

Reviewing the Global Campaign for Media Freedom in the Philippines



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Executive Summary

Reviewing the Global Campaign for Media Freedom in the Philippines

This case study reviews the implementation of the Global Campaign for Media Freedom (GCMF) in the Philippines by the British Embassy Manila and its partners from 2019 to early 2021, in the context of the broader media freedom landscape on the ground. The review asks three questions:

- How does the UK-implemented aspects of the Campaign frame challenges to media freedom in the Philippines, and how are activities designed to address these issues?
- Based on available evidence, how can we understand the performance of the Campaign against its intended outcomes?
- What are the emerging lessons that can be applied to future programming related to media freedom in the Philippines and globally?

The Philippines has been a country of interest for the UK's Campaign and the Global Media Freedom Coalition (MFC) from the very beginning, as media freedom and press safety are enduring issues in the Philippines despite assumptions of having the 'liveliest and freest press in Asia'. At least 234 Filipino journalists have been killed since the 1986 People Power Revolution. It now ranks 138th out of 180 countries in Reporters Without Borders' 2021 World Press Freedom Index. Tensions are perceived to have intensified with Rodrigo Duterte's rise to the presidency in 2016. As of May 2021, 223 cases of attacks and threats against Filipino press workers were recorded since the start of the Duterte Administration. Of this number, half are linked to state forces; nineteen have been killed. The extensive use of social media troll armies by political actors has tagged Philippines the "patient zero" of the global disinformation crisis, a state that has intensified with pandemic-related mobility restrictions.

In contrast, the Philippine government strongly rejects the narrative of state suppression of press freedom, and frames media safety as a predominantly industrial issue related to journalist integrity and labour rights which in turn become dangerous when combined with a culture of corruption, patronage, and impunity at the local government level. Notably, the Philippines is the first country to localise the 2012 United Nations Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity, with Philippine Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists (PPASJ). While the multistakeholder consultations and drafting of the PPASJ was led by journalists and local media freedom NGOs, the government's official endorsement of the Plan and public citation thereof is generally perceived as part of state efforts to improve the Philippines' image internationally.

The MFC and its Campaign's June 2019 launch at the inaugural Global Media Freedom conference in London prominently highlighted the case of embattled Filipino journalist Maria Ressa, partly due to the role of Ressa's legal counsel and then-UK Special Envoy for Media Freedom Amal Clooney. In July 2020, the MFC issued a statement of concern regarding growing restrictions on journalists in the country; the FCDO highlights the Philippines as a country of concern in many of its issuances, including MFC and GCMF-related reports to the House of Commons. As of 2021, the Philippines has been included in the list of 10 new MFC 'focus

countries', alongside Vietnam, Egypt, Belarus, Turkey, Bangladesh, Mexico, Myanmar, Morocco, and Ethiopia.

Beyond conferences and statements at the global level, the UK Government also implemented local activities building on the British Embassy Manila's existing human rights and governance portfolio. The UK's GCMF activities in the Philippines covers three components: i) public-facing advocacy events; ii) dialogues and public and private diplomacy, including closed-door meetings with officials and players in the media sector; and iii) the provision of small grants to selected media NGOs. The Embassy's grant budget amounted to GBP 70,000 for FY 2019-2020, with pandemic-related aid cuts slashing the FY 2020-2021 allocation to only GBP 15,000. A new call for proposals of up to GBP 10,000 has been released for the FY 2021-2022 cycle. With a significantly smaller footprint compared to other bilateral and multilateral partners operating in the Philippines, the UK-implemented GCMF's mix of direct grants and diplomatic strategies reflects the difficult balancing act faced by international actors dealing with the administration led by President Rodrigo Duterte, who has been under scrutiny by the United Nations and the International Criminal Court due to human rights violations dating back to 2011 and earlier.⁵ Notably, the Philippines is not a member-state signatory of the GCMF.

To undertake the review, in-depth interviews with 30 respondents were conducted from August 2020 to April 2021, of which half were directly affiliated with the campaign, while the rest were local journalists, donors, embassy representatives, and INGOs, as well as one Philippine senior government official. Due to pandemic restrictions, all interviews were conducted online and supplemented with a review of public statements, documents such as the UK Human Rights & Democracy reports, as well as analysis of media freedom-related fora and activities beyond the networks supported by the British Embassy Manila.

The Philippine case provides early evidence of how a global multilateral advocacy campaign gets translated at country level. In light of the delicate balancing-act for diplomatic missions operating in the Philippines, the Campaign's theory-of-change shifted to cover not only media protection, which can be perceived as antagonistic to host governments, but also *media responsibility*.

The consensus amongst respondents is that the GCMF and the local initiatives implemented by the British Embassy in the Philippines are relevant and timely. Interviews with bilateral and multilateral partners describe the Campaign and the Coalition as a welcome additional mechanism to strengthen pre-existing structures for monitoring and financing. According to Filipino journalists and media workers, embassy and FCO statements of support to Maria Ressa are generally the most visible, with some awareness of small group discussions and embassy receptions among the diplomatic set. The public statements issued by the Coalition, and separately by the British Government and the Canadian Foreign Ministry, were positively received and reportedly helped with morale among media workers. It was also observed that Regional Trial Court judges handling cases such as that of Maria Ressa and Rey Santos were more careful knowing that diplomats from the UK, Canada, Australia, Belgium, France, and the European Delegation were observing proceedings, either on Zoom during the lockdowns or onsite prior to the start of COVID-19 lockdowns in March 2021.

However, it is unclear if issuances such as the MFC joint statement on the Philippines, which are designed to push for more government accountability, have actually contributed to this desired outcome, given the disconnect between the state's reading of the current media freedom situation and that of civil society, and resulting adversarial relationships. The speed of judicial action on

media killings remains glacial. At the same time, very few local journalists and human rights workers are aware of the Coalition or the Campaign, much less the small grants provided by the Embassy. Although UNESCO has been a long-term presence in the sector, the UNESCO-administered Media Defence Fund and its links to the United Kingdom are not popularly known—a surprising situation in a small cash-strapped sector often dependent on external grants. The Embassy is aware of these limitations; nevertheless it has been able to maximise reach and relevance despite modest resources. The resulting portfolio—a product of consultations and listening processes—strategically engages academic partners for public advocacy, while using the small grants for quiet support to a handful of local media NGOs. While these grants are too small to cover operating expenses, they provide a degree of flexibility not possible with other donors with structured documentation requirements.

In this light, the first of the UK-implemented activities in the Philippines generally fulfilled its function as a *pilot* diplomacy campaign despite pandemic-related restrictions, but sustained and substantial effectiveness will depend on how the GCMF and the British Embassy in Manila under the new FCDO will decide on what constitutes ‘effectiveness’ and how it should be measured. While Coalition and the Campaign helped the Embassy direct attention and secure dedicated, if modest, resources to the media freedom issue, support to Philippine media during the period would likely to have happened anyway even without the GCMF given the country’s human rights context.

The next phase of the GCMF is unclear with aid cuts, the transition of the FCO into the new FCDO, as well as the shift of leadership of the Coalition to the Netherlands and Canada. Nevertheless, the UK’s GCMF-related operations highlights a ‘soft’, media-responsibility oriented approach to human rights issues, as opposed to the ‘hard’ path taken in countries where the new Magnitsky-style sanctions regime has been applied, namely Russia, Saudi Arabia, Myanmar, North Korea, and Belarus. Results of the Embassy’s monitoring and accompaniment are promising, and if used strategically and in coordination with other players, can assert positive pressure in the space. Translating the GCMF on the ground also creates opportunities for collaboration amongst diplomatic posts in Manila and stakeholders across the region. However, not all Coalition members have media freedom projects in the Philippines, and no Southeast Asian nation is currently part of the coalition.

Continuing a diplomacy-heavy, grant-light approach also has at least two potential challenges. First, operations are heavily personnel-driven and therefore depends on the strength and relational capacity of diplomatic staff to navigate these issues. For example, Ambassador Pruce’s journalism and media background was often cited in public engagements and was a useful basis for dialogue. Second, the perceived privileging of ‘heroes’ or ‘figureheads’ who may not necessarily represent local realities outside Metro Manila and/or elite circles of power, can not only have unintended consequences for these actors, but may also be seen as divisive within the wider media industry.

Given that few actors in Philippine media, even heads of major media organisations, have heard about the Campaign, the Coalition, or the FCDO grants, this raises the question of how international frameworks of media freedom relate to local discourses, whether that of the host state or the local media industry, let alone among regular citizens who consume media on a daily basis. While the needs of regional and grassroots-level community journalists and associated industrial issues are mentioned in public statements, increased attention and actual inclusion in programming will be required to translate vision to action.

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

AECID	Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional para el Desarrollo/ Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation
AIJC	Asian Institute of Journalism and Communication
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CIDA	Canadian International Development Agency
CMFR	Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility
CPJ	Committee to Protect Journalists
CPP/NPA/NDFP	Communist Party of the Philippines/New Peoples Army/National Democratic Front of the Philippines
DFID	Department for International Development
EU	European Union
FCO/FCDO	Foreign and Commonwealth Office / Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office
FMFA	Freedom for Media, Freedom for All
GCMF	Global Campaign for Media Freedom
HR	Human Rights
IAWRT	International Association of Women in Radio and Television
ICFJ	International Center for Journalists
IMS	International Media Support
INGO	international non-government organisation
JICA	Japan International Cooperation Agency
MFC	Media Freedom Coalition
NTF-ELCAC	National Task Force to End Communist Armed Conflict
NUJP	National Union of Journalists in the Philippines
NZAID	New Zealand Agency for International Development
PCIJ	Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism
PCOO	Presidential Communications Operations Office
PECOJON	Peace and Conflict Journalism Network
PPASJ	Philippine Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists
PTFoMS	Presidential Task Force on Media Safety
RSF	Reporters sans frontières / Reporters without Borders
SIDA	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UN HRC	UN Human Rights Council
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

1. Aim of the Case Study

The case study reviews the implementation of the Global Campaign for Media Freedom (GCMF) in the Philippines by the British Embassy Manila and its partners from 2019 to early 2021. Launched in 2019, the Campaign stems from an international commitment signed by 49 countries to date to “advocate for media freedom and safety of journalists, and hold to account those who harm journalists for doing their job.”¹ Activities of this global Media Freedom Coalition (henceforth, MFC) include an Annual Global Media Freedom conference, where other components were announced such as the creation of an international Media Freedom Contact Group; a High-Level Panel of Legal Experts; and a UNESCO-administered Global media defence fund.² The UK and Canada are founding co-chairs, and comprise two of the eight members of the Coalition’s Executive Group, alongside (currently) Germany, Ghana, Latvia, the Maldives, Netherlands, and the United States. While the MFC and its campaign are not the only international actors working on media freedom and safety in the Philippines, it provides an opportunity to assess how international commitments on the issue translate to results on the ground, as well as the perceived and actual role of bilateral development actors in supporting local media freedom initiatives.

Specifically, the review asks three questions:

- How does the UK-implemented GCMF frame challenges to media freedom in the Philippines, and how are activities designed to address these issues?
- Based on available evidence, how can we understand the performance of the GCMF against its intended outcomes?
- What are the emerging lessons that can be applied to future programming related to media freedom in the Philippines and globally?

¹ UK FCDO Policy Paper, “Media Freedom Coalition: an overview.” Updated 29 July 2021. As of September 2021, the Global pledge on media freedom has been signed by 49 member-states.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/global-pledge-on-media-freedom/global-pledge-on-media-freedom>

² A Task Force for the creation of national action plans to promote media freedom was announced but has not yet materialised.

2. Background

The Philippines has been a country of interest for the MFC and the UK-implemented GCMF from the very beginning. The Campaign's June 2019 launch at the inaugural Global Media Freedom conference in London prominently highlighted the case of embattled Filipino journalist Maria Ressa, partly due to the role of Ressa's legal counsel, Amal Clooney, being appointed the then-UK Special Envoy for Media Freedom. In July 2020, the Media Freedom Coalition issued a statement of concern regarding growing restrictions on journalists in the country, although traction was hampered by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.³ The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (formerly, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office) prominently highlights the Philippines as a country of concern in many of its issuances, including MFC and GCMF-related reports to the House of Commons.⁴ As of 2021, the Philippines has been included in the list of 10 new MFC 'focus countries', alongside Vietnam, Egypt, Belarus, Turkey, Bangladesh, Mexico, Myanmar, Morocco, and Ethiopia.

Beyond conferences and statements at the global level, the UK Government also implemented local activities building on the British Embassy Manila's existing human rights and governance portfolio. This took on multiple tracks: diplomatic backchanneling, dialogues, and the provision of small grants for selected organisations in the media space, all implemented by less than five Embassy personnel directly involved in Campaign-related partnership-building and management or administration. The Embassy's grant budget amounted to GBP 70,000 for FY 2019-2020, with pandemic aid cuts slashing the FY 2020-2021 allocation to only GBP 15,000. A new call for proposals of up to GBP 10,000 has been released for the FY 2021-2022 cycle. This is a significantly smaller footprint compared to other bilateral and multilateral partners, the mix of direct grants and diplomatic strategies reflects the difficult balancing act faced by international actors dealing with the administration led by President Rodrigo Duterte, who has been under scrutiny by the United Nations and the International Criminal Court due to human rights violations dating back to 2011 and earlier.⁵ Notably, the Philippines is not a member-state signatory of the MFC.

³ Press release from the FCDO. "Statement by Media Freedom Coalition on the situation in the Philippines", dated 9 July 2020.

⁴ See MP Dominic Raab's report on the Media Freedom Campaign to MP Tom Tugendhat, Chair of the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, dated 12 February 2021.

⁵ Press release from the International Criminal Court. "Situation in the Philippines: ICC Pre-Trial Chamber I authorises the opening of an investigation", dated 15 September 2021.

3. Approach

Standard evaluation metrics are difficult to apply given the lack of an explicit program design and the political nuances of a diplomatic initiative. Nevertheless, this review aims to learn from the experiences of the UK-implemented Global Campaign for Media Freedom in the Philippines by doing two things: a) teasing out the implicit theory of change at country level and b) gathering evidence on performance criteria such as relevance, effectiveness, coherence, and sustainability; as well as perceived gains and lessons learned.⁶

In-depth interviews with 30 respondents were conducted from August 2020 to April 2021, of which 15 were directly affiliated with the campaign (Foreign and Commonwealth Office⁷/Embassy staff, subgrantees, participants); 14 (journalists, donors, embassy representatives, INGOs) in the media freedom and governance space that were not directly part of the campaign; and one Philippine senior government official. Respondents were equally distributed between men and women. Due to pandemic restrictions, all interviews were conducted online and supplemented with a review of public statements, documents such as the UK Human Rights & Democracy reports, as well as online fora and activities beyond the networks supported by the British Embassy Manila.

4. Context

Media freedom and press safety are enduring issues in the Philippines⁸ despite assumptions of having the ‘liveliest and freest press in Asia’, earning monikers such as ‘the deadliest country for

⁶ This uses the OECD DAC (Development Assistance Committee) Evaluation Criteria as a starting point.

⁷ Data collection was done just prior to the merger and reorganisation of the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCDO) and the Department for International Development (DFID) to the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO).

⁸ Teodoro (2014, p143) identifies four factors that have contributed to “the erosion of free expression in the Philippines, as demonstrated by the killing of journalists and political activists”: “(i) the weakness of the Philippine government relative to control over its local organs; (ii) continuing armed struggle being waged by the Communist Party of the Philippines’ New People’s Army and security forces’ response to it; (iii) the failure of the Philippine mass media, under the present conditions of poverty and social deterioration, to provide citizens the information they need on such matters as their own rights; and (iv) the more recent official concern over terrorism, which in the Philippines has tended to be directed against legal Left-wing groups.” Media ownership and financing issues is a fifth issue not in Teodoro’s framework but is mentioned extensively in the literature (see RSF/Vera Files 2016)

journalists in Southeast Asia⁹, and ‘deadliest peacetime country for journalists’.¹⁰ At least 234 Filipino journalists have been killed since the 1986 People Power Revolution. It now ranks 138th out of 180 countries in Reporters Without Borders’ 2021 World Press Freedom Index.¹¹ Tensions are perceived to have intensified with Rodrigo Duterte’s rise to the presidency in 2016. In July 2019, the UN Human Rights Council released a resolution expressing concern over reports of human rights violations such as extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, and systematic attacks on rights defenders, including journalists.¹² As of May 2021, 223 cases of attacks and threats against Filipino press workers were recorded since the start of the Duterte Administration. Of this number, half are linked to state forces; nineteen have been killed.¹³ These risks are set against the backdrop of so-called ‘drug war’ killings, which as of September 2021 has reached the government’s official tally of 6,191 deaths.¹⁴ Independent estimates are significantly higher, ranging from 20,000 to 30,000 victims, mostly in urban poor areas.¹⁵

Beyond direct physical attacks, the weaponisation of libel and corporate laws to stifle dissent—dubbed by civil society actors as ‘lawfare’—has brought critics to heel.¹⁶ Notable targets include the Philippine Daily Inquirer; online news service Rappler and its staff, including editor Maria Ressa; and major media network ABS-CBN, whose non-renewal of its 25-year franchise by Philippine Congress led to 11,000 employees losing their jobs amid one of the longest COVID-19 lockdown regimes in the world.¹⁷ An intensified anti-insurgency campaign features the use of ‘red-tagging’, or labelling of organisations and individuals, including journalists, as communist or terrorist sympathisers affiliated with the Communist Party of the Philippines and its armed wing,

⁹ See reports from the Committee to Protect Journalists in 2015 cited by Ng (2015) and International Federation of Journalists in 2018, cited by The Asean Post (2018)

¹⁰ International Federation of Journalists (2018)

¹¹ RSF (2021).

¹² CHR and UN reports regarding systematic attacks on rights defenders across civil society including journalists. Chiu (2020).

¹³ PCIJ (2021) presenting data from CMFR and NUJP

¹⁴ Sarao (2021)

¹⁵ While early civil society monitoring efforts on the drug war were focused on documentation, in recent years efforts have shifted to accountability. The higher figures are due to so-called ‘deaths under investigation’, or drug-related deaths that were conducted outside ‘legitimate police operations’, or by vigilantes, hired guns, and other extrajudicial actors. Ball et. Al (2019) estimates that actual figures are closer to 2.94 times greater than what is reported by the police. Pangilinan et al (2021) provide analysis on the disproportionate concentration of killings in urban poor communities. See Johnson and Giles (2019).

¹⁶ A portmanteau of ‘law’ and ‘warfare’—described as a systematic, coordinated, and sequential attack on institutions beyond media. See Collas-Monsod (2020). A conference on lawfare was a prominent event for the human rights circuit in the Philippines in 2020 (Rappler.com, 2020).

¹⁷ Gajete (2021)

the New People’s Army.¹⁸ Cyberattacks on progressive alternative news sites and human rights groups have been traced to IP addresses associated with the Philippine Army, the government Department of Science and Technology, and firms based in Israel.¹⁹

COVID-19 protocols have made on-the-ground coverage difficult, due to both mobility restrictions and the shutdown of media operations due to financial woes. ABS-CBN notwithstanding, almost half of the Philippine Press Institute’s community newspaper-members ceased printing operations in 2020. At least two cases of the use of coronavirus legislation to arrest media workers have been recorded,²⁰ alongside the reported removal of a reporter from the Malacañang Palace beat after fact-checking COVID-19 response claims.²¹ In an environment where the use of social media troll armies has made the Philippines the “patient zero” of the global disinformation pandemic²², most journalists believe that the pandemic has made it harder for journalists to document events, much less hold power to account.²³

Nevertheless, the Philippine government has strongly rejected the narrative of state suppression of press freedom. The first administrative order under the Duterte administration mandated the creation of a Presidential Task Force to ensure “a safe environment for media workers”.²⁴ Government also endorsed a civil society-led formulation of a Philippine Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists (PPASJ). The PPASJ was the first national plan in the world that localises the 2012 United Nations Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity,²⁵ and therefore sets the Philippines a leader in the media freedom arena—at least nominally. Contradictions in how media freedom and press safety is understood in the Philippines are highlighted in the Plan of Action itself, which deftly integrates inputs from across the political spectrum. Civil society actors often stress weaknesses in the country’s protection and

¹⁸ International Federation of Journalists (2021)

¹⁹ Subingsubing (2021) and Guest (2021)

²⁰ RSF (2021b).

²¹ News channel GMA-7 has denied that Joseph Morong’s reassignment is related to COVID-19 fact-checking; the report in question was removed from Youtube shortly after uploading, to be replaced with a redacted version (CMFR, 2021). With lockdown-era reporting heavily dependent on online platforms, threats of removal from Viber groups or Zoom meetings are serious barriers for journalists. Prior to the pandemic, Rappler reporter Pia Ranada was physically blocked from entering Malacanang Palace after a Senate hearing on a controversial Navy frigates deal where then-Presidential assistant and now-Senator Bong Go accused Rappler of “fake news”. (Rappler, 2018).

²² Facebook whistleblower Katie Harbath described the Philippines as ‘patient zero’ on the damage wrought on electoral integrity through social media. See Combinido and Curato (2021) and Ong and Cabañes (2018)

²³ Interviews with journalists, 6 October 2020, 15 October 2020, 23 October 2020, 20 January 2021, 23 March 2021

²⁴ Administrative Order No. 1 series of 2016.

²⁵ AIJC and IMS (2019)

prosecution mechanisms as the main challenges to press safety. In contrast, government representatives frame media safety as a predominantly industrial issue related to journalist integrity and labour rights which in turn become dangerous when combined with a culture of corruption, patronage, and impunity at the local government level. Given precarious working conditions and low wages, corrupt media workers on the take (tagged in local parlance as ‘envelopmental journalists’, ‘hao-siao’²⁶ or ‘AC/DC’, or ‘attack and collect, defend and collect’) can be killed if they criticise local politicians and warlords. These dynamics were referenced in then-president-elect Duterte's infamous press conference in May 2016 when he stated, “just because you're a journalist you are not exempted from assassination, if you're a son of a bitch.”²⁷ As of late 2021, a proposed Media Workers Welfare Bill has yet to pass into law. By ensuring a decent minimum wage for media workers, government officials theorize that the Welfare Bill could limit media killings.²⁸ In the meantime, the PCOO marked the ground-breaking ceremony of a future Government Communication Academy in Manolo Fortich, Bukidnon on 27 September 2021, aimed at training public information officers and media workers alike.²⁹

The Philippines’ colonial past contributes to how donor-funded support for media freedom initiatives have been dismissed as foreign intervention in domestic affairs—as when Presidential Spokesperson Salvador Panelo released a ‘matrix’ of purported ‘enemies of the state’, including journalists and media outlets receiving grants from US State Department-affiliated INGOs.³⁰ In recent years, this has shifted to the argument that the outpouring of support provided for critical journalists undermines the argument that press freedom is being stifled in the first place. An editorial cartoon captioned “the sound of those who are ‘being silenced’” recently published by the Manila Times, an administration-aligned broadsheet, shows placard-bearing press freedom activists shouting “press freedom is dead” on megaphones, straight into the aching ears of a cartoon Duterte.³¹

²⁶ Hokkien for ‘fake’.

²⁷ Then-President-Elect Rodrigo Duterte’s response to question on journalist killings during a press conference in Davao City. 31 May 2016 (Agence France-Presse, 2016)

²⁸ Interview, 16 April 2021.

²⁹ PCOO (2021)

³⁰ See Ang, D. (2019) and Tiglao, R. (2019)

³¹ Manila Times (2021)

5. How is the GCMF addressing media freedom issues in the Philippines?

This section attempts to understand the performance of the UK-implemented GCMF against intended outcomes by reviewing four aspects: a) how the Campaign implemented by the British Embassy Manila publicly articulated its concept media freedom and an implicit theory-of-change; b) the Campaign's relevance to the Philippines and broader discourses on media freedom; c) its perceived efficacy; and d) its coherence vis-à-vis other media freedom-related initiatives implemented by local and foreign institutions.

5.1 Defining media freedom: media protection vs. media responsibility

The intention of the British Embassy Manila to conduct activities towards “standing up for media freedom where we see it under threat” was first announced by British Ambassador to the Philippines Daniel Pruce at a media reception in February 2019, several months prior to the formal launch of the MFC and the UK-implemented GCMF. The speech, posted on the UK FCDO's website, is the closest public articulation of a theory-of-change for GCMF operations in the Philippines. Much of it highlights a distinct ‘media protection’ model, where “shining a spotlight” on attacks against journalists and increasing “costs to governments that impinge on those freedoms” is essential to the support of “a well-functioning democracy and the rules-based international system.”³² Pruce, who has extensive experience on strategic communications for the UK government in various roles, has repeatedly cited his media and journalism background as a deep and personal basis for engagement in the media freedom space.

Shortly after launch, the Philippine media freedom campaign theory-of-change and messaging was calibrated by the Embassy and its partners to cover not only media protection, which can be perceived as antagonistic to host governments, but also *media responsibility*, highlighting professional media ethics and public media literacy within an environment of disinformation and mal-information. This shift reflects the delicate balancing-act for diplomatic missions operating in the Philippines. In July 2019, weeks after the launch of the MFC and the GCMF in London, 19 countries including the UK, Australia, Spain, and France signed a UN Human Rights Council resolution tabled by Iceland calling for a comprehensive review of the human rights situation in

³² Speech on Media Freedom by HMA Daniel Pruce, 9 February 2019.

the Philippines. In retribution, Duterte temporarily suspended all loan and grant negotiations with all involved embassies.³³ While it was not the first human-rights related censure from an international body, the Iceland declaration marred previously tranquil Philippines-UK relations.^{34,35} Aid suspensions were gradually lifted, but these conditions inform the framing and strategies chosen by the Embassy.

As a result, the UK's GCMF activities in the Philippines covers three components: i) public-facing advocacy events; ii) diplomacy and dialogue, including closed-door meetings with officials and players in the media sector; and iii) the provision of small grants to selected media NGOs.

- **Advocacy-related activities** directly implemented by the embassy include receptions, roundtables, and a 'media freedom caravan', i.e., a string of public events implemented through partnerships with journalism schools, particularly the University of the Philippines, Ateneo de Manila, and Miriam College. Consistent with the FCO's visual branding campaigns, these public events included photography exhibits and the use of colourful British benches decorated with a media freedom-related quote from Winston Churchill. Though not strictly included in the GCMF, the 2019 Chevening scholarships for Filipino graduate students in the UK also included media freedom as a priority category for selection. Although these events were largely related to popularizing and advocating for media freedom, Embassy officials noted that the events also allowed them to listen to and learn from local stakeholders, particularly media workers.

³³ Memorandum from the Executive Secretary issued on 27 August 2019. A strongly worded response from Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin Jr. questions the validity of the Iceland declaration, invoking the Philippines's status as founding member of the United Nations and the Human Rights Council: "Our foreign policy was summed up as being "Friend to all, enemy to none." In the face of today's changing realities, I refined this to "Friend to friends, enemy to enemies, and a worse enemy to false friends. [...] we will not tolerate any form of disrespect or acts of bad faith." <https://dfa.gov.ph/dfa-news/statements-and-advisoriesupdate/23804-statement-of-philippine-foreign-affairs-secretary-teodoro-l-locsin-jr-on-the-adoption-of-the-iceland-resolution-by-the-human-rights-council>

³⁴ See the European Parliament's 15 September 2020 resolution on the situation in the Philippines, including the case of Maria Ressa, (2020/2782(RSP)). Trade relations with the EU Delegation in the Philippines were smoothed over in early 2021 with the appointment of a new EU Ambassador to the Philippines and the preparation of a new five-year EU-Philippines partnership and Cooperation Agreement (ECA) (Hutt, 2021).

³⁵ PH-UK trade levels are modest (GBP 1.5 billion as of 2021, making the Philippines the 60th largest trading partner of the UK). Nevertheless, the embassy retains a small but diversified portfolio covering energy; education; science and technology; counterterrorism, peace, and security; and notably, pharmaceuticals and health. Up to 30,000 Filipinos are employed by the NHS as doctors, nurses, and medical technicians.

- **Diplomacy and dialogue.** The FCDO’s Human Rights & Democracy Reports consistently speak of public and private diplomacy on behalf of human rights defenders in the Philippines, specifically journalists, land rights activists, and the clergy. The framing shifted in 2019, when GCMF-related passages from the FCDO HRD reports prominently highlighted how the Embassy monitored the Maria Ressa case, including staff attendance in court hearings. This is reiterated in the 2020 report, alongside the shutdown of ABS-CBN network, and Embassy statements against “the harassment and detention of a number of journalists.” While strongly worded at the global level, activities by the Embassy are necessarily nuanced towards “holding space” and “ventilating arguments” particularly in ensuring the involvement of government representatives, whether through closed-door meetings and small-group dialogues with officials and lawmakers, or invitations to public events.
- **Small grants.** Journalist safety trainings were prioritised during the first stage of the campaign, including one on digital safety with HR Online and Thompson Reuters, as well as support for support for women journalists’ safety through the International Association of Women in Radio and Television (IAWRT).³⁶ Media literacy seminars for teachers were implemented by two major journalism schools, leading to the drafting of a media literacy curriculum for use by the Philippine Department of Education. The British Embassy had initially intended to support the regional roll-out of the Philippine Plan of Action on Safety of Journalists, which was drafted by a local media consortium led by the Asian Institute of Journalism and Communication (AIJC) and International Media Support (IMS) with funding from the EU and Denmark. Although embassy officials attended several of the regional consultations that informed the Plan’s formulation, grant support was delayed and discontinued due to the pandemic, although AIJC has requested support from the UNESCO-administered Defence Fund and other bilateral sources. In the meantime, available resources have been realigned towards addressing COVID-19 disinformation.

³⁶ Human Rights (HR) Online is a loose network of communications and information officers of various human rights non-government organisations in the Philippines. IAWRT is a global solidarity network of women communicators, journalists, and media researchers comprised of 14 national chapters in 54 countries. Its secretariat is currently based in Manila.

5.2 On Relevance

The consensus amongst respondents is that the GCMF and the local initiatives implemented by the British Embassy in the Philippines are relevant and timely. Interviews with bilateral and multilateral partners describe the Campaign and the Coalition as a welcome additional mechanism, acknowledging that more venues outside of the UN system to monitor and push for human rights and press freedom are necessary. Another perceived benefit of UK investment and the GCMF, particularly for long-term workers in the space, is that this ‘new’ project can strengthen pre-existing structures by drumming up support and expanding the list of interested parties who can provide top-up resources.

However, very few local journalists and human rights workers are aware of the Coalition or the Campaign, much less the small grants provided by the Embassy. According to Filipino journalists and media workers, embassy and FCO statements of support to Maria Ressa are generally the most visible, with some awareness of small group discussions and embassy receptions among the diplomatic set. Although UNESCO has been a long-term presence in the sector, the UNESCO-administered Media Defence Fund or its links to the United Kingdom are not popularly known—a surprising situation in a small cash-strapped sector often dependent on external grants.

The Embassy is aware of its limitations; nevertheless it has been able to maximise reach and relevance despite modest resources. The resulting portfolio—a product of consultations and listening processes—strategically engages academic partners for public advocacy, while using the small grants for quiet support to a handful of local media NGOs.

The selection by the Embassy, of Human Rights (HR) Online and IAWRT as grant-recipients covers several issues particular to the Philippine media freedom space, whether online or offline: the role of women journalists, who in the Philippines tend to lead more newsrooms compared to other global counterparts; as well as dangers faced by community and progressive or ‘alternative’ journalists who tend to be ‘red tagged’ by state forces given functional overlaps with human rights work on the ground.³⁷ Interviews with subgrantee representatives highlight how the FCO grants

³⁷ Local journalists who are also politically progressive may have multiple roles including work as paralegals or human rights and development workers, trade unionists, and community organizers.

provided access to funds and diplomatic channels that they would not otherwise receive. While these grants are too small to cover operating expenses, they provide a degree of flexibility not possible with other donors who may have more complex documentation requirements (ex. USAID).

Many media freedom-related civil society events in general usually do not invite state actors, leading to some criticism that such initiatives are only meant to ‘preach to the choir’. Efforts by the Embassy to ensure constructive engagement and continuous dialogue with government (whether through the Presidential Communications Operations Office, PTFoMS, or other executive and legislative representatives) have been met positively by government representatives. The PCOO has expressed general interest in knowledge exchanges between its news channel PTV4 and state broadcasters such as the BBC, Australia’s ABC, China’s CCTV, or Russia’s RT, although it is unclear if any linkages have actually prospered.³⁸

However, some respondents were critical of government inclusion in platforms such a State-endorsed Plan of Action³⁹ or attendance at media freedom events, stating that government’s narrative that media safety can be boiled down to corruption and unprofessionalism in media is a deflection, or even a distortion, of realities on the ground. Much of these issues were raised as a result of a 2019 European “Press Freedom Caravan” where Presidential Communications Operations Office (PCOO) officials travelled to Switzerland, Belgium and Bosnia to conduct a international information drive and discuss media-related issues such as Maria Ressa’s arrest. A specific statement was made by PTFoMS chair and PCOO undersecretary Joel Egco during this caravan blaming “irresponsible journalism” for negative reports about the Philippines, with specific references to institutions such as the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ), and PTFoMS observers Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility (CMFR) and the National Union of Journalists in the Philippines (NUJP).⁴⁰ Another point of contention is the appointment of Egco in May 2021 as concurrent spokesperson for the National Task Force to End Communist Armed

³⁸ Sabillo, K (2016). “BBC, ABC to visit PH for PTV 4 transformation—Andanar.”Philippine Daily Inquirer. <https://globalnation.inquirer.net/140748/bbc-abc-to-visit-ph-for-ptv-4-transformation-andanar>

³⁹ Much of the Plan of Action’s drafting was spearheaded by media and civil society, but the PCOO’s seal appears prominently on the cover of the final document, formalizing government approval and ownership.

⁴⁰ Parrocha, A. (2019). PTFoMS lashes back at ‘twisted’ CMFR report. Philippine News Agency. 24 February. Available from: <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1062827>

This is cited in International Media Support (IMS) (2020). Shared responsibility: Safeguarding press freedom in perilous times. Lessons learned and new approaches to media safety. IMS book series – 2020 Defending journalism. Denmark, International Media Support.

Conflict (NTF-ELCAC) in the face of journalists being accused as supporters of the Communist Party of the Philippines and its New People's Army. Egco has denied that holding both roles in PTFoMs and NTF-ELCAC simultaneously is a conflict of interests.⁴¹ One journalist described it as such: "*Di ko matanggap na kung sinong nangugulpi sa 'yo, siya pa ang magsasabi na eto ang paraan na gagamot sa sarili mong sugat* (I can't accept that those who beat you up are the same ones to recommend how to heal the wounds they inflicted on you)."⁴²

5.3 On Effectiveness

While it is difficult to rigorously assess impact or even effectiveness at this stage, the GCMF in the Philippines as implemented by the British Embassy was generally able to fulfil its intention to launch a campaign using private and public diplomacy in support of press freedom and safety.

The public statements issued by the Coalition, and separately by the British Government and the Canadian Foreign Ministry, were positively received and reportedly helped with morale among media workers. "For an important embassy to lead activities and make pronouncements and uphold media freedom...in another time and context it would just be lip service," noted a senior investigative reporter, "but in the current time it's very important."⁴³ A prominent opinion editor and academic observed that Regional Trial Court judges handling cases such as that of Maria Ressa and Rey Santos were more careful knowing that diplomats from the UK, Canada, Australia, Belgium, France, and the European Delegation were observing proceedings, either on Zoom during the lockdowns or onsite prior to March 2021.⁴⁴ While the potential impact of the July 2020 MFC statement of concern was blunted by the mobility and communications restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it nevertheless was a useful entry point for diplomats to engage in dialogue with government officials and other stakeholders.

The training grants and university-based media caravans were perceived to be value-for-money, as strategic activities were implemented by selected partners at little cost, leveraging counterpart resources from subgrantees. The public fora were popular venues for students and young people,

⁴¹ Parrocha, A. (2019). "**No conflict of interest in Joel Egco's new NTF-ELCAC role**" **Philippine News Agency**. 11 May 2021, accessed 23 October 2021. <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1139899>

⁴² Interview, 21 March 2021.

⁴³ Interview, 6 October 2020.

⁴⁴ Interview, 16 April 2021.

reinforcing the existing strong reputation of the British Embassy in culturally-relevant ‘soft’ engagement, although follow-up activities were curtailed by the pandemic. Respondents from the FCO accordingly described the media freedom portfolio as an affordable investment, in the sense that it can be cheaply implemented regardless of budget cuts.

However, taking into account both public and closed-door fora, other development actors and donors in the sector observed that while dialogue around the state of media freedom was useful during the first few years after 2016, this strategy may have reached its saturation point in the Philippines as of present writing. “It’s time to go beyond more seminars and into more accountability,” said one respondent frustrated with the lack of judicial action on media killings.⁴⁵ Another senior diplomat remarked: “We don’t need more meetings, we need more action.”⁴⁶

It is unclear if issuances such as the MFC joint statement on the Philippines, which are designed to push for more government accountability, have actually contributed to this desired outcome. Press Secretary Martin Andanar’s remarks on World Press Freedom Day maintains the Duterte administration’s commitment to “the rights and the freedom of the press”, while vowing to “eradicate biased information, disinformation, and fake news that are damaging not only to our society, but also to the trust and relationship between the government and the people, by working together at this crucial time despite our differences.”⁴⁷ Government representatives acknowledge the disconnect between the state’s formulation of the current media landscape and that of civil society. One senior official from the Philippine government decried the tendency for media freedom advocates to maintain that states are always in the wrong without inviting government to the table, leading parties to “debate about the same things and not talk to each other.”⁴⁸ The current consensus amongst local respondents is that traditional ways of defending media freedom no longer apply. “No one reads statements anymore,” remarked one senior investigative journalist. “Even the information space itself is the subject of accountability,” she said, noting how emerging studies are exposing the limits of anti-disinformation and fact-checking initiatives, and

⁴⁵ Interview, 1 October 2020.

⁴⁶ Interview, 16 April 2021

⁴⁷ PCOO (2021b). “News Release: Statement of Presidential Communications Secretary Martin Andanar on the World Press Freedom Day” 3 May 2021. https://pcoo.gov.ph/news_releases/statement-of-presidential-communications-secretary-martin-andanar-on-the-world-press-freedom-day/

⁴⁸ Interview, 16 April 2021.

making public discourse no longer a question of facts, but about who controls the dominant narrative.⁴⁹

Amidst this polarized and often-adversarial environment, the speed of judicial action on media killings remains glacial. It took ten years for the Philippine courts to conclude trials on the 2009 Maguindanao Massacre, which has been described as the “deadliest strike against the press in history” with the brutal deaths of 58 people including 32 journalists.⁵⁰ Prior to 2016, journalist killings were overseen by an Inter-Agency Committee On Extra-Legal Killings, Enforced Disappearances, Torture and Other Grave Violations of the Right to Life, Liberty and Security of Persons (IAC) headed by the Department of Justice. As of 2020, only 12 out of 385 cases involving activists, journalists, human rights and environmental defenders have been convicted since the IAC’s creation in 2012, of which 127 perpetrators were cleared.⁵¹ However, the May 2021 murder of John Heredia, formerly national director of the National Union of Journalists of the Philippines, was not forwarded to the IAC, but to the PCOO-headed Presidential Task Force on Media Security (PTFoMS).⁵²

Orienting the Global Campaign on Media Freedom as a UK ‘soft power’ instrument, while seen by some as a relatively ‘cheap’ and ‘easy’ strategy at the global stage, is necessarily shaped by local dynamics and perceptions when implemented at embassy level. One issue is related to branding, where support and the success thereof is often attributed by local actors to individual diplomats and not necessarily the British Government as an institution. Operationally, embassies are often challenged in sustaining and rebuilding institutional knowledge and relationships with stakeholders when diplomat postings are rotated. There is also some confusion amongst stakeholders between the activities implemented by the British Embassy and the British Council.

A more fundamental critique is that much of the emphasis taken by the GCMF and the Embassy is on personalities like Maria Ressa. In 2018, Ressa was honoured as Time Magazine ‘Person of the Year’ alongside other figures ‘under siege’ such as Myanmar’s Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo and murdered Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi. In 2021, she was awarded the Nobel Peace

⁴⁹ Interview, 21 March 2021.

⁵⁰ CMFR and FMFA Network (2019)

⁵¹ Buan (2020)

⁵² CNN Philippines (2021)

Prize alongside Russia's Dmitri Muratov for "their efforts to safeguard freedom of expression, which is a precondition for democracy and lasting peace." While this reflects a general trend of international criteria-setting and hero-making not limited to the MFC and the GCMF⁵³, Filipino respondents remarked that the focus on Maria Ressa as an individual contrasts heavily with the general lack of support for other embattled but less high-profile media workers who do not check the same boxes. "You won't see similar support for local human rights defenders," one civil society worker noted. These comments are often said with hesitation, although with clear acknowledgement and admiration at how Ressa can take the heat from the Philippine government in ways that other journalists cannot. Nevertheless, there is also an observation that Ressa, a Princeton alumna with dual US-Philippine citizenship, operates differently. The success of online media outfit Rappler notwithstanding, her work and messaging are seen to be pitched for international audiences and not necessarily local ones.

This contrasts with the case of community radio broadcaster Elena Tijamo, who was abducted from her Cebu home in July 2020 at the height of the pandemic lockdowns; her body was found in a Metro Manila hospital in August 2021, hundreds of kilometres away. Another case is that of Lady Ann 'Icy' Salem, IAWRT's communications officer, who was arrested at her home on 10 December 2020, International Human Rights Day and several weeks after the interview for this case study, where IAWRT's work and the threats faced by women community journalists were discussed.⁵⁴ Salem was belatedly released from detention in March 2021, one month after the courts dismissed the alleged possession of illegal firearms and explosives—a common charge against activists since communism is not a crime in the Philippines.⁵⁵ Salem maintains that police planted the firearms, bullets, and explosives in the one-bedroom condominium shared with trade unionist Rodrigo Esparago when they were forced to turn their backs during the arrest. The Mandaluyong Regional Trial Court dismissed the cases against Salem and Esparago, ruling that the search warrant used by police was null and void and the weapons found in the raid as

⁵³ In 2020, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ), and Reporters Without Borders (RSF) launched the #HoldTheLine coalition, a 60-institution campaign supporting Maria Ressa and the struggles of independent media in the Philippines. Ressa was a recipient of the ICFJ Knight International Journalism Award in 2018.

⁵⁴ Several IAWRT network affiliates have been harassed in recent months. Similar to Salem, Tacloban-based Eastern Vista editor Frenchiema Cumpio was detained on firearms charges in February 2020 and has yet to be released.

⁵⁵ At a Senate hearing ten days before Salem's arrest, alternative news site Manila Today (where Salem serves as editor alongside her roles at IAWRT and the National Union of Journalists in the Philippines) was linked by the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict to the insurgency. At least six other activists were arrested on 10 December.

inadmissible in court.⁵⁶ No public statement was released by GCMF members, although events were covered by Reporters without Borders and the Committee to Protect Journalists.⁵⁷

In this light, the first of the UK-implemented activities in the Philippines generally fulfilled its function as a *pilot* diplomacy campaign despite pandemic-related restrictions, but sustained and substantial effectiveness will depend on how the GCMF and the British Embassy in Manila under the new FCDO will decide on what constitutes ‘effectiveness’ and how it should be measured.

Beyond existing journalist threat databases and country indices or activity-level counts, suitable monitoring and evaluation frames and indicators for these types of interventions do not exist. Further, media freedom is generally seen by international development organisations and funders as a ‘political project’ and therefore often not evaluated with the same rigour as ‘regular’ development investment. Ultimately, the GCMF will have to decide how the success of the campaign can be measured. Is effectiveness at private diplomacy and raising the international profile of the British government the goal, despite the fact that very few media actors in the Philippines had heard of the GCMF? Or will this necessarily pivot to technical or financial support for institutional reforms, whether as a stand-alone program of the FCDO or in collaboration with other donors?

Ambassador Pruce’s 2020 speech described longer-term goals of the Campaign as “a reduction in state barriers to a free media, countries living up to their international commitments and the taboo on attacks against journalists re-gaining widespread acceptance.”⁵⁸ Given the context of the Philippines, this entails going beyond journalist safety and security and into structural issues such as the decriminalization of libel; fundamental weaknesses in the way that journalism as a business is financed and controlled, whether by oligarchs, local government advertising, or foreign grants; sector self-regulation and ethics; deep ideological polarization between more establishment/right-wing journalists and their more progressive counterparts; not to mention very fundamental debates regarding how grassroots-level Filipino citizens define and understand broad concepts such as ‘democracy’, ‘human rights’, or ‘press freedom’.

⁵⁶ Torres-Tupaz (2019)

⁵⁷ Committee to Protect Journalists (2020) and RSF (2021c)

⁵⁸ UK FCDO (2019b) Speech on Media Freedom by HMA Daniel Pruce - Speech on Media Freedom by the British Ambassador to the Philippines. 9 February 2020.

5.4 On Coherence

The Philippine international development sector has always had difficulties with horizontal and vertical coordination and integration; the media freedom space is no exception. Thus, most donor action related to media freedom rarely go beyond basic information sharing.

The British Embassy has co-hosted at least one GCMF public activity with Canada, with no indication of follow-up work as of present writing. Canada had invested in the sector long before the GCMF, notably through the Marshall McLuhan Fellowship for investigative journalism established in 1997 by the University of Toronto and the Canadian Embassy, although their once-robust aid profile in the country through CIDA has scaled back substantially in the last decade. The EU Delegation in the Philippines and US Embassy have no direct engagement with the GCMF despite having two of the largest governance and human rights portfolios in the country and the US being one of the founding signatories to the MFC. The USAID-funded Initiative for Media Freedom, administered through Internews, is programmed to support a broad consortium of media organisations with 7 million USD in grants for five years. A second round of partnerships is now being implemented under the UNESCO-administered Global Defence Fund, but these grants are substantially smaller than the Internews project. Similarly, local actors are not aware of the Global Defence Fund's relationship to the GCMF, or the role of UK and Canada as fund donors.

The UN system in the Philippines works in a unique way, with separate agencies working on different projects that may or may not contribute to the media freedom agenda, although its country partnership documents are now tied directly to and are therefore limited by the frameworks and indicators set by the Philippine government.⁵⁹ UNDP and affiliated INGOs have funded some projects related to addressing disinformation, but often under the moniker of preventing and countering violent extremism in Mindanao. UNHCR's officials and other human rights monitors, on the other hand, have been threatened with being shot, decapitated, or thrown into the Pasig River by Duterte himself.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ The UN in the Philippines has changed its framework from aid cooperation to collaboration, and is now implementing government projects as a conduit for government funds.

⁶⁰ Threats against rights workers are a common theme in Rodrigo Duterte's speeches. The Pasig River threat was mentioned in a 18 December 2019 speech. See Amnesty International (2017)

There are other international players that choose to not tag their programs as ‘media freedom support’, therefore avoiding scrutiny from the Philippine government, but are nevertheless investing in action research and advocacy related to disinformation, populism, historical revisionism, and shrinking democratic space. Australia, a GCMF signatory, has had longstanding investments in governance reforms and peace journalism, albeit balanced against security and trade imperatives. Spain’s AECID, New Zealand NZAID, Swedish SIDA and the German development foundations also provide modest but strategic grants supporting civil society, alongside INGOs such as the Open Society Foundation and other bilateral-adjacent orgs including the National Democratic Institute. A slightly overlapping network of civil society efforts are advocating for the Freedom of Information Act, presently pending in Congress, with technical projects supported by international open governance/open data institutions including the World Bank.

Japan is the latest signatory to the Coalition pledge and is the only other Asian country in the GCMF apart from Korea. However, the Embassy of Japan and JICA have no media freedom or human rights-related activities, although some elements are tangentially present in the cultural programming of the Japan Foundation and some of JICA’s peacebuilding support in Mindanao. No ASEAN member-states have joined the GCMF.

Initiatives and networks advocating for media freedom in the Philippines have existed long before the GCMF, with or without external support, although the reach and longevity of activities are often dependent on sustained donor funding. Popular activities include safety trainings, fact-checking, campus journalism, and engagement regarding online disinformation, which in the Philippines has been propagated through Facebook Free Basics.

Key institutional players in this space parallel to the universities and investigative outlets include the Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility, which holds the databases on journalist threats since the 1986 EDSA revolution, as well as the National Union of Journalists in the Philippines, which also runs its own legal defence fund for media workers. Regional citizen press councils in Cebu, Palawan and Baguio exist, as well PECOJON, the Peace and Conflict Journalism Network.

Various umbrella coalitions have formed over the years. Although these traditionally limit themselves to pooled editorials and support manifestos in response to crisis events and World Press Freedom Day, recent coalitions such as MediaNation, the Consortium on Democracy and Disinformation, and Freedom for Media, Freedom for All explore more varied forms of advocacy, primarily through online and offline fora and recently, the increased production of action research.

6. Key Takeaways

The Philippine case provides early evidence of how a global multilateral advocacy campaign gets translated at country level. While international--or predominantly Anglo-American--discourses related to media freedom have consistent definitions and features, national discourses and operating conditions vary. Implementing agencies (in this case, the British Embassy Manila) and their partners are therefore pushed to translate certain statements and slogans to the local context, in no small amount to protect diplomatic relations with the host country. While it is likely that UK support to Philippine media during the period would have happened anyway without the GCMF given the country's human rights context, the Coalition and the Campaign helped the Embassy direct attention and secure dedicated, if modest, resources to the media freedom issue.

The media freedom space in the Philippines features several contradictions that predicate GCMF operations. A prominent investigative journalist and academic says that Philippine media “has never been weaker since 1986... and it was not a robust institution to begin with,” further comparing the sector's structural issues with comorbidities and COVID-19, which she says “Duterte has now exploited in order to consolidate power.”⁶¹ However, it is also grudgingly acknowledged that media remains active and critical despite current conditions—the same argument that the Philippine government uses to counter allegations of media crackdowns. One international observer frankly notes that while abuses are certainly happening, local actors also benefit from framing and communicating conditions in a certain way. “[The media freedom situation in the Philippines] is not good,” he says, “but it's still better compared to other countries. Divergent voices are not completely crushed by government.”⁶²

⁶¹ Interview, 23 March 2021.

⁶² Interview, 16 April 2021.

Thus the UK's GCMF-related operations highlights a 'soft', media-responsibility oriented approach to human rights issues, as opposed to the 'hard' path taken in countries where the new Magnitsky-style sanctions regime has been applied, namely Russia, Saudi Arabia, Myanmar, North Korea, and Belarus, although not all of these sanctions have been for reasons of media freedom violations specifically. With a limited portfolio for grants-in-aid, the British Embassy in Manila has used the multiple tools of private diplomacy and public engagement to maximise resources available. Results of the Embassy's monitoring and accompaniment are promising, and if used strategically and in coordination with other players, can assert positive pressure in the space. However, continuing a diplomacy-heavy, grant-light approach has at least two potential challenges. First, operations are heavily personnel-driven and therefore depends on the strength and relational capacity of diplomatic staff to navigate these issues. Second, the perceived privileging of 'heroes' or 'figureheads' such as Maria Ressa who may not necessarily represent local realities outside Metro Manila and/or elite circles of power, can not only have unintended consequences for these actors, but can also be divisive within the wider media industry. While the needs of regional community journalists and associated industrial issues are mentioned in public statements, increased attention and actual inclusion in programming will be required to translate vision to action.

Translating the GCMF on the ground also creates opportunities for collaboration amongst diplomatic posts in Manila and stakeholders across the region. However, not all Coalition members have media freedom projects in the Philippines, and no Southeast Asian nation is currently part of the coalition. Given that few actors in Philippine media, even heads of major media organisations, have heard about the Campaign, the Coalition, or the FCDO grants, this begs the question of how international frameworks of media freedom relate to local discourses, whether that of the host state or the local media industry, let alone among regular citizens who consume media on a daily basis.

7. Media support in the Philippines: potential paths forward

The next phase of the GCMF is unclear with aid cuts, the transition of the FCO into the new FCDO, as well as the shift of leadership of the Coalition to the Netherlands and Canada.

Nevertheless, there are two general questions moving forward: what support can the GCMF and other initiatives provide in the Philippines moving forward, and in what fashion?

7.1 What can be supported?

Feedback from local respondents highlight that substantive engagement on media freedom in the Philippines will require new ways of strengthening media institutions, investing in different newsroom structures, and reorienting the way that journalists report. These include:

- Supporting independent news organizations and young media workers who can pivot from the traditional mode of passive ‘objective’ reporting to more actively providing critical context in an environment of disinformation. Such pivots are not new: local actors have had some success, albeit unfinished, in thwarting attempts by the Marcos family to rehabilitate its image and whitewash Martial Law abuses. Peace journalism has also played a role in accompanying the Bangsamoro peace process, although with less traction in relation to the peace process with the CPP/NPA/NDFP. Although much attention is given to Rappler, young journalists in mainstream outlets are now going back to old guerrilla tactics reminiscent of the Marcos-era mosquito press. These are not limited to print and media workers; some of the most effective forms of journalism in recent years have included photojournalism, documentary filmmaking, and podcasts on the drug war and other issues. Other organisations have also begun to direct resources towards campus journalism and increased applied research particularly at the grassroots level.
- Shifting the discussion away from Manila-centric national media organisations towards community and regional organisations, which can also ensure local accountability. Examples include Church-run radio networks in the provinces, local TV stations in Central Luzon and the Visayas regions, and other experimental forms of ownership structures, including media cooperatives. All of these will require technology, training, and community support.
- Addressing the legal constraints to free journalism and civil liberties in general through the decriminalisation of libel and addressing the overly broad application of the Anti-Terrorism Bill. Apart from legal defence funds, strengthening the Philippine court system and

supporting an independent judiciary will be necessary to ensure accountability, particularly given the spate of killings of lawyers and judges over the last few years.

- Using information to battle COVID-19 disinformation as well as addressing long-term health, economic, and social impacts. The Philippines has been one of the hardest-hit by the delta variant in Southeast Asia amidst limited vaccine access. The effects of high job losses and hampered access to education will be felt for decades to come. A vibrant and free media will be a necessary aspect of rebuilding.

7.2 How can the GCMF support media freedom in the Philippines?

Sustaining investments started by the British Embassy in the Philippines will require the continued deft use of public and private diplomacy, albeit without the kind of incentives that a generous grant window can provide. This leaves space to focus on relatively low-cost but attention-intensive inputs such as diplomatic outreach and monitoring; and bridging grassroots actors to global networks and platforms, including the work of the GCMF's High-level Panel of Legal experts and other UK technical specialists.

The Philippines' status as the first country to produce a national action plan on journalist safety provides an opportunity for cross-country exchange using the platform of the GCMF Task Force for the creation of national action plans, and follow-through with the UNESCO-administered global Media Defence Fund. If coupled with stronger coordination and collaboration with other donors and development organisations, it is possible for the GCMF to leverage limited resources while neatly sidestepping traditionally transactional project-based dynamics with civil society networks.⁶³

Options will need to be measured against two major changes. August 2021 marked the end of Ambassador Daniel Pruce's four-year assignment to the Philippines and the appointment of Ambassador Laure Beaufilet, formerly Deputy Director for the Middle East and North Africa at DFID. The Philippine presidential elections in May 2022 will reshape the landscape yet again—through the election of a Duterte-appointed successor, or a change in leadership and an

⁶³ Interview, 15 October 2021.

accordant and unknown shift in trajectory.⁶⁴ Either way, a new administration in 2022 will allow the UK and other diplomatic posts to craft new partnership strategies with the Philippine government—which are likely to balance human rights and governance reform investments with security and trade interests.

⁶⁴ The 1987 Philippine Constitution prevents presidents from seeking more than one six-year term of office, as a response to more than twenty years under the Marcos dictatorship.

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