2020\*

# 47

NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL AWARDS AND PRIZES GIVEN TO IMS-SUPPORTED INVESTIGATIONS AND DOCUMENTARY FILMS IN 2020



\*

The number covers all of IMS' partners – public interest media, media networks or other human rights-oriented civic organisations – who have received more than 10.000 EUR in 2020, including new partners supported extraordinarily due to Covid-19. The number of partners does not include single, minor collaborations, eg. a documentary film project or rapid response.

# How we work

IMS combines long-term, trusting partnerships with media outlets and other organisations with shorter intervention in crisis and catastrophes. We work with partners to build a strong, inclusive and sustainable media sector; one that promotes debate and holds leaders to account by covering issues of public importance

Where appropriate, IMS facilitates alliances and other forms of collaboration to strengthen societies. Our flexibility allows partners to adjust to the inevitable changes they encounter in what are usually volatile environments.

In 2020 this was very much the case due to the Covid-19 pandemic. At the UNESCO World Press Freedom Conference in December former and existing IMS partners described how IMS and our partners adapted.

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“Traditionally, women in journalism often have only freelance positions, so they tend to be the first to be sacrificed or the most vulnerable, when newsrooms are cutting costs. In this period, we were providing basic support, such as good internet connectivity, while highlighting the gender specific experiences of women journalists. We noticed the extra labour that women often take up, including the personal, domestic and emotional work as primary caretakers of their households.”

**Roula Asad, Syria**

CEO, SYRIAN FEMALE JOURNALISTS NETWORK, SHARED THE GENDER SPECIFIC VULNERABILITIES THAT SYRIAN FEMALE JOURNALISTS FACED

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“It has been an extremely challenging year for fact-checkers across the globe, during the Covid-19 crisis, which has been billed a ‘disinfodemic’. We check for the most viral pieces of misinformation on social media and speak with health experts, scientists and officials to debunk the myths. As part of “Network of Fact Checkers,” we gather every month to look at emerging trends and exchange ideas and information.”

**Lifaqane Nare, Zimbabwe**

EDITOR, ZIMFACT ON THE ROLE OF AFRICA'S LEADING FACT-CHECKING INITIATIVES DURING COVID-19

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“We had a regular podcast, but Covid-19 meant that we could no longer go to our studio, we were stuck at home, but still had to inform our audiences. Instead of competing with news coverage, we brought together the narrative of people on the ground - those traveling, in hospitals and directly affected. We used our time to stitch together slower, more complex stories.”

**Carl Javier, The Philippines**

COO, PUMA PODCAST ON HOW HIS TEAM OVERCAME THE CHALLENGES OF REDUCED NEWSROOM BUDGETS AND REACHED NEW AUDIENCES

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“Unlike the first wave of Covid-19, the second wave was deemed more severe and although elections were around the corner, the government did not classify media as an essential service. Apart from state television agencies, all independent media were told to stay at home, so we had to figure out how to cover the polls and Covid-19. So, we risked imprisonment for going out to cover essential stories.”

**Sonny Swe, Myanmar**

CEO, FRONTIER MYANMAR ON HOW COVID-19 WAS USED AS A TOOL OF OPPRESSION DURING THE PANDEMIC

“In Belarus, our government discarded Covid-19 as something not serious during the first wave, while hiding the real numbers. It was independent media that played a vital role in uncovering the truth and reporting about the real situation. At the same time, it was citizens and volunteers who mobilized support for frontline workers in the pandemic. Our role in this period has been organic, as fostering civic engagement is at the core of our editorial policy.”

**Iryna Vidanava, Belarus**

CEO AT THE FORMER IMS PARTNER CITYDOG, BELARUS ON HOW ONLINE MEDIA ENHANCED THEIR ROLE AS A MOBILIZER

“Given that we have extended local networks in our communities of coverage, we quickly adapted to the Covid-19 situation, with local, contextualised information. One of the main challenges we saw with our audiences is that many did not believe in Covid-19. Many thought that Covid-19 did not affect Muslims and that they simply had to pray for it to go away. So, we included many Islamic leaders in providing medical and factual information related to the pandemic in order to reach our target audiences.”

**Abdirahman Sharif Mohamed, Somalia**

EDITOR, RADIO ERGO ON HOW THE STATION FOCUSED ON LOCAL VOICES ON HUMANITARIAN ISSUES



IMS hosted a session at the World Press Freedom Day under the headline 'Global Challenges - Local Solutions'.

# Push for Quality Journalism

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IMS supports journalists and documentary film makers who look to tell compelling, fact-based stories about topics of public importance in an ethical and professional way: stories that stimulate debate and hold those with power to account; stories that challenge discriminatory stereotypes and norms; stories that dig deep and deepen understanding; and stories that articulate the views and perspectives of those underrepresented in the media or with limited access to it. IMS encourages innovative use of the technologies that have transformed the ways in which these stories can be told and received.

# Going viral

By providing reliable, in-depth information about the coronavirus, the pan-Arab digital media outlet Daraj thrived in 2020 — and made the case for independent media

## Lebanon

“There was so much noise and so many unknowns,” recalls Alia Ibrahim, co-founder and CEO of the independent media outlet Daraj, about the coronavirus pandemic that began in early 2020. “Now we know what Covid-19 is, but back then, even the word ‘pandemic’ was new to our vocabulary.”

Like so many organisations, Daraj soon found itself scrapping best laid plans. Founded in November 2017, the Beirut-based organisation had fast become one of the most credible pan-Arab sources of information. Thanks to a network of journalists striving to tell stories that traditional media in the Middle East and North Africa typically overlook, by early 2020 it covered more than 50 cities across the region.

“We had our proof of concept and we had planned our strategy for the next two years,” Ibrahim says. “When Covid-19 happened, we were working on projects for testing our revenue stream and diversifying our platforms. We had to put that aside and start working on creating space for coverage of the pandemic.”

Its pivot came amid fierce political headwinds. With at least four revolutions taking place in the Arab world in 2020, governments had the “perfect excuse” to clamp down on civil liberties, Ibrahim says, while the region’s traditional media was doing little to combat the spread of “fake news, propaganda, and all kinds of conspiracy theories and crazy ideas”.

In this light, Daraj sought to “declutter” the news and provide “good, factual information” about the virus. To meet the demand for reliable coverage, Daraj’s 16-strong editorial team created a Covid-19 landing page

— and soon saw a 49 percent increase in monthly unique visitors. “It makes the case for why people need independent media in a time of crisis,” Ibrahim concludes.

Of course, Covid-19 wasn’t the only crisis that Lebanon faced in 2020. As well as biting economic hardship, the country was roiled by a deadly explosion in the port of Beirut in August. Ibrahim and her team worked around the clock from their home offices to keep people informed. “It’s in our DNA,” she says. “The reason we were born was out of a true belief that one of the reasons the Arab Spring failed was the lack of independent media.”

Eventually, Daraj carried out investigations and published articles that had a tangible impact. Standout stories in 2020 included an investigation of Lebanon’s central bank, a look at the gender consequences of the coronavirus crisis and an examination of how fundamentalist groups such as ISIS have been affected by the pandemic.

Ultimately, says Ibrahim, having core

funding guaranteed for more than a year was critical. “What allowed us to keep our feet on the ground, despite all the destabilising factors, was the support we got from our core donors including IMS,” she says. “That sense of stability made the difference. It meant we could focus on dealing with what was happening.”

To meet the demand for reliable coverage, Daraj’s 16-strong editorial team created a Covid-19 landing page — and soon saw a 49 percent increase in monthly unique visitors.

Alia Ibrahim, far left, with Daraj co-founders Hazem el Amin and Diana Moukalled.



PHOTO: AMMAR ABD RABO/DARAJ



PHOTO: JESS KELLY FOR BBC NEWS ARABIC

# The virtues of virtual

Unable to offer journalists on-the-ground media training amid the pandemic, a leading pan-Arab organisation swiftly pivoted to digital — and has never looked back

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## Middle East

Rawan Damen was barely six weeks into her new role as Director General of the Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism (ARIJ) when the majority of the world went into lockdown as part of efforts to combat Covid-19.

“Everything changed,” Damen recalls

today with wry understatement. For one thing, stay-at-home orders across the Arab world torpedoed her organisation’s modus operandi. The brainchild of several Arab and Danish media professionals, ARIJ is dedicated to promoting investigative journalism across the Arab world. It was founded in Amman in 2005 with the aim of supporting independent, quality and professional journalism by offering training,

media coaching, mentoring, funding and networking opportunities with local and international media outlets.

And until 2020, Damen explains, ARIJ had carried out that work almost entirely on the ground. “We did some online work, but never live workshops online,” she says. The pandemic forced its 30-strong team to pivot to digital — “and to do it early”, Damen adds. Within a fortnight, ARIJ had

For 18 months, reporter Fateh Al-Rahman Al-Hamdani went undercover inside 23 schools for BBC News Arabic across Sudan documenting students in chains, beaten, tortured and sometimes kept in a prison cell for days. From the start of the investigation, Fateh Al-Rahman Al-Hamdani was supported by Arab Reporters For Investigative Journalism (ARIJ), a network for investigative journalists in the Arab region funded by IMS among others.

a secure beta version of its academy up and running online.

That wasn't the only major decision ARIJ made, however. The organisation also ignored advice to break up its five-day media training courses — on the basics of investigative journalism, say — into shorter classes spread across a four-week period.

"We refused," says Damen. "We didn't follow best practices because we are different. We provide training by doing. Our secret sauce is that we're a network. We support journalists and they need to be able to reach out to others in our network. That cannot not be [through] small chunks of online."

In fact, in the first "virtual workshop" that ARIJ ran in 2020, no fewer than 24 journalists from six Arab countries received online training from five different trainers. "It was extremely successful," Damen says. "They all got very emotional at the end and it was difficult to turn off the cameras and say goodbye."

ARIJ ran its virtual workshop 30 times throughout 2020 — a "pivot to digital" that culminated in its 13th Annual Regional Forum, #ARIJ20, which took place in November and December. Because of the pandemic, it proved to be ARIJ's first fully virtual forum — and possibly its best yet. The event gave journalists a chance to network and share knowledge with the leaders of Arab and global investigative journalism movements, discover new reporting skills and new tools, and get acquainted with the latest trends in investigative reporting. It was also an opportunity to network with

broadcasters, technology companies, and universities from around the globe.

"Everyone advised us to do it small, for the usual reasons. Because small is beautiful. Because people have 'Zoom fatigue'," Damen says. "We said, 'No, it will be big and huge.'"

In fact, the forum saw more than 1,500 people participate in over 50 sessions and attracted more than 160 speakers from 40-plus countries — half of whom were women.

As well as putting on dozens of sessions, ARIJ even organised an awards ceremony — and secretly arranged for the partners of the winners to surprise them with their award in person, wherever in the world they were. It was a theatrical touch that wouldn't have surprised anyone familiar with Damen's background. A filmmaker and media consultant, she has more than 20 years of experience in television and digital media production, and has produced and directed many award-winning documentaries and investigations.

According to Henrik Grunnet, a senior adviser at IMS, ARIJ's success last year was built on the platform established by co-founder Rana Sabbagh. As ARIJ's Executive Director until 2019, she delivered several big investigations — a legacy that Damen continued amid the more restrictive environment for media organisations in 2020.

"Rawan is doing an excellent job," Grunnet says. "The virtual forum was especially impressive in how well-organised it was." Another indicator of the success that ARIJ enjoyed in 2020, he says, was the continued quality of its investigative journalism — such as its "phenomenal" award-winning story on religious schools in Sudan, which it produced with BBC Arabic.

"Every year there are stories that have big impacts, but in 2020 we were lucky with several stories," agrees Damen. As well as the Sudan story — which prompted a parliamentary inquiry — she says ARIJ's investigation of hundreds of people imprisoned without charge in Yemen demonstrated the organisation's strength. That story also had an immediate impact, with about 1,600 Yemen prisoners released a few weeks after its publication. Of course, concedes Damen, not every story creates such big waves.

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**“Our secret sauce is that we’re a network. We support journalists and they need to be able to reach out to others in our network.”**

"We do about 50 to 60 investigations a year and have success with perhaps 10 to 15," she explains. "It's very difficult because in many cases the government or parliament doesn't react [to the story]. But it doesn't stop us from doing them because one day someone will come and use our investigation for real change."

Damen believes the shift to working online will be temporary. "Some people working at ARIJ meet twice a week online and [are bonded] like siblings by now. But people are social beings and love to see one another, to talk and walk together."

Damen anticipates adopting a hybrid model, where the real world coexists with the virtual. Because by offering its training online, ARIJ opened new doors:

"Going online helped us reach people whom we could never have reached before, especially women in conflict zones who could never travel," she says. "We had women in Gaza City, Libya and Iraq — women journalists who cannot travel but are getting the same attention as everyone else from our trainers. It gave them a huge push to work and learn — and it was emotional for them. We would love to continue doing that."

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## Programme facts

### PROGRAMME PERIOD

2016-2022 (Norway 2023)

### DONORS

SIDA, DAPP, Ford Foundation, OSF, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Swiss Development Cooperation SDC from 2021 onwards.

### FOCUS AREAS

- Media content production
- Investigative reporting
- Online media training
- Strengthening regional networks
- Supporting new initiatives
- Documentary films
- MENA law reform

# Laughing matters

A potent mix of street journalism and satire helped the online media outlet Bustop TV focus on topical issues in 2020 — including the coronavirus crisis



Satire is Bustop TV's calling card, but by venturing out into urban communities and interviewing people inside a bus, the media outlet enjoyed a straight-faced success in 2020.

## Zimbabwe

Social distancing, lockdowns and access to healthcare might not seem funny — but all three were topics that Bustop TV mined for comedy in 2020. The Zimbabwean youth-run media house, which was established in 2014, is known for satirical skits that tackle economic, political and social issues. Published online, the skits have a huge audience.

Kudzai Kwangwari, a community media advocate working with IMS, says Bustop TV is "daring and disruptive" — and that its use of comedy is especially potent. "They can cover any issue, from policy issues to presidential statements, and convert it into humour, which really works," he says. "It encourages the public to engage in discussion and dialogue."

According to Simbiso Marimbe, Zimbabwe programme manager at IMS, "content creators are finding new ways to express public sentiment about governance" in the southern African country, where freedom of expression is curtailed. The pandemic

provided plenty of grist for the mill at Bustop TV. A case in point? A skit about how the government managed to erect a private ward to care for the political and economic elite, while ordinary citizens infected with Covid-19 had to make do with poorly maintained public hospitals.

While satire remains Bustop TV's calling card, the Harare-based outlet enjoyed straight-faced success last year as well, venturing into urban communities to interview ordinary people about the delivery of public services such as healthcare, utilities and education, as well as more controversial topics like child marriage and LGBTQ+ rights.

Initially, the plan had been to travel by bus along popular routes, pick up locals and interview them in an onboard studio. When the pandemic parked the idea of the "People's Bus", the reporters headed into those communities anyway.

According to Bustop TV's founder, Lucky Aaroni, they "managed to cover stories that the mainstream media does not prioritise". Marimbe adds that with Zimbabwe's mainstream media "restricted

to elite spaces and elite issues", Bustop TV's approach enabled it to "bring more voices to the fore" and produce more "inclusive journalism". Indeed, not only did the Harare-based organisation reach its target audience of people aged 16 to 35, it also managed to bridge the urban-rural divide and address women's issues.

Aaroni says support from IMS was crucial in 2020. In particular, IMS helped Bustop TV to produce the People's Bus series, as well as source experts and professionals to take part. IMS's support also means that Bustop TV can afford to pay contributors to its news website, while the capacity-building workshops that IMS hosted in 2020 "contributed to the growth of Bustop TV as an organisation and us as individuals," Aaroni says.

## Programme facts

**PROGRAMME PERIOD**  
2019-2022

### DONORS

Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (with Fojo Media Institute) and European Union (EU) Delegation to Zimbabwe

### FOCUS AREAS

- Addressing information and communication gaps
- Support capacities of CSOs and local communities
- Strengthening media professionally and financially
- Citizen-centred, democratic policy implementation and practice

Indeed, not only did the Harare-based organisation reach its target audience of people aged 16 to 35, it also managed to bridge the urban-rural divide and address women's issues.





A Bangladeshi journalist with face mask works amid a coronavirus outbreak in Dhaka, Bangladesh, March 2020.

# Sustainable media improves society

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Business viability advisor Clare Cook wants partners to look at strategies that will consider both the long-term growth of public interest journalism and anticipate how to withstand short-term shocks

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## Interview

Clare Cook is IMS' business viability advisor. In her role, she supports IMS partners in tackling the business side of running a media outlet by looking at strategies that will consider both the long-term growth of public interest journalism and anticipate how to withstand short-term shocks.

"I believe support can be a catalyst for independent media becoming progressively more self-reliant through income diversification, new products and formats, better audience knowledge and data usage," says Clare Cook. "IMS' partners need business sustainability to help protect editorial independence. Ensuring sustainability is important, not just for those working in the news media industry, but

for better societies. Without it, their position as part of plural and diverse media landscapes will be thwarted."

## The building blocks of sustainability

Paradigm shifts over the past two decades in modes of consumption, competition, data and production have brought massive upheaval. Media outlets at all levels have struggled to maintain revenues and have faced challenges, whether transitioning to a sustainable model for digital distribution or designing new approaches that are native to the web.

PHOTO: JON CHAPPELL



Unlike many media owners who often consider sustainability to be a dark art, business viability advisor Clare Cook feels confident many challenges that can be overcome.

“We know media sustainability is a major challenge for our partners – and there’s little about the playing field that’s level,” says Clare Cook. “While the barriers to entry are low, the barriers to sustainability are anything but: high costs for technological tools, patchy audience data, under-resourced and overworked teams having to grapple with opaque algorithms.”

Having spent the last decade researching, consulting and mentoring independent news media globally has given Clare Cook a unique perspective on the field as well as a network of contacts in technology, media development and business. And unlike many media owners who often consider sustainability to be a dark art, Clare

Cook feels confident this is something that can be won.

“Often a clear vision and mission are building blocks. Some technology partners need to offer more, some news media need to do more of the heavy lifting in terms of experimenting and then sharing lessons learned – but together there are many challenges that can be overcome.”

### The value of collaboration

While many partners face similar challenges, each is still working in a unique context, and the solutions offered to them need to meet their individual needs. The approach

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Quality news costs money but finding diversified revenue sources is a fundamental challenge for media.

Clare Cook and her team take tailors support for each partner, whether through new products or services, creative advertising formats, new distributed content or membership packages.

“We can work with media outlets to generate revenue in ways that fit with their values: leveraging the relationships they’ve built with their audiences and offering products and services that strengthen those relationships by giving extra value to the communities they’ve created. We look for opportunities to offer solidarity, advice and networking, bridging the tech world to media development, between partners and agencies. There is also a growing recognition of the need to collaborate among media partners,” she explains.

Recognising the value of collaboration between partners led to a series of IMS partner webinars, which throughout 2020 provided public interest media with an opportunity to share lessons learned and best practices. One webinar showcased remarkable initiatives by Somalia’s Radio Ergo, Zimbabwe’s Bus Stop TV and Pakistan’s Lok Sujag-initiated pop-up newsrooms to cover more stories outside urban centres.

## Meeting the demands of 2020

2020 was coloured by the effects of the pandemic, and public interest journalism was no exception. The demand for reliable reporting at the peak of the Covid-19 crisis underscored the value of independent media outlets. While IMS partners saw record traffic on their websites, their revenues fell. For these partners to survive under continuously challenging conditions, Clare Cook recommends they lean on what makes them unique and take a diverse approach to improvements.

“A common thread is that independent public interest media sustain their operations by adapting to their niche in ways not seen by corporate or legacy media. This includes stimulating their ability to try things out, and to showcase others in similar contexts facing similar challenges to identify incremental steps that work. Contributing to sustainability is as much about small improvements in workflow as it is about rapid response, low-cost distribution solutions or building a new, high-end media platform. All are valid and valuable.”

### TUNISIA

## Media culture house connects journalists and community – and increase revenue

With support from IMS, Tunisian independent media platform Nawaat has established a new cultural hub in Tunis where their members can attend documentary film screenings, exhibitions, concerts and other events. According to co-founder Sami Ben Gharbia, these activities benefit the editorial room by keeping their fingers on the pulse of the community. “Our close relationship with our

readers improves our ability to produce relevant public interest content,” he says. On top of this, the new space allows Nawaat to rent out their event facilities and office spaces, and activities related to the house are expected to cover up to 30% of the media outlet’s expenses. A true win-win situation and currently a one-of-a-kind in Tunisia.

**As Covid-19 paved the way for false information and conspiracy theories in Tunisia, independent media platform Nawaat saw a growth in readers engaging with accountability journalism to counter fake news on social media. Nawaat’s new cultural space in Tunis improves the media’s ability to produce relevant public interest content.**



PHOTO: NAWAAT/IMS

There is a spectrum of enhancements that can be made as part of different business viability strategies, all working towards long-term sustainability. Providing better access to quality journalism through improved user experiences, using audience discovery and new audience engagement techniques and using data to inform decisions can amplify content outside of existing echo chambers. Partners' ability to leverage technological advances – such as a promising new podcasting app for low-cost distribution that speeds up journalistic production workflows – in the short-term can also help them future-orient their responses.

“Ultimately, I want to ignite interests and enable media partners to feel more confident in the business side of operations. Zooming out, I am committed to informing policy changes for better societies based on grassroots experiences in some of the most fragile markets in the world.”

#### BIO

Clare Cook is an award-winning journalist and business viability advisor for IMS. In parallel to her role at IMS, Clare is a senior lecturer at the University of Central Lancashire in the UK where she is course leader of a Masters of Journalism, Innovation and Leadership. She is co-founder of the Media Innovation Studio.

#### IMS' APPROACH

### Our definitions moving forward

**Business viability** refers to the capabilities on the business side of media operations at the organisational level and requirements of running those over time.

**Viability** is the potential or existing ability of individual media partners to cover the cost of producing and distributing public interest journalism without having to compromise their values and ethical standards. They fulfil a demand or perceived need for content.

**Sustainability** in economic and business terms is the ability of firms to continue their activities and endure over time. Media organisations and practitioners sustain the production of public interest content in the medium-to-long term and can withstand short-term shocks.

**Resilience** adds to sustainability the possibility of making a profit or growing. It refers to a site's ability to adapt in the longer term, and to being particularly adept at dealing with a lack of universally applicable or permanent solution. It requires having strategies for adaptation and to withstand shocks.

#### PAKISTAN

### Tackling trust deficit in media with public interest journalism

As censorship pressures have increased in recent years on legacy media in Pakistan, it has been forced to abandon its public interest mission resulting in a trust deficit for media consumers in a country of 200 million people. In the backdrop of exploding internet access and affordability, public interest news and information – as well as audiences – have migrated online hosted by non-legacy indie media start-ups high on passion but low on technical resources. “We have long struggled with aligning our journalism mission with a

business viability,” says Badar Alam, editor of Lok Sujag, a platform that has become representative of Pakistan's nascent but growing ecosystem of public interest journalism start-ups. With technical assistance of IMS, Lok Sujag in 2020 honed their new institutional strategy redefining their mission (“Voices from the margins of power”) and developing a business plan that fits. “We have improved our outreach to audiences through customized content for marginalized communities and begun attracting advertisers to our model,” says Alam.

Lok Sujag journalists at work in the office.

PHOTO: LOK SUJAG



# Access to reliable information is (also) a question of inequality

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Online disinformation has become one of the most discussed themes in relation to the challenges media faces. Here, Andreas Reventlow, Deputy Director of IMS, shares his view on the challenges laying ahead and why he is still an optimist

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## Interview

**In which ways does the issue of disinformation relate to IMS' work?**

“The partners we work with are those who guarantee good, trustworthy information. The whole point of disinformation is to undermine the concept of “truth” and the idea that you can actually trust something. It is not that people should uncritically trust journalism, but good pluralistic journalism is required as a base for that trust to emerge - which is the premise of

journalism. In that sense disinformation is a threat to journalism since it undermines the trust between public interest media and the public.”

**If we use Covid-19 as a prism to observe and understand the most recent developments around disinformation and digital freedom, what are we seeing then?**

“In general, social, economic and health disparities seem to have only gotten worse,

PHOTO: JUSTINA LESTON



**Andreas Reventlow joined IMS in 2011 and has extensive experience managing programmes on independent journalism, press freedom, and technology and human rights.**



PHOTO: LETYAR TINUMS

Reporters at work in the streets of Yangon, December 2020.

and what Covid-19 has highlighted is also how access to information – both online and offline – is a marker for inequality. It's become clear how little essential information actually reaches the less privileged groups worldwide, and during a pandemic, the health consequences have become all too obvious. Add to that how disinformation disproportionately affects these groups, and you have a very unfortunate cocktail.”

**Where does this development leave IMS, our partners and public interest media in general?**

“One of the biggest challenges for everybody who supports or produces public interest content is to find ways to reach the widest and most diverse possible audience. For one, we need to experiment more with different journalistic formats to reach audiences that otherwise wouldn't be reached. However, we need to overcome several fundamental challenges to succeed in this regard, in addition to coping with the direct consequences of the pandemic; the economic setback affecting media worldwide;

and the numerous media freedom restrictions that many governments have imposed using Covid-19 as a pretext to undermine critical, independent media.”

**Can you elaborate on what the obstacles are for public interest media when we talk about tech?**

“First of all, with the current surveillance capitalist model that the biggest tech companies are built on, there's little incentive to give access to public interest journalism. Basically, journalism that works solely to support the public has little chance to thrive on the premisses of capitalism as it exists today. Today, the power of the biggest tech companies has reached an unseen level, and we cannot change this situation without addressing their monopolistic nature and finding alternatives that can provide similar services in a manner that doesn't amplify current inequalities, that doesn't incentivise human rights violations and that are not easily manipulated by bad-faith actors. Such fundamental changes need to take place on a political level and

**MYANMAR**

**Countering disinformation during the Myanmar election**

As part of a year-long process leading up to the general elections in November 2020 in Myanmar, IMS-Fojo and partners initiated a project to counter disinformation and hate speech. Among the long list of results was an investigative series of articles by media partner Frontier that – inspired from the 'Shark-tank'-model by former Philippine IMS-partner Rappler – tracked and exposed online disinformation networks operating especially on Facebook. The coverage revealed several disinformation actors, which led to Facebook removing vast amounts of false and misleading content on the platform in addition to removing several accounts and pages spreading disinformation. Through transparently exposing these disinformation networks and the methods used, the effort also had an educational element to readers by highlighting various signs of inauthentic behaviour and showcasing how to verify online information.

There are more than 28 million Facebook users in Myanmar, a four-fold increase compared to the previous election in 2015.



by providing support to technological initiatives that are not premised on exploiting people's data and violating their privacy for the monetary gain of their investors."

#### Until these infrastructural changes occur, what is IMS' response?

"I think it's clear that journalism plays a key role in creating healthy information environments. Luckily, what is really positive in that regard is how many of our partners produce incredible, world-class public

interest journalism and marvellous visuals that set the bar for others to follow. And they manage to do this in repressive contexts and under conditions that are extremely harsh. Few reach very large audiences in their home countries. However, the number of these incredible outlets we're supporting have been growing over the past ten years, despite the overall deteriorating conditions for media in that period. So as long as there are these bright spots in an otherwise bleak 2020, then I believe there's reason to be optimistic."

#### ZIMBABWE

### The political misuse of Covid-19 information in Zimbabwe

Covid-19 has played well into the political climate in Zimbabwe where facts do not always matter.

"The government has used disinformation to portray itself as handling the Covid-19 pandemic in an exemplary manner, while opposition parties has used false stories to try and discredit the work that the government has been doing," explains Lifaqane Nare, Head of Programmes at ZimFact, an IMS partner and Zimbabwe's first

fact-checking platform.

Since the arrival of Covid-19 in early 2020, ZimFact have had their hands full debunking stories circulating on social media about alternative cures and immunity, but also with misleading or false statements from political actors.

In Zimbabwe, official information is either slow or non-existent, creating an environment where misinformation flourishes. To Cris Chinaka, founder of ZimFact, their mission is clear:

"We need to make it easier to find reliable information."

Zimbabwe Vice President Chiwenga receiving a shot of the Sinopham vaccine. March 2021, Harare, Zimbabwe.

PHOTO: KNOWLEDGE CHINGWECHA/GETTY IMAGES




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“What Covid-19 has highlighted is also how access to information – both online and offline – is a marker for inequality.”

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#### BIO

Andreas is the Deputy Director for Programme Development and Strategy at IMS. He has extensive experience in managing programmes on independent journalism, freedom of expression, media in conflict, and technology and human rights. In parallel to his role at IMS, he is a co-founder of the initiative 'Dansk Mandesamfund' which seeks to get more men involved in gender equality work.

# Keep media workers safe

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Producing quality journalism can be dangerous, and IMS strives to provide media workers with the means to do their work without having to self-censor out of fear. Our approach deploys “the three P’s” - prevention, protection and prosecution - through initiatives anchored in programme countries that provide media workers with knowledge and skills to avoid being harassed and attacked, help when they are, and which push for attackers to be brought to justice. This approach caters for the different safety and protection needs of media workers of different genders.

# Talkin' 'Bout a Revolution

By addressing the challenges that journalists face in northern Syria, a series of workshops has helped make the media sector more secure

## Syria

When a bomb rocked the northwestern Syrian city of Azaz, local journalist Sajid Al-Shimali grabbed his camera and headed to the scene. A security officer soon blocked his path. “He prevented me from filming and, when I wanted to talk to him about it, he was violent towards me and went as far as pointing his gun at me”, recalls al-Shimali, whose work documents Syria’s humanitarian crisis.

The incident typifies the challenges faced by journalists trying to cover the Syrian civil war, which is now in its eleventh year. In areas outside regime control, media workers struggle to operate safely or without harassment.

In 2020, however, significant progress came from a series of “stakeholder dialogue workshops” held in northern Syria between June and August. To discuss the challenges that journalists face and find ways to make the media sector more secure, two of IMS’s local partners — Baytna, a civil society organisation, and the Stabilisation Unit, an infrastructure development organisation — facilitated five workshops in three cities, including Azaz. The workshops were attended by 180 participants, including media organisations, freelance journalists, and local council representatives.

The workshops revealed that many locals view the media dimly, deeming journalists to be unreliable, partisan or profiting from people’s suffering. Local authorities also fail to provide support, in part because they misunderstand the role of independent media. And women journalists face particular challenges, including underrepresentation and cultural barriers.

Following the workshops, IMS helped

its partners give journalists tools to communicate constructively with their local communities and build trust and respect between them. One immediate consequence was a sharp drop in violations against journalists in the relevant region — from 34 in the first half of 2020 to four in the second half.

According to Bashar Abdul Kader, a key member of the Stabilisation Unit, the manner in which local security forces interact with media workers is changing and “local security forces are becoming more trusted by media workers”.

The aim, Kader says, is to hold “regular meetings between media workers, local government authorities, decision-makers and security forces to ensure the constant development of safety mechanisms and keep up to date with safety/security threats facing media workers”.

The stakeholder dialogue project will also try to help women journalists operate

**Baytna facilitated workshops in three cities to discuss the challenges that journalists face and find ways to make the media sector more secure.**

more securely within their communities, as well as to combat the pernicious influence of social media platforms.

Sajid Al-Shimali, who attended two workshops in Azaz, has already noticed the difference they’ve made, too. “The margin of freedom to cover the work and activities of institutions is somewhat more significant”, he says.

## Programme facts

**PROGRAMME PERIOD**  
2021-2023

**DONORS**  
Sida, Norad

### FOCUS AREAS

- Ensuring long term access to good journalism content reflecting and representing Syrian diversity
- Building institutional resilience and sustainability of media community
- Enhance engagement between public interest media and civil and civic society
- Safety for journalists and risk management for media outlets
- Enable accountability for human rights violations
- Enable conducive space for media locally through stakeholder dialogue and interaction
- Emphasize the importance of women's equal involvement in peace and security through media in accordance with UNSCR 1325



PHOTO: BAYTNA/IMS

# Mission control

## IMS continued its long-term support for the Gambian media sector in 2020 — paving the way for a groundbreaking legal challenge

### Gambia

Emil Touray has no trouble recalling how parlous life was for Gambian journalists during the 22-year rule of strongman Yahya Jammeh. “Persecution and prosecution of media workers, particularly journalists, were the hallmarks of the Jammeh administration”, says Touray, a former president of the Gambia Press Union who’s now executive director of FAME-DEV Gambia, a women’s communication and media entity whose main objective is to advance women’s rights through media advocacy and capacity building. “Torture was a tool for coercion and repression. The climate of fear we operated under forced us to engage in self-censorship so that we would not be brutalised by state security agents.”

Jammeh’s hatred of the free press — he routinely described journalists as “dead and rotten horses” and the “illegitimate sons of Africa” — also stoked a culture of impunity in which violence against journalists was commonplace. But his repressive rule ended in December 2016, following his defeat in the presidential election to Adama Barrow, whose campaign promised greater respect for human rights. After two decades of dictatorship, The Gambia is now enjoying the promise of lasting transformational change.

Its political transition has also provided IMS with a unique opportunity. In early 2017, IMS began a long-term, cross-sector engagement with multiple stakeholders in the west African country’s media sector. The mission involved a series of interviews with multiple actors in the media reform sector aimed at grasping the scope of the challenge, plus the establishment of a strategic media steering committee.

Two years later, IMS led a follow-up mission in the wake of a report presented to



**Collaborations with the Gambian media sector resulted in a report that informs the struggle against impunity.**

the UN’s Human Rights Council by Agnès Callamard, following her office’s inquiry into the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi. Callamard recommended several ways to fight impunity, including the development of a global protocol for investigating and responding to threats against journalists. To help support the development of a mechanism based on her recommendations, IMS launched a pilot project in Banjul in November 2019.

As part of this mission, IMS staff — along with expert legal consultants — met with lawyers, government officials, police personnel and other key players, including the Gambia National Human Rights Commission and the Gambia Press Union. IMS’s mission report was published in August 2020 and recognises that responding to threats and attacks against journalists means being prepared to scrutinise investigations and the laws that govern them. The overall mission reflects not only IMS’s innovative approach to holding perpetrators of attacks, killings and disappearances of journalists, media workers and human rights defenders to account, but also the value of the relationships it established with key stakeholders during its 2017 mission to The Gambia.

### Blossoming engagement

IMS’s long-term engagement with the Gambian media sector blossomed again in 2020. IMS enjoyed an ongoing partnership with GAMES (Gambia Media Support) and its partner GPU (Gambia Press Union), a collaboration that will include a series of training on digital safety, first aid for reporters and reporting during elections.

IMS was also invited to support strategic litigation aimed at challenging the constitutionality of Section 60 of the Criminal Code of The Gambia, which covers “defamation of foreign princes” and has been used to impose draconian penalties on journalists, including prison sentences. (Local journalists like to say that the country’s biggest problem is no longer its dictatorship, but its statute books.)

Specifically, IMS supported litigation research that began in July 2020 and led to FAME-DEV Gambia filing a case at the Gambian Supreme Court in March 2021. IMS is also supporting advocacy efforts to explain to the public why the law is unconstitutional and harmful to press freedom. “This is a colonial-era law which is inimical to press freedom,” says Touray, adding that if the Supreme Court strikes it down, “it will enlarge the democratic space and pave way for people to exercise their right to freedom of expression without fear of facing prosecution and arrest.” The hard work for the Gambian media continues, though the road ahead looks far less treacherous than it once did.

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“The climate of fear we operated under forced us to engage in self-censorship so that we would not be brutalised by state security agents.”



Journalists seen near a bomb-laden car in Afghanistan's capital Kabul in December, 2020. Throughout 2020, threats and violence against 132 journalists and media workers were documented, including murder and kidnap, according to a report by IMS partner Afghan Journalist Safety Committee. This is a 26 percent increase compared to 2019.

# BAJ of honour

In the face of unprecedented hostility towards the media, one organisation worked overtime to ensure the safety of journalists whose rights had been violated

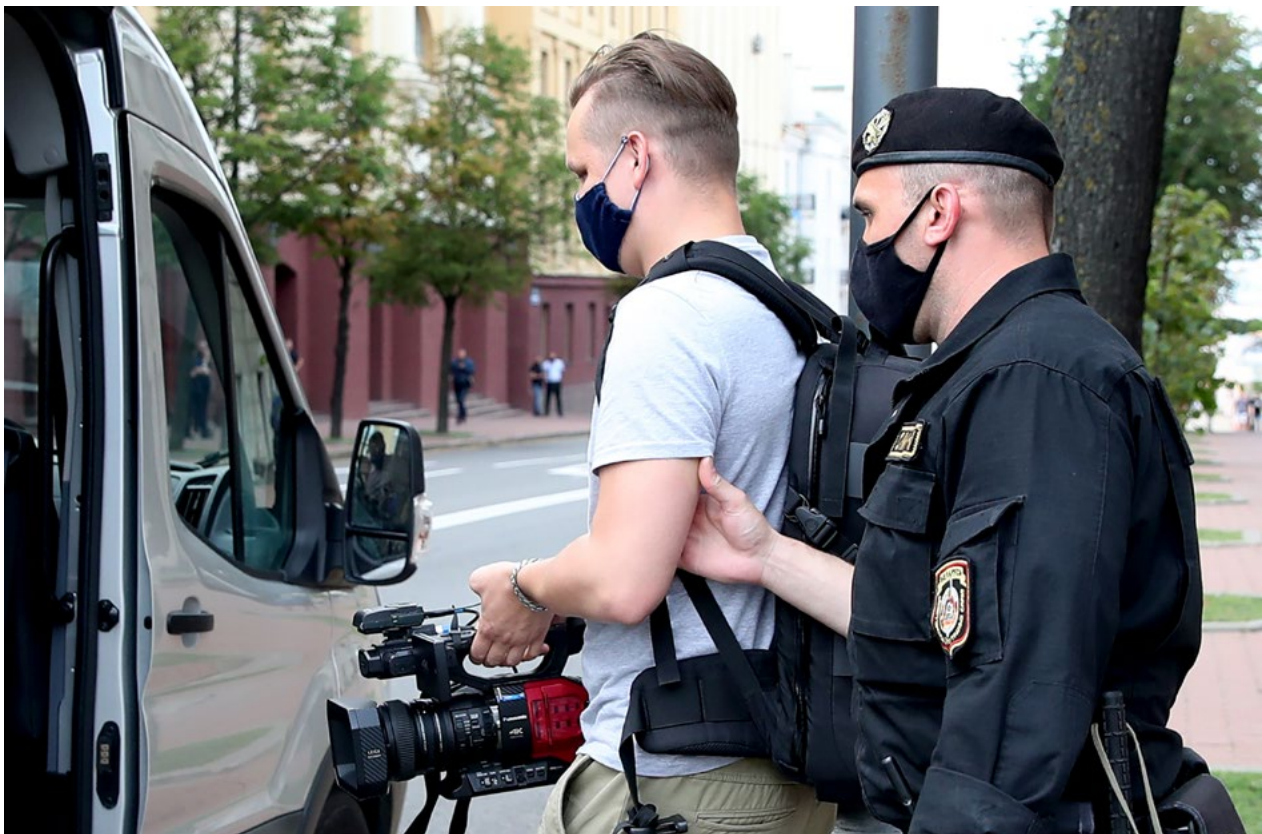


PHOTO: NATALIA FEDOSENKO/TASS/GETTY IMAGES

A journalist detained outside the Belarusian State Security Committee building, July 28, 2020.

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## Belarus

Natalia Lubneuskaya should have been safe. A reporter for *Nasha Niva*, one of the oldest weekly newspapers in Belarus, she was standing with a group of fellow journalists wearing protective vests marked with the word “PRESS”.

But that made no difference to the Belarusian law enforcement officer who stopped just metres away from the reporters and started firing rubber bullets at them. Lubneuskaya was shot in the knee and

spent 38 days in hospital.

She wasn't alone. As Belarusian journalists sought to cover the mass protests that swept Belarus in August 2020, following the disputed presidential election that saw the contested re-election of President Alexander Lukashenko, hundreds of them were assaulted, arrested or arbitrarily detained by the country's security forces.

According to the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ), which tracks violations of media rights in the country, there were at least 62 incidents of violence against

journalists in 2020 following the contested election. The most shocking cases occurred in the city of Hrodna, where one journalist had both of his arms broken by security forces and another had his front teeth knocked out by police officers.

A non-partisan NGO that promotes freedom of expression and independent journalism, BAJ was founded in 1995, a year after Lukashenko came to power and four years after the country's independence following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

“In terms of the harassment of journalists and the media, 2020 was the most

difficult year in the history of independent Belarus,” says Barys Haretski, BAJ’s deputy chairperson, adding that the majority of attacks on journalists came amid coverage of the presidential election and the protests that followed. In fact, BAJ registered 23 violations of media rights between January and May but more than 400 violations between August and October.

While the most common violation was arbitrary detention, the repression was “systemic”, Haretski says, with authorities using a range of tactics against the media. These included blocking internet access following the election; restricting mobile internet access during protests; blocking access to websites providing independent political coverage; obstructing the distribution of independent newspapers; seizing equipment; refusing to give accreditation to foreign journalists and stripping it from those who had received it; and prosecuting journalists.

Much of BAJ’s work in 2020 involved representing journalists whose rights had been violated and trying to ensure their safety. In the face of unprecedented hostility towards the media sector, Haretski says BAJ had to find new ways to support its members. “We’ve used all available channels at the Ministry of Internal Affairs in an attempt to negotiate the release of journalists and get permission to give food and clothes parcels to colleagues in prison,” he explains. “And we’ve changed our tactics. Since August, we’ve been doing our best to respond to incidents with reporters as fast as possible. Every day, even in the evening and at the weekend, the BAJ team are always available to find lawyers, promptly prepare all necessary legal documents, collect and disseminate information about the incident, convene a press conference, send out a press release, and provide legal and other assistance to journalists.”

Of course, BAJ faced another challenge in 2020: the need to operate during a pandemic — a situation made more alarming by the insouciance of Lukashenko himself, who refused to impose measures to combat Covid-19 and insisted that hard work, vodka and saunas would prevent its spread.

Reflecting on the most tumultuous year in the country’s recent past, Haretski says his organisation is proud of what it achieved. “We believe that BAJ responded



PHOTO: EVGENIY MAULETKA/AP PHOTO/SCANPIX

A cameraman films as Belarusian opposition supporters rally at Independence Square in Minsk, Belarus, August 2020.

to the challenges of 2020 very professionally,” he explains. “Never in the history of independent Belarus have we experienced repression at such scope and scale, especially under such pressing circumstances as a coronavirus pandemic. But in these circumstances, BAJ managed to reach a whole new level of performance.”

One indicator of BAJ’s success in 2020 is the surge in membership it has enjoyed. “Many journalists joined BAJ in the fall, seeing the quality and scope of our work, and made donations,” Haretski says.

Haretski also says BAJ benefited from collaboration with Belarusian and international organisations in 2020. Their support was “extremely important”, he says, especially in terms of “disseminating information and drawing attention to the problems of journalists” and ensuring that the situation in Belarus remained in the spotlight thanks to international media coverage.

Many months on from the start of the protests, Belarus continues to endure brutal repression, while its opposition has fragmented. The public face of the opposition, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya — who claims she won the election and is intent on toppling Lukashenko — remains in exile in Lithuania.

Despite the uncertainty, BAJ has its eye on the future, though. Its volunteers and lawyers have interviewed more than

120 journalists whose rights were violated, gathering documentation that may one day be used to hold the perpetrators to account — including the law enforcement officer whose rubber bullet put journalist Natalia Lubneuskaya in hospital for more than a month.

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**In November 2020 BAJ won the Canada-UK Media Freedom Award. The organisation was singled out for its ongoing commitment to journalistic ethics and principles and its perseverance and self-sacrifice in the face of crackdowns on media in Belarus.**

BAJ WAS NOMINATED BY THE EUROPEAN FEDERATION OF JOURNALISTS AND IMS.

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# The Safety Fund

The DJ Safety Fund supports journalists who are victimised as a direct result of their journalistic work. The support is made possible through donations made by members of the Danish Union of Journalists (DJ) and is used in cases where a journalist needs immediate protection as a result of a direct threat. Funds may cover urgent relocation, basic needs and legal or medical assistance.



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In 2020 a total of 41 media workers from 13 countries received individual support. The list includes freelancers, staff journalists, photographers, camera persons and a cartoonist. A professional from a Latin American journalist union also received support. 15 percent of all beneficiaries are women.

All cases are carefully vetted, and support is coordinated with other members of the Journalists in Distress (JID) Network, a group of 19 international organisations assisting journalists and media workers whose lives or careers are threatened because of their work.

For more information about how to apply, visit [mediasupport.org](https://mediasupport.org)



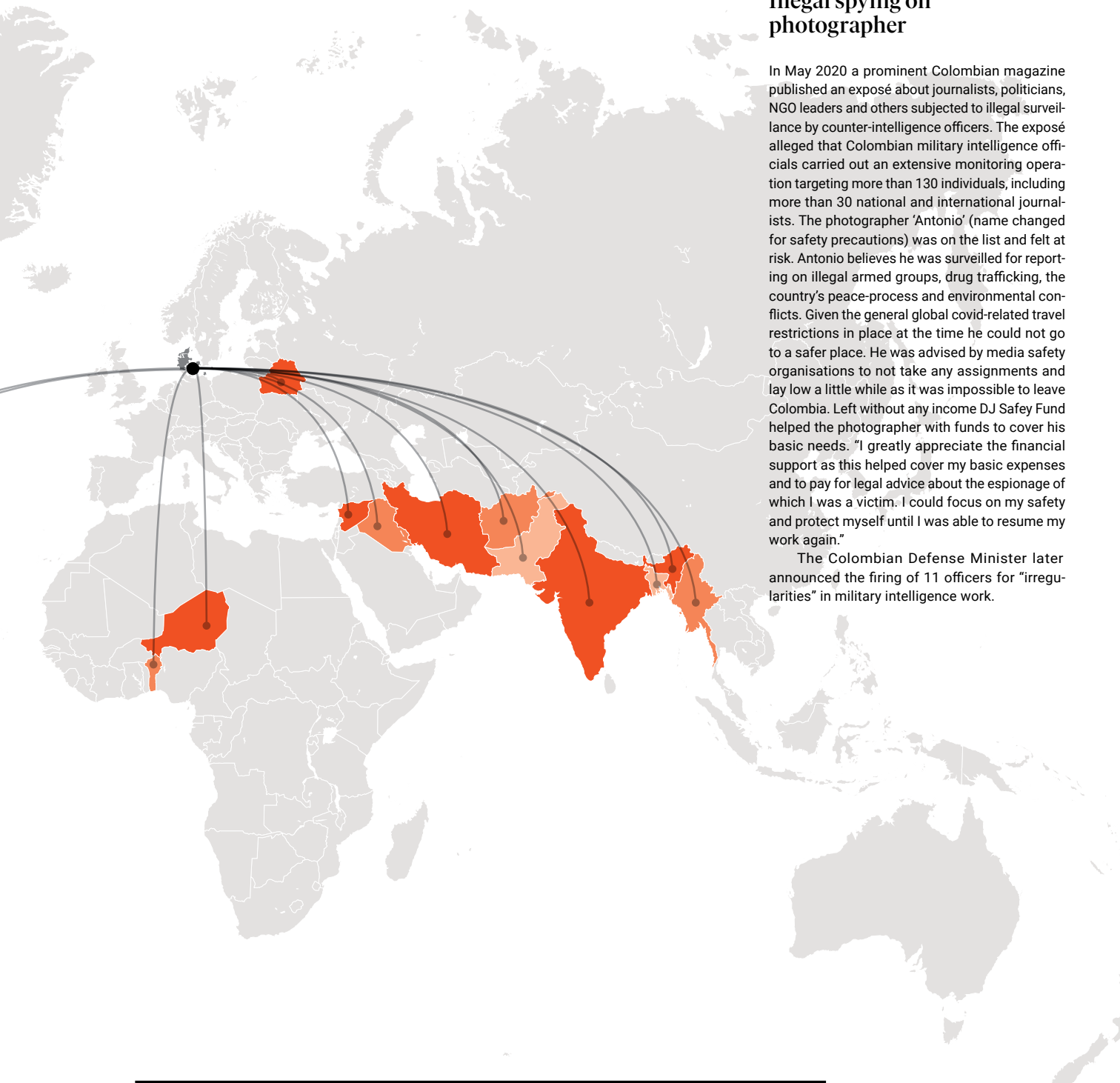


**COLOMBIA**

**Illegal spying on photographer**

In May 2020 a prominent Colombian magazine published an exposé about journalists, politicians, NGO leaders and others subjected to illegal surveillance by counter-intelligence officers. The exposé alleged that Colombian military intelligence officials carried out an extensive monitoring operation targeting more than 130 individuals, including more than 30 national and international journalists. The photographer 'Antonio' (name changed for safety precautions) was on the list and felt at risk. Antonio believes he was surveilled for reporting on illegal armed groups, drug trafficking, the country's peace-process and environmental conflicts. Given the general global covid-related travel restrictions in place at the time he could not go to a safer place. He was advised by media safety organisations to not take any assignments and lay low a little while as it was impossible to leave Colombia. Left without any income DJ Safe Fund helped the photographer with funds to cover his basic needs. "I greatly appreciate the financial support as this helped cover my basic expenses and to pay for legal advice about the espionage of which I was a victim. I could focus on my safety and protect myself until I was able to resume my work again."

The Colombian Defense Minister later announced the firing of 11 officers for "irregularities" in military intelligence work.



**Colombia**  
**Venezuela**  
**Niger**  
**Benin**  
**Belarus**

**Syria**  
**Iraq**  
**Iran**  
**Afghanistan**  
**Pakistan**

**India**  
**Bangladesh**  
**Myanmar**

# Rapid Response

IMS' Rapid Response Mechanism address the immediate needs of independent media and their audiences while longerterm solutions are put in place. Often these are a response to the flare up of a conflict or a humanitarian emergency, in which case Rapid Response interventions focus on ensuring that media can continue reporting as professionally and as safely as possible under the circumstances



PHOTO: GABRIEL GRIGOROV/GETTY IMAGES

Reporters make selfies by a road sign written in Armenian at an entrance to the village of Mincivan. On 21 October, 2020, Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev announced gaining control of settlements in Nagorno-Karabakh, including the village of Mincivan.

## Countering one-sided conflict reporting

### Armenia/Azerbaijan

On 27 September 2020, conflict broke out between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh. Control of the region has been an area of contention between the two countries since the breakup of the Soviet Union and a war that ended with a fragile ceasefire in

1994. Since then, Nagorno-Karabakh has remained part of Azerbaijan but controlled by separatist ethnic Armenians backed by the Armenian government. In both countries, media helped fuel nationalistic sentiments and thus contributed to the conflict. IMS decided to engage in order to promote impartial and professional coverage of the aftermath of the interstate conflict and facilitate discussion and debate

between the two sides.

The intervention was two-pronged: linking Armenian journalists with experienced European reporters in a mentorship program, leading to the production of more impartial and professional coverage of the aftermath of the conflict and the current political crisis; and establishing a partnership between two media partners from either side of the conflict. Here, Azeri IRFS and Armenian Epress.am jointly organised and produced a series of live programs facilitating discussion and debate regarding issues such as hate speech to women's role in peacebuilding. The two media organisations produced and broadcast a total of 20 live programs involving women and men from both countries. Statistical analysis showed a total of 980,000 views, 25,000 likes and 11,000 comments on Facebook and YouTube. Moreover, the live programs shed light on a number of important – and underreported – issues and acted as a countermeasure to the otherwise biased and one-sided coverage on both sides.

The brief but bitter and violent conflict killed several thousand soldiers on both sides and displaced tens of thousands of civilians. Hostilities came to an end with a ceasefire agreement signed on 10 November 2020, under which Armenia will return to Azerbaijan territories it occupied in 1994. The activities were intended as a response to the immediate needs in the wake of the conflict and therefore designed as a stand-alone effort. However, IRFS intends to continue the cross-border radio programs.

# Cyber-attacks no more

## Venezuela

The situation in Venezuela has been going from bad to worse over the past five years, with the government and opposition engaged in a bitter power struggle and widespread discontent fuelled by hyperinflation, power cuts, and shortages of food, water and medicine. More than five million people have left the country, including journalists who were facing arrest or other threats to their work and lives. Armando.info is an influential investigative journalism website reporting on all matters that contribute to the crisis in Venezuela, including corruption in other countries. As a result of their reporting Armando.info has experienced a number of serious cyber-attacks, compelling it to publish through social media rather than through a paywall, which affects its business model. To help secure and improve Armando.info's website IMS linked the media with a Swedish organisation specialising in secure hosting and with a website expert from Danwatch in Denmark with a view to upgrade and better secure its website.

This collaboration led to a migration of all content to Wordpress and a more user-friendly website, which is also easier to update and better secured against future attacks.

“With the messages on Nhamatanda radio, I start to get very worried and to know how to take care of myself. You saw that I only put on the mask when you started to send prevention messages”

**Selestino Abílio, Mozambique**

NHAMATANDA DISTRICT, SOFALA PROVINCE

## Mozambique

Originally planned to enable community radio stations to follow aid money pouring in after devastating cyclones hit Mozambique in 2019, this accountability journalism intervention launched in early 2020 but then had to be put on hold due to the Covid pandemic.

IMS and FORCOM, a national network for community radios and an implementing partner, agreed to build on the trainings that had already happened and launched a Covid awareness campaign instead. Through dedicated radio programs listeners were educated about how to prevent contagion. Another component included a community mobilization and awareness campaign that saw radios joining hands with local health experts and workers to reach faraway communities. Armed with megaphones and pre-designed messages, community radio staff fanned out to remote districts and met people in central squares, markets etc. The ten participating radios broadcast close to 2,000 spots in local languages and in Portuguese. Protective masks and disinfectants were also provided to the community radio stations.



“I am very happy for everything that I am listening to on the radio. Here in my community, there are few people who have television. Many people lost everything because of the cyclone. It is radio Búzi that is giving us information about Covid-19.”

**Alima Saquina, Mozambique**

BUZI DISTRICT, SOFALA PROVINCE



# Challenge Repressive Laws

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Laws ultimately define the environment in which the media operates, and therefore IMS supports partners looking to navigate and challenge laws that restrict media freedom, as well as partners pushing for reforms that uphold international human rights standards for free expression.

This may entail defending media workers and contesting unjust laws in court, as well as identifying laws that need to be changed, working for their reform and, once passed, making sure they are applied. IMS pays particular attention to finding balanced solutions to disinformation and hate speech, and the regulation of online content.

# Better legislate than never

Amid renewed concerns about Ethiopian press freedom in 2020, IMS helped shepherd the passage of a long overdue new media law

## Ethiopia

On World Press Freedom Day back in 2019, Ethiopian media workers had cause to celebrate. For the first time in years, not a single journalist was imprisoned in the east African country — a turnaround that could be attributed to the government of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, who had initiated a huge reform and transformation period after taking office in 2018.

In 2020, though, media freedom in Ethiopia appeared to be on shakier ground. For instance, journalist Kumerra Gemechu, who had worked for the Reuters news agency as a freelance cameraperson for a decade, was detained without charge in Addis Ababa on 24 December, eight days after two federal police officers assaulted Reuters photographer Tiksa Negeri. While the government denied that Gemechu had been detained because of his journalism, the contrast with the wave of optimism and reform that had marked the first two years of Abiy's premiership was plain to see.

The recent adoption of a new media law is a step in the opposite direction, however. The Media Proclamation, approved by Ethiopia's parliament in February 2021, introduces liberal new legislation that was broadly inspired by the most solid media laws on the African continent. Among other things, the law makes major changes concerning the independence of the media regulatory body; media ownership rules; and administrative and legal measures for violations of the law and content standards. It also decriminalises defamation and tries to strike a balance between the freedom and autonomy of the media and their obligations and responsibilities.

"The previous laws were vague and ambiguous and gave unreserved and un-

accountable power to the executive branch, in particular," says Solomon Goshu, the former head of independent Media Law Reform Working Group (MLRWG) who is now the Programme Officer for IMS-Fojo, responsible for its media reform component. "The laws were instrumental in oppressing freedom of expression and press freedom, and journalists and media institutions were harassed as a result of them."

The legislation process was supported by the Swedish-Danish media programme in Ethiopia, Media Reform in a Time of Change – Promoting Journalism and Democracy. The programme — which was developed and implemented by IMS and the Swedish Fojo Media Institute — was central to the process of supporting the MLRWG, which has formulated most of the legal texts as input to the reform. The programme also supported the work of getting Ethiopia's media sector parties and the government united in a common cause.

**Journalists and editors working in groups at a media self-regulation event implemented by IMS partner Mersa Media Institute.**

According to Goshu, it was vital to ensure that the proposed legislation was in line with best practices internationally and IMS was instrumental in "hiring international legal consultants who supported the drafting team on the international standardisation of the submission regarding freedom of expression".

While 2020 ended on a worrying note, there is much hope now that the new law will help promote the democratic transformation that the government promised back in 2018 and genuinely improve freedom of expression and media freedom in Ethiopia.

## Programme Facts

### PROGRAMME PERIOD

2019-2023: Media Reform in Times of Change (with Fojo Media Institute)  
2019-2023: Protecting Independent Media for Effective Development - PRIMED (with BBC Media Action and wider consortium)

### DONORS

Sweden, Denmark, FCDO

### FOCUS AREAS

- Institution building, cooperation and self-regulation
- Journalism, management and viability of media
- Media diversity
- Sectoral support for and defence of the media freedom
- Evidence and learning



PHOTO: MERSA MEDIA INSTITUTE

# Network effects

Inspired by an IMS-organised trip to Myanmar, a group of Sri Lankan media lawyers have started to make concrete interventions on behalf of their country's media sector



PHOTO: IMS

Presidential counselor Jagath Wickramanayake addressing the Asia regional journalist safety forum in Manila, the Philippines, Nov 2019.

## Sri Lanka

When a Sri Lankan television station asked President's Council Jagath Wickramanayake about the legal consequences for journalists who interview Covid-19 patients and their families, the eminent lawyer didn't mince his words. "There's no way that journalists can trespass into the homes of ordinary people to video-shoot them without their permission," Wickramanayake said — adding that those who did could well find themselves being accused of breach of privacy, criminal trespass and defamation.

Wickramanayake's advice to journalists — which came on World Press Freedom Day — wasn't the only welcome contribution he made to the Sri Lankan media sector last year. The President's Council also helped launch the Media Law Forum (MLF), an informal collective of senior

lawyers that is hoping to address two shortcomings in Sri Lanka's media landscape: the absence of a robust media law and policy framework — particularly when engaging with the government on new or amended media legislation — and the lack of media lawyers or organisations capable of providing journalists with legal aid.

"We were in a vacuum," says Ranga Kalansooriya, Asia Regional Advisor at IMS, about the circumstances that led to the launch of the MLF. "We had two very urgent requirements: to help journalists facing legal threats and to be engaged in the government's media law reform process. But we didn't have experts who could represent civil society and press defenders on legal grounds, so we had to start from scratch."

That process began in 2017, when IMS decided to identify Sri Lankan lawyers interested in media freedom and introduce them

to IMS "success stories" in similar situations. A case in point was the Myanmar Media Law Network (MMLN). The brainchild of IMS, the MMLN comprises lawyers working in the freedom of expression space in Myanmar — and in 2018, IMS took a handful of Sri Lankan lawyers to meet them and discuss lessons learned.

IMS also mobilised the embryonic legal collective by introducing its members to international legal experts. As well as providing mentorship and advice on best practices, they offered support with capacity-building, which helped the MLF become a fully fledged organisation in September 2020. IMS initially hosted the collective's weekly meetings, until Covid-19 restrictions forced them to convene online. IMS has also helped introduce the 15-strong group to other international donors.

The MLF has a dual mandate: to provide legal support to the media sector and to build a collective platform for media reform in Sri Lanka with the participation of lawyers, journalists and other relevant stakeholders.

"After two to three years in the making, we are live and will pioneer proactively sharing regional and international media law best practices with lawmakers, journalists and other stakeholders, so that Sri Lanka's landscape for a free media and free expression remains dynamic and inclusive," says Wickramanayake.

Wickramanayake was one of the lawyers who travelled with IMS to Myanmar in 2018 and describes the trip as instrumental in his thinking. "Conceptualising Sri Lanka's Media Law Forum is an honour and a responsibility," he explains today. "My inspiration for media law as a discipline came after an exposure visit to Myanmar where I realised that the media's freedom to report the truth must not come at the expense of the public's right to privacy."

Indeed, the MLF also participates in specialised media literacy initiatives for citizens — often highlighting citizens' rights over the media. It also advocates for the media's need to uphold higher editorial standards by exercising editorial independence and encourages adherence to media ethics in fostering a responsible media culture.

That said, the MLF's primary purpose is to address the absence of a robust media law and aims to convene discussions among

multiple stakeholders on media law, collate their input, and submit balanced assessments of proposed media legislation to uphold the public interest.

A case in point was its recent work with the Sri Lankan Broadcasters' Guild and many of the country's professional web journalists to provide a legal opinion on the government's proposed extension of Sri Lanka's archaic print media laws to the broadcast and new media sectors. The MLF held consultations with both groups, solicited their views and subsequently recommended new legislation rather than the government's proposed extension.

Another concrete intervention saw the MLF provide input on an anti-fake-news bill that the government is considering, which would provide a framework for taking action against anonymous social-media accounts and ostensibly allow the government to control dissent.

The MLF is aiming to develop and implement an outreach and sustainability plan; operate a legal mechanism to facilitate pro bono support for journalists and content producers; provide legal and digital protection and interventions for journalists and media workers; and generate

more awareness about the legal and digital assistance available to them. Kalansooriya is cautiously optimistic about the impact of these efforts. "We're seeing light at the end of the tunnel," he says.

## Programme Facts

### PROGRAMME PERIOD

2016-2019 (now moved to 2021-2023)

### DONORS

Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, British High Commission in Sri Lanka, European Union Mission to Sri Lanka, Canadian High Commission in Sri Lanka, Open Society Foundation

### FOCUS AREAS

- Media Law related Policy, Advocacy and Reforms
- Investigative journalism (Not a focus area in 2021-2023)
- Disinformation and fact-checking and developing community-centric counter narratives
- Digital Safety & Hygiene
- Public Interest Content production support for digital media start-ups
- Business strategies, sustainability and viability plans for digital media start-ups

“My inspiration for media law as a discipline came after an exposure visit to Myanmar where I realised that the media’s freedom to report the truth must not come at the expense of the public’s right to privacy.”

People buying newspapers at a stall in Colombo, Sri Lanka. The headlines are about the Sri Lanka Podu Jana Peramuna (SLPP) party winning the Parliamentary Elections, August 2020.



PHOTO: AKHIL A. JANWARDANA/GETTY IMAGES



PHOTO: EZRA ACANAN/GETTY IMAGES

# Striking back against SLAPP

In 2020, a new coalition made the case for adopting new EU rules to shield civil society organisations from a notorious type of legal harassment

## Global

When the Swedish business publication Realtid began looking at off-market transactions of shares in Eco Energy World (EEW) last September, ahead of EEW's stock market launch, it could never have imagined that its pursuit of public interest journalism would lead to an English courtroom.

But that's what happened just two months after Realtid's reporters put their questions to EEW and its Swedish owner, Svante Kumlin. Instead of exercising their right of reply, Kumlin and EEW filed a libel lawsuit in London against Realtid, its editor-in-chief and the two reporters.

According to civil society groups, the lawsuit against Realtid is a prime example of a form of legal harassment known as a

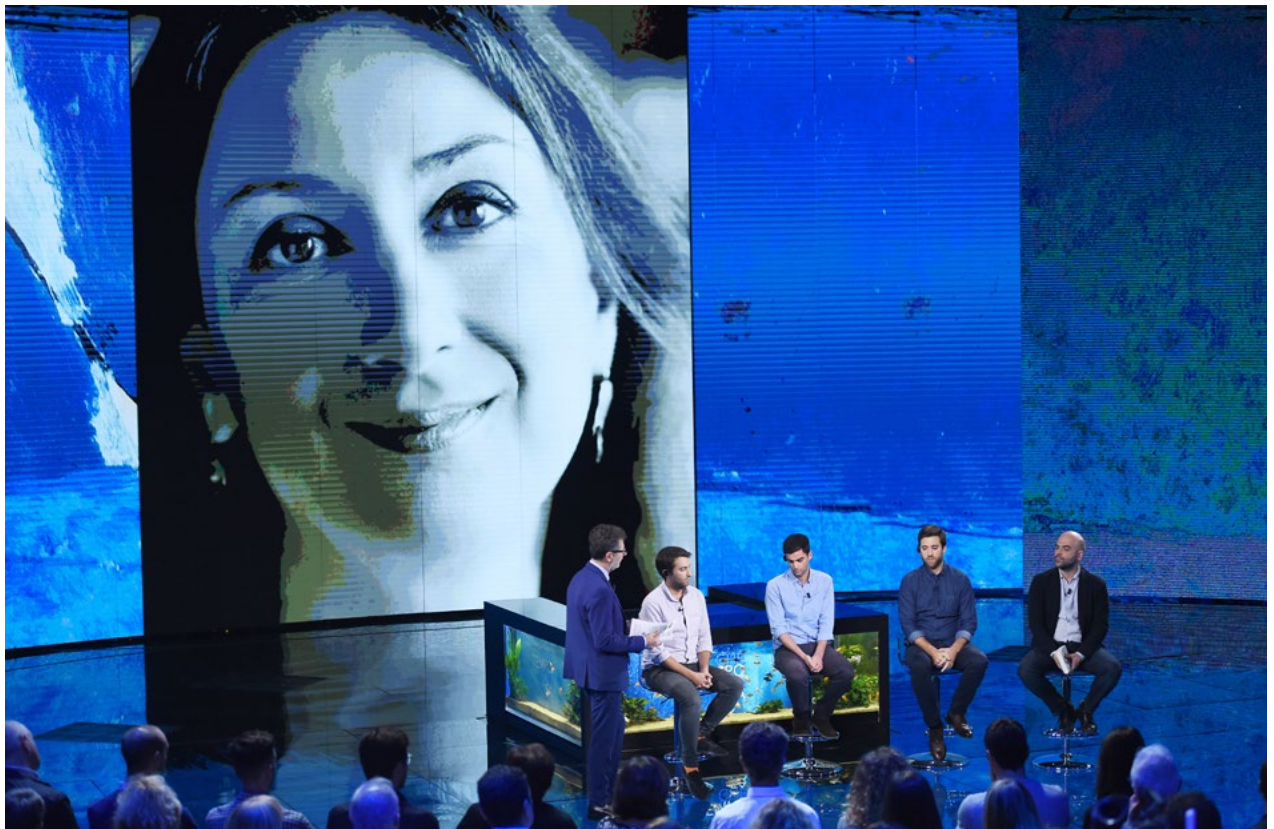
Maria Ressa, editor and CEO of Rappler, leaves a regional trial court after being convicted for cyber libel in June 2020, in Manila, Philippines. Maria Ressa, a veteran journalist and outspoken critic of President Rodrigo Duterte, is facing a string of libel, tax and securities charges, feared widely as moves by the government to intimidate critics and to stifle press freedom in the country.

Strategic lawsuit against public participation, or SLAPP. SLAPP suits are typically pursued by law firms on behalf of powerful individuals and organisations seeking to avoid public scrutiny. Their purpose is to drain defendants' financial and psychological resources and silence critical voices — to the obvious detriment of public participation.

Efforts to combat the use of SLAPP suits



PHOTO: STEFANIA DALESSANDRO/GETTY IMAGES



Andrew Caruana Galizia with his brothers Paul and Matthew attending a TV show in Italy, October 2019. At the time of her death, their mother, journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia was fighting 47 libel suits, most of which had been brought against her by people in the Maltese government or businessmen with close links to the ruling party.

got a boost in 2020, when almost 30 civil society organisations launched the Coalition Against SLAPPs in Europe (CASE). Their aim is to speak with one voice and make the case for the EU adopting targeted rules to specifically shield civil society organisations from SLAPP suits. The culmination of their work in 2020 was a model EU anti-SLAPP law proposing a set of rules which, if implemented, would help secure a safer environment for public watchdogs and public participation in Europe.

One of CASE's founder members is the Daphne Caruana Galizia Foundation — named in honour of the Maltese journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia, who was assassinated in 2017. At the time of her death, she was fighting 47 libel suits, most of which had been brought against her by people in the Maltese government or businessmen with close links to the ruling party.

"Over the last few years, we have seen a growing trend of abusive lawsuits such as these" says her son, Andrew Caruana Galizia. "They target anyone whose role

it is to hold the powerful to account, journalists, activists, whistleblowers, advocacy groups, and public watchdogs. With no laws currently in place in Europe to protect public watchdogs, there is little to stop the rich and the powerful from weaponising the legal system against their critics."

His testimony appeared in a web video that IMS produced after it joined CASE in 2020. With the pandemic preventing in-person meetings, the video was a clever way to communicate CASE's goals and was widely shared, among both coalition members and IMS's media partners in the EU. "We certainly helped spread the word," says Colette Heefner, a Global Safety Advisor at IMS. "The video crystallised everything the coalition had talked about."

The video has since been translated into German and attracted the attention of IMS's media partners who risk similar lawsuits in non-EU countries like Colombia, The Philippines, Belarus and Ukraine. In the face of legal harassment, then, civil society is increasingly looking to slap back.

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Efforts to combat the use of SLAPP suits got a boost in 2020, when almost 30 civil society organisations launched the Coalition Against SLAPPs in Europe.



# When media strengthens human rights – and vice versa

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2020 underlined the close linkage between human rights and media development, as well as showed the need for more and stronger collaborations, Gulnara Akhundova, Head of Global Response says

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## Interview

In Burkina Faso and Mali, local radio's 'women's listening clubs' supported by IMS bring topics of public interest to a wider audience. In 2020 the station for instance broadcasted stories on why the women's rights to buy land on equal terms as men, in Tapoa in Burkina Faso, are not upheld and pointed to environmental problem with plastic waste in the town of Gao in Mali.

"Our policies, projects and programmes – everything we do at IMS – aim at the realisation of human rights. Human rights principles guide our programmes in all phases – from initial assessment to final

evaluation," head of Global Response at IMS, Gulnara Akhundova, explains.

The focus leads to changes; like in the two above cases, where women in Tapoa now can acquire land by purchasing and the local authorities in Gao put in place a new sanitation strategy based on the proposals made by the women.

"The way we see it, robust, inclusive journalism that holds power to account is essential for the achievement of human rights. Journalism influences duty bearers, like governments, and holds them to account, but it also - when it has a human rights-based

PHOTO: LARKE POSSELT



Having a human rights based approach for instance means that a media ensures that a piece of vital information is not only accessible for a certain segment of the audience, but that this content is produced, packaged and distributed in a way that no individuals or groups are left behind, Gulnara Akhundova, Head of Global Response says.

approach – sensitize right holders, the people, about their rights. Bolstering this type of journalism is IMS’ raison d’être. And our partners are subscribed to human rights-based approach, which leads to a stronger impact of our work,” Gulnara explains.

As part of IMS’ human rights based framework Gulnara Akhundova is responsible for the organisation’s work to push for media freedom and freedom of expression in global and regional policies.

“We do so by influencing policy and public opinion and bringing local concerns to the global agenda and vice versa. In

2020 this work has been even more important than what we’ve seen before, due to Covid-19 and a rising tendency to closing spaces,” Gulnara Akhundova says, adding that the linkage between human rights, the Sustainable Development Goals and media is still somewhat new in media development.

## Global and local solutions

“IMS continues to explore the untapped potential of media to advocate for the sustainable development goals and the realisation of human rights. Good journalism however cannot bring about change on its own

— but it can be a strong part of a bigger coalition of actors and events that do bring about change,” Gulnara Akhundova says. This range from the global level, like the coalition of Safety of Journalists which works to promote the UN Plan of Action, (IMS is co-chairing), to supporting and partnering with local civil society organisations. “One of our strengths are that we can bring forward local solutions to global problems and vice versa,” she adds.

In 2020 an example of how civil society and media on local level works to strengthen human rights, comes from Iraq, where IMS’s partners work to encounter hate speech: The



The PumaPodcast Network had a total of 46,500 listeners by the end of 2019. One year later it had grown to 267,000. Puma Podcast took part in regional project #AsiaRightsRepressed where IMS collected examples of crackdowns on media freedom in Asia.

ASIA

## Pan-Asian journalism series sheds light on rights violations

Six media organisations from the IMS Asia Media Start-ups Network joined forces in the Asia Covid-19 Rights Repressed Journalism Series in October 2020 to shine light on human rights setbacks during Covid. Through podcasts, video stories, blog posts and articles, media from Nepal, Indonesia,

Myanmar, Pakistan, Cambodia and the Philippines documented how emergency laws, lockdown restrictions and clampdowns on media and civil society during the pandemic are affecting the most vulnerable. One example of a story is Herne Karta's story which points to migrants moving back and forth in poverty between Nepal and India, left to their own devices during times of high infections.

Coupled with supporting op-eds in *The Diplomat* (EU) and *Altinet* (Denmark) on the authoritarian trend sweeping through South and

South-East Asia, the initiative had an estimated audience reach of more than 275,000 people.

"It was our privilege to publish not only our own stories, but to share content from other media partners too," says Carl Javier, chief executive officer from Puma Podcast in the Philippines. "For us to unfold this globally spanning story we need to partner and collaborate, to support and boost each other as we move forward in the network together in this common cause that is independent journalism."

Iraqi Media House developed its 'Hatred Dictionary for journalists' to also include religious minorities. The dictionary aims at countering ethnic and political hate speech used in Iraqi media, and the work was developed in cooperation with religious minorities by asking them how they preferred to be presented in public debates.

## Coalitions to strengthen democracy

The work to strengthen human rights through media is truly global, and even more so in 2020, highlighted by the pandemic as well as the decline in freedom rights in many countries, also within Europe and neighbouring countries.

Gulnara Akhundova, born in Azerbaijan, started her work as a human rights defender in a part of the world, in which IMS has

enhanced its work in 2020, namely Eastern Europe.

"The eyes of the international society have been directed towards Eastern Europe during 2020. From examples of crackdowns on freedom of expression in some countries to grave human rights abuses and unspeakable violations of international law following the elections in Belarus. Though, what gives inspiration and hope is the tenacious, persistent and incredibly brave efforts of civil society and media, not the least in Belarus", Gulnara Akhundova says.

In response to democratic challenges in the region, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark in December 2020 presented 'The New Democracy Fund', which aims to support civil society partnerships to strengthen democratic development. IMS and four other Danish-based organisations are partnering with local organisation in Belarus,

Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan to promote democratic organisation of civil society; people-to-people exchange of experience and regional networking.

"The new partnership embodies the way of working: An active, independent, and diverse civil society, including media, who works united around core values of democracy, human rights, diversity and inclusion are important cornerstones of peaceful, and stable societies," Gulnara Akhundova states.

### BIO

Gulnara Akhundova is Head of Global Response and a human rights defender with wide-ranging international advocacy expertise. Gulnara Akhundova has reported on and advocated for journalists and media workers who have been censored, threatened, unjustly prosecuted or murdered.

GLOBAL

## Documenting the pandemic's impact on media

In 2020 IMS gathered information to document on the one hand a decline in press freedom, on the other a rising demand of trustworthy information. The report *Covid-19 and the media: A pandemic of the paradoxes*, was released to mark World Press Freedom Day 2021.

Findings showed that physical attacks against journalists were at a relatively low level in 2020, but online violence was at an all-time high, and overwhelmingly targeted at women. The report also found that even though the pandemic put journalists at the frontline of supplying essential health information to massively expanded

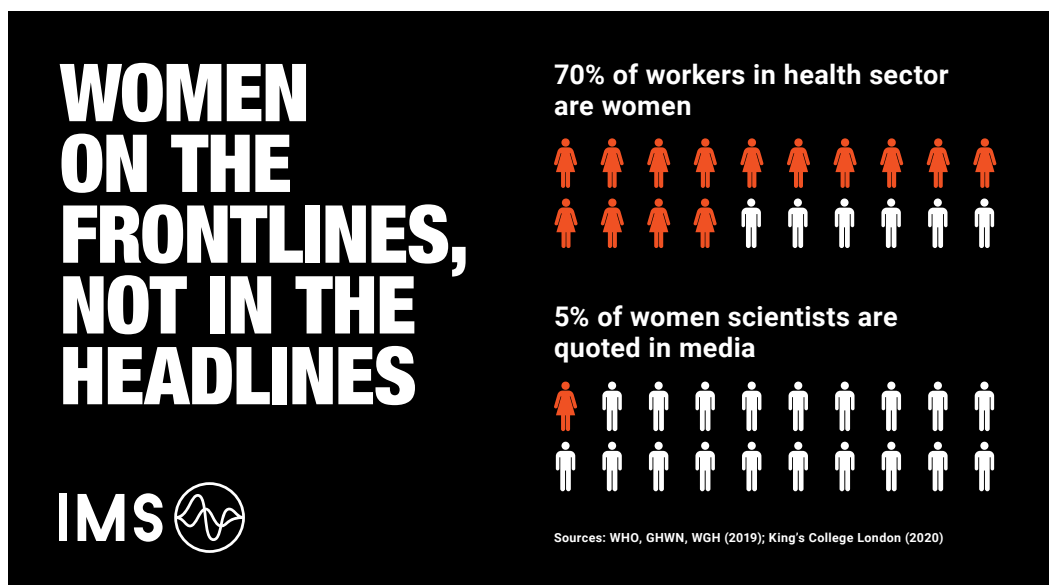
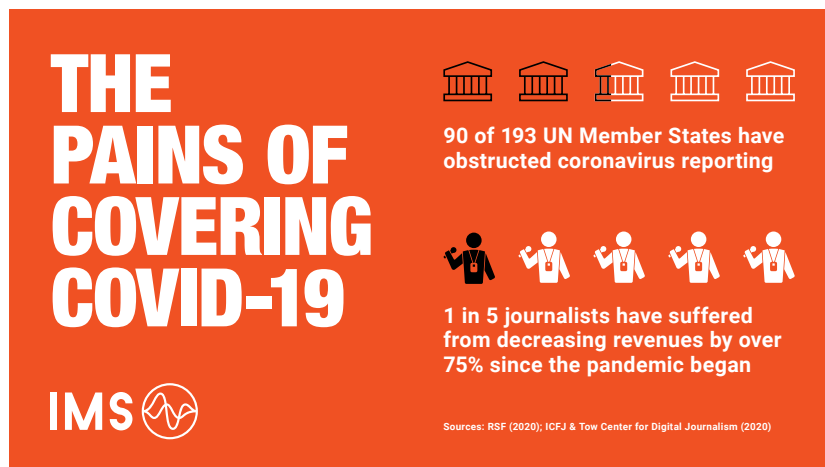
audiences, the decimated advertising revenues were leaving public interest media vulnerable to bankruptcy or to takeover by media barons with a political agenda.

The report was used as a tool to inform decision makers and media. IMS recommend that States investigate taxation of multinational technology companies to subsidize public interest media, as well as the imposition of targeted sanctions on individuals responsible for crimes against journalists. Further recommendations included countering misinformation by supporting fact-checking as a public good, reforming hate speech laws to enable prosecution of online assault and leveraging the demand for reliable information by training public interest journalists in media and information literacy.

Since 2006, more countries have become less democratic. During 2020 Covid-19 added pressure on democracies and human rights. In 2020 of all human rights violations, those against freedom of press topped the list.

[source Svenske V-Dem Institute]

Visuals from the report *Covid-19 and the media: A pandemic of the paradoxes*. The report features interviews with journalists from four IMS programme countries, Colombia, Ethiopia, Sri Lanka and Ukraine and success stories from independent media in Pakistan, the Philippines, Somalia and Zimbabwe.



# The good and the ugly side of media

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Journalists, often unknowingly, create stereotypical, victimizing portraits of women, but media also has the power to transform, as gender advisor Laura Gil has learned

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## Interview

Laura Gil is the programme advisor of IMS' 1325 programme. It is named after UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) which seek to increase women's participation and representation in peace processes, and it runs simultaneously in Colombia, Myanmar and Syria – three countries which are all torn by lengthy, brutal armed conflicts and which in different ways strive to find peaceful solutions. IMS' programme focus on increasing the number of women journalists reporting on peace processes and conflicts as well as making stories from women in excluded groups known to the public and decision makers.

Prior to joining IMS, Laura Gil, who has a background in international relations, worked on the drafting and implementation of the Victims and Land Restitution Law, a law that ultimately opened the door to peace negotiations in Colombia. In parallel to this, she had a column in the country's biggest newspaper. "I was a human rights defender who by accident became an opinion journalist, and I learned about the good, the bad and the ugly sides of media - for example how journalists, often unknowingly, transform women social leaders' strong, active narratives into stereotypical, victimizing portraits."

PHOTO: HOLMAN ESTEBAN SALGADO BERNAL



While 2020 was by all means a challenging year for women and for women's rights, it also fired up the fight says programme advisor Laura Gil.

But Laura Gil also realised the positive power that media can perform. "I came to see journalists not only as simple messengers, but actors of change," she explains. It is one of the main reasons she finds IMS' 1325 programme extraordinary. "This programme has an innovative twist that I haven't seen anywhere else: instead of considering the media an ally in promoting the gains of the 1325 resolution, IMS turned media into an active implementor."

### Reservation plans

A main goal of the programme is to further collaboration between local women's rights organisations and local media to promote a diverse coverage, expert knowledge and a gender and conflict sensitive approach. An example of this is a podcast published in 2020 with personal interviews of a group of indigenous Awá women from the south of Colombia. These women had all moved to a nearby big city as very young – down to eight years – in the hope to escape poverty and find a steady income to support their families, many lured in with false promises

of education and fair salaries alongside their work as housekeepers for city residents.

In the podcast they told their stories: after working under conditions bordering to slavery for decades, they attempted to move back home to their birth reservations, but the local indigenous authorities questioned their Awá identity and denied them access. After the podcast had aired on local indigenous radio, it stirred an intense debate among the local authorities and Awá women who are now trying to set up their own women's reservation.

“I learned about the good, the bad and the ugly sides of media - for example how journalists, often unknowingly, transform women social leaders’ strong, active narratives into stereotypical, victimizing portraits.”

“This issue is now discussed broadly, and the indigenous authorities is forced to take it seriously. To me, it’s amazing that these women – who have been largely invisible in public life and debate – have joined forces to establish a new life and demand to be heard,” Laura Gil says and underlines: “It’s a long and complex process to set up a new reservation, but I see it as a major contribution that they now are in a position to negotiate with authorities. It’s a great example of the power of media to push for positive change and women’s rights.”

Via two local partners, a media and women’s organisation, IMS supported the production of the podcast, from the initial research to publication and distribution. The programme supported trainings of the journalist in gender sensitive reporting and interviewing of sources. Thus, the podcast is also a good example of its untraditional approach to working with media. “We believe that media shouldn’t only engage with women’s organisations when they publish the main findings of a report – no, it should be a close, mutually beneficial collaboration where the organisations help the media gain access to stories,

sources and expert knowledge, and women’s many roles and voices in society will be portrayed accurately, respectful and stereotype-free,” Laura Gil explains.

## 2020: a trying year

It is no secret that 2020 was an exceptional year in many ways. According to UN, the outbreak of Covid-19 put at risk all the gains on women’s rights made during the past decades, and gender-based violence rose dramatically. As sad as this fact is, it also established the importance of programmes like IMS’ 1325 programme which focus specifically on those who are most vulnerable during conflicts and crises. “Women’s voices and needs were overlooked in media coverage of the pandemic as well, and it clearly emphasized that there is still a great need to work on gender equality in the media everywhere in the world – especially during a crisis,” she states.

The IMS programme managed to continue in all three countries during the pandemic, but with necessary adaptations: “As many of those we work with are women,

Still images from 'Domestic violence in the rise amid Covid' - a collaboration between various IMS media partners.

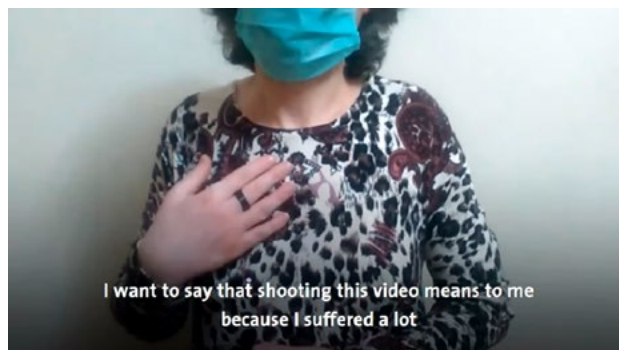


PHOTO: HARITV LOK SINGH, ROZANNA INKYPADJINS

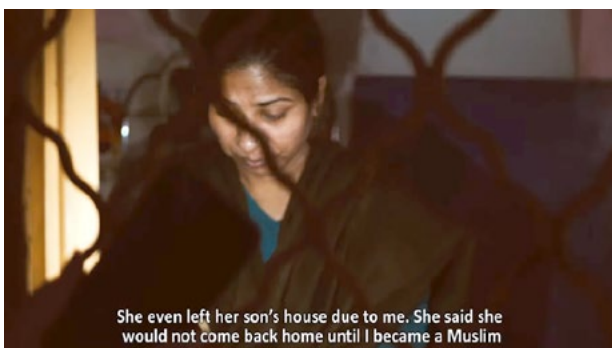
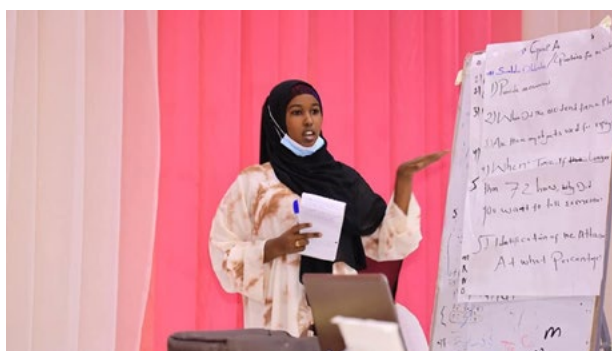






PHOTO: SWJO



In 2020 at least 85 male and female journalists from different Somali media took part in gender equality trainings aiming to create equitable job opportunities in the business. Trainings were organised by Somali Women Journalists Organisation and IMS-Fojo in Somalia.

we had to consider the gendered differentiated implications of the pandemic – we knew that men and women would be affected differently and that much of the domestic and caretaking work would fall on our women collaborators and sources, for example, so we had to be sensitive to their needs,” Laura Gil explains.

While 2020 was by all means a challenging year for women and for women’s rights, it also fired up the fight. “It felt like a collective sentiment of women all over the world that this is it! We’ve had it with the inequality and injustices. Structural changes must be made,” Laura Gil recalls. “At no other point in my lifetime, the gender differentiated consequences of a crisis has stood out so clearly, and everywhere I looked, women were calling out for change.”

**BIO**

Laura Gil is IMS programme advisor in Colombia and a feminist foreign affairs expert committed to the defense of human rights. Laura Gil has a broad experience as commentator.

**GLOBAL COLLABORATION**

**Rising abuse prompts media collaborations**

Domestic violence on the rise amid Covid was a joint journalistic production on rising gender based violence amid the Covid lockdown in 2020 initiated by IMS. Led by media start-ups Hari TV in Sri Lanka and Lok Sujag in Pakistan in cooperation with Rozana, Syria and Inkyfada in Tunisia and a freelance journalist in the Gambia, the montage series documented the lives of different protagonists – woman, men, LGBTIQ+ individuals, who have experienced heightened hardship or violence during Covid. The violence often sprang from social stigmas, political repression or economic discrimination related to gender norms in the respective country contexts. The series also provided a glimpse of how these individuals were overcoming the obstacles, or even thriving and how civil society initiatives or their own innovations were aiding their situation and that of others in their societies. The series was aired on the platforms of participating media in all four countries and led Hari TV in Sri Lanka to further produce a 12 episode flagship talk show focusing on the challenges facing women and LGBTIQ+.

**SOMALIA**

**Fighting sexist job advertisements to promote gender equality**

In April 2020, the Somali National TV (SNTV), run by the country’s government, advertised two vacant positions that could “only be applied by female journalists meeting the following conditions: “1) She must have at least a university degree, 2) She must not be older than 25 years of age, 3) She must have a TV style look in terms of body weight, height, and physical beauty, 4) She must have a media excellence voice and good style in clothing.”

IMS partner Somali Women Journalists Organization (SWJO) led dozens of critical statements directed at the Ministry of Information for their discriminatory and unequal treatment of women media workers, demanding an official apology and an immediate retraction of the advertisement. After three days of strong condemnations and public discussions, the ministry recalled the advertisement, apologized and later fired the director of SNTV.



Still image from the documentary 'The World Around Me' by Ousmane Samassékou, Mali. The film won the CPH:DOX main award in April 2021.

# Storytelling that moves the world

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While trust in the media is challenged globally, the independent documentary film industry and its audiences are growing. It has become one of the most influential ways of telling stories

Over the past 15 years, IMS has worked with documentary filmmaking and its ability to contribute to social, political and cultural change in some of the most trying parts of the world. By amplifying overlooked issues and voices rarely making it to mainstream media and public debate, the films supported by IMS have served as vehicles for developments in countries across Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa and the Middle East.

IMS Documentary Film works with independent filmmakers from around the world to develop new projects, especially in countries with a small or non-existing documentary film scene or in areas affected by conflict or unrest, and have a special focus on inclusion, gender equality, marginalised groups and diversity.

## Breaking migration taboos

An example of is the *The Last Shelter*, filmed in Mali during 2020, which won the main award at CPH:DOX 2021 - one of the world's most prominent documentary film festivals.

In the film, Malian director Ousmane Samassekou documents the lives of African migrants who come to The House of Migrants in the North Malian town of Gao where two groups temporarily live side by side: those who take shelter before attempting to cross the Sahara and returnees who have already made the attempt and now juggle broken dreams and, most often, traumas. Samassekou's film captures the impossible decisions they face in their quest for a better future and particularly explores the taboo surrounding returning home after an unsuccessful migration attempt. By zooming in on individuals of all genders and their stories, the film adds nuances to the debates and stereotypes that stick to the issues of migration.

IMS supported the film in the initial phase of the process with funds from Danida. This type of funding; also known as front-end funding, is a core element in IMS' Documentary Film strategy, and to most filmmakers such a grant is crucial as it gives legitimacy to the project and opens doors to additional funding. This was also the case with *The Last Shelter*.

"This boosted us a lot and enabled us to finish our production, leading to the creation of this beautiful movie," film director Ousmane Samassekou states. To IMS, finding and supporting local filmmakers is not only about the individual film, but also a way to support the development of film makers in often overlooked corners.

## Getting the films "out there"

In addition to the relatively small seed funding, IMS provided expert input and facilitated collaboration and linkages to the film industry. Henrik Underbjerg, IMS Documentary Film Advisor, explains:

"We do not only support with front-end funding, but also follow the films closely to make sure that they actually reach the right audiences. With *The Last Shelter*, for example, we played a role in the editing of the trailer and in promoting the film to important festivals."

After winning the CPH:DOX award, *The Last Shelter* received around 50 reviews in international film magazines, and the international attention has created a strong platform for Ousmane Samassekou for

expanding his local and global networks. IMS also organised public screenings at the Danish Embassy in Mali and in Burkina Faso, and to ensure broad local audiences' access to the film, IMS is negotiating with national TV stations in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger to broadcast it, reaching potentially up to 60 million people in areas with many young people - a group likely to consider migrating.

"We aim to support films and stories, which would not have made an impact on important audiences without IMS – audiences, both local and global, who are in need of nuanced perspectives and who are in a position to incite change," Henrik Underbjerg explains.

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TOTAL DOCUMENTARY PRODUCTION IN 2020:  
FEATURE DOCUMENTARIES: 16  
SHORT DOCUMENTARIES: 56

## SAHEL

### Will I die from Covid-19 or from starvation?

Empty streets, no planes were the sky, everything was silent.

While international travel restrictions and pressure on local journalists mounted under Covid-19 lockdown, IMS contracted filmmakers around the world to document their experiences during this very special moment in history. The outcome was "Living in Times of Coronavirus", a series of short films exploring a pandemic with stories from Lebanon, Syria, Tunisia, Ukraine and three countries in Sahel.

One of the filmmakers was Malian Ousmane Samassékou, who IMS had work with in relation to his documentary film *The Last Shelter*.

"Our society is deeply rooted in living together,

and it's not about to change anytime soon, despite the evil," Ousmane Samassékou said about the films that he and other local filmmakers produced from Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger in West Africa.

A serious challenge in the Sahel region was that a large part of the population did not believe in the existence of the virus. The films gave a glimpse into the local realities and the challenges that citizens faced due to the imposed regulations and restrictions. "How will we get food to eat?", "how do we live together?" and "will we die from this?" were some of the questions raised in the films.

The films were featured in collaboration with local media platforms in the regions.

Still image from the documentary 'The World Around Me' by Ousmane Samassékou, Mali.





IMS HAS SUPPORTED  
JOURNALISTS WITH PERSONAL  
PROTECTION EQUIPMENT (PPE)  
ACROSS PROGRAMMES.  
IN SOMALIA

**1.000** journalists

RECEIVED PPE  
THROUGHOUT 2020.



A Nepalese health personnel in protective gear collect nasal swab sample of a Nepalese journalist in Kathmandu, Nepal, May 2020. Nepal has designated media workers and journalists as essential workers.

# Building strong programmes for greater impact

2020 is the first implementation year of the IMS Strategy 2020-2023. In order to deliver on its goals, the organisation works with three so-called institutional 'HOWS', which cover *how* IMS enables programmes and partners to progress towards greater impact

## HOW 1: Adjusting strategies and enhancing internal capacity

- In 2020 geographic departments and country programmes initiated a process of adjusting strategic goals and approaches. This entailed comprehensive consultations.
- Covid-19 provided a sense of shared challenges propelling a series of trainings and webinars for staff and partners globally to share experiences and spur on the development of new media collaborations across countries and regions.
- IMS local partners are losing key means to generate income, which was exacerbated by the effects of Covid-19, making IMS ramp up its internal capacity on media business viability.

## HOW 2: An adept, accountable organization, ensuring equal opportunities

- As part of its ongoing work to safeguard staff and partners, IMS boosted internal procedures on preventing sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment. IMS took concrete steps throughout the year to re-affirm its strong commitment to battling such injustices.
- As Covid-19 forced our staff to work from home all over the world, IMS developed a fully digital workflow for internal processes. This enabled us to continue to support our partners from the first day of pandemic shutdowns and throughout the year.
- In 2020, IMS continued its strong focus on developing its financial management

and compliance capacity to handle the increasing number of grants.

## HOW 3: Diversified and durable funding

- In 2020, IMS secured important multi-year grants from the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida) and the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which are key to sustain the organisation's operations and strategic development. These grants also provide key support to our rapid response interventions in emergency situations.
- In 2020, IMS continued to diversify its funding sources and attracted new grants from the EU and from the Swiss Development Cooperation. These grants contribute to our work in Africa, MENA and Asia.
- IMS is also growing its public engagement in especially Denmark. In 2020, IMS' supporting members scheme saw a solid 54% increase to a total of 573 individuals, who directly support independent journalism, and at the same time saw an increase in reach, including a 100% growth in traffic to IMS platforms and doubling its Twitter followers.



# IMS Board 2020

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## Andrew Puddephatt

Chair of the Board, International Media Support, Board member,  
Global Partners Digital  
UNITED KINGDOM

## Gene Kimmelman

President and CEO, Public Knowledge, Georgetown University  
UNITED STATES

## Moukhtar Kocache

Independent advisor and consultant  
LEBANON/UNITED STATES

## Ann-Magrit Austenå

Vicechair of the board, Leadership development,  
Oslo Diocese, Church of Norway  
NORWAY

## Lars Møller

Journalist and media consultant  
DENMARK

## Eva Grambye

Deputy Director, The Danish Institute for Human Rights  
DENMARK

## Trine Nielsen

Principal, Danish School of Media and Journalism  
DENMARK

## Edetaen Ojo

Executive Director, Media Rights Agenda  
NIGERIA

## Louise Brincker

Chief Executive Officer, The Association of Danish Media  
DENMARK

## Tine Johansen

President, The Danish Union of Journalists  
DENMARK

## Annika Palo

Senior Adviser, Swedish International Development  
Cooperation Agency (Sida)  
SWEDEN

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IMS board members are volunteers; receives no salary for their work, except the chairperson, who receives a nominal fee.



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*“Freedom of the press is essential for providing citizens with access to trustworthy information, a right which is fundamental for societies if they aim to be free and democratic. Freedom of the press is under pressure everywhere in the world, on- as well as offline, and this development undermines both the fundamental structure of our societies and our trust in one another. IMS does impressive work to counter this development, and I am glad to be able to support these efforts as a board member wherever I can.”*

## Eva Grambye

Deputy Executive Director, International Division at The Danish Institute for Human Rights, joined the IMS board in the fall of 2020.



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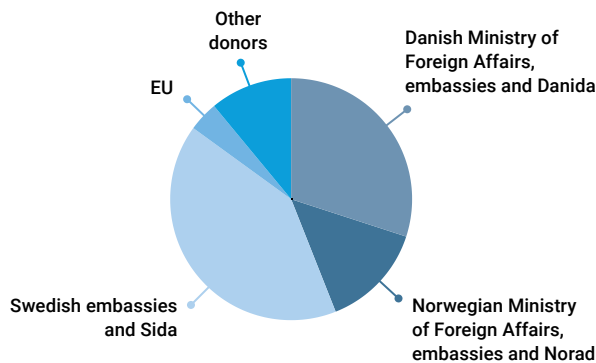
*“IMS builds long-term and trust-based relationships with media in very difficult environments. Enabling partners, ranging from innovative start-ups to stronger independent media houses or coalitions, is key to the organisation’s success in creating impact. At a time when the need for independent media is even greater than ever, it is such a pleasure to be part of this work. ”*

## Moukhtar Kocache

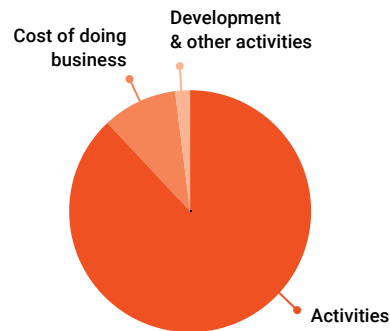
Independent advisor focusing on independent creative platforms, cultural and social justice philanthropy and other areas, joined the IMS board in 2018.

# Financial overview 2020

## Funding



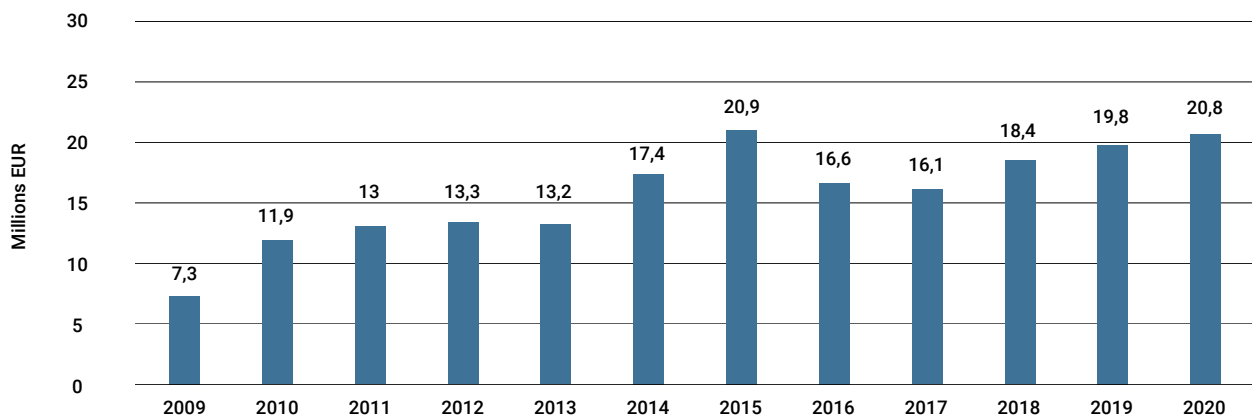
## Expenditures



	EUR	%
Swedish embassies and Sida	8,551,346	41%
Danish embassies and Danida	6,204,547	30%
Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, embassies and Norad	2,775,390	13%
EU	2,339,094	11%
Other donors	888.580	4%
<b>Total funding</b>	<b>20,758,957</b>	<b>100%</b>

	EUR	%
Activities	18,333,309	88%
Cost of doing business	1,975,428	10%
Development & other activities	450,220	2%
<b>Total expenditures</b>	<b>20,758,957</b>	<b>100%</b>

## Turnover 2009 - 2020





IMS quick facts

142

STAFF MEMBERS

36

STAFF NATIONALITIES

40

STAFF AVERAGE AGE

38

NEW STAFF MEMBERS IN 2020

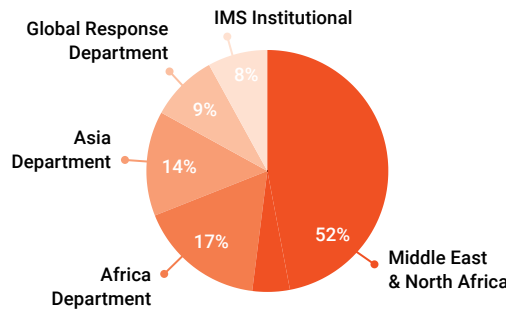
58%

FEMALE STAFF

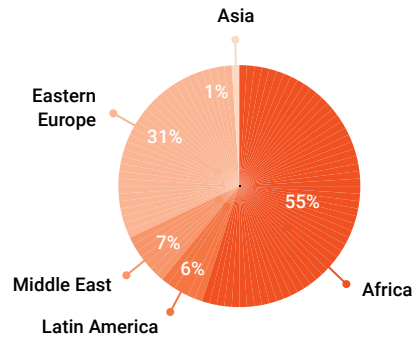
573

SUPPORTING MEMBERS

Regional expenditures



Rapid response expenditures



Examples of IMS partners' reach

THE SAHEL NETWORK OF COMMUNITY RADIO REACHED

2

MILLION RURAL SAHELIAN CITIZENS

THE SOMALIA RADIO ERGO HAD ESTIMATED

6

MILLION LISTENERS

SRI LANKAN HARI TV GREW IT'S SUBSCRIPTION BASE

45%

IN 8 MONTHS

THE MYANMAR FACT-CHECKING TV PROGRAMME BY DVB REACHED

2.9

MILLION VIEWERS

PARTNERS IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA REACHED AN ESTIMATED TOTAL OF

292

MILLION CITIZENS ON FACEBOOK ALONE

# Thank you to our donors

IMS' cause is increasingly important and a rising number of donors\* are committing to support the work. For that, we are grateful! We strive to have a diverse funding portfolio to enable our ongoing development and support to the media corporations, journalists, start-ups, alliances and coalitions that we partner with.

\* WE KEEP OUR INDEPENDENCE AND SUPPORT WILL GIVE NO ACCESS TO DECISIONS NOR CONTENT NEITHER WITHIN THE ORGANISATION NOR AMONG IMS PARTNERS.

IMS' biggest institutional donors are:



MINISTRY OF  
FOREIGN AFFAIRS  
OF DENMARK  
*Danida*



Norwegian Ministry  
of Foreign Affairs



In 2020, we also received support from a number of other donors:

Swiss Foreign  
Ministry

Ford  
Foundation

Google News  
Initiative

The Open Society  
Foundations

Members of the Danish  
Union of Journalists

During a pandemic journalists all over the world need protection gear. In 2020 this demand led the Swedish company Gibson Medical to donate 10,000 facemasks, to be distributed among IMS' partners and media workers. Michael Yim, Founder, says:

“Journalists are in the frontline and necessary in times of crisis. It was an easy choice for Gibson Medical to support IMS with an in-kind donation, given with no restrictions.”



Michael Yim, Founder,  
Gibson Medical



Robin Johansen,  
IMS individual supporter

In Denmark IMS invite individuals to become individual supporting members. This is a way for people to support the mission of strengthening good journalism and improve societies. Robin Johansen, an individual supporter explains:

“People can only live and function well if they can also think and speak freely. That is why free media and independent journalists are crucial for citizens around the world. We need a free press in order to develop open and democratic societies.”

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# Support independent media

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Democratic values are under threat worldwide. You can help push back against the rising tide of disinformation and authoritarianism by supporting independent media in some of the most repressive environments across the globe.

Your donation makes it possible for local journalists to uncover corruption, giving people news and channels, so that they can demand accountability.

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## Support our work

International donations:  
[mediasupport.org/donate](https://mediasupport.org/donate)

Donations from within Denmark:  
mobile pay: 98209  
[dk.mediasupport.org/stot/donation/](https://dk.mediasupport.org/stot/donation/)

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## Be part of the IMS network

Sign up to receive news from IMS  
[mediasupport.org/newsletter](https://mediasupport.org/newsletter)

Follow us on social media  
 [forfreemedia](#)  
 [InternationalMediaSupport](#)

Contact us with questions on how to support our work at [info@mediasupport.org](mailto:info@mediasupport.org)

*IMS' vision of peaceful, stable and democratic societies sustained, supported and promoted through strong and effective public interest media has never been as relevant during the organisation's 20-year history as it is today.*

[mediasupport.org](https://mediasupport.org)

 InternationalMediaSupport

 forfreedia



GOOD JOURNALISM | BETTER SOCIETIES