

## Evaluation summary

### Right to Voice: Promoting media freedom of expression in Nepal project

#### Evaluation theme

Conflict sensitive media

#### Introduction

This evaluation summary presents the findings of a final evaluation of the Right to Voice: Promoting media freedom of expression in Nepal project implemented by International Alert (Alert) and the Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ). The overall purpose of this evaluation was to assess media freedom of expression and pluralism, through a reduction in threats to journalists and the promotion of marginalised voices.

#### Background to the project

International Alert and the Federation of Nepalese Journalists implemented the joint action, titled Right to Voice: Promoting media freedom of expression in Nepal, around the Free Media Networks (FMN). FMN is a platform to discuss issues surrounding media and find cooperative ground for addressing issues. The FMN's work was strengthened by building the capacity of media professionals and FMN members in conducting dialogue to resolve issues amicably. In addition, in order to ensure media security through the systematic documentation of attacks and threats and increased transparency and accountability for media rights violations, the project also sought to build the capacity of FMNs on documenting media rights violations. A dedicated website where incidents of media rights violations can be reported online was built. The action also sought to bring about strengthened policy frameworks for media Freedom of Expression (FoE): The advocacy targeted senior officials in the Ministry of Information and Communication and in the Nepal Press Council with the aim of strengthening existing policy framework, such as the Working Journalists Act and the Media Code of Conduct. Finally, the project provided fellowships to deserving journalists for writing news reports and articles to address the perspectives or agendas of marginalised groups in the mainstream media so they could reach the public and policy makers.

The Overall Objective of this action was to contribute to increased media FoE and pluralism, through a reduction in threats to journalists and the promotion of marginalised voices. The project was structured around two specific objectives and four expected results:

**Specific objectives:** **1)** To reduce self-censorship among journalists. **2)** To increase the diversity of perspectives and agendas in the media.

**Expected results:** **1)** Cooperation between the media, security forces, political parties, civil society activists and policymakers towards improved media FoE. **2)** Strengthened capacity of journalists to document media rights violations to hold perpetrators accountable. **3)** Strengthened policy frameworks for media FoE. **4)** Greater freedom of expression for women and excluded groups.

## Methodology

A mixed qualitative and quantitative approach was taken for this evaluation. The evaluation was led by a mixed team of evaluators, an independent consultant with in-depth knowledge of the Nepal context and a staff member of International Alert who had not been involved in the project before, the Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Coordinator. Both evaluators have experience in the design and management of social change projects, including of tools for project cycle management, and monitoring and evaluation, as well as knowledge and experience of peacebuilding. While the lead evaluators conducted Key Informant Interviews (KII) and Focus Group Discussions (FGD), led the analysis and drafted the report, the evaluation team also included a translator and Alert Nepal's Monitoring and Evaluation Officer, who provided background documents, led logistics and administered the survey. The KIIs and FGDs were supported by results from the endline survey.

## Summary of findings

**Relevance and adaptability:** With the shrinking space of civil society and FoE, the project was seen to be highly relevant by evaluation respondents. Some respondents expressed that the project was even more relevant now than when it was initially designed. No significant change was made to the project approach during the implementation and the project contribution was overall highly appreciated by FMN stakeholders.

**Effectiveness:** The project was successful in establishing six FMNs in project districts and in training over 155 FMN members under the Expected Result 1 (ER1). Changes related to these activities included an improved relationship and cooperation among stakeholders, strengthened information flow and changes in perception. Activities have also contributed positively to strengthening the capacity of journalists to document media right violations to hold perpetrators accountable. Under ER3, negative trends in the legislative environment prevented activities from having any meaningful result. However, these activities provided some opportunities for empowerment and influence for journalists. Under the ER4, it is still difficult to determine increased FoE for women and excluded groups. A major obstacle in ER4 is the lack of participation of women and excluded groups linked to entrenched social and gender norms that go beyond the media sector and that the project was not directly addressing.

**Impact:** Although this project was only implemented for 30 months, the evaluation finds that it has contributed to media freedom of expression. As the highlight of the project, FMNs contributed to cohesiveness and increased accountability, which contributed more to FoE than the reduction of threats (which the project might have contributed to but is more likely a consequence of the changing security and governance environment). For instance, journalists and other stakeholders feel more unified and stronger together, which had an impact on self-censorship. However, these positive tendencies were negatively affected by the new policies targeting media. As a result of these new policies, self-censorship is at risk of increasing again. In a review of one of the project's main assumptions, evaluators

conclude that self-censorship is less a response to threats of violence on journalist than journalists' pragmatism and realism on what will be published.

**Sustainability:** There is some evidence which suggests that the approach adopted by the Right to Voice: Promoting media freedom of expression in Nepal project is conducive to longer-term sustainability. The project was designed in close cooperation with FNJ, and FNJ was responsible for implementing it to a large extent. This guaranteed ownership of the project with the local partner provided more chances of sustainability in the long run. More importantly, local ownership among FMN members ensures the sustainability of the platforms and project impact. Yet, the lack of concrete actionable plan by FMNs and the lack of institutionalisation of results (due to limited results on the advocacy component and an adverse policy environment) limits the sustainability of results.

## Recommendations

1. FMN approach should be continuously supported and replicated in other districts

There is a general consensus among FMN stakeholders, journalists and implementing partners that the project brought notable change in FoE and the capacity of journalists to hold media right violators accountable. Thus, Alert and partners are encouraged to continue with the project approach, particularly considering that broader challenges in the media sector remains intact.

2. Stakeholder engagement within the FMN should be consistently encouraged and monitored

More sustained engagement at FMN level will increase ownership of FMNs, strengthen sustainability and ensure new police and state authorities are easily brought into the process because the FMN is regarded as an institution. As a result, more FMN ownership activities are recommended at the district level to strengthen the relationship, collaboration and cooperation among various stakeholders.

3. Strengthen links between FMNs and between District and Kathmandu level FMN

The district level FMNs felt that there is a missing link between the FMNs and district level and the Kathmandu FMN, which in a few instances resulted in discrepancies in information flow. Additionally, no collaboration was found among FMNs. It is therefore, recommended to integrate inter-FMN exchange and coordination, or collaboration activities in future approaches. Finally, there was interest at the district level for participating in advocacy initiatives.

4. Increase contribution to trust in journalists

FMNs should communicate more around successful cooperation among FMN stakeholders and show that it has led to more freedom of expression. This will generate trust so that further journalists that can speak out. Widening the echo of positive stories will increase the scope of the FMNs' effectiveness and contribute to a scaling of results beyond the FMNs and throughout the wider media community.

5. Strengthen gender mainstreaming throughout the project

Women journalists face radically different issues than men, which has not always been taken into account through all components of the project. We recommend that FMNs look

specifically at the implications of including women members, of creating a safe space for them to express themselves, represent their specific interests and increase their ability to play a part in decision-making within the FMNs.

#### 6. Strengthen sustainability of FMNs

FMNs should formally develop clear action plans and have accountability mechanisms to ensure actions are followed through. This should strengthen the institutionalisation of the work of the FMNs and therefore increase their effectiveness and sustainability.

#### 7. Continue to support capacity building of journalists

Journalists are also faced by harassment by the public who lack trust or understanding of the role journalists play. This trust and understanding of the role of journalists is significantly undermined by the lack of professionalism in the sector. It is therefore recommended that journalists continue to be supported in developing their knowledge of their rights and duties.

#### 8. Inclusivity component should be significantly strengthened

Because of the challenges that inclusion of diverse perspective face, including structural social norms and values, changes on that front will required significantly more resources than what was initially planned as part of this project. It is therefore recommended that more resources be invested for activities related to women's and marginalised group's FoE, pluralism and diversity in content.