

Report

From

Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA)

To

Wikimedia Foundation

Project Title:

Promoting freedom of expression, independent journalism and digital rights to advance DEI in West Africa

(August 2021 – July 2022)

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1. INTRODUCTION

In August 2021, the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) received a grant of **\$150,000** from the Wikimedia Foundation Knowledge Equity Fund to support its ongoing operations and charitable mission. During the grant period, the MFWA worked with its national partner organisations across West Africa to achieve significant milestones in expanding the frontiers of freedom of expression and digital rights, revamping independent/investigative journalism and expanding the civic space and civic participation in governance processes, especially, for minority groups and underserved communities in the region.

These efforts were also in line with recognising and advancing the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals especially, Goals 10 (*Reduce Inequalities*) and 16 (*Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels*).

This Narrative Report provides updates on work undertaken within the grant period - August 2021 – July 2022 vis-à-vis the planned focus areas mapped out in the Grant Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). The report captures some reflections on Impact and Assessment; Challenges; Evaluation and Lessons learned; and Funding and Finances of our work within the period.

The report is segmented into the three focus areas of the Grant MoU with a presentation of activities undertaken under each of the areas.

A) Championing Freedom of Expression

Freedom of expression constitutes an important human right and an essential foundation of a democratic society as it enables the free exchange of ideas, opinions and information and allows society to form their own opinions on issues of public importance. A thriving freedom of expression environment enables a vibrant media and an open civic space for dialogue, transparency and accountability in governance. This makes it imperative, the need to protect such right for the enjoyment of all persons in the region without fear, intimidation and discrimination.

During the grant period therefore, the MFWA and its national partner organisations continued to advocate for improved freedom of expression for the general public across the region, particularly, media, activists, protestors and other minority groups. The issue of press freedom and safety of journalists' conditions were also particularly prioritised. The organisation's advocacy work was carried out through monitoring, documenting and the production of reports on freedom of expression violations as well as the publication of advocacy statements and petitions. There were also dialogue sessions, forums and campaigns that targeted duty bearers – (governments, security agencies) to respond/take actions that address violations against journalists.

To ensure a conducive environment for freedom of expression and the practice of journalism, the MFWA paid particular attention to the Sahel countries (Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Northern

Nigeria) that are battling issues of insurgency and radicalism. For instance, Mali and Burkina Faso, have been in the grips of jihadist insurgency and have been rocked by military coups with serious implications for the work of citizens particularly journalists and activists. After monitoring events leading to the January 2022 coup in Burkina Faso, the MFWA issued a statement condemning the serial violations of freedom of expression (FoE) including an internet disruption in that country and called on the military junta to respect the citizens' rights to FoE. In Mali, the organisation also condemned the expulsion of a foreign correspondent from a public meeting for which she had obtained prior accreditation and the hostility against the foreign media in Mali and urged the government to ensure inclusivity and diversity of voices in news coverage.

Below are some more specifics:

A1) Monitoring, documenting and production of reports on freedom of expression violations as well as advocacy statements

- **80 Alerts and Statements on freedom of expression, safety of journalists and digital rights issues were produced and published**

The MFWA monitored and reported on the context and trends of freedom of expression and digital rights of persons within the West Africa region. The reports released as daily *Alerts* and *Statements* highlighted issues such as arbitrary arrests and detentions, physical attacks on journalists and media outlets, censorship, and imprisonment of journalists and dissident voices. The reports also named and shamed the perpetrators of such violations and made recommendations to authorities and duty bearers in the countries to take action to ensure the protection of journalists.

- **Three (3) quarterly Freedom of Expression (FoE) Monitor published**

Every quarter, the MFWA produced a comprehensive report on the freedom of expression situation and emerging trends in the region known as the **Freedom of Expression (FoE) Monitor**. Within the grant period, three editions of the FoE Monitor were produced and published. These are the third quarter and last quarter for 2021, and the first quarter of 2022.

- **Database of evidence and reference for freedom of expression violations in West Africa**

The MFWA's monitoring reports continually serve as a database of evidence of incidents of abuses of freedom of expression and digital rights of all persons in the region, particularly, journalists, activists, minority groups and those in underserved communities in the specific countries. The reports are referenced and cited in several conversations, deliberations and advocacy work by governments, media regulatory bodies, journalists, and other key stakeholders both national and international. The data informs advocacy and policy directions on issues of freedom of expression, media practice, safety of journalists and improving the civic space.

A2) Freedom of expression Campaigns and Key Results

Ghana: In Ghana, the MFWA mobilized over 600 journalists, activists and non-journalists (i.e. general citizens) to petition the National Security Minister Hon. Albert Kan-Dapaah about continuous attacks against journalists by national security officials as well as press freedom and safety of journalists' issues in Ghana. The Minister, later in September 2021, invited the MFWA into a meeting during which he committed to ensuring that such abuses against journalists and activists by national security operatives will be brought to an end and those found culpable sanctioned. The meeting resulted in improved relations between media- security operatives and a significant reduction in attacks perpetrated by National Security operatives. For example, our monitoring shows that over a period of ten-months after the said meeting with the Minister, Ghana recorded only one incident as compared to six incidents of violations by national security operatives in the seven months leading to the petition.

Guinea Bissau: On February 10, 2022, the MFWA and its partner press freedom organisations from fifteen West African countries petitioned President Umaro Sissoco Embalo of Guinea Bissau to personally intervene to help improve the freedom of expression and press freedom environment in that country and combat impunity for crimes against journalists. This followed a number of recent attacks on press freedom in Guinea Bissau, the highpoint of which was an incident in which a group of men in military uniform raided the premises of the Bissau-based radio station, Radio Capital FM, and destroyed practically all equipment at the facility. Again, the Government through its Ministry of Social Communication shut down 79 radio stations for failing to meet a 72-hour deadline to regularise their broadcast license status. Given the important role of the media (radio) as a primary medium of access to information, especially, for underserved communities, the (MFWA) and its partner in Guinea Bissau, SINJOTECS, engaged the Ministry of Social Communication on the shutdown of the radio stations. Following the discussion, 77 radio stations out of the 79, were allowed back on air as indicated in this report.

A3) Conference on the Safety of Female Journalists

In line with the principles of diversity and inclusion and to ensure greater protection for female journalists and activists – online and offline – a Conference on the Safety of Female Journalists was organised in Ghana for over 80 media practitioners made up of reporters, editors, producers and veteran journalists and media consultants and activists. The speakers, panellists and participants shared personal experiences on some of the safety challenges they encounter in their line of duty and made recommendations to media owners and managers, associations and colleague female journalists on best practices in promoting and upholding the safety of female journalists. Participants were also giving tips on how to stay safe in their line of work both online and offline.

B) Promoting Media and Good Governance

Even though 12 out of the 16 countries in West Africa have passed Right to Information (RTI) or Access to Information (ATI) laws, governments in the region remain largely reluctant in granting citizens their right to access public information on how their resources are utilised. As part of its effort to promote citizens access to information and participation in governance processes, a major component of the organisation's work, focused on strengthening the capacity of media organisations

journalists and citizens in the region to be vibrant, professional, independent and critical in order to effectively contribute to participatory, responsive, transparent and accountable governance.

During the Grant period, the MFWA prioritised and worked at improving investigative and accountability journalism; capacity building for journalists and citizens access to information and participation in governance issues and national discourse. Below are some specifics:

B1) Improving investigative and accountability journalism

Across West Africa, the media landscape has often been characterized by key challenges such as the low professionalism and limited critical reporting that holds duty bearers to account. Media viability remains a challenge and has serious implications for independent journalism. To help address the above, the MFWA in March 2021, launched a non-profit journalism project called *The Fourth Estate*. The project is an independent, public interest and accountability journalism initiative aimed at producing quality journalism, that holds the powerful to account, enhancing public sector transparency, and amplifying the voices and needs of the marginalised. It is also to serve as a training ground for young aspiring investigative journalists across the region.

During the Grant period, the Fourth Estate was supported to produce several investigative reports covering areas such as corruption, human rights, environment, and health. For instance, on health and corruption, a comprehensive story on fraudulent activities in some COVID-19 test labs revealed how staff at some testing laboratories were engaged in the issuance of fake COVID-19 test certificates. The facilities named as complicit in the practice included the clinic at Ghana's Presidency, the Jubilee House clinic. The story prompted the Presidency to order investigations into the issue. Three months after the publication of the story, the Office of the President directed the Ministry of Health to withdraw the officers implicated in *The Fourth Estate* investigations. Other COVID-19 related investigations revealed wasteful expenditure of public resources by the Ghanaian government in the fight against the pandemic, and how the lack of proper care resulted in COVID-related deaths.

On corruption, an investigation titled: "Bongo Scandal" that revealed fraudulent activities at a community bank in Bongo, a town in Northern Ghana, prompted an investigation into activities of the bank by the regulator for rural and community banks in Ghana, the ARB Apex Bank. On human rights, an investigative piece titled: "The licensed sex predator" revealed how a number of women were sexually assaulted by a self-styled physiotherapist, Jonathan Ohene Nkunim. The story resulted in the arrest of Jonathan who is currently facing prosecution. This publication obviously saved many unsuspecting women from falling victims to such acts. It is not surprising that in December, 2022, the Global Investigative Journalism Network (GIJN), named the story among the top 10 investigative stories from Sub-Saharan Africa in 2021.

Also during the Grant period, the MFWA, commenced a new initiative known as the Next Generation Investigative Journalism Fellowship (NGIJ). The objective is to promote public interest, accountability journalism in West Africa through mentorship and training of young promising journalism graduates (*with at least 40% being females*) as well as bolster quality

journalism that advances transparency and accountability in governance, and the promotion of human rights.

The Project builds the capacity of early-career journalists in the West Africa region to be able to conduct critical, high-quality, fact-based and in-depth reporting towards improving lives and promoting good governance through journalism excellence. It involves a combination of a six-month Training/Mentorship for a competitively selected group of young promising journalists; training them in investigative reporting and fact-checking as well as supporting Fellows to produce compelling investigative and/or fact-checking reports. The mentorship programme is directly offered under the MFWA's Fact-Check Ghana and The Fourth Estate, both being MFWA's public interest and accountability journalism projects made up of seasoned journalists.

This report, for example, captures a synopsis of some of the compelling stories produced and published by the first Cohort of Fellows holding authorities to account in the provision of basic amenities such as water, health facilities etc.

B2) Media and Participatory Governance and Access to Information advocacy:

As part of efforts to improve the media's capacity to utilize access to information laws in investigative and accountability reporting, a total of 60 journalists from Ghana, Niger and Cote d'Ivoire were trained on how to use their respective access to information laws for investigations. In Niger and Cote d'Ivoire, public forums bringing together key state and non-state actors were convened to discuss the effective implementation of access to information laws with key recommendations made on how to improve the access to information ecosystem in the respective countries. Again, some journalists were financially supported to produce critical stories using the access to information laws.

In Ghana specifically, in order to improve the public's right to access information and ensure that access to information is guaranteed by regional and national laws and respected in practice, citizens groups made up of about 30 individuals (*particularly women, youth, PWDs, traditional leaders, local based media/journalist*) were constituted in some local districts and trained to test local government authorities' responsiveness to the Right to Information law. Preliminary findings from the exercise were published in this report.

At the national level, the MFWA's Fourth Estate team also tested the responsiveness of 33 Ministries, Departments and Agencies to information requests. Findings of the exercise were also published in this report. For example, the very first decision by Ghana's RTI Commission on an RTI request was on a case filed by *The Fourth Estate*. Subsequent to that, the Commission recently fined the Ghana National Fire Service GHC50,000 (about US\$8,000). This was after the Fire Service had failed to grant *The Fourth Estate's requested* information and also failed to provide an explanation to the Commission on why it refused to grant the requested information. The RTI Commission also recently imposed a fine of GHC30,000 (about US\$5,000) on the Health Facilities Regulatory Agency (HeFRA) for failing to grant information requested by *The Fourth Estate* and also for failing to respond to the RTI Commission's enquiry in relation to *The Fourth Estate's* request. Following another case by *The Fourth Estate*, the RTI Commission ordered the state Scholarship

Secretariat, to release the list of all scholarship beneficiaries for 2019 and 2020 to The Fourth Estate, as requested.

Key Milestone

Undoubtedly, the MFWA's access to information advocacy work in Ghana have triggered authorities' responsiveness and engagement on matters relating to local and national development such as utilization of public resources, procurement and budgets. For instance, while responding to questions in Parliament on the operations of the RTI on March 15, 2022, Ghana's Minister for Information, Kojo Opong Nkrumah, singled out the [MFWA for praise in testing the RTI law](#) and continuously keeping the law alive

For instance, while responding to questions on the floor of Parliament on the operationalisation of the RTI law on March 15, 2022, the minister said the continuous efforts by the two entities have kept the RTI law alive.

B3) Countering Fake News, Mis/Information and False Claims by public officials

Around the world, the problem of mis/disinformation has posed a significant threat to elections, stability of countries, health delivery and governance in general. There is the proliferation of fake news, misinformation and propaganda especially during electioneering campaigns, political debates, public health and other emergencies, and other matters of significant national and/or international public interest. Moreover, in recent times, a number of authoritarian foreign states have resorted to the use of mis/disinformation for external propaganda and extremists' narratives that sometimes have negative consequences on the peace, security and stability of targeted countries.

The MFWA, through its [Fact-Check Ghana](#) project, therefore, enhanced fact-based public discourse, debates and decision making as well as factual and timely health information by fact-checking claims, statements, promises and messages that are of public interest, and widely publicising findings to help the public make informed opinions, decisions and choices.

For instance, the **COVID-19 pandemic** occasioned a proliferation of information including mis/disinformation about the pandemic through different channels. This required credible information from media organisations for purposes of public education and sensitization. The MFWA, therefore, worked in partnership with some influential national level and local radio stations in Ghana to counter fake news and dis-misinformation on COVID-19 and increase public education about the pandemic and vaccines. The fact-checkers produced verified/fact-checked reports and explainers on COVID-19. These include [this report](#) and [this other report](#) that counters claims by Ghana's Health Minister about the country's COVID-19 management. The fact-checked reports and explainers were taken up by the partner local radio station and shared/discussed in local languages that the local population (literate, semi-literate, illiterate, rich, and poor) could understand and appreciate.

On politics and national discourse, the fact-checking team produced reports such as [this report](#) on some contradictions in Ghana’s 2022 State of the Nation Address delivered by the President; and [this viral video](#) on flying fighter jets purportedly related to the Russia, Ukraine conflict.

B4) Key Convenings and Conferences

During the grant period, a number of national level and regional convenings were held to discuss media development, especially, in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic and coping strategies. The high point of these convenings was the West Africa Media Excellence Conference and Awards ([WAMECA 2021](#)) which brought stakeholders and experts together to deliberate on the theme *Misinformation, Digital Media Legislation and Journalism in Africa*. The Awards component of WAMECA 2021 rewarded journalists who had produced impactful stories. Participants at WAMECA 2021, called on governments in the region to desist from using digital media legislation as a pretext to control and curb free expression online and further shrink the civic space. Rather, they should make conscious efforts to make the internet as free as possible for diversity, inclusion, and civic engagement.

A [Forum on Media Professionalism and Safety of Journalists](#) was also organised as part of activities to mark the International Day to End impunity for Crimes Against Journalists (observed annually on November 2) – to use the occasion to highlight the safety challenges journalists face in their daily work and to call for redress for such violations. Specific recommendations were made to the government, media regulator, media groups and associations, media owners and managers, and journalists themselves to help improve the environment.

B5) Engagements with ECOWAS

To contribute to policy at the regional level and help improve freedom of expression of all persons as well as public participation in governance in the region, the MFWA continued its engagement efforts with the regional bloc ECOWAS. The MFWA and its partners engaged ECOWAS to ensure that regional level policy frameworks that promote media freedom, good governance and accountability are implemented. These engagements followed an earlier development of a [mapping report](#) on the extent to which ECOWAS mainstreams media in its regional development agenda.

C) Advocacy and Training

C1) Capacity building for female journalists, activists and bloggers on digital rights and internet freedom issues

To enhance the capacity of women to effectively use digital tools, 150 female journalists, bloggers and activists in Liberia and Sierra Leone were trained on digital literacy and women’s rights online. Through presentations, practical and interactive sessions, participants were introduced to Digital Rights, Social Media and Online Privacy and Identifying and Dealing with Online Abuses Against women. They were also trained on Digital Storytelling and Digital Content Creation. The capacity

of the participants was also built on how they can contribute to Women's Rights Online advocacy in their respective countries. Training beneficiaries from the respective countries are currently actively engaged in continuous discussions via WhatsApp groups created at the end of each training and are in a network of women's digital rights activists that support advocacy for women's rights online. The WhatsApp platforms are also being used for peer learning and supporting advocacy activities by group members.

Communication and outreach: The MFWA made a conscious effort to publicise its work i.e. activities – trainings, conferences, forums/webinars, publications, advocacy statements and campaigns. These are published on the MFWA's website and social media handles as well as circulated to its list serve of over 1500 contacts made up of both national and international individuals and organisations from within CSOs, government, media, donors/funders etc.

D) Challenges

Despite the progress in economic growth, democratisation and regional integration in the West Africa region, recent rise in political violence, conflict and extremism has sparked concerns of instability in the region and insecurity for its citizens. There were some major democratic drawbacks that made working in the region more difficult and precarious, especially for media workers. This included the two successful coups in Guinea and Mali and the abortive coup in Guinea Bissau. Indeed, in the sub-region currently, there are extremists' narratives with fears of a terrorism spillover to coastal states from the Sahel regions. Countries like Ghana, for instance, have recently been on red alert for fears of terrorist attacks. These activities are taking place against a backdrop of persistent social and economic vulnerability in the region.

In addition to the unresolved insurgent attacks in the Sahelian countries, there were also some major democratic drawbacks that made working in the region more difficult and precarious, especially for media workers, activists, protesters, civil society organisations and the general public. These include the successful coups in Guinea and Mali, Burkina Faso and an abortive coup in Guinea Bissau.

The political tension in the region, coupled with growing economic hardships and challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic created an atmosphere of uncertainties within which the organisation worked across the region and by extension for programme implementation. For example, the organisation was forced to suspend its Media Freedom and Access to information project in Guinea Bissau due to the attempted coup in that country this year.

E) Evaluation and Lesson learned

Guided by its systems and policies such as the Gender policy, Safeguarding policy, and the values of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, the MFWA ensured that gender was mainstreamed in all programme activities. Voices of the marginalised, minority groups and underserved communities were also prioritised. The organisation also ensured value for money in the procurements of goods and services.

A major lesson is the need to remain neutral and independent in all its operations and continuously monitor the landscape. In the event of possible violence, the organisation will make necessary adjustments to plans in consultation with funders.

Again, in the last couple of months, conversations around extremists' narratives in the public are gaining traction. The MFWA therefore is gearing up to carry out a study on the context and also deploy its fact-checking work in that area to avert mis-disinformation including propaganda narratives.

F) Funding and Finances

The organisation continues to maintain funding relations with its main funding partners including the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Open Society Foundation's Programme on Independent Journalism (OSF-PIJ), Open Society Initiative for West Africa (OSIWA), IFEX, DW Akademie and Embassy of the United States in Ghana. Others are the Dutch Foreign Ministry through the Embassy in Ghana, the European Union and National Endowment for Democracy.

Financial Management Practices

Working with different funders with different requirements and based on learnings over the years, the MFWA maintains and complies with a robust financial system that ensures accountability to all stakeholders and value for money in all transactions. The system ensures effective and efficient internal controls over funding inflows and disbursements. As a requirement, all disbursements are done through cheques approved and signed by the Executive Director which must be countersigned by one other Board member.

The MFWA audits its accounts annually through an external auditing firm appointed by the Board. The current external auditor of the organisation is Sraha Consultancy Services (Chartered Accountants). To ensure effective management of all grants, the organisation goes through monthly financial review and quarterly internal audit processes led by the Executive Director and the Finance Manager. The Executive Director also carries out monthly reviews by going through cashbooks and bank reconciliation records prepared by the Finance Manager who also ensures that financial transactions strictly adhere to prudent financial principles.

Processes for payment are initiated through memos from programme officers, vetted and recommended by programme managers and approved by the Executive Director for processing by the Finance Manager. All expenses in relation to the Executive Director require approval by the Board Chair to avoid conflict of interest. The approved software for financial management of the organisation is QuickBooks. To efficiently track and account for different grants, the organisation accepts to maintain separate accounts for grants that exceed US\$60,000 or its equivalent in Ghana cedis if so required by a funder.

Copies of each of the organisation's Financial Policies and Procedures Manual, annual audited accounts for the last five years can all be made available on request.