



**PRIMED**

PROTECTING INDEPENDENT MEDIA  
FOR EFFECTIVE DEVELOPMENT

**GLOBAL**

# Public subsidy to independent media

What works (and what doesn't)

LEARNING BRIEF



2024



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## About PRIMED

**The programme Protecting Independent Media for Effective Development (PRIMED) was designed to support public interest media content provision in three very different media environments –Bangladesh, Ethiopia and Sierra Leone. It also aimed to create and share learning to contribute to a more targeted and impactful global approach to supporting media outlets.**

A three-year programme that ran from late 2020, PRIMED was implemented by a consortium of media support organisations with expertise in different aspects of media and development. These were BBC Media Action (consortium lead), Free Press Unlimited (FPU), International Media Support (IMS) and Media Development Investment Fund (MDIF), with further contributions from Global Forum for Media Development (GFMD), and The Communication Initiative (CI).

PRIMED sought to address the challenges facing public interest media at both outlet and environment level. The programme involved working with selected media outlets to increase

resilience to political and economic pressures. At the same time, it supported the development of information ecosystems that enable a better flow of trusted public interest media content. Gender equality and inclusion were integrated across the programme.

To create and share learning about effective media support in different contexts, PRIMED used the insights and data gained during its implementation phase to prepare this series of learning briefs. These attempt to answer key questions in relation to independent media and media support:

- The financial viability of media organisations (led by MDIF)
- The effectiveness of public subsidies to public interest media (led by BBC Media Action)
- Improving gender equality in media workplaces, content and audiences (led by FPU)
- The role of local coalitions in strengthening media ecosystems (led by IMS)





# Introduction

## Why read this brief

There are consequences for society, politics and development if public interest media no longer exist. The market model that has sustained most independent journalism in modern history has largely broken down. The failure of the market to provide what UNESCO calls “information as a public good”, is most acute in the low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) where that information is often most vital. Multiple strategies adopted especially over the last decade as this model has broken down, to solve this problem have failed, or at best been small points of success.

Other briefs in this series summarise the innovation and application of fresh, market-based approaches to making independent journalism financially and commercially viable. But this brief argues that, especially in low- and many middle-income settings, these approaches will be vital but insufficient to ensure media sustainability.

This learning brief summarises the lessons learned from the PRIMED programme and associated synthesising of experience related to whether fresh approaches to public subsidy can help to ensure more sustainable media systems. It builds on a PRIMED working paper published in April 2021 prepared for UNESCO World Press Freedom Day, which celebrated the 30th anniversary of the landmark Windhoek Declaration on press freedom.<sup>1</sup>

That working paper outlines the financial challenges confronting independent media in LMICs and argues for treating independent media and the information it generates as a “**public good**” (the theme of the UNESCO conference). The paper argues that, particularly given few credible alternatives, fresh energy and resources should be explored in supporting public subsidy to independent, public interest media. It also sets out a series of options and approaches to prioritising public subsidy. “Public subsidy” is funding that is allocated with a clear public purpose, and a credible, legitimate and effective set of governance arrangements to ensure that it serves the public interest and is

independent of the interests of those providing the funding.

Historically, public subsidy has been provided when markets fail in providing essential public benefits. Public subsidy for independent media, as a partial solution to sustaining independent journalism, is contested by some on the grounds of principle and workability. The former because some argue that any substantial financial support to media organisations that involves a governmental role inevitably undermines the independence of a free press. And the latter because models of public subsidy have not been clearly shown to be effective in sustaining independent media, especially in LMICs.

The focus of this learning brief is on the workability of public subsidy to independent, public interest media. It disagrees with in principle arguments against public subsidy as a policy option, not least because the BBC provides a century old example of how public subsidy can be arranged in ways that guarantee editorial independence (see Box 1).<sup>2</sup> While the focus of this paper is on diverse models of public subsidy (not public service broadcasting), it does make an assumption – based on BBC Media Action’s experience – that public subsidy can be consistent with editorial independence.

This brief aims to answer three questions about the workability of public subsidy as a potential solution to media viability in low- and middle-income settings:

- Under what conditions are approaches to public subsidy of independent media worth exploring, especially in LMICs?
- Which strategies are most effective at encouraging reform-minded government and regulatory institutions to explore subsidising independent media?
- Which public subsidy strategies are likely to work in sustaining independent media, while fostering innovation and guaranteeing independence?

## Why this issue matters

The [collapse of media markets](#)<sup>3</sup> and the consequent degradation of independent media has accelerated over recent years. This collapse is principally a consequence of three main trends:

- the accelerating migration of advertising from media (especially print media) to technology platforms
- the extreme hit on media incomes caused by the Covid-19 pandemic<sup>4</sup>

- the intensifying financial and political co-option of independent media by autocratic actors and others with resources intent on exerting political influence

While the picture is not uniform, and many independent digital media start-ups have sought to find fresh ways of sustaining their operations, these are often significantly dependent on philanthropy.<sup>5</sup>

### Box 1: Public subsidy and editorial independence: The BBC

**The BBC, the UK's public service broadcaster, was founded in 1922. It is publicly funded principally through a compulsory, legally enforceable licence fee paid for by anyone who consumes BBC services in the UK (direct government funding also supports the BBC World Service).**

The BBC "Royal Charter" – in effect its constitution – sets out its public purposes and is designed to guarantee its independence. The BBC's history reads as a litany of episodes where governments have sought to influence the BBC and the institution has sought to resist that influence.<sup>6</sup> During a General Strike in 1926, Winston Churchill, then the UK's finance minister, sought to commandeer the BBC to report the government's line. The BBC's founding Director General, Lord Reith, refused to curtail its coverage or broadcast what he considered to be government propaganda (although he was also accused of not fully representing the views of opposition parties or interests).

Multiple crises and confrontations with UK governments have occurred since, most notably during times of war, ranging from the 1956 Suez crisis to the 1982 Falklands conflict and the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Today the BBC is the focus of consistent criticism from across the political spectrum for its coverage of contentious issues such as Brexit. The institution is also under acute pressure from the current government, which is reviewing its financing.

Opinions will differ as to whether the BBC has always and sufficiently resisted government interference, but it remains the most used and trusted source of information in the UK<sup>7</sup> (especially in times of emergency such as the Covid-19 pandemic) and continues to have high trust levels internationally.

After more than a century of existence, the BBC, together with other long established public service broadcasters, continues to guard its editorial independence fiercely. For all the challenges that entails, it provides a clear example that public funding can be consistent with media freedom. But the BBC is also a product of a particular historical moment and context.

As media organisations around the world become more financially vulnerable and increasingly prone to being co-opted by oligarchs or other political or commercial interests, it is reasonable to assert that public funding can, in at least some circumstances, offer an effective guarantee of editorial independence.

But multiple efforts over decades to support the development of public service media models based on the BBC or other successful public service broadcasters have rarely succeeded.<sup>8</sup> This brief does not argue that this is an easy model to replicate, and in any case countries should forge their own models on their own terms according to their own contexts.





## The PRIMED programme and its work on public subsidy

The PRIMED programme provided in-depth programmatic support to media partners, especially in Sierra Leone, to develop innovative new approaches to public subsidy in the sector (see Box 2 – Supporting Public Service Media in Sierra Leone). It also commissioned a series of detailed analyses on market conditions and other approaches to public subsidy.

These included:

### Public funding for private media in the Middle East and North Africa region by Sarah Zaarour (2022),<sup>9</sup> which examines:

- The establishment of a national fund in **Morocco** under government supervision and without independent governance dispensing more than US\$100 million to the press sector alone between 2005 and 2020. The report highlights:
  - criticisms of the fund, including its heavy focus on supporting a very small number of large institutions; and its lack of independence from government; its failure to encourage innovation and enable media organisations to adapt to deteriorating market conditions
  - the fund's importance in *“providing a lifeline to the Moroccan press sector for 15 years, it has saved jobs and protected the sector from collapsing which has been the fate of the press in most [Middle Eastern and North African] countries”*
- Public funding arrangements in **Tunisia**, in a context where advertising revenues have fallen dramatically, with the print media sector attracting only US\$1.5 million in such revenue by 2020. The report particularly highlights:
  - Efforts to create a new and independent public advertising agency. Public advertising has a highly contentious history in Tunisia, particularly given its use by former dictator Ben Ali to control media and ensure loyalty. In 2021 the government allocated around €7 million in public advertising but its allocation was perceived as opaque. In response, the publishers' association and journalists' union agreed to create an autonomous national agency to collect public advertising revenues and redistribute them to print and online newspapers. However, the law required to create this agency has not yet been passed, and democratic conditions in the country have deteriorated.
- The establishment by the media regulatory agency Haute Autorité Indépendante de la Communication Audiovisuelle (HAICA) of a €50,000 fund to support community radio in partnership with UNESCO and the French Institute in Tunisia. However, this funding has been both very small and dependent on international, rather than national, funding sources.
- Tax breaks and reduced fees and social contributions designed, in theory, to support the media sector. Zaarour's report found that the tax breaks had mostly benefited large media houses, and that media organisations had been unable to take advantage of the reductions in social contributions.
- The fact that despite Tunisia having one of the most vibrant media sectors in the region, it has been heavily dependent on external (mostly European) funding and no long-term, structural solutions to setting up public funding arrangements have yet materialised despite substantial effort, imagination and advocacy.
- A state-controlled media fund in **Mauritania** established in 2012, which has now reached €500,000 per year in grants with more than 300 successful applications. The fund has a board that, although it includes representatives from the print and broadcast media, is heavily dominated by state or state-appointed representatives, leading to criticism that it is used to control rather than support the media. A National Commission for Media Reform recommended increased financial support as well as regulatory and other changes to reduce the dominance of the state but these recommendations have not yet been implemented.

**Government and industry led initiatives to support the development of the media market: case for Kenya by Dr Haron Mwangi (2022)<sup>10</sup>**

This paper documents how, in one of the most complex and competitive media markets in the world, media houses have found ways to exert collective advocacy with the Kenyan government and how discussions between industry and government have generated credible potential policy solutions to support the media sector.

These include the creation of a major, publicly backed and independently managed universal access fund for independent public interest media, reform of government advertising (with practical recommendations on how this could be structured), joined-up government/industry engagement with major technology platforms to improve support for public interest media, and other proposals to explore opportunities provided by a more coherent approach between media and telecommunication regulation.

This paper was prepared before Kenya's 2022 election. Political conditions have made it challenging to implement greater public investment in the Kenyan media, which continues to weaken.

**Indirect and Direct Subsidies for Media: the European experience by Milan Živković and Karolina Leaković (2022)<sup>11</sup>**

This paper provides a detailed analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of different public subsidy regimes from the European context, drawing especially on the experiences of Croatia, the EU, Serbia and Sweden. It concludes that while indirect subsidies such as tax breaks have their advantages, their benefits to public interest journalism are questionable.

The authors favour an emphasis on direct subsidy and argue that core investment in journalism, rather than (targeted) support for specific categories of public interest journalism, is a more effective strategy for supporting independent journalism.

**The Search for Sustainable Local Media: Tools and Models by Dr Franz Kruger (2022)<sup>12</sup>**

This paper highlights different mechanisms for support to local media organisations, including direct and indirect subsidies. It draws in part on the South African experience but also references a diversity of experience, ranging from Argentina to the Nordic countries.



## What is public subsidy?

Most media organisations now exist because they are subsidised in one form or another, either by government or by political or commercial actors who are close to government. Commercial, profit-making media organisations continue to survive and in some cases prosper, principally in industrialised markets, but they are the exception.

Subsidy involving government can take the form of formal financial arrangements, or less formal arrangements such as the allocation of government advertising. “Government” or “political subsidy”, by far the most prevalent form of subsidy, is when this subsidy is allocated to exert informal or formal editorial influence in the interests of those providing the subsidy.

“Public subsidy” is funding that is allocated with a clear public purpose, and a credible, legitimate and effective set of governance arrangements to ensure that it serves the public interest and is independent of the interests of those providing the funding. ”

The different options and models of public subsidy for independent media are explained in more detail in the [PRIMED working paper](#). In summary, they encompass five different models consisting of:

- **indirect subsidy**, such as tax reliefs, zero tax ratings for news sites, preferential postal tariffs for newspapers and preferential fees for community radio stations
- **direct subsidy from government** to media organisations
- **direct subsidy** from public sources to media organisations **through a framework guaranteed by government**
- **flexible or transactional payments to media outlets, such as through government advertising**, including advertising that combines public purposes with an explicit aim of supporting media organisations (such as payments for health messaging in a pandemic)
- **international media support** from public resources

This paper draws on the experience of the PRIMED programme to capture some key lessons learned during the programme. Its principal focus is on direct subsidy from government to media organisations.

At the start of PRIMED, the programme sought to answer the following questions:

- Under what conditions are approaches to public subsidy of independent media worth exploring, especially in LMICs?
- Which strategies are most effective at encouraging reform-minded government and regulatory institutions to explore subsidising independent media?
- Which public subsidy strategies are likely to work in sustaining independent media, while fostering innovation and guaranteeing independence?

This brief aims to outline answers to these questions.





## Main findings

The PRIMED public subsidy work led to the conclusions outlined below.

### Under what conditions are approaches to public subsidy of independent media worth exploring, especially in LMICs?

- **Democracy is normally a precondition for effective public subsidy to independent media, making this a moment of crisis:**

Autocracy has, once again, become the dominant form of government around the world. According to the University of Birmingham, if current trends persist, only 5% of the world's population will be living in a full democracy by 2026.<sup>13</sup> A minimum level of democracy is necessary for any serious consideration of public subsidy of media.

The existence of public subsidy is incompatible with government that is not fully committed to democracy, as autocratic power increasingly involves targeting and neutralising independent media and stoking division in society.<sup>14</sup> Nearly all autocratic governments actively and heavily subsidise media organisations in their own political interest, not the public interest. Such strategies are increasingly successful not only at shaping public and political opinion but also making it impossible for independent media to compete financially. Approaches to public subsidy will obviously not work under conditions of autocracy.

**“ The existence of public subsidy is incompatible with government that is not fully committed to democracy, as autocratic power increasingly involves targeting and neutralising independent media and stoking division in society. ”**

There are few options for exploring public subsidy in non democratic states but this does not mean that they are never worth considering. Several of the funds highlighted in the PRIMED commissioned background papers, such as those focused on audio visual support, were in non democracies. It is also possible that effective civil society and media community activism can potentially lead to some minimal forms of public subsidy such as reduction in indirect taxes and other tax breaks.

- **A moment of opportunity:** There are fresh political, organisational and programmatic opportunities for developing new models of public subsidy to independent media. The widespread collapse of the advertising-based business model that has supported free and independent media, and the lack of feasible alternative business models, are leading to increasing experimentation with various public subsidy models in different countries. Any country committed to democracy and a functioning free press has both the opportunity and increasingly realistic policy pathways to develop these models.

Ensuring the independence and sustainability of media that reaches across societal divides may be one of the most effective defences against autocratic power which thrives on social and political polarisation. In politically supportive settings, it has perhaps become more possible to engage serious policy attention on this challenge now than at any time in the last three decades. As the threats to democracy intensify, democratically committed countries are paying closer attention to how they can shore up democracy including through media support. Consequently, there are arguably growing opportunities to consider focusing on prioritising public subsidy.

- **Mounting costs of inaction:** The costs of independent media extinction, both to society and to government, are mounting. Societies that do not have the capacity to generate and make widely available independent, trustworthy news and information face increasing challenges. Widespread public exposure and vulnerability to disinformation is growing, and is likely to accelerate and greatly intensify as

new technologies such as artificial intelligence become more widely available. This makes it extremely difficult for citizens to navigate and respond to the development, political and other challenges that confront them. It also makes government investments in areas such as vaccine provision or climate adaptation much more difficult to implement cost-effectively. And corruption is likely to increase as independent media organisations disappear.

There is a substantial economic value to ensuring publics have access to information they can trust and a media sector capable of holding government to account. There are also wider public benefits when media is subsidised.<sup>15</sup> If the market is unable to support public interest information environments, it can be highly cost-effective for even resource-strapped governments to make relatively modest investments in independent media.

- **Public subsidy is a problematic policy option – but so are all others:** Providing public subsidy to support independent media is problematic, especially in LMICs where government resources are stretched. But there are no unproblematic solutions to the challenge of sustaining independent media in the current market and political conditions. This is particularly the case in low- and middle-income settings, where financial independence is inextricably linked to editorial independence.

**“ There is a substantial economic value to ensuring publics have access to information they can trust and a media sector capable of holding government to account. There are also wider public benefits when media is subsidised. ”**

Making public subsidy work is challenging, but so too are all other policy solutions to support independent, public interest media. If there are better policy solutions to ensuring widespread public access to this kind of media, they should normally be considered first. But those solutions do not often seem to be readily available.

- **Public subsidy will only work in a limited number of contexts:** Given global declines in democracy and press freedom, there are only a few countries where exploring public subsidy to independent media is likely to be worthwhile. However, where conditions are reasonably favourable, it is worth implementing well-planned, properly resourced, locally-driven and long term strategies to support reform-minded governments and systemic approaches to media reform.

While the number of these countries is limited, the opportunities within them are great. For example, Ukraine has demonstrated substantial commitment to reforming and reinvigorating its public service broadcaster (just one form of public subsidy) as maintaining public trust and building national identity have become increasingly important in the context of a war characterised by disinformation. Ghana, one of the most democratically committed countries in Africa, is actively exploring fresh approaches to how its former state media enterprises can be reformed, made independent and adapted for a digital age. Numerous other governments, from Indonesia to Brazil, are exploring negotiating new bargaining codes with internet platforms designed to generate revenue for news media. Although these are focused on generating funding for news media from internet platforms, they may also potentially involve partnership or linkages with government or other public support.



## Which strategies are most effective at encouraging reform-minded government and regulatory institutions to explore subsidising independent media?

- **Public subsidy is highly unlikely to work if governments drive the process:** Any process of public subsidy to independent media is optimised if civil society drives the process. Ideally, the process should be conceived, framed and driven by the media sector and related civil society organisations. There is a growing number of successful examples of a media sector coming together to drive a constructive and creative conversation with government, resulting in a more supportive stance – even in extremely low-income settings.
- **Political will is vital:** No process of public subsidy can be expected to succeed without a minimum level of political will from government. Governments need incentives and rewards to implement public subsidy, with the most promising being international reputational reward and accolades. There may be other – largely untested – incentives for governments to support public interest media, including building support into loans from multilateral development banks or others. However, governments should not expect more favourable treatment in their own domestic media as a result of increasing public subsidy.
- **Arrangements for public subsidy need to assume that political will is temporary:** It is naïve to assume that even relatively democratic governments will sustain a political commitment to public subsidy over time. Political pressures and structures change, crises emerge, and tensions with the media will reach crunch points. Continued public subsidy will depend on real-world political calculations so the reputational and other costs to reducing or subverting public subsidy need to be high. Similarly, the reputational rewards (especially internationally) of continuing significant public subsidy of independent media and related governance arrangements need to be designed to withstand political shifts.
- **Cross-party consensus is essential:** Sustaining public subsidy for independent media in ways that guarantee editorial independence is likely to be even more challenging. Breakthroughs in policy are normally only possible in certain political conditions (eg not at election times). Democratic governments change and different political parties will have differing views. Any process to develop new systems of public subsidy should be multi-stakeholder and include, where feasible, opposition parties.
- **A minimum level of public support for expenditure of public money is vital:** Public subsidy to independent media needs to command a minimum level of public legitimacy and demonstrate value for money. If independent media is to benefit from public funds that might otherwise support core public services, it requires a clear and compelling rationale of why this funding is justified that can be understood by the public (eg outlining the role of journalism in exposing corruption or in public education).
- **Incentives are important:** Public subsidy of independent media is challenging both for the media sector, which risks being accused of co-option, and for government. Governments need to provide a clear public justification for allocating public resources in this way, in effect strengthening the capacity for accountability and independent scrutiny of their actions. Those wishing to advocate or support public subsidy processes should explore how the government can benefit from these arrangements, including through reputational rewards.
- **Public subsidy requires a legal environment capable of implementing an independent governance mechanism:** Any public subsidy arrangement needs to be underwritten by a set of governance arrangements that can ensure editorial independence and resilience to political co-option. Even the best governance arrangements can be manipulated over time and so wider factors, such as the existing of muscular and independent legal environment, also need to be taken into account when considering public subsidy of independent media.



## Which public subsidy strategies are likely to work in sustaining independent media, while fostering innovation and guaranteeing independence?

- **National funds:** This brief does not replicate the work of others examining the potential of national funds to support independent journalism, including the Global Forum for Media Development<sup>16</sup> and UNESCO.<sup>17</sup>

Substantial recent academic and policy interest has focused on the potential of national funds to support independent public interest media. Some of this focus can be attributed to the policy experimentation of the PRIMED programme, particularly developing the Sierra Leone National Action Plan for media viability, which included creating a National Fund for Public Interest Media. This initiative emerged from extensive consultations within the media sector, facilitated by BBC Media Action and now spearheaded by the Sierra Leone Media Reform Coordination Group (see Box 2).

The key lessons from developing the national fund in Sierra Leone are:

- Although developing this fund was rooted in a clear, inclusive, systematically researched and country-driven process, significant risks still needed to be catered for. BBC Media Action's expertise, international experience and significant reputational investment reassured the Sierra Leonean government of the seriousness of the proposition.
- Bringing this fund to life was highly dependent on commitment from the government. The

country's president gave a keynote address at a conference to discuss the strategy of which the fund was the principal component. The time taken to develop the fund meant that it could not escape political dynamics – it was scheduled to launch before the 2023 general election but the promised government funding did not materialise. The election, in which President Julius Maada Bio won a second term, was highly contentious featured accusations of government vote-rigging. Six months later, the government's financial commitment remains unfulfilled, making it uncertain whether this model can generate substantial domestic public resources.

- The fund has, however, created a clear, legitimate and independent governance system, through which public and other investments can be made in Sierra Leone. One long-term option for the fund is to explore a range of investments, perhaps including those from development banks and other sources of public investment.
- A key potential strategy to maximise the chances of success for public subsidy to independent media is through external co-investment by a donor or media support organisation. Such co-investment has key advantages as it:
  - acts as a deterrent to political co-option or capture of a national fund or other financing mechanism
  - helps to ensure long-term horizons for public subsidy, shares costs with government, and may help to secure longer-term commitment from government to the arrangement
  - can reassure other potential co-investors (including funds resulting from news bargaining codes) of the dependability and independence of the subsidy mechanisms established

**“ Direct subsidy should be targeted principally at building the institutional resilience and journalistic strength of media organisations rather than investing in specific public interest media content. ”**





## Box 2: Supporting Public Service Media in Sierra Leone

**The government of President Julius Maada Bio came to power in 2018 with a stated reform agenda. Within a year or so, it repealed the country's 50-year-old criminal and seditious libel laws, and welcomed internationally-funded support programmes intended to increase the country's media regulator's independence. The minister for communications sought advice from local and international experts on how to improve the media sector's financial situation, recognising that a viable independent media sector is critical to the development of Sierra Leone.**

This offered an opportunity to look into the country's wider media ecosystem and provide support to achieve lasting and positive change.

As part of the PRIMED programme, BBC Media Action supported a sector-wide consultation that culminated in a national conference hosted by the Ministry for Communications and the Sierra Leone Journalists' Union. This brought together government, the media regulator, the media sector and civil society organisations, resulting in a seven-point National Action Plan for Media Viability.

This national action plan called for continued legal reform, commitment to improving the governance of both the state broadcaster and the media regulator, and a fairer distribution of government advertising spend.

The plan's sixth recommendation paved the way to create a public subsidy for independent media:

*"Government and development partners should commit to a national fund for public interest media:*

- The Government should allocate at least 3% of the annual national budget to media investment and development.*
- The scope and focus of the fund should be established as well as criteria for the allocation of funding.*
- A multi-stakeholder governance mechanism and operating guidelines should be developed for the fund.*
- The Government of Sierra Leone should engage with development partners to seek complementary support for the fund and to help coordinate the efforts of international actors."*

The Media Reform Coordination Group (MRCG) was tasked with taking steps towards implementing the national action plan, and setting up the national fund for public interest media envisaged in the sixth recommendation. The government of Sierra Leone made a pledge to provide its financial share, while the International Fund for Public Interest Media (IFPIM) pledged to match the amount for a one-year pilot.

BBC Media Action provided extensive technical support to MRCG to establish the fund's scope, governance mechanism and operating framework. However, as of early 2024, the promised government contribution for the national fund has not yet appeared, despite repeated assurances.

Consequently, MRCG, IFPIM, BBC Media Action and its funder for PRIMED (The UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and the British High Commission in Sierra Leone) are looking into alternative funding options.

The Sierra Leone experience shows that the right conditions existed for public subsidy to independent media. These included political will, and quickly deployed technical support to secure catalyst funding and draft a robust governance model and operating procedures. Despite this, public subsidy has not yet got off the ground in Sierra Leone – highlighting the precarious nature of public subsidies in low-income countries, even before they launch.





- **Core journalistic support:** Given experiences in Europe and elsewhere, it seems likely that direct subsidy should be targeted principally at building the institutional resilience and journalistic strength of media organisations rather than investing in specific public interest media content. This is likely to be more efficient as a strategy and also to help reduce editorial interference.
- **Public service media:** Serious consideration should be given to revisiting how national public service media (formerly known as public service broadcasting) can be supported and enabled, including by transforming state broadcasters into digitally focused independent public service media organisations. Reform of public service media was not a significant component of the PRIMED programme and the record of external reform efforts has been poor, not least because such efforts require substantial resourcing and political will.

Nevertheless, public service media organisations are, in many respects, a tailor-made model for the 21st century. Most societies are increasingly fragmented, fractured, divided and characterised by increasing levels of disinformation. Public service media is designed to be independent of all interests, to serve the whole of society, to form a key component, shaper, reflector and symbol of national identity, and to form a trusted common reference point for fact-based public debate. That is why the countries most committed to democracy and defending their national identity heavily prioritise reinventing their national broadcasters.

Ukraine provides a good current example of this. In Ukraine, this commitment to media independence has led to growing audiences, increasing trust, and the public service broadcaster becoming a critical reference point for news and information.

### Box 3: Supporting Public Service Media in Ukraine

**BBC Media Action started working with Ukraine's national public service broadcaster, Suspilne, in 2015, when it was operating under the name NTU. Co-operation began with the production of the social drama *5baksiv* and accompanying online debate programming, as part of efforts to increase the broadcaster's capacity to produce public interest content.**

In 2017–2021, BBC Media Action supported Suspilne's efforts to reinvent itself as a modern national public service media organisation and distance it from its roots as a state-controlled TV channel.

A key component of this support was designing and building a state-of-the art, multi-platform and multimedia newsroom that could produce quality, objective and unbiased news content for different segments of the national and regional populations. This included reorganising newsroom workflows, tailored training across the organisation. It also encompassed overhauling Suspilne's approach to content distribution, focusing on digital and social media and enabling the organisation to both increase its reach and improve its engagement with new audiences.

Simultaneously, BBC Media Action supported a publicity campaign to enhance Suspilne's public service brand values. Suspilne's supervisory board visited the BBC and Ofcom (UK media regulator) headquarters to improve the board's understanding of its own remit, strengthening their oversight of the broadcaster.

In addition, BBC Media Action provided technical support to Suspilne's flagship current affairs programme, Public Studio, and its flagship debate programme, Countdown, and delivered numerous bespoke training courses for the broadcaster's staff.

Immediately after the Russian Federation's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, BBC Media Action provided emergency support to Suspilne, funding equipment and expenses so it could operate from Lviv after evacuating from Kyiv. BBC Media Action also supported Suspilne staff by providing training in first aid, surviving in hostile environments, producing Lifeline (life-saving) programming and trauma-sensitive reporting.

- **Indirect public subsidy:** Some of the simplest public subsidy measures are indirect mechanisms such as reduced sales tax rates or other tax breaks for media organisations, which reduce the costs of journalism. PRIMED analysis in Europe showed that indirect public subsidies were almost uniform in their application both inside and outside EU countries. Where these breaks do not exist in LMICs, they could be usefully introduced to improve the financial viability of independent media organisations.

Indirect public subsidy is not a magic bullet. It is often accused of making it easier and cheaper for factional and political actors to co-opt independent media, and profits are often passed on to shareholders and owners rather than being invested in independent journalism. However, new tax breaks and similar measures are a clear measure that can, when properly designed, improve media plurality and independence.

- **Government advertising:** Governments are often the largest advertising spenders in LMICs. One of the simplest measures that any democratically committed government can implement to support independent media is to allocate government advertising spend in a fair and transparent way. Government advertising tends to increase during emergencies, which are also times when independent media finances can be especially vulnerable. Having clear government guidelines or codes of conduct, and maximum transparency, on how government advertising budgets are allocated can be critical for independent public interest media.

## The future

This brief has mainly focused on what has been learned from the PRIMED programme. As highlighted in the original working paper, other models of public subsidy exist.

There is substantial room for further experimentation in this field. A key example is increasing policy experimentation, and adaptation of news bargaining codes. These could also involve hybrid funding between technology companies, international donors like the International Fund for Public Interest Media and potentially also national level public funding.

The precise form of successful models involving news bargaining codes and their role in supporting independent public interest media remains speculative, untested and subject to often contentious policy debate. But they do highlight growing room for policy experimentation, imagination and ambition in developing fresh models of public subsidy in this area.

More generally, more opportunities exist through creative, nationally led coalitions working to identify the most relevant solutions for their own context of which the Sierra Leone provided a strong example. Specific arrangements for public subsidy will need to be context-specific but should follow many of the same principles outlined in this brief, particularly in relation to nationally driven, multi-stakeholder processes that put the independent media sector at their core.

The success of future innovation in public subsidy of independent media will depend on several factors. These include the existence of institutions capable of reflecting and commanding legitimacy of the media, the presence of effective government counterparts and, very often, the willingness of external actors to bring in complementary financial capital and perhaps also technical assistance. In other words, this issue requires not only a focus on specific policy solutions but also on the mechanisms and architectures capable of arriving at the most context-appropriate and effective solution.

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# PRIMED

PROTECTING INDEPENDENT MEDIA  
FOR EFFECTIVE DEVELOPMENT



Public interest media are vital to open, just societies – they provide trusted news and information, hold the powerful to account and create a platform for debate. Yet truly public interest media are in crisis.

PRIMED (Protecting Independent Media for Effective Development) is a three-year programme to support public interest media in Bangladesh, Ethiopia and Sierra Leone – addressing critical challenges, building resilience, and sharing research and insight about what works.

Led by BBC Media Action, PRIMED partners include Free Press Unlimited, International Media Support and Media Development Investment Fund, with additional support from Global Forum for Media Development and The Communication Initiative.

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