

# Sustainability: Going Beyond the Buzzword

by  
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*by Michel Leroy*

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## Abstract

Often praised by donors but rarely defined, sustainability is a major challenge for both media and assistance organisations. The term first emerged in the field of biological conservation but has expanded to become a development goal in itself or a “transformation process”, as the Brundtland Report put it in 1987 – the first official document to attempt to define the concept of sustainable development. It was above all the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) that established a set of criteria in 1991, setting a framework that quickly became an inevitable standard for all development projects. From sustaining a process, the focus shifted to sustaining a project, i.e. an activity that is allocated an established time frame, with a beginning, a middle and an end.

Consequently, for many, sustainability has become a “buzzword” (Solow, 2019), an injunction to assess the likelihood that the effects of an intervention will continue after it is completed. Over time, other terms have also appeared such as resilience, viability and attainability. Sometimes they are nuances of sustainability, sometimes they overlap with the construct, but most often they reinforce a general impression of vagueness.

This paper aims to trace the social construct of sustainability in the context of media development and define what is to be sustained, at the level of the intervention (the process of change) or its outcome (the impact on the medium itself). It is intended for all those who are concerned, closely or remotely, with ‘media action’ – and this expression is used here to mean any intervention (inside or outside a given media system) that promotes either communication for social change (the use of media for development purposes) or media development (the targeted development of independent outlets).

This literature review focuses on the evolution of the concept of sustainability and the way it has been endorsed by the media, media action implementers and donors over time, as funds dedicated to media assistance have increased and the digital revolution has questioned most of the foundations of the media industry, with regard to production, distribution and information usage. Far from being an unambiguous obligation to which everyone agrees, sustainability is compelling precisely by virtue of its elasticity and multiple dimensions, at the intersection of what is lasting, resilient and desirable.

## Key findings

- » Since gaining mainstream appeal in the 1990s, sustainability has become a key concept in the field of media action. Its proponents would like to make it an unquestionable imperative, while its objectors question its catch-all nature. **There is no widely accepted definition of sustainability** but the OECD proposed a criterion that has since been used as a benchmark: “the extent to which the net benefits of the intervention continue, or are likely to continue”. Some donors (e.g. Japan and the United Nations Development Programme) also focus on the related notion of “human security”.
- » Overquoted but still often neglected<sup>1</sup>, **sustainability is more of a process than an externally driven goal to be achieved.** Whether an activity, outcome or principle is sustainable can only be known afterwards and what is assessed is a likelihood or probability, along with the capacity to mitigate risks, learn from mistakes and adapt along the way.
- » In the field of media action, scholars have explored a multitude of entry points in relation to sustainability. The **influence of Gumucio Dagron’s “community radio” model** (where sustainability is financially, institutionally and socially assessed) **and a focus on the online media market** are noticeable trends even if their specifics are giving way to a more systemic approach. Nevertheless, there remain numerous blind spots, notably the effects of corruption and the various interpretations of what the “future” refers to across different cultural backgrounds.
- » For a long time, a very normative (and donor-centric) vision of sustainability tended to **ignore local stakeholders**, especially in advertising markets that are not yet considered sufficiently mature. However, as media action interventions increasingly focus on emerging markets, their methodology has evolved to favour loan funds or local subcontracts rather than rely solely on North-South capacity building. In doing so, this approach comes closer to a vision of media action that combines external interventions and internal processes of change.

<sup>1</sup>) A 2008 systematic review of 34 evaluation reports from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency estimated that only 47% are adequate in assessing sustainability (Sida, 2008).

» **Unsustainability is rarely questioned in humanitarian media projects**, but it becomes critical when the emergency project becomes a long-term endeavour. The role of donors and their coordination play a key role, especially since not all of them have a formal policy on media sustainability, and there are even fewer cases with a concerted strategy. This is concerning because over the past three decades studies have shown that scattered, unrelated interventions have no effect or are even counterproductive.

## Conclusions for the practitioners

**A. (Real) participation is key.** Public engagement and empowerment are two central elements in media action policymaking. All voices, including the most marginalised, must be heard, throughout the process of change.

*A participatory approach (whether involving “beneficiaries” of a Communication for Social Change (C4SC) intervention or the audience in media development projects, for example in order to define their needs or to assess to what extent outcomes are reached) may be a challenge in multi-stakeholder processes, like those at work in media action. While the tools available for conducting qualitative research and audience measurement are numerous and more accessible today, methods for fostering critical analysis and avoiding the usual biases of this type of research (its statistical unrepresentativeness in particular) are still not widely used, which can sometimes give the impression of an “illusion of inclusion”. This is especially problematic in the C4SC sector, where the underlying goal is often behaviour change. Hence, it is advisable to develop a robust theory of change that provides a framework, linking activities to expected outcomes in a given context, depending on underlying assumptions. Sustainability can then be understood as the ability to manage risk.*

**B. Think holistically about sustainability from day one.** Thinking holistically means considering the various systems, mechanisms or contexts – the ‘ecologies’ – in which stakeholders operate in a media action project rather than concentrating on a single perspective

*Media action as a field could learn from the experiences of other sectors like social investment, social services (Aracy, 2008) or more broadly from any cross-sector partnership or collaboration to better understand interactions between actors and to avoid a siloed approach to complex challenges. The overall value of this sharing of information and resources is “not merely in connecting interested parties but, rather, in their ability to act – to substantially influence the people and issues within their problem domain” (Koschmann et al., 2012). Sharing a common trajectory helps to make a theory of change robust, with agreement on the relevant underlying assumptions about the delivery of desired outcomes in a particular context, thus enhancing the sustainability of a programme from day one (as early as the planning stages).*

**C. Never underestimate the likelihood of unsustainability.** An unhealthy information environment, a change in management or an unexpected serious crisis are among the structural and cyclical risk factors that can jeopardise the sustainability of a media initiative.

*Sustainability is a multilayered concept whose evaluation is increasingly complex and can require a tremendous number of indicators. It may therefore be tempting to reduce it to an essentially economic agenda, for example when donors use terms like “value for money” in the allocation of public funds. However, since communication is at stake in the media action sphere, it seems more meaningful to adopt a triple approach to sustainability, centred on the transmitter (the viability of what can be considered a business unit), on the receiver (what use does the audience of the medium make of it?) and on the message itself (what does the medium produce in terms of its status as a public good?).*



**D. Do not forget to assess the project after its completion.** True ex-post evaluations (at least three years after the project has ended) are extremely rare in the media action sector.

*Apart from the Japanese (since 2003), few donors and operators systematically plan for “real” ex-post evaluations, focused on a project’s impact and sustainability on the recipient side. Between 2009 and 2012, for example, only 8% of all USAID-led evaluations were ex-post (USAID, 2013a). However, only an ex-post evaluation can provide a comprehensive analysis of sustainability a posteriori, combining assessments of the processes and outcomes.*

**E. Think out of the box.** A flexible and pragmatic approach to sustainability should make it possible to diversify intervention methodologies, adjust the associated funding mechanisms and strengthen targeting of assistance.

*When it comes to supporting a media project, one size does not fit all. The “Salzburg Principles of Media Development” (SIM, 2010) cited creativity as a critical factor in adjusting to complex realities for successful investment, in particular the ability to “offer a mix of vehicles to fit individual circumstances (e.g., grants, loans, technical assistance, capital support, program related investments, including equity stakes in for-profit ventures)”. This is not only a way to “seek[...] out non-traditional grantees” but also to “manage a funding portfolio that includes high risk investments and therefore a higher proportion of projects that can be expected to fail”. Such an entrepreneurial approach to media development also requires thinking about the positioning and added value of development aid in relation to what the market itself does.*

# 1. Summary of the scientific literature

Few concepts are as multifaceted as sustainability. The difficulty of translating it into foreign languages is not so much to do with the polysemy of the word (O’Riordan & Voisey, 1998) but more with its capacity to evolve and adapt to its sociohistorical context. In the development field, sustainability seems fruitful because of its multifarious nature – even if it is sometimes tempting to define it by what it is not and resort to the concept of unsustainability (Lombardo & Sabetta, 2020).

Although sustainability is a convenient concept for setting expectations, the vagueness that surrounds these prescriptions (B.J. Brown et al., 1987) can make it appear as a meaningless and technocratic buzzword, slogan or undetermined “path” to be taken, as described early on (L.R. Brown, 1981). A historical discursive analysis of the concept illustrates the extent to which it arose from numerous schools of thought (Du Pisani, 2006) and suggests that the relevance of this concept lies more in what it aims at than in what it achieves.

## 1.1. The roots of a multilayered concept

It might come as a surprise that sustainability is not actually a newly coined word. Grober traces it back to the 17th century<sup>2</sup> when there was an early energy crisis arising from an acute shortage of wood, which was the main fuel source at that time in Europe (Grober, 2007).

A common feature in the very construction of this concept is its reference to scarcity<sup>3</sup> due to extensive exploitation in times of mercantilism and its long-term projection: the threat of a fuel shortage can only be contained by a methodical scientific strategy in the interests of people to come. As Grober puts it, this “containment” should include the need to “support, hold out, hold up, hold back, ‘nach-halten’” (p. 24), which is related to the German term “Nachhaltigkeit” and the Latin verb “sustinere”, from which the English “sustainability” and the French “soutenabilité” are derived.

From the beginning, then, sustainability has been synonymous with **endurance** or **maintainability** – not in the sense of lasting for the sake of lasting, but of being committed to an “ethic” (Kidd, 1992; Shearman, 1990) or “values” (Milbrath, 1984) or even a “transcenden[ce]”<sup>4</sup> (B.J. Brown et al., 1987) in terms of passing on a commodity from one generation to the next.

The promise of sustainability is therefore connected to the ideas of “well-being” or “welfare”, with all the vagueness that these terms imply. With the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, known as the Stockholm Conference, the shift was made in an official way. It was the first public event to mainstream the concept of sustainability and publicise the idea that environmental degradation is a threat to the development and well-being of hundreds of millions<sup>5</sup>.

Even if sustainability was primarily perceived as an ecological concept, it has nevertheless been part of a societal project from the outset. Following the 1973

2) Other sources (Grove, 1995) go even further back, to ancient Mesopotamia.

3) It is interesting to note that its appropriation by the media action sector came at a time when funds were ironically increasing. This major difference is one of the factors that can explain the length of this transfer process.

4) The importance for the construction and popularisation of the concept of sustainability among researchers and think tanks close to religions remains a scarcely explored field of research.

5) In 1992, the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro adopted the “Rio Declaration on Environment and Development” with 27 principles of sustainable development, and a plan of action to implement it, Agenda 21.

oil crisis (and there again, one can find the reference to scarcity), the term became popularised and recurrent in international conferences<sup>6</sup> as well as in development policies, encompassing a wider range of political, economic and social goals, mainly supported, questioned and stimulated by non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

The concept of a “sustainable society”, or more extensively, of a “just, participatory, and sustainable society”<sup>7</sup> emerged in the 1970s, at the international assemblies of the World Council of Churches, an ecumenical organisation whose members include Protestant, Anglican and Orthodox churches (founded in Amsterdam in 1948).

Driven by the work of the Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources in 1980, a key milestone was reached with the World Commission on Environment and Development, an independent study group established in 1983, whose final report, *Our Common Future* (known as the Brundtland Report, after its chairman’s name, also mentioned in the introduction to this paper) spoke of “the ability to make development sustainable”. It set the standard “to ensure that it [development] meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (*Brundtland, 1987*).

## 1.2. A desirable guiding principle

This focus also corresponds, as far as media action is concerned, to the reintegration of organic internal processes of change besides international assistance and, as *Berger (2010)* puts it, represents “a welcome step to freeing ‘media development’ from being treated as only those outcomes that result from external interventions” (*p. 551*). This two-dimensional dynamic is key. Previously, development communication happened under the auspices of a missionary paradigm in keeping with Lerner’s legacy surrounding the role of the media in modernising the Middle East, even if dependency theorists (*Frank, 1992*) paved the way for a New World Information and Communication Order with more emphasis placed on cultural identities.

From that point on, sustainable development became a desirable guiding principle, not only for international bodies but also for local governments, corporates and international organisations who integrated it into their operations and mandates, like the World Bank<sup>8</sup> with its concept of “sustainable globalization”.

*Kidd (1992)* points out that “the term ‘sustainability’ first existed in the lexicon of the bank in a narrow sense – the willingness of other entities to continue support for Bank-financed projects after the Bank loans have been disbursed” (*p. 21*). This view has had a lasting impact on international bodies, like the OECD with its perception of “sustainability” as the responsibility of the recipient “after the donor has left” (*1991, p. 8*) on the one hand, or the United Nations Development Programme (*UNDP, 2011*) which recognises the commitment of partners “to providing continuing support” (*p. 18*) on the other hand.

In any case, *OECD (2019)* set what has become the benchmark for sustainability evaluation criteria, as “[t]he extent to which the net benefits of the intervention continue, or are likely to continue” (*p. 12*)<sup>9</sup> after initially mentioning resilience (*C. Cook & Bakker, 2019*) as one of its possible components. Many composite

<sup>6</sup>) It first appeared in a UN document in 1978, according to *Kidd (1992)*.

<sup>7</sup>) For the first time, in Bucharest in 1974, the conference of the World Council of Churches on “Science and Technology for Human Development” closed with a call for a “sustainable and just society”.

<sup>8</sup>) The first studies on sustainability were conducted in 1986 by the World Bank, as mentioned by *Gustafson (1992)*

<sup>9</sup>) The 2002 original version was “[t]he continuation of benefits from a development intervention after major development assistance has been completed, [t]he probability of continued long-term benefits [and t]he resilience to risk of the net benefit flows over time” *OECD (2002, p. 36)*.

words (e.g. self-sustainability) or other concepts such as perennality or durability (with similar but not necessarily identical meanings) also mushroomed in evaluations of media action interventions.

This new conceptual spreading of sustainability in development practice is driven today by a confluence of forces and processes that are expected to be increasingly fluid and interconnected (Dal Zotto & Mavhungu, 2017). In this way, development has become a “shared global challenge” (McGrew, 2000) among governments and societies, North or South, and sustainability can thus be seen as **adaptability** or **transformability** (Walker et al., 2004) concerning both organisations and individuals.

When development interventions are evaluated for their sustainability, the issue of donor dependency is also at stake, along with the very sustainability of aid (M. B. Anderson et al., 2012) and the likelihood of a donor-dependent intervention converting into a self-contributing one. The latter came under a great deal of scrutiny in the late 2000s and in the 2010s (Banerjee & Duflo, 2011; Moss et al., 2006; Moyó, 2009).

### 1.3. A challenging assessment

The health sector has long been engaged in sustainability issues. Based on the lessons learned from randomised evaluations of a specific health project, Kremer & Miguel (2007) described the “pursuit of sustainability” as an “illusion of sustainability” (p. 1061) and argued that the recurrence of external subsidies is a short-term necessity.

Traces of such questioning can also be found in the media action sector, especially in the wake of the 2010 Reuters Institute conference, which generated much debate on alternative forms of media financing in a context of declining traditional revenues (Cagé, 2016; Konieczna, 2020; McChesney, 2016; Picard, 2016).

On the other hand, there are authors who share the view that a contribution-based model can hardly replace a support-based one overnight. For these authors, it is more a question of commodity than of demand. In the media sphere, for example, a proven demand for information does not exclude a reluctance to pay for it. Picard (2016) argues that “[f]or many, the kind of information and journalism practised in newspapers does not reflect their lives and the issues with which they are concerned daily” (p. 137). Sustainability in these views can be seen as a form of risk estimation and mitigation in order to adjust. Given the emergence of new kinds of news providers, a phenomenon once described as ‘adjunct journalism’ (Downie Jr. & Schudson, 2009), reporting in the public interest has become critical in determining sustainability.

All human activities, whether political or commercial – despite the inherent “potential contradictions” of the latter (Gray, 2010) – can contribute to achieving the three interlinking goals of economic prosperity, social equity and environmental conservation. But here again, the economic dimension seems to take precedence as there is no real consensus on a common meaning for the other dimensions (Vallance et al., 2011)<sup>10</sup>.

**10)** Are there only “three bottom lines”, namely profitability, environmental quality and social justice (Elkington, 1999) as identified at the Rio+20 conference in 2012? Or are there “four dimensions”? The Sustainable Development Solutions Network, for example, added “good-governance” to the list (SDSN, 2013), while some scholars have included “human sustainability” (Benn et al., 2014) or “technology” as a bridge between the natural and human systems (Cabezas et al., 2003). Or should we structure the discussion around the five pillars (“5 Ps”) of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development – people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnerships?

In the media action sector, at least, the three fundamental community-related pillars identified by *Gumucio Dagron (2001)* as social, institutional and financial sustainability remain a shared reference twenty years later.

The issue of indicators and quantification of sustainability has long been a prominent concern. This has resulted in a quest for indicators and metrics (*Surampalli, 2020; UNECE/Eurostat/OECD, 2013*), which takes into account the contribution of independent media to institutional sustainability in particular.

However, the current trend is to focus less on quantitative data (often fragmented in countries where institutional sustainability is most fragile) and more on a tracing of processes, to assess accountability in a more qualitative manner. To give just one relatively early example in the media sphere, the theory of diffusion of innovation (*Rogers, 1962*) helped to explain how innovations are adopted and become routine practice. In the media action sphere, accountability can be seen as “a concept, a process, a moral sentiment” (*BBC Media Action, 2012, p. 5*) connected to sustainability in that it demands answerability of power holders and contributes to enforcement (*Fengler, 2019*). This evolution also reflects the gradual shift from the macro to the meso, from social systems to routine practices. The unpacking of these routines can be useful for assessing the expected change in the concept (considering, in other words, the output of the intervention), in the process (the outcome) or in the moral sentiment (the values) after the intervention.

#### **1.4. Towards “sustainable media action”**

As Goldsmith states in a literature review for *USAID (2015)*, “[s]ustainability adds another tier of complexity to assessment because it cannot be observed directly and must be estimated based on things that can be observed, but only retroactively” (*p. 6*). Moreover, sustainability relies on one’s conception of what the future is and how it should be considered, which makes it reducible to a cultural context (*O’Riordan & Voisey, 1997*). At a time when a global and inclusive perspective is being promoted, authors are starting to think about the ability to reset the post-Covid-19 economy in a resilient way so that it can become “more attuned to the needs of our global commons” (*Schwab & Malleret, 2020, p. 7*).

The future is not only unpredictable. It is also shaped by the environment. Scholars are increasingly engaging in the multicultural field and have shown, for example, how African countries have developed differentiated media systems, notably in the structuring of the media market (*Frère, 2012*). Attention has also been drawn to the ways in which the ethical and moral framework of *Ubuntu*, the Bantu concept for “humanity”, is re-appropriated as an essential part of communication for sustainable development (*Shumba, 2011*).

## SEED CAPITAL, A BLIND SPOT IN MEDIA DEVELOPMENT

If mass media have increasingly been regarded as “business units” in a media market (G. Anderson et al., 2008), the importance of loans in providing seed capital is a definite blind spot in the media development literature, although it has been extensively discussed in other development fields (García-Pérez et al., 2018; Lelart, 2015).

Meanwhile, the role of investment funds is continuously growing in international finance and development financing. Microfinance has become the most important banking market in terms of clients since 2005 was proclaimed “year of microcredit” by the United Nations Economic and Social Council. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the Global South face a lack of financial tools capable of meeting their needs. Lending rates are often excessively high, making investment prospects unrealistic. Confronted with Official development assistance (ODA) budget constraints<sup>11</sup>, “increasingly, the idea is emerging of using ODA to catalyse other sources of financing for sustainable development goals” (Brodin, 2015).

This is all the more remarkable in media development given the existence of dedicated organisations such as the Media Development Investment Fund (formerly the Media Development Loan Fund), which was created in 1995 and has disbursed more than \$230 million to support independent media around the world (MDIF, 2020). Other initiatives include the Southern Africa Media Development Fund (2013) and the Tanzania Media Fund (2016). Nevertheless, media development support still relies on grants (87% between 2010 and 2015), and loans only represent 8% (CIMA, 2018).

In emerging economic systems (e.g. in the Balkans or Eurasia), several media action organisations (e.g. Hivos and Internews) have resorted to soft loans or even direct investment to serve as seed funds for media, but these experiences have rarely led to transversal evaluations.

The links between media business (Hollifield et al., 2016), financial markets (van der Wurff et al., 2008) and public interest (McQuail, 1992) are well documented, but few researchers have focused on the reverse side: the connection between participation and financial sustainability. One exception is a study by Jallo and Jannusch (2014) who coordinated an online debate in three languages involving more than 200 community radio contributors. The authors concluded that “to become sustainable, a community radio needs strong community ‘ownership’ that grows out of community participation and engagement in the radio; and content that is relevant” (p. 4). Social sustainability can also foster economic viability.

Research has only recently put emphasis on interactions with the media ecosystem, homing in on: the media firm’s corporate strategy and perimeter for understanding new dynamics of media practice, for example through an analysis of Sky Group’s growth strategy (Oliver & Picard, 2020; Will et al., 2020); the use of emerging technologies to update media entrepreneurs’ business models (Will et al., 2020); or the effects of taxes and subsidies on media services (Kind & Møen, 2014) and in this instance the written press. Studies often conclude that it is difficult to find empirical evidence on the full causal effects of direct and indirect media support.

<sup>11</sup>) Between 2010 and 2015 media assistance represented just 0.3% of total ODA (CIMA, 2018).

## WHEN MEDIA ACTION TEMPLATES FAIL TO ACHIEVE SUSTAINABILITY

More critical research on the barriers to sustainability in post-crisis contexts was stimulated by a workshop organised by the London School of Economics (Putzel & van der Zwan, 2006) on the obstacles presented by repressive regimes. Noteworthy contributions to date include an analysis of the funding structures of 19 independent exiled or restricted outlets (C. E. Cook, 2016), and more broadly, a study by Waisbord and Jones (2010) who pointed out four key findings: “imprecise definitions of broad programmatic goals; the lack of clear rationale for how goals are operationalized into specific activities and interventions; discrepancy between objectives and programmatic goals; and the absence of measurement of long-term impact” (p. 9). All such studies share the common finding that templates for media action sometimes simply do not work.

The shift back to an open and holistic understanding of sustainability allows us to move beyond the phony debate about whether newsmaking is a commodity or a public good; it has in fact been documented that it is actually both. No sector, not even so-called community media, can extricate itself from the economy. The theoretical contribution of “sustainable communication” (Berglez et al., 2017) to outlining the premise of future journalism highlights the importance of cross-sector partnerships, “multilateral collectives that engage in mutual problem solving, information sharing, and resource allocation” (Koschmann et al., 2012, p. 332) with a capacity for “collective agency” or trajectory.

Further research on the concept of “sustainable media action” as a practice intersecting with various approaches would be the next step forward to stay true to the “post-media-missionary” mindset (Noske-Turner, 2017). Following a supposedly “missionary” era (Hume, 2004) during which donors promoted a single Western democratic governance model while supporting the media, a new era of media action approaches has begun, in which bottom-up processes focus on participation, social change and accountability.

Advocated in a joint document by both donors and media action implementers (IMS/Sida/Wan-Ifra, 2010), “sustainable media [action]” is based on a cross-disciplinary approach (Becker et al., 1999) and the theoretical assumption of interdependency between global sustainability challenges and media action challenges, especially those connected to the donors’ changing strategies (Deane, 2019).

## 2. Summary of ‘grey literature’ and other sources

Before the 1990s, the development sector paid little attention to sustainability. It is not mentioned as such in the Logical Framework Approach developed for USAID in 1970<sup>12</sup>, nor in the first version of the innovative project methodology introduced in 1983 by the German international cooperation agency GTZ, *Zielorientierte Projektplanung* (ZOPP, which means ‘goal-oriented project planning’). The term eventually appeared in the introduction to the German participatory planning method published five years later without really being defined, other than as a continuation of the overall long-term goals, which “incorporate the cultural background of all project partners” (GTZ, 1988, p. 5).

<sup>12</sup>) This grew out of the work of Fry Associates and Practical Concepts Incorporated, two American consultancies.

## 2.1. Intercultural normative influences

The ZOPP method has become widespread and directly inspired the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA)<sup>13</sup>. Its success can be explained by its focus on expressing needs, a participatory approach and increased attention to the intercultural dimension.

Development practices in Germany and Japan<sup>14</sup> are both certainly based on sustainability, but they have differences of interpretation regarding the notion of “self-help”. In Germany, development cooperation is linked to participation at the community level and recipient state efforts. In the Japanese context, however, “self-help, or *jijyo-doryoku*, means that recipient governments are primarily supposed to make an effort to improve their development by themselves, whereas aid only assists their self-efforts” (Nakabayashi, 2000, p. 55).

In Japan, moreover, sustainability is associated with a production system which was in vogue in the industry in the 1980s and transferred to the world of services in the 1990s, known as “5S” which stands for the Japanese words *seiri* (sort), *seiton* (set), *seiso* (shine), *seiketsu* (standardise) and *shitsuke* (sustain). Sustainability is seen as an overturning of *muri* (“overburden, unreasonableness or absurdity”), *mura* (“unevenness or inconsistency, primarily concerning physical matter and the human spiritual condition”) and *muda* (“activity which is wasteful or does not add value”) according to a presentation by the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA, 2015).

References to the term sustainability (or perhaps one should say “sustainabilities”) flourished from the beginning of the 1990s, with many dedicated publications (Norad, 2000; SDC, 1991; UNDP, 1998) and the European Commission’s adoption of Project Cycle Management (PCM) in 1992.

Nevertheless, it is often the case that the question of sustainability only comes to the fore when projects are to be evaluated. In the late 1980s, the OECD compiled a compendium of evaluation experience – and thus a collection of normative judgements – to map sustainability in development projects (OECD, 1989). Since then, meta-evaluation exercises have regularly punctuated donors’ sustainability assessments (Sida, 2008; USAID, 2004, 2013a, 2013a) or studies by scholars (Kinsbergen et al., 2021; Zivetz et al., 2017).

By following Bob Williams (2012), it is possible to draw up a typology of the ways in which sustainability can be framed: sustaining a specific **activity**, the intended **outcomes** or the underpinning **principles**. In any case, the grey literature agrees on the fact that responsible transition dynamics implemented from the outset are preferable to “exit strategies” mobilised too late because “transition is as much a beginning as it is an ending” (USAID, 2020, p. 15).

The earliest evaluation dealing specifically with sustainability in the field of media action can be attributed to Liebersson et al. (1987): an evaluation of the factors of sustainability in Gambian mass media, assessing a 3-year project which developed and tested mass communication techniques for promoting oral rehydration therapy in the treatment of acute childhood diarrhoea. It is important to note that sustainability was first investigated in the communication for development subsector (where behaviour change is the intended objective) and subsequently in the health sector where the continuation of effects after an intervention can be fairly easily observed and measured.

**13)** This was also influenced by the monitoring and evaluation system of the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad).

**14)** Germany and Japan were the second and third largest media support funders respectively, behind the United States, between 2010 and 2015, excluding support to international broadcasting (CIMA, 2018). Surprisingly, JICA has produced few studies dedicated to media action so far.



TABLE 1. A SUSTAINABILITY ANALYSIS GRID (SELECTED ORGANISATIONS FROM 2000 TO 2020)

	Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation's Handbook in Assessment of Institutional Sustainability, 2000	Southern Africa Institute for Media Entrepreneurship Development, Financial Sustainability Model for Community Radio Stations in Southern Africa, 2002	AMARC Africa, The African Community Radio Manager's Handbook, 2005	IREX's Media Sustainability Index, 2005 (and CFMD's Media Development Toolkit, 2010)	Fondation Hironnelle, Sustainability Assessment Grid, 2006	Internews, Community Media Sustainability Guide, 2009	Deutsche Welle Akademie's Media Viability Index, 2020
<b>Economic Viability</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Financial Resources</b> (financial resources/ economic independence)</li> <li>• <b>Performance</b> (performance and productivity/ performance demands and control)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Strategic planning</b></li> <li>• <b>Financial planning</b></li> <li>• <b>Monitoring and evaluation</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Working with the people with the money and in support services Managing the money</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Media are well-managed enterprises, allowing editorial independence (business management indicators)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Financial and economic viability</b> (including real estate)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>A nonprofit business model</b></li> <li>• <b>Financial sustainability</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Economics</b> (national economy/financial stability and independence of media organisations, financial competition, audience demand)</li> </ul>
<b>Social Sustainability</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Management</b></li> <li>• <b>Personnel</b></li> <li>• <b>Participation and legitimacy</b> (local ownership and participation/ legitimacy and trust in the community)</li> <li>• <b>Culture and communication External cultural framework</b> (community rules and norms/ rules and norms in official agencies)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Establishing partnerships</b></li> <li>• <b>Human resource planning</b></li> <li>• <b>Project implementation</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Knowing your stakeholders</b> (working with the people in the station, working with the people on the board)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Journalism meets professional standards of quality</li> <li>• Multiple news sources provide citizens with reliable, objective news</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Social sustainability</b> (information needs of the population, audience, purpose of sustainability, media collaborators)</li> <li>• <b>Managerial sustainability</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Community</b> (in terms of geography or interests)</li> <li><b>Service:</b> validates and strengthens communities</li> <li>• <b>Internal democracy</b></li> <li>• <b>Networking and convergence</b></li> <li>• <b>Language and cultural relevance</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Community</b> (media and information literacy, social cohesion, trust and credibility, participation, audience data)</li> <li>• <b>Content and Expertise</b> (quality content, journalism expertise, ownership of news media organisations, business structure, business expertise)</li> </ul>
<b>Institutional Sustainability</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Purpose and strategy</b></li> <li>• <b>Competence</b></li> <li>• <b>Linkages</b> (alliances and connections/ competitors and rivals/ relations to donors)</li> <li>• <b>Legal and political framework work</b></li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>The mission statement</b> (making it all work)</li> <li>• <b>Understanding negotiation</b> (working with the people in government and in the community)</li> <li>• <b>The problem solving exercise</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Supporting institutions</b> function in the professional interests of independent media</li> <li>• <b>Legal and social norms</b> protect and promote free speech and access to public information</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Institutional feasibility and sustainability</b> (legal parameters, policies, security and partnerships)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Institutional feasibility and sustainability</b> (legal parameters, policies, security and partnerships)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Politics</b> (rule of law, freedom of expression, access to information, legal equality, media within society)</li> </ul>
<b>Technical Sustainability</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Infrastructure</b> (technical infrastructure/ administrative equipment)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Environmental scanning</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Working with equipment</b></li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Technical feasibility and durability</b> (including ownership of equipment, equipment needs)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Appropriate technology</b> ("affordable, durable, easy to use, and whenever possible, able to be maintained by local technicians")</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Technology</b> (access to production and distribution resources, news media organisations' access to technologies, audience access to technologies, digital expertise, citizens' digital rights)</li> </ul>

The table above presents the results of a capitalisation that the author of this research review conducted with a media action implementer. It shows the different notions of sustainability that were detected in pertinent documents from different geographical and cultural areas, the objectives being to identify their common elements and to compare the innovations of the selected organisations since the year 2000.

The Southern Africa Institute for Media Entrepreneurship Development's checklist is part of an entrepreneurial vision that emphasises strategic planning (SAIMED, 2002), whereas the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (whose grid is not dedicated to media action) highlights the institutional dimension<sup>15</sup>, legitimacy and "linkages" (Norad, 2000). A sustainable project is one that not only has the financial means to last, but also corresponds to a "willingness to use resources for this purpose; [and demonstrates] whether benefits justify future costs" (Norad, 2000, p. 30). The World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters was inspired by Norad, putting a "mission statement" and the spirit of negotiation at the heart of its approach (AMARC Africa, 2005). In line with SAIMED, the International Research and Exchanges Board primarily considers the media as a company and focuses on its independence (IREX, 2011). It has also introduced a focus on "professional standards of quality", which has since become the rule. The Media Sustainability Index has recently been replaced by the 2021 Vibrant Information Barometer (VIBE) which brings in the notions of engagement and "transformative action" on how information is used. The Global Forum for Media Development's toolkit for assessing media landscapes draws upon the experience of the IREX MSI, UNESCO's Media Development Indicators (MDIs) and Freedom House's metrics (GFMD, 2012). Lausanne-based Fondation Hirondelle, which is itself a content producer (often in precarious security contexts), spotlights "people's need for information" and "security" in order to propose a vision of sustainability that is part of a system and can be summed up as the maintenance of high editorial quality and audience levels over time (FH, 2010). Finally, the grid relating to Deutsche Welle Akademie (which was originally to be included among UNESCO's MDIs) is probably one of the most comprehensive attempts to assess so-called "viability" according to 25 key indicators and 119 sub-indicators (DWA, 2020, 2021)<sup>16</sup>.

Leading metrics are of course widely used but it must be remembered that these are "measurement tools developed in the developed, Western context" (Banda, 2010, p. 39). Scholars have also engaged in critical reflection about their underlying theories and methods (Price et al., 2011), especially the difference between "expert-led" and "participatory" paradigms, when assessing the sustainability of communication for social change (Servaes et al., 2012).

Thus, there has been a shift in the focus of sustainability from the business model of economic solvency – which works in times of change and crisis (Leandros & Papadopoulou, 2020) – to the "ability [of the media] to function as the 'fourth estate'" (IREX, 2011) or to produce "quality journalism" in a sustainable way (DWA, 2020; Schmidt, 2019). From this perspective, it is crucial to maintain "a stable balance between the aspects of politics and economics, the community, technology, and content" (DWA, 2020).

**15)** In line with *Simon Bell and Stephen Morse (1999)* the sustainability of the institution is distinguished from that of the project implemented by the institution.

**16)** The first media viability assessment applying these Media Viability Indicators (MVIs) has recently been conducted in Lebanon (DWA, 2021).

The study concluded that “the project was not sustained” (p. 6) even if “the technology and teaching methods [...] were sustainable” (p. 7), mainly because “no provisions were made for gradual phase-over” (p. 7), which in turn was because “the short time frame and emphasis on immediate behaviour changes resulted in weak institutional development” (p. 8). Furthermore, “conflicting A.I.D./Washington and field Mission agendas stifled successful maintenance of this effective project” (p. 9)

## 2.2. “Overlooked and ignored”

The factors on which a sustainability analysis is based can be grouped into four areas: economics and finance; project design and implementation; project management; and contextual elements. Three decades after Liebersohn et al.’s study, the criteria have undoubtedly been refined, but the basic grid remains broadly the same, with the notable exception of an increased focus on technology as well as media content and systems.

The so-called “community” radio service has become a standard for the media action sector as Africa’s radio landscapes go through a process of liberalisation and peace media continue to emerge in post-conflict areas. The objective of supporting democratisation and/or humanitarian service therefore takes precedence over any other consideration for this medium with its “complementary role” (UNESCO, 2015), and in particular over economic viability, which tacitly takes a back seat – even if the grey literature on economic models of community media remains abundant. **Recurrence** seems to take precedence over **perenniality**, and it will be years before this opposition is overcome and a social entrepreneurship model is considered.

The subsidised model is even deemed preferable according to AMARC, the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters, for whom the proposal of **unconditional public funding**, when justified by the social nature of community radios, “ensures C[ommunity] R[adio] basic financial sustainability” (AMARC, 2007, p. 23). At best, self-reliance is “possible through partnership or other well-thought-out sustainability strategies” (Panos London, 2007, p. 28). At worst, sustainability is seen as a “myth” or an illusion (SFCG, 2009).

In 2003, a study by the Netherlands Institute of International Relations, or ‘Clingendael’, found that sustainability in international media action projects was generally “**overlooked and ignored**” (Howard, 2003, p. 21), citing the example of *Radio Untac*, the United Nations radio station in Cambodia, which had no successor at the end of the Transitional Authority’s mission, leaving a fiercely partisan ecosystem to flourish. As the study concluded, “the media became an instrument of discord and disinformation, which impeded Cambodia’s democratic evolution” (Howard, 2003, p. 21).

At the same time, an evaluation of media assistance over a 15-year period (USAID, 2004) generated a similar observation: “The economic sustainability of the independent media outlets remained a major problem. [Related activities] achieved only limited success” (p. xi). The problem is so acute that in the 230 or so bibliographic references of the Media Map Project, only seven explicitly mention sustainability (Arsenault & Powers, 2010)

The need to generate revenue in an increasingly constrained ecosystem was identified over 15 years ago as a major challenge to sustainability in a large-scale cross-cutting study of 17 African countries (BBC World Service Trust, 2006) – and

this has become more and more prevalent (CIMA, 2007; FPU, 2020; FRI, 2008; IMS, 2007). Not only has the expression “money matters” flourished (FoME, 2006) but also the idea defended by US media scholar Ann Hollifield (2015), that

“one of the mistakes made by media development community in the past few decades is buying into what has been the traditional argument in Western countries – that more media is always better for the consumer, for the audience and for society. We now are realizing that this is not the case.”

## **SUSTAINING REVENUE GENERATION, A LEVERAGE EFFECT?**

Efforts to support the media ecosystem often come up against the inability of certain media to generate revenue, alone or in a shared manner, as well as the inability of stakeholders to consider the economy of the sector in a holistic manner. Capacity-building sessions are just one of the levers to encourage change in this area. In the 2010s, several projects also appealed to the creativity of advertising agencies.

For example, in the Central African Republic (CAR), where radio stations received permission to broadcast advertising in 2010, the radio station supported by Fondation Hironnelle, *Ndeke Luka*, set up an advertising department and trained up a team of marketers. In a UNESCO guide cowritten by *Gumucio Dagron and Dlamini (2004)*, the authors highlight the case of an independent station in Nicaragua, Primerisima, which managed to raise 90% of its budget locally through advertising, renting air-time and listeners’ donations. At the time, the ambition in CAR was more modest, aiming for 20 to 30% of the budget. Outside periods of crisis, this proportion can in fact double or triple. The potential for new dynamics, however, was downplayed in the findings of a study on South Asian radio stations (involving only 12) which concluded that “stations in extremely poor and remote areas will need to remain small if they are to survive primarily on community resources” (*Arora et al., 2015, p. 33*). UNESCO is preparing a “handbook of innovative practices” that will reinvent the ways in which we consider media sustainability (*UNESCO, to be published*).

In 2019, MiCT and its local partner, the Uganda Radio Network, were inspired by European experiences to launch a marketing company in Uganda (*EARS, 2020*). It is based on the pooling of some of the local radio stations, which often do not have access to media planning agencies but together cover more than 70% of the national population. The income generated is then redistributed to members.

Sometimes the leverage effect of advertising is not enough. Between 2016 and 2019, Cameco coordinated a project aimed at “strengthening the economic viability and connection with audiences of local media” (*Cameco, 2019*) in Peru. It combined training in marketing, especially digital marketing, the development of strategic business plans and the production of investigative journalistic tools. Nevertheless, according to a mid-term evaluation, most local TV and radio stations cannot rely solely on advertising revenues to operate and maintain their staff (*Acevedo, 2017*). Additional options such as bartering or programme co-production are highlighted to contribute to sustainability.

These experiences come a few years after the publication of studies linking foreign direct investment and press freedom (*Pal et al., 2011*) or more broadly media development and the reform of business and governance environments (*G. Anderson et al., 2008; Islam, 2002*).

### 2.3. Barriers to sustainability

Surprisingly, no systematic review of barriers to sustainability in media development has been published (not even in the form of a list of blind spots or evaluation assumptions). Scholars often focus on a selection of stumbling blocks specific to a particular media project or system. Lack of donor coordination is regularly cited as one of the major obstacles to media sustainability. In the mid-1990s, Bosnia and Herzegovina proved to be the archetypal example of a country with scattered but unparalleled money flows that helped support donor-dependent media but ultimately had a marginal impact on democratisation (USAID, 2003). In contrast, an international media assistance fund took the opposite direction in 1998 by providing coordinated development to support the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (Rhodes, 2007).

Another major obstacle to sustainability is **political turnaround**, as quoted by a member of the Media Council of Tanzania in a capitalisation of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation's Media Assistance (iMedia Associates, 2017): “[it is] ‘important to acknowledge that an executive that is hostile to media freedoms can put in place legislation and regulations that might reverse some achievements gained’” (p. 43). In this matter, editorial independence is key (GFMD, 2020).

The media action sector is also witnessing the same debates that shook up the health sector two decades ago concerning the importance of a financial instrument that could have a **mass effect**. These original discussions led to the creation of the Global Fund in 2002 (Sachs, 2001). Similar initiatives in the context of media sustainability have timidly emerged in recent years, with the Media Sector Development Program, a three-donor “basket fund” in the Democratic Republic of Congo from 2007 to 2012 (SEE, 2012) and the Consultation on an International Fund for Public Interest Media, launched in 2019 by a subsidiary of the Omidyar network (Luminate, 2020). At the same time, a few (rare) donors have formalised their media action strategy (DfID, 2008; SDC, 2020; Sida, 2010; USAID, 2013b).

These new mechanisms should also address fundamental sustainability-related questions that have already been asked, such as those put forward by Deane (2007):

“Why does communication still attract comparatively few resources? Why are resources mainly made available for short-term, difficult-to-sustain interventions? And last, but not least, how well equipped is the communication for development community to answer a simple question – what really works well now?” (p. 56).

Nevertheless, this comprehensive holistic approach views sustainability as a **static feature** difficult to act upon – a different form of impact, so to speak – rather than as a future pledge that one can grasp. Yet, sustainability has less to do with fixing end goals than with engaging in processes; it could even be understood more in terms of taking **a gamble on the future**.

### 3. Conclusion: A need to refocus

In media action project design and implementation, sustainability is sometimes understood in a narrow utilitarian sense as an element in the last-minute checklist that is supposed to match the alleged expectations of financial backers or as part of a siloed approach that seeks to foster audience engagement, digital switch or monetisation strategies separately. In this regard crises amplify the challenge to “refocus from long-term viability to short-term **survivability** [through] consulting on controlling costs, forecasting, maximizing revenue, building financial reserves, bringing events online and increasing subscriptions, donation and programmatic and native ad revenue” (*Internews, 2020*).

Even before the Covid-19 pandemic (and the mortal danger it poses to the news media), survivability was already a recurrent theme in the media action sustainability literature (*Robinson et al., 2015; Schiffrin, 2019*). At the turn of the 2000s, the digital revolution fulfilled democratic aspirations while at the same time it thoroughly re-examined and overhauled media business models. On the basis of a study of 21 start-ups, mostly from the Global South, *Schiffrin (2019)* notes that professionalisation is one of the essential conditions for survival and that, in particular, “[t]here is a strong correlation between the presence of a full-time marketing person and revenue generation” (p. 14).

Whether it is to adjust in order to become part of a more **harmonious** way of living together or to mitigate the risks of extinction, the process of sustaining is certainly less traced in the literature than sustainability itself. This shortcoming paves the way for the exploration of sustainability mechanisms based on theories of change (*Spurk & Koch, 2019*) and process tracing methodologies. Sustainability will then cease to be the unquestionable imperative it seems to have become and instead return to its fundamentals: a promise about the future. It will no longer be seen as an injunction to be measured but rather something that is open to debate and predictable, with risks that can be assessed.

Even if “difficult to measure and rarely defined explicitly” (*L. R. Brown, 1981*), sustainability remains a “beguilingly ambiguous” concept (*O’Riordan, 2001*) whose relevance lies within its flexibility, as long as one accepts that it is nothing less and nothing more than a promise of future responsible attainment. Assuming this flexibility opens up the space to raise questions about the impact of sustainable activities, results and values and to re-examine ways to achieve them. This paves the way for true sustainable media action where both the intrinsic forces of media and assistance projects could be sustained. Beyond the buzzword, as *Solow (2019)* concluded, in a 1991 “economist’s perspective”: “sustainability is a vague concept. It is intrinsically inexact. It is not something that can be measured out in coffee spoons. It is not something that you could be numerically accurate about. It is, at best, a general guide to policies that have to do with investment, conservation and resource use. And we shouldn’t pretend that it is anything other than that” (p. 187).

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