



PROTECTOR MEDIA  
FOR EFFECTIVE DEVELOPMENT



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What media coalitions are and what coalition building entails



## Abbreviations and acronyms

**BJC** Broadcast Journalism Centre

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**CARD**

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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)







## Methodology

International Media Support (IMS) – the consortium member that led PRIMED’s Coalitions for Change workstream, with a focus on Ethiopia – set out to answer the learning question in three phases, as outlined below. This learning brief reflects on findings from all three phases.

1. **2020:** IMS and Free Press Unlimited (FPU) reviewed existing reports and evaluations to identify approaches, results and lessons from their own support to coalitions. Their findings were outlined in a paper that aimed to

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2. **2021:** IMS convened an online programme design workshop from 31 August to 3 September 2021. Its 30–40 participants included partner<sup>10</sup> representatives and implementing organisations’ staff involved in PRIMED’s planned activities in 14 DdEMCWEMC /P Lapmalia, work in Bangladesh, Ethiopia and Sierra Leone as well as in coalitions that PRIMED implementing organisations had supported elsewhere.

Participants discussed examples of existing media coalitions in Pakistan, Somalia,



## Findings





Meanwhile, in Sierra Leone PRIMED supported **the formation of a broad coalition of stakeholders to formulate and implement the NAP**. Following the conference that approved the plan in April 2022, the MRCG became convener of, and secretariat for, the coalition. This reflects MRCG's mandate to coordinate efforts to address media development priorities, as highlighted in a 2014 study undertaken as part





## Key ingredients

The 2021 workshop identified factors that seem to determine the

Similarly, unusual unity among a range of media stakeholders contributed to the **Bangladesh** media coalition's ability

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The experiences of coalitions supported by PRIMED in Bangladesh, Ethiopia and Sierra Leone have largely confirmed the influence of these factors. This includes the need for media coalitions to be both focused and inclusive in terms of the diversity of interests represented by their members and how these diverse interests shape each coalition's objectives and strategies. Having a diverse membership allows coalitions to see issues from different perspectives, enabling them to find solutions that address the needs of a variety of stakeholders.

Participants in the 2021 workshop recognised the need for coalitions to balance involving broad interests with developing a clearly focused agenda. They also saw this as a challenge given the risk of in-fighting when trying to accommodate potentially conflicting viewpoints. However, the experiences of the PRIMED-supported coalitions point to the opportunities afforded by inclusion and diversity.

The CSOJ and the MRC in **Ethiopia** sought to involve organisations representing a variety of media outlets (commercial, community, digital start-ups and state-owned media), including those from regions hit hardest by ethnic conflict. Both coalitions also attracted more women than the country's existing media bodies. As a result, both coalitions managed to unify sections of an otherwise polarised media at a time of high tension by providing safe spaces for media stakeholders to discuss and identify solutions to issues of common interest.



because of the groundwork it had undertaken in preceding years when there was little prospect of reform. With this example in mind, the MRC in Ethiopia continued to engage with authorities around the government's media reforms.



## Purpose, role and objectives

Another key ingredient in influencing media coalition building is the clarity of a coalition's purpose and role, the focus of its objectives and how these resonate with coalition members.

Participants in the 2021 workshop noted the ability of coalitions to help countries gradually move towards more open media ecosystems, as well as their role in frustrating attempts to further restrict the media. Crucially, coalitions play a vital role in securing consensus and driving collective action within the media community, helping diverse stakeholders to devise and execute a common strategy, and to define joint success criteria.

Coalitions are instrumental in building the confidence of media practitioners, and their resilience to external pressures. Media coalitions can facilitate capacity-building among their members, accessing and channelling experiences that can enrich the local media sector and promote best practice models. They may also offer inspiration and solidarity in countries where the media sector is particularly fragmented or subject to politically motivated attacks.

The 2023 study **in Ethiopia** found that the ability of media coalitions to play these roles was influenced by the acceptability and visibility of their members – particularly their lead organisations – to other stakeholders. Furthermore, the study found that coalitions seem to be more successful when their objectives are linked with those of the lead organisation. Therefore, coalition building requires careful analysis of coalition members' relevance, potential and credibility in relation to

coalition objectives. The 2023 study also found that coalition members were inspired by the examples of media coalitions from elsewhere.

The October 2023 workshop heard that the need to improve journalistic standards resonated with the role and purpose of the **BJC in Bangladesh**. Likewise, the MRCG's original mandate to co-ordinate media reform projects during the peace process that followed **Sierra Leone's** civil war meant the organisation was well-placed to drive NAP implementation. For both the NAP coalition and the CSoJ in Ethiopia, involving groups representing interests that extended beyond the media ensured that their objectives appealed to a wider constituency, which seemed to give further legitimacy to the coalitions' roles and purposes.

## Architecture

There is no one-size-fits-all structure for a media coalition. Instead, a coalition's architecture should suit its context and purpose. The 2021 workshop found that successful coalitions remain open to new and different members, giving them the ability to evolve organically and take advantage of fresh opportunities to achieve their objectives. No matter how spontaneous the growth of a coalition is, each coalition member's role and obligations should be clearly defined.

The 2023 study found that efforts to formalise the CSoJ **in Ethiopia** provided its members with this clarity, as well as some protection and legitimacy. Meanwhile, the MRC remained an informal network that engaged with the authorities through voluntary dialogue meetings convened by ENMS. Some loose, temporary Ethiopian coalitions also successfully advocated around a specific issue. For example, the Coalition of Civil Societies for Peace spearheaded civic groups' call for the cessation of hostilities in northern Ethiopia in 2022, and then disbanded when a truce was called.

The **BJC in Bangladesh** worked with individual journalist members from a wide variety of broadcasters – including high-level representatives of other media organisations such as trade unions – to advocate with other media bodies for changes to laws that threatened their members.

“ Another key ingredient influencing media coalition building is the clarity of a coalition's purpose and role, the focus of its objectives and how these resonate with coalition members. ”



The BJC leadership then drafted the broadcasters' code of conduct but will need to involve its wider membership and, through them, other media organisations in implementing it. The NAP coalition in Sierra Leone emerged from the consultative conference, the steering committee which was then remodelled to oversee the plan's implementation, with the MRCG acting as its secretariat.

All these varied architectures are vehicles suited to the terrain they have to cross and the passengers they need to carry to reach their respective destinations. An important part of coalition building is identifying the vehicle best suited to the journey and the organisations best placed to play roles required for each coalition.

## Leadership

While leadership approaches also varied among the media coalitions studied, a coalition's success can be determined by what its members are willing to contribute, the benefits they derive from the coalition's work, and how far they are prepared to stand up for their coalition's aims.

The media coalitions examined in 2021 seemed to achieve momentum when all members made a proactive contribution of resources such as people's time, effort and expertise as well as infrastructure and funds because they had a stake in the issue the coalition was looking to address. This collective approach was underpinned by shared accountability and a commitment to embracing lessons learned.

Effective leadership was also described as beginning with devising and agreeing on a strategic plan that fully maps out the coalition's vision, goals and objectives. A galvanising vision can help to rally stakeholders and maintain cohesion, but it should be complemented by specific, short and mid-term goals, each with their own indicators of success and with the potential to make measurable progress towards targets.

Participants in the 2021 workshop felt that strong media coalition leadership also has the flexibility to respond to changes in the operating environment. This requires continuous learning, including a willingness to revisit leadership issues when they provide cause for concern. Leadership also needs to make sure that all members of a coalition – in particular those representing women and marginalised groups – are heard and can contribute.

A factor closely connected to effective leadership is the need for clear communication to help secure sustained commitment to a coalition. This can be underpinned by regular meetings and public engagement approaches that promote openness and transparency. Proactive communication and sharing results also serve to foster ownership of a coalition's outputs and outcomes among its members.

Furthermore, the 2023 study found that, **in Ethiopia**, what mattered was the aptitude and credibility of individuals who can build bridges between coalition members with different interests. The Ethiopian experience shows that the effectiveness and sustainability of media coalitions are influenced by the characteristics of individual leaders who are campaign strategists and can prioritise the coalition cause over self-interest. In the case of the CSoJ, CARD's experience in campaigning on human rights issues meant it was best placed to initiate the coalition, encourage journalism associations to play a role in advocacy, and act as a bridge between institutionally weak media associations and the international community.

**In Bangladesh**, the BJC adopted a shared leadership approach, in which members with relevant expertise take the lead in each project or initiative. Meanwhile, the organisations and





individuals driving the NAP **in Sierra Leone** came to the fore during the consultative processes that gave life to the plan.

Among all the media coalitions examined in 2021–2023, the most effective seemed to combine strong leadership with organisational capacity in the form of small secretariats that could convene and co-ordinate coalition activities. These tended to be headed by respected executives who could speak and act on behalf of the coalition and work well with other coalition members. At the same time, coalition members would keep operational costs as low as possible by supporting the secretariat with resources or in-kind contributions, and by shouldering some of the responsibility for hosting and organising coalition activities.

### **The evolution of coalitions**

There is no predetermined developmental arc that a media support coalition should follow. Coalition leaders may prefer to start small and build their efforts gradually, basing strategic decisions on learning and experience.

one participant told the 2021 workshop.



## The role and influence of international partners

As funders and advisors, international media development agencies and donors yield considerable influence that is not always healthy for, nor suited to the iterative and long-term nature of coalition building. To use their influence constructively, these international partners require an ability to initiate (and, if necessary, drive) a new coalition in its early stages. At the same time, they need to ensure that coalition members set the agenda from the outset and can gradually take over the reins once they have the confidence and capacity to do so.

As with the coalitions examined in 2021, international partners were a catalyst for the formation and growth of the **Ethiopian coalitions** that PRIMED supported – perhaps even more so, given the context.

IMS initiated and nurtured both coalitions by:

- Commissioning the research that informed discussions that galvanised the coalitions
- Contracting partners identified in the 2020 analysis and stakeholder assessment to conduct research, host discussions and convene the coalitions
- Linking the coalitions with other coalitions and experts in other countries
- Providing ongoing advice and representing the coalitions' interests at national and international fora involving other media development agencies

This was the kind of role that Ethiopian stakeholders expected IMS to play:

...one respondent told me in the 2023 study.

The 2023 study found that technical and financial support from international partners encouraged local institutions to build the capacity to initiate, own and lead media coalitions. Active support from international media development partners also encouraged alliances between journalists' associations and CSOs.

This role, the study pointed out, can be more productive when international partners understand the country context and coalition interests while applying international principles and channelling relevant experience and expertise to the coalitions. This approach enabled international partners to respond to the priorities and direction provided by the coalitions. For example, PRIMED respected the CSOJ decision to spend time, effort and funds on formal registration, even though this differed from its experiences of coalitions in other countries.

PRIMED consortium members played a similar role **in Bangladesh and Sierra Leone**. IMS and BBC Media Action identified and commissioned legal experts to advise the BJC about the restrictive laws it wanted to challenge, then put the BJC in touch with an Indonesian counterpart that provided inspiration for, and input into, the code of conduct. In Sierra Leone, BBC Media Action brokered the NAP and IFPIM's investment in the media investment fund. It did so by working directly with the government and other stakeholders, and identifying relevant international experts who could advise and support them.

Reflecting on the Ethiopian experience, the 2023 study suggests that international partners should introduce merit-based and competitive





funding is not for purpose. The UNESCO-headed body set up to co-ordinate media development assistance in Ethiopia stopped meeting at the height of the civil war, when many expatriates left the country, but it was revived in October 2023.

Given their networks and their access to relevant knowledge and expertise, international partners can contribute much more to coalition building than just funding. This added value comes from being able to respond to coalitions' changing needs as opportunities and challenges arise. But this requires a flexibility and long-term perspective that development assistance does not always allow.

### **The sustainability of coalitions**

A media coalition's sustainability is closely linked to its ability to remain relevant to its cause, while keeping overheads low and relying as much as possible on the in-kind, material and/or financial contributions of its members.

Participants in the 2021 workshop felt that theme-specific coalitions may struggle to remain relevant after achieving their primary goals. A coalition that has the resources and mandate to address the shortcomings of a media ecosystem on multiple levels is more likely to be seen as an enabling mechanism for members to address the wider challenges they face.

As such, it can be worth sustaining the institutions that lead or drive a media coalition, as they may be needed for another cause in future. That said, a coalition should be a means to an end, and coalition members should be ready to disengage if their efforts are frustrated by deliberate political blocking or stakeholder indifference.

The Ethiopian CSoJ and MRC were both theme specific (journalists' safety and media reform). Both provided a platform and a safe space for media stakeholders to discuss these themes and figure out how to approach them. As a plethora of Ethiopian laws need reforming, and the application of others needs to be monitored, it is likely to take a long time for the MRC to achieve its objectives. Similarly, as Tat said, a coalition



## Common challenges

### Building trust with government stakeholders

Many of the challenges to coalition building identified by workshop participants in 2021 stem from the volatility and fragility of the environments in which coalitions operate, and the complicated politics that coalition building demands. The latter notably includes the need to engage with political systems that, at best, keep journalists and human rights defenders at arm's length, and often see them as hostile opponents.

If media coalitions are to succeed, at some stage they will need to enter a sustained dialogue with government policymakers and legislators. All the PRIMED-supported coalitions managed to do this to varying degrees, with the NAP coalition in Sierra Leone taking advantage of government willingness to engage with – and actively support – the coalition's agenda. Coalitions must find ways of persuading government to cede political ground and to adopt recommendations that politicians and civil servants may see as a challenge to their authority. Building trust with such political actors is closely linked to openness, transparency and continuous engagement.

Programme Manager  
for the Media Institute of Southern Africa  
Zambia, Jane Chirwa, said when presenting to

the 2021 workshop.

While **Ethiopia** proved to be both a volatile and fragile environment for coalition building,





## Conclusions

As the PRIMED consortium pointed out in 2020:

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Media coalitions also need time and long-term, flexible funding – two things that relatively short-term, overly planned and often inflexible, project-based development aid tends not to provide. Despite receiving cuts to its funding just as it was getting going, PRIMED at least provided some flexibility to consortium partners and programme teams in all three programme countries. This enabled them to nurture and drive coalitions, and to respond and adjust to rapidly changing priorities and needs.

The PRIMED-supported media coalitions are now up and running but they still have a long way to go to achieve their objectives, proving once again that coalition building is a marathon rather than a sprint. Until media development agencies and donors develop the stamina and techniques needed to go the distance, media support organisations should probably be more up-front about their limited capacity to support coalition building in the long-run and focus on putting in place the essential foundations identified in this brief.

“Respond to the short-term but remain focused on the long-term” seems to be the main mantra emanating from the media coalitions examined during PRIMED. These examples indicate that coalition building should be seen both in terms of the issues coalitions seek to address and the structures put in place to do this, whether a loose-knit, informal alliance or a formally registered legal entity with its own identity, policies, systems and procedures. Addressing core issues require a long-term vision and objectives, while a media coalition’s structure should reflect the most efficient way to move the coalition incrementally towards its objectives and vision.

The media coalitions examined in this brief appear to be a hybrid of conventional advocacy coalitions and social movements.<sup>33</sup> While their position on this spectrum is unlikely to alter coalitions’ vision and objectives, it will likely affect their structures, strategies and tactics. The coalitions supported by PRIMED have all managed to engage with their governments at some level, and therefore are probably more akin to conventional advocacy coalitions than to social movements.

The media coalitions examined in 2021 tended to operate outside the policy-making spheres dominated by ruling elites who, at least initially, perceived public interest media and coalitions advocating in their interest as a threat. Members of MAZ, for example, were initially shunned and hounded by a hostile regime. It was only after the unexpected formation of a national unity government that ushered in constitutional reform that MAZ began advising politicians and holding them accountable.

MAZ seemed to derive this trust and credibility from its quiet lobbying of sympathetic ruling party politicians and its members’ success in mobilising public support for a change in the constitution to secure media freedom and access to information.<sup>34</sup>

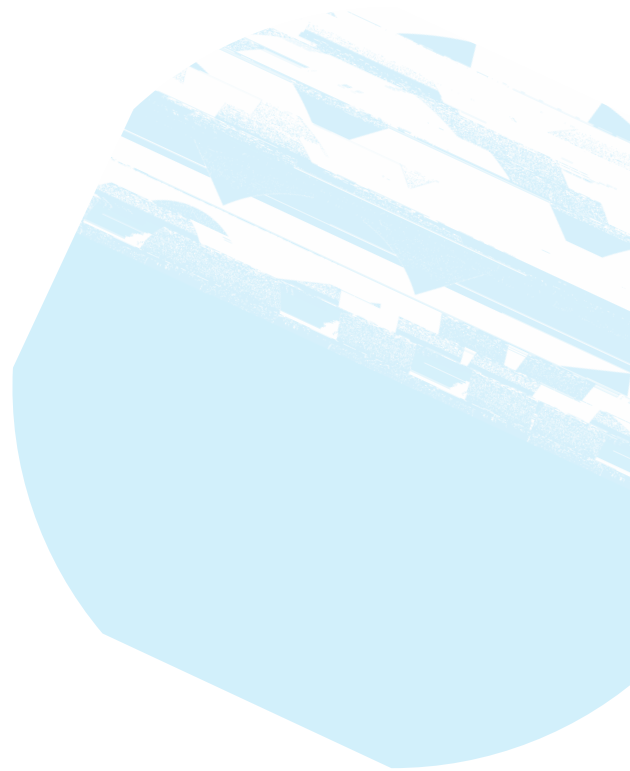
Of the coalitions examined here, only the CSoJ in Ethiopia and the NAP in Sierra Leone have involved organisations outside the media. Other coalitions have tended to comprise media stakeholders, and perhaps lack some of the invention and creativity that comes with looking at a problem from a variety of perspectives. This

## Recommendations

This section contains recommendations based on the findings of PRIMED's learning journey.

### **To donors**

It can take years, if not decades, to bring about the kind of lasting, structural improvements to media ecosystems that will ultimately impact international development objectives. The findings indicate that media coalitions can make



## Areas for further research and learning

The following topics may be worth further exploration as understanding of coalitions and coalition building continues to deepen:

- Testing and refining the model theory of change (see Appendix 1) by applying it to other coalition-building initiatives.
- Examining how coalition leadership can best be nurtured and developed, given how important it seems to be in determining coalitions' success or failure.
- Examining how to encourage inclusion and diversity, both within coalitions and through coalition building. How do coalitions involve women and under-represented groups in a way that enables them to make a meaningful contribution and influence the coalition agenda?
- Looking at how to involve relevant stakeholders from beyond the media sector – such as CSOs and the private sector – in media coalitions without diluting their focus and cohesion.
- Developing a pool of expertise from existing coalitions and PRIMED consortium members to assist with future coalition building.



## Appendix 1: Coalition building: PRIMED's Model Theory of Change in light of the Ethiopian experience

The 2021 learning brief included a model theory of change (MToC) based on the findings of the first workshop for PRIMED consortium members and partners (see diagramme)<sup>35</sup>. IMS tested the MToC against the findings of the 2023 study in Ethiopia and found that the model generally reflects the coalition building process in Ethiopia<sup>36</sup>.

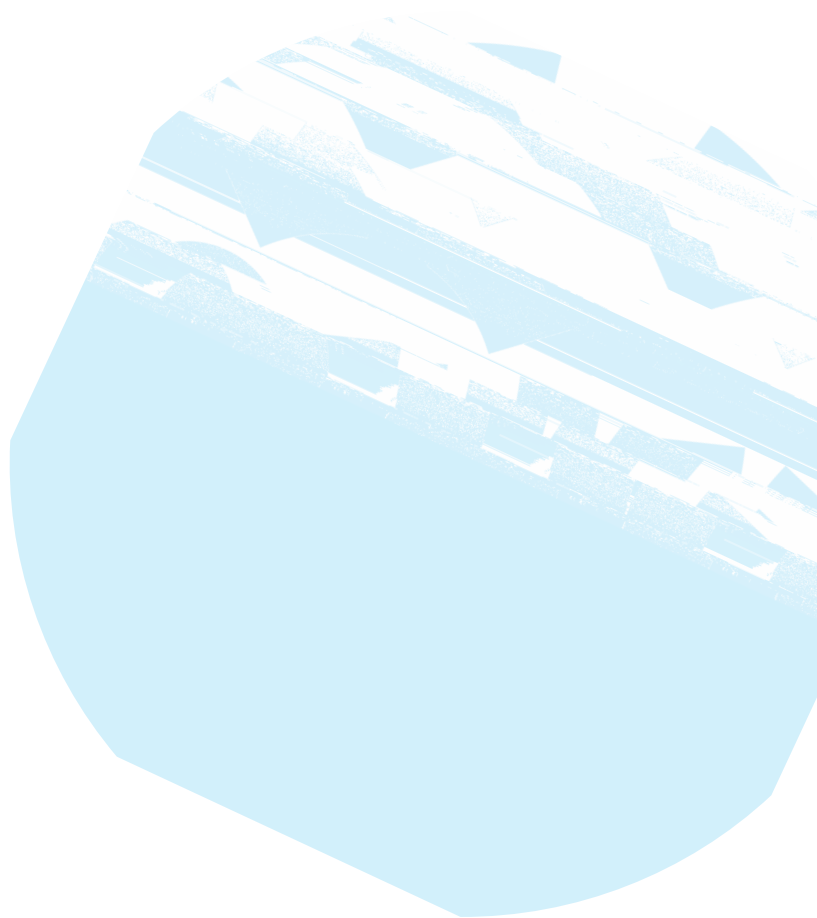






in the MToC (e.g. draft legislation, declarations, petitions and calls to action etc.).

## **Outcomes**





## Appendix 2: Coalition-building toolbox

In 2021, workshop participants highlighted an array of methods, tools and techniques for building the capacity of coalition members,

facilitating dialogue between key stakeholders and advocating for positive change. What follows is a comparison of the coalition-building methods and tools identified in 2021 and those the 2023 study identified as being used in Ethiopia, along with some of the methods used in Bangladesh and Sierra Leone that were identified during the October 2023 workshop.

Method	2021	2023
<b>Research and monitoring</b>	It is vital to have an in-depth understanding of the issues a coalition is looking to address, and to use these insights to determine appropriate interventions.	<p>In Ethiopia, studies into issues such as the safety of journalists, the post-election media environment, and conflict-sensitive media informed the design and tactics of both PRIMED-supported coalitions.</p> <p>In Sierra Leone, PRIMED commissioned a set of studies looking at various aspects of media viability for the national stakeholder conference that approved the NAP.</p>
<b>Stakeholder consultation</b>	Regular consultation with those most directly affected by a coalition's work secures consensus around immediate priorities and effective approaches.	Stakeholder consultations were a key feature of coalition building efforts in Ethiopia, Sierra Leone and Bangladesh during PRIMED. They created platforms for media actors to discuss their challenges and identify issues that needed joint action.
<b>Direct advocacy</b>	A coalition's success is closely linked to coalition members' ability to find common ground where their individual agendas overlap, and to act collectively to address these issues.	<p>In Bangladesh and Ethiopia, the BJC, CSoJ and MRC coalitions showed that engaging the authorities in policy advocacy is possible and can have an impact in challenging political contexts.</p> <p>In Sierra Leone, the authorities were more supportive of and responsive to the NAP coalition. But their commitment began to wane towards the end of PRIMED, requiring the coalition to step up its direct advocacy.</p>







## Appendix 3 – Case studies

The 2021 learning brief includes case studies of six media coalitions<sup>39</sup>. Here, using a similar format, are case studies of the two Ethiopian coalitions supported through the PRIMED programme.



in an open discussion about the challenges



## **Activities**

The December 2021 workshop to disseminate findings of the survey on the safety of journalists in Ethiopia attracted 37 participants (17 female and 22 male) from journalism associations and media organisations. This group expanded over time and reached an agreement to establish a coalition for the safety of journalists. The

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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.

PRIMED is funded by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

To learn more about PRIMED please see [bbcmediaaction.org](https://bbcmediaaction.org) or email [media.action@bbc.co.uk](mailto:media.action@bbc.co.uk).

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