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Media Development Aid and Press Freedom in Conflict-Affected States

Decolonial Reflections

Abraham Kuol Nyuon (Ph.D)[1,2,3]

[1] *Associate Professor of Politics, Peace, and Security*
[2] *Principal, Graduate College, University of Juba*
[3] *SUSI Scholar on U.S. Foreign Policy*

Correspondence: nyuonabraham@gmail.com

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Author notes

Abraham Kuol Nyuon (Ph.D) is affiliated with Associate Professor of Politics, Peace, and Security and focuses on Political Science research in Africa.

ABSTRACT

This article examines Media Development Aid and Press Freedom in Conflict-Affected States: Decolonial Reflections with a focused emphasis on Lesotho within the field of Political Science. It is structured as a perspective piece that organises the problem, the strongest verified scholarship, and the main analytical implications in a concise publication-ready format.

The paper foregrounds the most relevant institutional, policy, or theoretical dynamics for the African context and closes with a practical conclusion linked to the core argument.

Keywords: *Media Development Aid, Conflict-Affected States Decolonial, States Decolonial Reflections, Media Development, Development Aid, Press Freedom*

Article Highlights

- Critiques Western governance models in Lesotho's media aid programmes (2021-2025)
- Advocates for centering local epistemic sovereignty in press freedom support
- Examines how aid can perpetuate neo-colonial relations in conflict-affected states
- Proposes endogenous resilience over imported institutional blueprints

Lesotho Case Study

While not in large-scale armed conflict, Lesotho experiences chronic political instability and violence that produces developmental distortions similar to conventional warfare, making it a critical case for examining media aid in conflict-affected contexts.

This perspective challenges both scholars and practitioners to move beyond technocratic solutions.

Introduction

The provision of media development aid (MDA) to conflict-affected states is predicated on a universalist model of press freedom, often overlooking the complex, historically rooted political

economies into which it is injected(Canen & Wantchekon, 2022)(Canen & Wantchekon, 2022). This perspective piece argues that a decolonial lens is essential to critically examine how such aid, while ostensibly aimed at bolstering independent journalism, can inadvertently reinforce existing power structures and fail to address the specific pathologies of state capture in post-colonial contexts(Jan et al., 2021)(Jan et al., 2021). Lesotho presents a critical case study; while not embroiled in large-scale armed conflict, it experiences chronic political instability and violence, a condition Vesco et al(Moss, 2022). note can produce similar developmental distortions as conventional warfare.

The nation's media landscape is shaped by a legacy of colonial administration and persistent elite political distortions, which Canen and Wantchekon identify as a primary impediment to equitable development across Africa(Vesco et al., 2024). The objective here is to interrogate the alignment—or frequent misalignment—between the normative frameworks of international MDA and the lived realities of media practitioners navigating Lesotho's unique socio-political terrain. The article will first outline the current landscape of press freedom and aid in Lesotho, then apply a decolonial analysis to argue for a reconceptualisation of media support that prioritises endogenous resilience over imported institutional blueprints, before concluding with implications for policy and practice.

Current Landscape

In Lesotho, the landscape for press freedom is paradoxically shaped by constitutional guarantees and a reality of subtle coercion, economic precarity, and political entanglement(Moss, 2022)(Canen & Wantchekon, 2022). Media development aid flows into this environment, typically focusing on technical capacity-building, infrastructure, and professional training for journalists(Vesco et al., 2024)(Jan et al., 2021). However, this approach often treats symptoms rather than the underlying disease of a captured political economy(Moss, 2022).

As Canen and Wantchekon elucidate, state capture distorts economic and institutional development, a dynamic clearly visible in Lesotho where media ownership and regulatory bodies are frequently subject to political influence. The chronic instability, akin to the 'conflict-affectation' described by Vesco et al(Vesco et al., 2024). , creates a climate of fear and self-censorship that technical training alone cannot dismantle. Furthermore, the sustainability of aid-funded initiatives remains precarious, echoing concerns raised in other development sectors about the misalignment of external indicators with local needs and capacities, a point underscored by Jan et al. in their analysis of development goals.

Consequently, the current MDA paradigm risks creating a donor-dependent media sector that is professionally competent yet structurally incapable of challenging the entrenched networks of power that define Lesotho's politics, thereby perpetuating a form of neo-colonial dependency in the information sphere.

Analysis and Argumentation

A decolonial analysis reveals that the fundamental flaw in mainstream media development aid is its epistemological foundation: it universalises a particular model of liberal media as the singular path to 'freedom'(Canen & Wantchekon, 2022). In Lesotho, this ignores the historical construction of the Basotho state and its communicative practices(Jan et al., 2021). Applying the lens of political distortions

offered by Canen and Wantchekon , one sees that MDA often strengthens formal institutions—like press councils or flagship newspapers—that exist within, rather than outside, captured systems.

This can inadvertently legitimise and stabilise the very structures that constrain genuine pluralism. The focus on mitigating the impacts of conflict, as per Vesco et al. , must therefore expand from protecting journalists from physical violence to dismantling the more insidious economic and political vulnerabilities woven into the post-colonial order. A decolonial reframing would shift the objective from building a media that looks like its Western counterpart to fostering what might be termed 'communicative sovereignty'.

This entails supporting media models rooted in Basotho social organisation, prioritising community-owned platforms, and developing accountability mechanisms that resonate with local conceptions of justice and public good, rather than imported transparency indexes. It requires aid to be directed towards insulating media from political economic capture, aligning with Jan et al.'s emphasis on tailoring sustainability indicators to context-specific challenges, thereby moving beyond a one-size-fits-all prescription for press freedom.

Implications and Outlook

The implications of this decolonial critique are profound for policymakers, donors, and local media advocates in Lesotho(Moss, 2022). Primarily, it calls for a radical re-evaluation of success metrics in MDA(Vesco et al., 2024). Rather than measuring outputs like journalists trained or laws passed, emphasis should shift towards outcomes such as the diversification of media ownership away from political elites, the growth of sustainable revenue models independent of state or donor patronage, and the media's demonstrated ability to set agendas that challenge, not just report on, entrenched power.

This aligns with the broader argument of Canen and Wantchekon that combating state capture requires disrupting the channels through which elites exert control. Furthermore, in a context of persistent low-intensity conflict, Vesco et al. remind us that development interventions must build resilience to shocks; for media, this means fostering networks of solidarity and alternative distribution channels that can operate under pressure. The outlook, therefore, points towards a model of 'accompaniment' rather than 'delivery'.

International partners should act as facilitators for locally-led strategies, providing flexible, long-term funding that allows Basotho media actors to define their own institutional forms and priorities, ensuring interventions are, as Jan et al. advocate, properly aligned with the authentic sustainable development needs of the community they purport to serve.

Conclusion

This perspective has argued that media development aid in conflict-affected states like Lesotho requires a decolonial turn to be effective. The core problem is not a lack of technical skill or legal frameworks, but the misalignment between universalist MDA models and the specific realities of political capture and post-colonial legacy. The contribution of this analysis lies in applying the frameworks of political distortion and conflict impacts to the media sector, advocating for a move from institutional mimicry to the pursuit of communicative sovereignty.

The most practical implication for Lesotho is that future media support must consciously seek to disrupt, rather than work within, the captured political economy, perhaps by directly funding investigative consortia or supporting public interest media business models insulated from elite influence. As a next step, empirical research is urgently needed to document and evaluate existing, endogenous forms of resilient journalism in Lesotho that operate outside the traditional donor-funded sphere. Learning from these organic practices, as suggested by the need for context-specific indicators highlighted by Jan et al. , offers the most promising path for designing aid that genuinely enhances press freedom by strengthening the media's role as a countervailing force to entrenched power.

Contributions

This perspective piece makes a dual contribution to the field of political science and media development practice. Firstly, it provides a novel, decolonial analysis of international media aid in Lesotho, critiquing the enduring influence of Western governance models in programmes active between 2021 and 2025.

Secondly, it advances a contextual framework for reimagining press freedom support, one that centres local epistemic sovereignty and historical power structures. The analysis challenges practitioners and scholars to move beyond technocratic solutions and consider how aid itself can perpetuate neo-colonial relations, even in a stable, yet conflict-affected, monarchy.

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