

Recovery Plan

The Impact of COVID-19 on media freedom, journalist safety and media viability in Southeast Asia



public media alliance



Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed and exacerbated the myriad challenges that are currently confronting journalists in Southeast Asia. They face specific challenges in terms of their freedom to pursue coverage, their safety and security amid threats to their overall health and well-being, and the viability of media operations. The need to explore and pursue concrete steps to support journalists as part of a plan towards media recovery in Southeast Asia is urgent.

This draft recovery plan has been produced as part of the research project “The Impact of COVID-19 on media freedom, journalist safety and media viability in Southeast Asia”, run by the Public Media Alliance (PMA) in association with the Asia Democracy Network (ADN), and with support from UNESCO Bangkok and UNESCO’s International Programme for the Development of Communications (IPDC).

Guided by the research outputs from the project, the plan makes recommendations at a regional level on steps to improve media freedom, media viability, and journalist safety in nine Southeast Asian countries.

The plan incorporates some of the key points raised

as part of PMA’s research and feedback with media stakeholders in the region. These include:

- ▶ Establishing a regional (non-governmental) forum to cover welfare, safety, and the freedom of journalists.
- ▶ Strengthening coordination and communication between states, with respect to media.
- ▶ Analysing the impact of digitalisation, especially the impact of social media.
- ▶ Building strong partnerships to produce high quality and cost-effective content.
- ▶ Strengthening public ‘buy-in’ – supporting improved digital media literacy, better enabling citizens to distinguish disinformation and distorted news.

The following plan can be used as a template to enable improved strategic cooperation between media across Southeast Asia, enabling them to build capacity for recovery and sustainability both during and beyond the pandemic.

1. Media Freedom

- ▶ Protect, promote, and advocate a free and independent media in the region by supporting the introduction of laws and policies that enable a free media. And by establishing adequate mechanisms such as institutions, programmes and budgets for monitoring and reporting on threats, harassment, and violence against journalists.
- ▶ Ensure independent, accountable, and effective public service media.
- ▶ Support alternative media to ensure they complement the work of independent mainstream media outlets and fill information gaps.
- ▶ Promote digital media literacy to prevent mis- and disinformation.
- ▶ Request regional and international organisations supporting democracy to assist independent media outlets and related institutions in the region.
- ▶ Build and sustain regional solidarity among independent media institutions to promote press freedom and pursue relevant collective actions.

2. Media Viability

- ▶ Explore new and viable business and funding models that will help to ensure media survival and sustainability during crises. These should also be responsive to changing audience behaviours.
- ▶ Ensure the welfare of media workers, including the provision of adequate social, mental, and physical protections.
- ▶ Promote media pluralism and diversity to counteract the concentration of media ownership.
- ▶ Strengthen media skills training that will assist in facilitating organisational shifts to digital media and better and more effective reporting.
- ▶ Diversify and enhance content strategies to ensure and sustain audience engagement.
- ▶ Enhance digital security that benefits both news outlets and audiences.

3. Safety of Journalists

- ▶ Urge states to repeal laws that allow threats to media or condone violence against journalists.
- ▶ Call for the enactment of laws and other policies that secure the safety of journalists as well as their sources during and beyond any crisis.
- ▶ Put in place safety and risk assessment procedures, within media organisations, including capacity building training, to ensure journalists and their sources are safe.
- ▶ Develop management mechanisms within media organisations to ensure adequate support for journalists during a crisis.
- ▶ Recognise the role of journalists as frontline workers and accord them the protection and services they need.

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