



Applying the UNESCO Media Development Indicators in the Arab World: A Comparative Personal Assessment

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Each MDI assessment in the Arab World was done in a very different way and thus provided me with different insights into the opportunities and challenges of conducting these assessments in that region. This paper looks at the three assessments I was more closely associated with in the Arab World from my personal perspective, drawing some tentative conclusions about some of the particular features of undertaking MDI assessments in that region of the world.

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UNESCO's *Media Development Indicators: A framework for assessing media development* were endorsed by the Intergovernmental Council of the International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC) in 2008 (UNESCO, 2008). The framework revolves around five main Media Development Categories, as follows:

- Category 1: A system of regulation conducive to freedom of expression, pluralism and diversity of the media;
- Category 2: plurality and diversity of media, a level economic playing field and transparency of ownership;

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Category 3: media as a platform for democratic discourse;
 Category 4: professional capacity building and supporting institutions that underpins freedom of expression, pluralism and diversity; and
 Category 5: infrastructural capacity is sufficient to support independent and pluralistic media.

These are, in turn, broken down into increasingly detailed levels of 21 Issues, 50 Key Indicators and 100s of Sub-indicators.

Taken as a whole, the Media Development Indicators (MDI) assess virtually every aspect of the environment for media development in a country, including the legal and policy framework, regulatory issues, commercial considerations, the nature of media players in a given country, safety, the approach to education and training of media workers, and even the technical infrastructure for the production and dissemination of media products. At the same time, the MDI are not designed as a tool to rank how well countries are doing in terms of media development compared to other countries. Instead, they provide an assessment of the strengths, weaknesses and gaps in the media development framework, which provides a sort of mapping of media development needs and priorities.

So far, a total of four full media development assessments based on UNESCO's MDI's have been done in the Arab World — in Egypt (UNESCO, 2013a), Jordan (UNESCO, 2015a), Palestine (UNESCO, 2014) and Tunisia (UNESCO, 2013b)— along with one partial assessment —in Libya (UNESCO, 2015b)—. I have been closely involved in three of the four full MDI assessments, namely those for Egypt, Jordan and Palestine. In the case of Egypt, I was the Lead Author, whereas in the cases of Jordan and Palestine I was the International Expert, although I played a very different role in each country. I also provided inputs to the Tunisian assessment. Beyond the Arab World, I have been involved in a number of other MDI processes, including as Lead Author for the Maldives and Timor Leste assessments, and playing various roles in the cases of Ecuador, Mozambique, Myanmar and Nepal. Finally, I was the author of the UNESCO publication, *Applying UNESCO's Media Development Indicators: A Practical Guidebook to Assist Researchers* (UNESCO, 2012), which provides guidance to researchers on how to undertake an MDI assessment. I thus have very extensive experience with MDI assessment processes in the Arab World and beyond.

Each MDI assessment in the Arab World was done in a very different way and thus provided me with different insights into the opportunities and challenges of conducting these assessments in that region. This paper looks at the three assessments I was more closely associated with in the Arab World from my personal perspective, drawing some tentative conclusions about some of the particular features of undertaking MDI assessments in that region of the world. The views expressed in this paper are mine alone and in no way represent or reflect the views of any of the other players who were involved in these three assessment exercises.

The first section of this paper describes the approach taken in each of the three assessments. The paper then focuses on a number of different areas where the particular context or features of the Arab World appears to have had some impact on the way the MDI assessment was conducted. These are:

- International Standards and Local Realities
- Language
- Nature of Laws
- Political and Background Context
- Legitimacy; and Historical Factors.

Process

The processes for developing each of the three MDI assessments in the Arab World which are the subject of this paper were, as noted above, all very different. Egypt was perhaps the most unique, driven in part by the local situation. There was a desire to produce a very rapid interim assessment following the revolution, the removal of Mubarak and international hopes and to some extent expectations of important changes in terms of the environment for media freedom and freedom of expression more generally. The goal of this rapid assessment was to provide reformers with at least some guidance as to the main reforms needed in Egypt, so as to support them in making choices about priority focus areas.

The most efficient way to conduct a rapid interim assessment was to hire an experienced MDI assessment expert to lead the process, and so I was brought in for this task. The *Interim Assessment of Media Development in Egypt: Based on UNESCO's Media Development Indicators* was published in June 2011, just four months after the removal of Mubarak (UNESCO, 2011).

To achieve this rapid output, the process was significantly streamlined as compared to both the subsequent assessment and what happened in other countries. I undertook a couple of missions to Egypt to conduct interviews, mostly of a one-on-one nature although a few were group interviews. This was supplemented by desk research, conducted with the support of a team of local legal and media experts, and the translation of a few key laws from Arabic into English.

The publication of the Interim Assessment was followed, almost immediately, by a more complete, rigorous assessment process. No doubt because I had been the Lead Author of the Interim Assessment, and given the experience and knowledge I had developed through that process, I retained the same role for the more in-depth process. This was very different from the assessments done in Palestine and Jordan, for which the drafting was led by local researchers. Although I served as lead author for a few other assessments, most follow the Palestine/Jordan process.





The process for the second assessment was similar to the first, albeit far more rigorous and of course it built on the knowledge amassed during the preparation of the first assessment. Once again, a team of local researchers and experts conducted research, but in a far more intensive and iterative fashion —i.e. with me going back to them for further information as needed— than for the first report. As with the Interim Assessment, this material was provided in English and the drafting of the report also took place in English.¹ The local team and, during two further missions, myself, conducted a series of both unstructured and structured interviews with leading local experts and officials, mostly on an individual basis but with a few group interviews. The focus was particularly on issues which had not received full coverage in the original assessment. This was supplemented by an extensive literature and legal review, including online sources, and further translation of core legal texts.

Two further elements were added to the process. First, three external peer reviewers were asked to provide comments on the text and those comments were then reflected in an amended version. Second, a beta version was launched at a major conference in Cairo where selected experts, including some of the peer reviewers, and the audience provided feedback on the report, and especially on the recommendations. Once again, these comments were integrated into the document before it was published.

In contrast to the Egypt assessment, the Palestine MDI assessment was essentially driven by local researchers, led by the Birzeit University Media Development Center. An initial part of the process was conducting a training workshop on the MDI methodology, for which I was the facilitator and which was intended to raise awareness among the research team. There were around 20 participants physically present at the workshop, held in Ramallah, as well as another 10-15 participating online from Gaza. This was supposed to include members of the research team along with some members of the national taskforce responsible for the development of the National Media Strategy. In the event, however, for various reasons, none of those who attended the workshop actually served as researchers so the hoped for skills transfer did not happen, at least not through the training.

As with the Egypt and all other assessments, the Palestine assessment included an important component of desk-based research looking at laws and other legal instruments, policies and existing reports. This was supplemented by 58 interviews with a range of stakeholders. An important supplementary source of information for the Palestine assessment was a comprehensive poll of 555 journalists in Palestine, of which 400 questionnaires were completed through face-to-face interviews and the remaining 155 were completed by phone or by email.

¹ I do not speak or write Arabic.

Based on these inputs, the local researchers drafted the various chapters of the assessment in Arabic and this was then translated into English for review by myself, as the International Expert, and UNESCO staff. In this assessment, partially due to more limited funding, my role as international expert was rather limited. Although I did provide detailed feedback at least once on each draft, after that I feed in comments via the UNESCO staff member who was leading the process. Once preliminary findings and draft recommendations had been drafted, these were presented and discussed at two multi-stakeholder conferences and the feedback from these conferences was then incorporated into subsequent drafts.

The Jordan MDI assessment had both parallels with and differences from its Palestinian counterpart. This assessment also started with a training workshop facilitated by myself. However, this workshop was much smaller, involving only the core team of four local researchers who had been hired to draft the report and a few other supporting individuals, all of whom were physically present for the training and all of whom continued to be involved (i.e. the core team remained in place until the exercise was completed). As in the case of Palestine, the local researchers led in terms of the actual drafting. However, by agreement this was done in English rather than in Arabic and then translated.

Evidence was collected via a series of semi-structured interviews with focus groups and individual stakeholders, including legal experts, journalists, editors, owners, academics, civil society organisation (CSO) representatives, regulators and officials. At the centre of the process were ten focus group discussions, which looking at the following issues and groups: training and education; legal and policy framework; news websites; refugees; community media; broadcasting; the Jordan Press Association; print media; gender; and journalists. Over 30 additional individual interviews allowed the team to fill in any gaps left by the group discussions.

An Advisory Board of media experts and two peer reviewers also provided input into and feedback on a draft version of the assessment. As with all such exercises, an extensive literature and legal review supplemented the other evidence gathering processes. The review in this case was particularly extensive, with the list of laws running to two and one-half pages and the bibliography taking up nearly ten full pages.

As part of the process, UNESCO facilitated eight national consultations — in Ajloun, Jordan Valley, Karak, Maan, Madaba, Mafraq, Tafleh and Zarqa — with a view to ensuring broad geographic coverage of the evidence collection process. UNESCO also facilitated five thematic workshops and roundtables, focusing on public service broadcasting, training and education, media self-regulation, local radio, and media and information literacy.

A number of factors impacted importantly on the relative success of these processes. A very important one was the resources which were available. As far as I am aware, the Jordan assessment benefited from more resources, and



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this led to a better overall result, in terms both of the actual product and the acceptance of that product (its legitimacy) by local stakeholders, including the government. Among other things, as international expert I was given far more time to work on the Jordanian assessment and the Jordan assessment benefited from a more extensive set of outreach and information gathering tools, although no survey was done, unlike in the case of Palestine.

Undertaking a dedicated survey as part of an MDI assessment process is a high-powered evidence generating tool and some proof of this can be seen in the numerous references to the survey in the Palestine assessment. In Jordan, in particular, and to a lesser extent in Egypt, a number of local surveys and statistical studies were available to researchers but, even taken together, these failed to respond fully to the questions raised in the MDI indicators in the way that a dedicated survey could. Given the cost of a survey, a middle ground might be to try to insert a few MDI assessment-dedicated questions into a survey that is taking place at the same time the assessment is being done.

The language in which the initial drafting was done—in English in Egypt and Jordan and in Arabic in Palestine—had a significant impact on the fluidity and effectiveness of the interaction between the international expert and the local drafting/support team. In Jordan, for example, the absence of a language barrier allowed me, as international expert, to have far more regular and tailored interactions with the local researchers. This took the form not only of more reviews of drafts, which allowed for continuous improvement of the text, but also of providing tailored advice and resources to the researchers in response to queries they had. A middle ground here might be to have local researchers that at least share a spoken language with the international expert, even if they are not comfortable drafting in that language, so that they can exchange queries and responses on particular issues. However, in my view drafting the assessment in a shared international language is a very significant advantage.²

Another extremely important factor is maintaining consistency in the core drafting and international expert team. One of the issues which seriously undermined the process in Palestine was significant turnover in the team, including the fact that no one who attended the initial training actually participated in the drafting. A related issue is the design of the initial training. In Jordan, it was a very small workshop style format, which included only the core members of the team. This not only provided a very positive environment for knowledge exchange and learning, but it also provided an excellent opportunity to build trust and a cooperative approach among the team. The much larger participation in the Palestine event, even aside from subsequent changes in personnel, meant that it was more of an awareness raising than a really focused training activity.

² Of course in theory this could be Arabic, if the international expert spoke Arabic.

A challenge for MDI assessments in general is getting the balance right between international expertise and local knowledge and engagement. Both are essential for a good product since absent the first the process will yield a report which accurately reflects the local situation but fails to align with international standards while missing the second will mean the report has gaps and misunderstandings about the local situation. The basic model for both the Palestine and Jordan assessments seems to me to be the most robust one, although different models may work in some other countries. But the amount of international expertise made available in the case of Palestine was in my view insufficient for a really strong report. For the team to be able to work well together, both parties —i.e. local researchers and international expert— need to have at least a reasonable base of shared knowledge. In other words, the international expert needs to be reasonably familiar with the country in question and the local researchers need to be reasonably familiar with international standards. Finally, once again a shared language is a huge asset not only for formal communication purposes but also as a basis for building strong relationships and trust.

Finally, I would hazard the opinion that a reasonably intense and fast-paced process is an asset. The Jordan process was incredibly intense, being completed within seven months (not including translation) despite involving very extensive information gathering processes. While this was perhaps a bit too much, the much longer period taken to complete the Palestine assessment meant that momentum was not maintained while material became dated. Completing an assessment within a one-year period might be a good working goal.

International Standards and Local Realities

One of the particular challenges of doing an MDI assessment in the Arab World is the huge gap between local realities in terms of media freedom and the better practice international standards that are reflected in the MDI assessment tools. Every country in the world has some challenges in terms of respecting media freedom and the whole point of doing an MDI assessment is to identify those challenges in a comprehensive and high-quality evaluation tool, so that local actors can try to address them.

It is a little bit different, however, in the Arab World where, even today, quite repressive overall environments for media freedom and development exist in most countries. There are a few related threads to this challenge. Even today, after progressive developments in some countries in the region, anything resembling a progressive environment for media development is very much absent among the vast majority of the countries in the Arab world.

This has a number of wider implications in terms of the broader understanding of international standards. Civil society groups and journalists asso-





ciations regularly protest in individual cases where journalists are imprisoned for their criticism, although many journalism associations fail to meet democratic levels of independence. But in many cases these same groups struggle to understand international standards regarding more complex notions of media regulation and independence.

This problem of the region suffering from repressive governments is exacerbated by two other factors. First, awareness of international standards regarding media freedom is very low in the Arab World, among the lowest for any region of the world. International engagement in the region on this issue prior to the Arab Spring had been very limited. There was, for example, remarkably little material available in Arabic, even though it is a very widely spoken language. Indeed, this remains the case today. Second, a degree of similarity within the region towards at least some media regulatory issues led to the regional approach being considered normal, even where it is clearly divergent from established international standards. Put differently, if every country in the region follows a certain approach, it can be difficult even for activist campaigners, let alone anyone else, to see beyond that and to call it illegitimate.

An example which highlights both of these problems is the approach towards regulation of journalists in the region. Journalism has historically been treated in the same way as other professions, with a statutory central association to which all members of the profession must belong and which has statutory powers to regulate the profession including to expel members who act in breach of (also often statutory) codes of conduct or codes of honour as they are sometimes called. Even though this is directly contrary to international standards, and this is explicitly reflected in the MDI, most journalists in the region believe that this is not only appropriate but even necessary to maintain the professional status of journalists. Of course the (statutory) journalists' unions also support this approach.

From the perspective of applying the MDI, the broader lack of understanding of international standards, of course with some notable exceptions, means that it can be a challenge to prepare local researchers to assess their country practice against the progressive standards set out in the MDI. Even if individual researchers understand international standards in a particular area, if these run contrary to the deeply held views not only of officials but also of media professionals and even civil society organisations, it can be difficult to reflect them in the report.

Another side of this is that it is crucially important that references to international standards in the MDI assessment are formally correct in the sense that positions which are not established internationally are not put forward. Wrongly referencing international standards can undermine the credibility of the whole assessment, not only among those who oppose change but also among media freedom advocates. Less important, but still of some relevance, is the need to ensure that appropriate evidence is given for international stan-

dards, at least in the form of cites to the primary authorities that establish those standards. Both of these require a good understanding of international standards to be present in the assessment process.

Language

Another challenge with applying the MDI in the Arab World is language. As noted above, one aspect of this facilitating relations and feedback loops within the MDI assessment teams and, in particular, between international experts and local researchers. Language issues also have an impact on the the issue noted in the section above. Local researchers who are fluent in English or another major foreign language have access to materials in that language, and are more likely to have a better understanding of international standards. As noted above, the availability of material in Arabic, albeit better than before, is still remarkably limited.

Language affects an MDI assessment in the Arab World in another important way. We realised early on in the Egyptian assessment that there were a number of concepts that simply did not translate properly into Arabic, such as public service broadcasting. Even the core concepts of media diversity and independence are challenging to translate. This has two main implications. First, it can make it even more difficult to raise awareness locally about international standards, and highlights again the point just above, about how English (and other major foreign) language speakers have an advantage in this respect.

Second, it can make it difficult to present these concepts in the Arabic language version of the report. In the context of the Egyptian assessment we considered developing a glossary to help overcome this challenge, although due to time constraints we never actually got around to it and for some reason it was not done in the Palestine, Jordan or Tunisia assessments either. It would be very useful if a future Arab World MDI assessment did include a glossary of some of these terms which are difficult to translate.

It should be noted that these language issues are in no way restricted to the Arab World. The point about interactions between the international experts and the local team would apply anywhere. However, as noted, it is my impression, although I have no solid empirical evidence to support this, that the absence of translated materials is particularly acute in the Arab World, especially given the size of that world.

Political and Background Context

The nature of an MDI assessment needs to take into account the local political context both in a general sense and also in the sense of the goals of the particular exercise. All of the MDI assessments that have been done in the Arab



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World, and to some extent globally, are in contexts where there is some expectation that the overall environment for media freedom is likely to change for the better in the coming years.³ If assessments are to be done in more repressive contexts, particular care needs to be taken to ensure that those who are involved are not placed at risk. A particular aspect of this is whether quotations and references are to be on or off the record.

Different MDI assessment exercises may target different sets of actors. Overall, the MDI process looks at the roles played by a wide range of actors. Although official actors —government, parliament, regulators, the different players involved in the administration of justice— are key to many of the issues considered, given the key role they play in terms of creating the overall environment for the media, other players —media owners and businesses, public media, journalists and their associations, civil society, training bodies, the tech sector— are also covered.

Beyond the formal scope of an MDI exercise in terms of who is covered by the assessment, there is the issue of who is a particular target of the exercise. Ultimately, of course, those covered will be targets in the sense that they are the ones in a position to bring about the changes which are needed. At the same time, there may be interim targets, for example where a particular set of players is in a position to leverage change among the ultimate targets.

In the case of Egypt, for example, the Interim Assessment in particular but also to some extent the final assessment were targeted more at civil society than at government. This was because there was a huge amount of change within government, which made it difficult to find consistent partners/targets. Furthermore, it was felt that civil society was in a good position to advocate for positive changes, but that to do this in the media freedom sector, civil society needed quick inputs on what the main reform needs were. In Jordan, in contrast, the focus was more on government.

Although there are minimum standards for MDI assessments, including in terms of style and approach, there may be differences depending on who is the primary target. Thus, the need for scrupulous attention to balance and the involvement of officials is somewhat mitigated if the primary target is civil society.

A slightly different political context factor which is fairly prevalent in the Arab World, and also present in many other parts of the world, is a high degree of politicisation of many stakeholders and/or the presence of a number of strong political or social networks or factions (for example based on ethnicity, religion or other features). This can lead to the presence of complex, and often shifting, political and social allegiances and orientations. The manner in which the assessment is conducted needs to take careful account of this. For example, a fair balance needs to be maintained in terms of who from among the different stakeholders gets interviewed. In addition, there is an important

³ This can, of course, change over time, as happened in Egypt where the military coup essentially reversed the post-revolutionary context of change.

focus within the MDI standards on media diversity, which also requires the process to involve these different groupings.

Legitimacy

It is likely, indeed almost a given, that the government will not like at least some of the findings and recommendations of an MDI assessment because in many cases these will be directed at the government. At the same time, as noted above, in most cases an important goal of an MDI assessment is precisely to convince government to implement some of the recommendations. As a result of both of these considerations, the credibility or legitimacy of the exercise is extremely important. It will be far more difficult for a government to reject the results of an exercise which carries a lot of legitimacy, whereas one that has been done quickly or poorly will be easy to discredit. Legitimacy is also, of course, important vis-à-vis other stakeholders—including media businesses, journalists and civil society— although it may be less of a challenge to demonstrate legitimacy to these groups.

Legitimacy can be undermined, and conversely supported, in a number of different ways, some less serious but no less important in terms of their impact, and some more serious. Fairly obviously, a core legitimacy issue is the way that evidence was collected and, at the end of the day, the quality of the evidence upon which findings and recommendations are based. This, of course, goes to the core of the process by which the assessment is conducted.

In some countries, there are a number of quality studies and pieces of research in different areas which can support the findings of the MDI assessment, while in other countries the availability of pre-existing research is more limited. In the latter case, the MDI assessment will itself need to provide direct evidence to support its findings.

As noted above, conducting a survey is a very important way of collecting evidence. Although surveys linked to the MDI assessment process are ultimately somewhat subjective, since they reflect the views of participants rather than just facts, they are also relatively objective, since, if done well, they reflect the views of a representative sample of the target group, rather than a few hand-picked individuals (which is always the case with direct interviews). The point, for present purposes, is that relying on a well-executed survey can bolster the objectivity and credibility of the findings. For example, a finding that a large majority of journalists surveyed feel they are subject to informal pressures to self-censor is more persuasive of the existence of such pressures than a claim by two or three leading journalists that such pressures exist.

Scrupulous attention to detail is always important, but it is especially important if there is likely to be pushback against an assessment. Although it is probably impossible to get everything 100 percent correct in a complex exercise such as this, opponents can be expected to take maximum advantage



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of mistakes to undermine the results. In my experience, even small mistakes —like having a name wrongly transliterated back into Arabic after it has been transliterated into English (i.e. so that the final Arabic version is misspelled) — can undermine the credibility of the final product. Other technical mistakes – such as factual errors or not providing evidence from the latest of a series of reports —tend to be more undermining than other forms of error—.

It is very important not only to reach out to a large number of stakeholders but also to ensure a good balance among the different stakeholders in terms of who gets interviewed. A perception that the exercise is weighted in one or another direction in this respect can seriously undermine the perceived credibility of the results, even if this is not in fact justified. In one of the exercises I was involved in, a certain individual had been quoted and referenced extensively. This was due to the high degree of relevance of his comments, but we still decided to limit these quotes and references so as not to appear to be too close to that individual. Neglecting, or leaving out entirely, a particular set of stakeholders can really undermine the results. In Jordan, workshops were held in different parts of the country and also on different thematic issues so as to ensure broad both geographic and thematic coverage.

Involving official players, both from the government and from regulators and oversight bodies, is essential to maintaining credibility. It remains the case in the Arab World that governments, and often also regulators, are in most countries the primary threat to media freedom. As a result, they are the target of a large majority (albeit certainly not all) of the recommendations. In this context, it is particularly important to ensure that the views of government and regulators are heard and that any legitimate concerns or points that they raise are taken into account. Even where certain measures or systems are designed or abused to limit media freedom or independence, there may also be mitigating or explanatory circumstances. Ensuring that these circumstances are referenced, while still calling for the measures or systems to be changed or even dropped, can do a lot to bolster the credibility of the assessment in the eyes of the government. The need to involve officials goes not only to the process of collection of evidence but also to formal steps in the process, such as a verification or feedback conference or the launch event.

There is also the very question of who is formally involved in the MDI assessment. While the methodology belongs to UNESCO, and by itself brings a degree of credibility to any MDI assessment, it is very important, if possible, to have UNESCO formally involved, although a few assessment exercises have been done by private actors. As an inter-governmental actor, UNESCO lends a certain degree of weight to the recommendations. It also increases the chances that the government may be a formal partner in the process, which again enhances the chances that the recommendations will be acted upon. At the same time, if government is involved, it is essential that it understands and accepts that final decisions about the text and especially the findings and recommendations always rest with the research team.



Historical Factors

A few historical factors create additional local contextual issues for applying an MDI assessment in at least some countries in the Arab World. In many countries, it is difficult for international donors to focus on improving any aspects the media environment outside of journalism or communications education. While this is of course useful, there have been complaints that it has created a lopsided situation whereby students learn many skills and values in class that they cannot actually apply in the workforce (including about professionalism, independence, diversity, accuracy and so on).

Whatever the merits of that complaint, it has in some cases created a lopsided situation in terms of available evidence about the MDI indicators, with far more research, studies and expertise being available about education, not to mention far more activities taking place in that area, than for other types of MDI indicators.

Historical repression in many Arab countries has also created a very particular institutional environment. A key example of this is the situation with journalists unions. The problem of journalists being required to be members of these unions has already been mentioned. Official attempts to exercise influence over these unions have been a part of official attempts to control or at least tame the profession for a long time in many Arab countries. These have been more or less successful in different countries.

In many cases, this creates a challenge in terms of applying the MDI assessment because an institution which the MDI indicators view as essentially a support body for media freedom is compromised. It is often far from clear how to transition from the existing situation to a more democratic one. The existing situation is often characterised by a union which is established or supported by law, which is subject to at least some degree of government influence, to which all journalists are required to belong and which often sets minimum conditions for journalists, all of which are contrary to international standards. At the same time, in democracies journalists' unions play an essential role in terms of supporting journalists and media freedom, and the Arab journalists' unions are in many cases a very important part of the institutional structure for journalists even if they suffer from very serious structural flaws. The MDI standards do not provide a roadmap or even clear standards for such a transition (just clear standards about where the transition should end up).

Conclusion

The application of the MDI assessment process in different countries in the Arab World has taught us a number of lessons. Some of these are fairly specific to that region of the world, while others are more generic in nature.



A key issue in applying the MDI methodology in a country is the process by which this is done. Getting the balance right between international expertise and local knowledge has been a persistent challenge for MDI assessment exercises. In my experience, the Jordan approach, which combined a strong local team—all of whom spoke English and who, at least collectively, had a fairly strong understanding of international standards—with significant support from an international expert was a very robust way of doing an MDI assessment. A small but intense initial capacity building workshop for the local researchers, which also allowed for the building of relationships and trust, made an important contribution to the success of this process, as well as the fact that the same core team remained together throughout. Although I would be hesitant to put this forward as a ‘model’, it certainly has elements which are worth replicating in other exercises.

This approach depends on the allocation of fairly significant resources to the exercise. Other key success factors in the case of Jordan were the very extensive means used to collect information about the environment for the media which involved, in addition to the usual desk research and individual interviews, a large number of thematic workshops and group interviews, as well as workshops in different parts of the country. This, along with the close engagement of the government and other official actors in the processes, meant that all of the key external stakeholders felt that their views had been taken into account. Peer reviewers and inputs from an Advisory Board further bolstered the credibility and robustness of the report. One element that was missing, however, was conducting a dedicated survey to assess the views of the public and journalists about key MDI indicators for which only indirect evidence otherwise existed.

More generally, the wide gap between international standards and national and regional practice in most Arab countries and the Arab World as a whole is a challenge when undertaking an MDI assessment there. This is exacerbated by the still very limited availability of materials about international standards regarding media regulation and freedom of expression in Arabic, although this is starting to be addressed, and the very limited international programmes in this area, at least prior to the Arab Spring. All of this means that it can be difficult to find researchers with a good understanding of international standards and, even if this challenge is overcome, it may be hard to convince a broad range of local stakeholders of the justice of some of the findings and recommendations that emerge from the assessment.

One area where this has proven to be particularly challenging in this regard is in relation to the regulation of journalists. The dominant understanding in the region is that journalists are professionals and so should be regulated in the same way as other professionals, namely by setting minimum standards for joining the profession, by requiring them to belong to a single professional body, and by giving that body the power to sanction its members, including ultimately by withdrawing their right to practise. All of these are

clearly contrary to both international standards and the standards specifically recognised in the MDI, and yet the latter provides little or no direction on how to transition from this existing situation to a more democratic dispensation.

Language is another challenge in undertaking an MDI assessment in the Arab World, in part because many terms of art that are central to the way we communicate about international standards regarding media freedom simply do not have proper counterparts in Arab. Even core media freedom concepts like independence (especially from government) and diversity, let alone more specialised concepts like public service broadcasting, are hard to translate accurately into Arabic. An Arabic language glossary to explain the real meaning of certain media freedom and development terms would be a real asset here.

The primary targets of an MDI assessment should be taken into account when designing the approach. In some cases —as was the case in Egypt immediately following the revolution— a quick assessment directed primarily at certain stakeholders —in that case civil society— may be deemed to be important. If so, it may, for example, be less important to focus on engaging government in the process and more important to focus on getting the assessment completed rapidly.

In most cases, however, a key target of the assessment will be the government and other official players —such as regulators and oversight bodies— given the important role they play in setting and policing the overall environment for media development. Given the sensitivity of directing recommendations for change at official actors, the final product or report needs to be as legitimate and credible as possible. This can be bolstered, among other ways, by ensuring that the evidence relied on is as extensive and reliable as possible, by paying scrupulous attention to detail and to avoiding making mistakes, particularly of a factual nature, by ensuring that all of the main stakeholder groups are involved in the process, and, where possible, to formally including official players such as UNESCO and the government in the process of undertaking the assessment.

Despite the challenges, it is becoming clear that the MDI assessments that have been done in the Arab World are not only quality products in and of themselves, but are also having a positive impact on media reform in the target countries. As we learn from the assessments that have been done so far, the quality should only improve and, as a consequence, hopefully also the impact that these assessments are having. In this way, they can contribute properly to the objectives for which the whole MDI methodology was designed.

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