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**Entry Points For
Programming That
Supports Locally Led
Development:**

- Engaging in co-design
- Relying on local expertise

BALKAN MEDIA ASSISTANCE PROGRAM:

A case study in locally led development

This case study highlights the achievements of the Balkan Media Assistance Program (BMAP) made possible by the project's use of such locally led development enabling tools as engaging in co-design and relying on local expertise during the planning and implementation phases of the project. Highlights from this case study include:

- » Creating an environment where local media outlets served in leadership roles, identified the areas of focus, and designed the project's activities through a collaborative co-design process empowered them to implement solutions that met their specific needs and that were sustainable over the long-term.
- » Relying on local expertise and knowledge promoted trust building and resulted in more impactful results given that region and country-specific experts had a greater understanding of the local context ensuring the relevance of their support.
- » To facilitate the scaling of these types of outcomes, BMAP also acted as a facilitator, building trust and cooperation between different media stakeholders in the region, allowing knowledge to be shared sustainably, an essential step for lasting change.

BACKGROUND: Press freedom is under threat globally. The Balkans region is no exception to this trend with journalists in many Balkan states facing a polarized political environment and threats from criminal groups.¹ Political-economic interests have captured much of the mainstream media sector through opaque ownership structures, direct state support, and consolidated advertising markets, substantially limiting competition in the media marketplace and the public's access to objective, balanced reporting. Such a consolidated, captured market, which operates alongside poorly functioning legal protections, further distorts the watchdog role the media should play in society and creates an uneven playing field for independent media. Against this backdrop, support for freedom of expression is needed to ensure that the independent media sector can advocate more effectively as a community and that citizens begin to recognize the value of a free press and demand access to high-quality, fact-based reporting, and mitigation mis- and disinformation. In response to this need, USAID created BMAP.

USAID launched the first iteration of BMAP in September 2017 with the objective of enhancing the professionalism and sustainability of media in the Balkans region by working with renowned and promising news media outlets to improve their digital content quality, business processes, and collaboration. The success of BMAP, which closed in July 2022, led to the launch of a second iteration of the program, entitled Balkan Media Assistance Program to Foster Organization Readiness While Advancing Resilient Development (BMAP Forward), which launched in February 2022.

BMAP, the focus of this case study, was designed and implemented by 10 media outlets spanning Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. Together, the work implemented by these media outlets in partnership with Internews, sought to achieve three main objectives, outlined below.

- **Objective 1: Provide outlets and media partners with more substantial and stable resources to operate as viable enterprises.**



BMAP ended up providing to key partners and other grantees a total of 165 grants equivalent to \$2.8 million.

- **Objective 2: Strengthen the ability of content producers to engage wider audiences and expand their reach across the region.**
- **Objective 3: Foster stronger partnerships to advance solutions on common challenges in the digital space.**

ACHIEVEMENTS: The successes of the BMAP programs have been multi-faceted and far-reaching. All of its key partners have seen marked increases in their programmatic advertising revenue, significantly boosting their financial sustainability. For example, Bosnia-based media outlet Oslobodjenje saw an increase in monthly programmatic advertising revenue of 206 percent, going from \$2,770 at the start of the program to \$5,680 by the end of the program. Meanwhile, Vijesti, an outlet based in Montenegro increased its advertising revenue by 1,300 percent going from \$1,100 in revenue per month to \$10,200.

Additionally, media partners strengthened their expertise in digital content development supporting weighty increases in their audience sizes. The same partners mentioned above saw audience increases of 179 percent and 82 percent, respectively, with

1. [Reporters Without Borders \(2022\). "World Press Freedom Index."](#)

Oslobođenje increasing its monthly userbase from 630 thousand to 1.8 million, and Vijesti increasing its userbase from 2.4 million to 4.3 million. Moreover, several BMAP partners, including KRIK, Danas, and Juzne Vesti were named the 2020 Silver Winners at the prestigious 41st Annual Telly Awards. Their 30-minute video was produced during a workshop organized by the U.S. Embassy in Croatia with mentorship from BMAP trainers in December 2019.

In addition to training and mentorship, participating media outlets' digital content development work benefited from BMAP's responsiveness and flexibility as a partner. BMAP's willingness to change directions and quickly respond to media outlets' requests, including through the use of a rapid response fund, allowed partners to cover pressing news stories in a timely and effective manner. In one case, BMAP's Serbia-based partner KRIK's coverage of police brutality in response to COVID restriction protests—facilitated by gas masks, which provided some protection from tear gas and were purchased through BMAP's rapid response fund—received millions of impressions and became the primary source for exposing local and international audiences to the police brutality taking place in Serbia.



Through BMAP, media partners were also successful in enhancing their digital security and technological optimization. An assessment of each firm's digital security showed improvements among every partner.

“The biggest change that 360 Degrees has accomplished thanks to BMAP is a vivid change in our philosophy/ mindset on how to secure our financial sustainability. Prior to BMAP, our existence was dependent exclusively on donors' help. Today, we are an outlet that secures 40 percent of our income through other sources. That would not be possible without the constant work, trainings and consultancies provided through BMAP.”

Vasko Popetrevski, Executive Manager and Editor in Chief of BMAP partner 360 Degrees

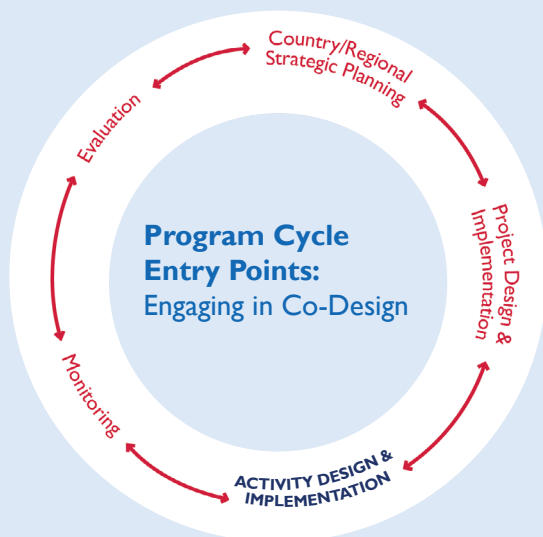
Oslobodjenje stands out as a particularly high achiever, having met all its goals for upgrading its technical architecture, including numerous changes to its website and content management system. This helped increase the outlet's security, for example through the introduction of two-factor authentication), while also contributing to the outlet's record-high web traffic through optimization. Oslobođenje also achieved its goal of conducting a dry run of its virtual newsroom, allowing journalists to securely access the content management system remotely, contributing to mobility during reporting.

Media partners participating in BMAP also emerged with a more robust network and stronger relations with other media outlets. During the life of the project, this made it possible to launch two collaborative content production projects, including a collaborative cross-border content production project titled “Strategic Foreign Investments in the Energy Sector and Infrastructure,” and a joint regional weekly TV magazine titled “Via Balcanica.” In addition to fostering communication and collaborative production, these initiatives presented partners with the benefit of expanding their audiences beyond national boundaries by exploring the potential of producing content for regional audiences that speak Bosnian/Croatian/Montenegrin/Serbian and Albanian languages and promoting cross-border collaboration around other issues relevant for meaningful public discourse in their countries. Importantly, many of the connections forged during BMAP have outlasted the project with news outlets continuing to work on joint projects and continuing to reach out to BMAP technical experts for advice.

ENTRY POINTS FOR PROGRAMMING THAT SUPPORTS LOCALLY LED DEVELOPMENT

BMAP's success as a program is inextricably linked to locally led development. Notably, two elements in the design of the project stand out in particular: engaging in co-design with local actors and relying on local expertise.

ENGAGING IN CO-DESIGN



The first step in getting BMAP off the ground was identifying and selecting the local media outlets that would lead the design and implementation of the program. To do this, the BMAP team held an open call for media outlets in the five countries where BMAP was being implemented—Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia—to apply to guide the program. Applicants were shortlisted following a review of applications by USAID. The final selection of local media outlets, referred to as key media partners by BMAP, was decided based on whether the outlets had a proven track record of editorial independence, demonstrated commitment to upholding professional journalistic standards and ethics, and actively implemented the principles of inclusion, diversity, and reconciliation. Additionally, the BMAP team

TIPS FOR SUCCESS: ENGAGING IN CO-DESIGN

- Empower local partners to establish and build their own Performance Improvement Plans, with BMAP providing technical and financial support along the way. Remember, they are best placed to know the challenges and opportunities that they face.
- Design capacity strengthening efforts (measured by performance indicator CBLD-9) according to the needs identified by partners.
- Plan for flexibility: partner needs change, therefore, workplans and their elaboration/implementation should be flexible enough to allow for dynamic adjustments.

considered the clarity and achievability of the goals outlined in their applications, as well as their perceived ability to implement the necessary changes to strengthen their sustainability as viable enterprises.

BMAP and its key media partners worked together to produce Performance Improvement Plans. These plans helped guide BMAP's capacity strengthening efforts as articulated in USAID's Local Capacity Strengthening Policy—that is, capacity strengthening initiatives where partners 1) defined their own vision for success; 2) strengthened their ability to be effective and relevant actors within their local communities and contexts; and 3) elevated local ownership in sustaining development results. More specifically, the plans covered top priorities

highlighted by partners, which were then synthesized into a set of activities by quarter, focusing on the next 18 months of the project. Performance Improvement Plans were developed by a variety of senior managers at the respective media outlets, including CEOs; Editors-in-Chief; and Directors of Marketing, Sales and HR, in cooperation with the BMAP team. They were also informed by Organizational Capacity Assessments (OCAs). OCAs, undertaken collaboratively with the media partners, helped partners reflect on quantifiable data to evaluate the capacity of media outlets over an extended period of time, including, for example, the outlet's position within the market and its potential to expand. The Performance Improvement Plans not only highlighted the expert assistance requested by partners, but also provided the structure that would be used to develop investment grants, including establishing milestones that each media partner should meet within those grants. The performance plans were jointly refreshed at the midpoint in the spring and summer of 2020 and helped chart the second half of the project.

While the Performance Improvement Plans served as the basis for guiding support decisions, importantly, BMAP remained flexible and attentive to the needs of its partners. For example, BMAP provided trainings to help its Kosovo based media partner Koha, strengthen its digital storytelling and data visualization—a need identified with Koha during the planning phase of project. However, BMAP provided particularly intensive support to Koha during the 2021 Presidential Elections in Kosovo, assisting in the production of high-quality maps, timelines, and other data visualizations. Following the elections, at Koha's request, BMAP provided further training to its digital team, so that they would be able to create graphics on their own. In another example, grantee Novo Ekonomija reported that BMAP supported them when they requested that more emphasis be placed on digital content creation in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which began in the middle of their grant period.

Given the unpredictability of the news cycle and the events that are reported on, partners were also able to rely on a flexible and rapid response fund set up by BMAP should they rapidly require items for emergency situations. For example, in July 2020, Serbia experienced mass protests following the



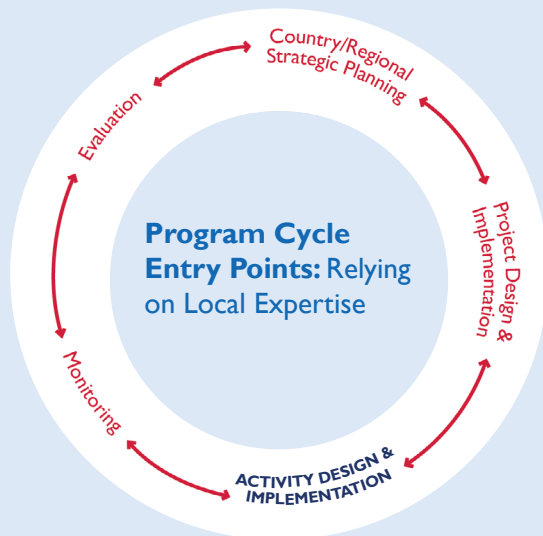
“Technical assistance, training, and mentorships were not imposed on us. We identified targets we wanted to achieve, and they offered a list of experts who could help.”

Mateja Agatonovic, staff member at Nova Ekonomija (Serbia)

government's announcement of the reimplementing of a curfew in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and its alleged overall poor handling of the pandemic. Beginning on their second day, the Serbian government initiated a brutal response to these protests, sending out special police forces and commando troops who engaged in an indiscriminate and mass usage of tear gas. In response, local media partner KRIK requested gas masks through the rapid response fund, allowing them to cover the police brutality, while being (reasonably) protected from the tear gas. The video materials made by KRIK journalists during this time

had millions of impressions and served as the main source for exposing local and international audiences to the police brutality occurring in Serbia. While the rapid response fund that BMAP set up with USAID only held a limited amount of money (approximately \$10,000 USD), it proved to be an effective mechanism to get funds over to partners in need without having to engage in any lengthy and onerous procurement process.

RELYING ON LOCAL EXPERTISE



With an individualized Performance Improvement Plan in place for each participating media outlet, local partners could start identifying and requesting tailored training, mentoring, and financial support to enhance media management and reorganization to make them more professional, stable, and sustainable. This work was undertaken with the help of a core group of interdisciplinary local and regional experts, identified by BMAP to work continuously with the key media outlets on business development over the course of the project. These experts established a common strategic planning approach to allow for better coordination when working with different media outlets and the identification of shared approaches and opportunities.

Additionally, for trainings, BMAP sourced technical experts and trainers from within the region. This was highly valued by the media partners and facilitated the establishment of trust, particularly given local experts' greater levels of relevant expertise and a greater understanding of contextual realities. For

TIPS FOR SUCCESS: RELYING ON LOCAL EXPERTISE

- Relying on local expertise to provide technical support promoted trust building and resulted in more impactful results given that local experts had a greater understanding of the local context ensuring the relevance of their support.
- Facilitating local partnerships can support the sustainability and scalability of long-term results.

instance, Ivana Pavlovic from grantee Nova Ekonomija explained, "In this initial phase of development of content, it was very important to have local experts because they understood well that our budget and equipment was modest and provided relevant advice for the context." As is the case with many other participating media outlets, the level of trust that was built between Nova Ekonomija and the technical experts it met under BMAP is made evident by the fact that they have stayed in touch beyond the end of BMAP with experts continuing to provide occasional advice to partner outlets when needed. While sourcing experts from the region was a high priority for BMAP, it should also be noted that the number one criterion they emphasized was the quality of the experts to ensure that partners would receive a high standard of technical assistance.

BMAP also helped upgrade the knowledge and expertise of some of its partners, enabling them to become sources of expertise for other media partners (creating genuine, "localized" expertise that will remain active far beyond the initial program's lifespan). This outcome is essential to the sustainability of the project's results. Perhaps the best example of this concerns the Montenegrin media outlet Vijesti. Following its participation in BMAP-provided training and technical expertise efforts from 2018 to 2020, Vijesti has become a "net exporter" and a source of expertise in the fields of audience analytics and content monetization (primarily, although not exclusively, in programmatic advertising). Vijesti is now sharing its expertise to other BMAP/BMAP Forward

partners in the region, but also to media partners in some “sensitive countries,” under other USAID-funded programs.

To facilitate the scaling of this type of outcome, BMAP worked to foster partnerships between media outlets throughout the region, including through the establishment of an annual innovation lab and an annual media forum as well as through the promotion of regional collaboration through support for joint initiatives and collaborative content production. The result of these efforts by the end of the fourth year of the program included over 75 partnerships and examples of cross-border content production between two or more media outlets. These partnerships have endured beyond the scope of the project with many of the media partners continuing to work jointly on media projects.

“In the past 20 years, we had many international experts visiting us. Some of them couldn’t find my country on the map of Europe. Many of them used their standard training formats, changing only names and dates.

This is the first time that we are working with an international organization and experts who truly understand the environment in which we work. And much more than that: an international organization and group of experts whom we trust up to the level of giving them a guiding role in defining strategic solutions for our company, in whom we have invested all of ourselves. We couldn’t be asking for more.”

Marijana Bojanic, CEO of BMAP partner Vijesti (Montenegro)

