

Project Completion Report

Advancing News Media Reform in Bangladesh

(11 January 2025 to 10 March 2025)

Prepared by



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Background

Although journalism in Bangladesh has expanded in a long way, we are still far behind in practicing ethical, quality and objective journalism. Bangladesh has been ranked 165th out of 180 countries in the World Press Freedom Index 2024 due to lack of frequent interference from state machinery, audience mistrust, the relationship between owners and politicians, self-censorship and absence of self-regulatory framework practices by the news media.

On the other hand, the existing situation is not improving due to the absence of an important role of the Bangladesh Press Council in protecting the freedom of the press and maintaining the standards of professional and ethical journalism.

The interim government has been formed as a result of the recent mass upsurge and political change. The Government has set up various reform commissions to carry out necessary reforms in key areas. As part of this, an 11-member commission has been formed on 18 November 2024 to recommend steps necessary for initiating reforms in the media sector. The commission will propose a set of reforms in consultation with various stakeholders within 90 days from its formation.

In continuation of its involvement in news media and journalism development, MRDI took the initiative to assist in the preparation of recommendations for the Media Reforms Commission under project *“Advancing News Media Reform in Bangladesh”* supported by *The Asia Foundation*.

Under this initiative, MRDI organized series of consultations with news media stakeholders to gather their expectations, key information interviews (KIIs) with three - an editor, an investor & an expert and a survey to ensure that all stakeholders including journalists, civil society, academia, youth groups and consumers are represented properly in the reform process. Finally, a recommendation report was handed over to the Media Reform Commission for their consideration.

Objective

To foster inclusive reforms with a sustained impact to enhance press freedom and improve the journalism standards engaging diverse stakeholders by articulating their expectations and recommendations for the Media Reform Commission.

Project Duration: 11 January 2025 to 10 March 2025

Activities

Activity-1: Team Set-up

MRDI engaged two senior journalists - Afsan Chowdhury and Sajjad Sharif- both having experience in Bangladesh's overall journalism ecosystem to guide the project. Afsan Chowdhury is a veteran journalist and researcher who served as an editor for Dhaka Courier, contributed to The Daily Star, produced a number of BBC World Service series and a teacher of BRAC University. Sajjad Sharif is the Executive Editor of the Daily Prothom Alo.

Activity-2: Inception meeting with Media Reform Commission

MRDI organized an inception meeting with the head of the Media Reform Commission, Kamal Ahmed where MRDI's Executive Director Hasibur Rahman discussed the project's objectives and implementation plan. The commission formally acknowledged the initiative and assured MRDI of cooperation throughout the process. In this meeting, Kamal Ahmed requested MRDI to present the recommendations by 30 January 2025.

Activity-3: Inception meeting with experts

An inception meeting was held with the experts on 12 January 2025, to discuss the project's implementation plan and the methodologies for gathering stakeholder recommendations at the office of Daily Prothom Alo. In this meeting, a representative from The Asia Foundation was also present. Sajjad Sharif suggested conducting a large-scale survey targeting journalists, utilizing a specifically designed questionnaire.

The meeting resulted in a decision to employ three primary methods for gathering recommendations:

1. Consultation meetings with seven representative groups of news media stakeholders.
2. Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with three news media investor, editor and experts.
3. An online survey.

The meeting also identified three key informants for the KIIs and finalized the core issues to be addressed in the consultations and KIIs, along with a preliminary schedule.

Key Issues:

The consultations and KIIs focused on the following critical issues:

1. Press freedom
2. Licensing, registration, ownership, and operational transparency
3. Media self-regulation and accountability mechanisms
4. Welfare, rights, and protection of journalists
5. Legal reforms
6. Capacity building of state-owned/operated media entities and institutions
7. Journalism education and skill development
8. Gender equality and inclusion

Activity-4: Consultation meetings

Seven consultation meetings were conducted, each involving 10-12 participants representing diverse groups:

a) Newsroom managers from national news outlets; b) Gatekeepers from digital platforms of news media; c) District correspondents of national news outlets; d) Editors of community news outlets; e) Journalism academia, representatives from civil society and organizations working with the news media; f) Members of MRDI's Gender Working Group; and g) News consumers.

In all, 70 participants, including 12 female and a transgender, participated in the consultation meetings.



Talking points for each group were developed in consultation with Afsan Chowdhury to ensure relevant and focused discussions. These meetings provided invaluable insights into the challenges faced by different stakeholders and their expectations for news media reforms. Participants provided specific recommendations on VIPP cards after each session. Recurring concerns include either the establishment of an independent media commission that will cover the regulations surrounding news media ownership and licensing, advertising practices, journalists' welfare law, censorship issues, self-regulation mechanisms, ethical standards, editorial independence, transparency within state institutions and news media literacy or strengthening the press council.



To ensure a focus on gender equality, fairness, and sensitivity, the MRDI Gender Working Group recommended incorporating the Gender Charter of Commitment into the final recommendations. This Charter, developed by MRDI with stakeholder input, has been recognized by 21 national and

community news outlets.

Activity-5: KIs

Key Informant Interviews (KIs) were conducted by Afsan Chowdhury with an investor of news media, a publisher and a digital platform expert.

Regarding stakeholder recommendations for a media commission, new laws and financial transparency, both the publisher and the investor agreed, though they expressed concern that such measures might decrease the number of news outlets due to reduced investment. The digital platform expert suggested that news media industries should focus on comprehensive development, including robust business plans, rather than relying on a new commission. Concerning new laws for journalists' rights, he stated that the existing Bangladesh Labour Act is sufficient if properly enforced.

Activity-5: Survey

MRDI conducted an online survey to collect suggestions from more journalists in a limited time. The recommendations of 401 journalists were collected from 16 January 2025 to 22 January 2025 after developing a survey questionnaire in consultation with Sajjad Sharif. The survey was disseminated in the alumni group of MRDI in WhatsApp having 700+ journalist members.

Among the journalists surveyed, 63.1 percent are engaged in journalism outside Dhaka and 36.9 percent in Dhaka. Among them, 48.9% are working in national newspapers, 32.9% in television, 9.2% in national online portals, 6.7% in local newspapers and 2.3% in local online newspapers. The survey results also reflected the recommendations from the consultation meetings.

The top three recommendations from the survey are:

- A new law for protection of journalists (57.4%)
- Reform of the media related laws (48.6%)
- Formation of an independent media commission as a regulatory body to address the needs of the media, journalists and consumers. (38.2%)

Activity-6: Findings sharing meeting and report handover

Following the compilation of all recommendations, Afsan Chowdhury, in collaboration with the MRDI team, developed a comprehensive recommendation report. This report was subsequently reviewed and proofread by Sajjad Sharif.

MRDI held a findings sharing and report handover meeting with the head and eight members of the Media Reform Commission on 30 January 2025 where representatives from The Asia Foundation were also present. Sajjad Sharif presented the key recommendations to the commission.



Kamal Ahmed, head of the Media Reform Commission, commended MRDI's data collection efforts, noting that despite some gaps, the recommendations aligned with the commission's own findings. He suggested a more specific and expanded definition of media self-regulation. He confirmed that the commission had also received recommendations for an independent media commission from various stakeholders, highlighting a

unique proposal to mandate news outlets to deposit two years' worth of employee salaries as security money with the commission. He suggested the government could be involved in this process.

Kamal Ahmed further asked regarding the press council's role in grievance redress and in reply Afsan Chowdhury said the participants of the consultation meetings pointed out that audience/readers don't have any faith in press council with some unaware of its existence. Participants had consequently emphasized the need for media commission.

Jimi Amir, a member of the reform commission and a journalist, raised a concern that that in-house editorial policies and self-censorship could hinder grievance redress, even with an independent media commission in place.

The commission had also received a recommendation for the Editors' Council to develop a national code of conduct and standards. Kamal Ahmed suggested MRDI could organize a national convention for this purpose.



Addressing the emergence of social media in spreading mis-disinformation, Kamal Ahmed stressed the importance of media literacy campaigns. Afsan Chowdhury responded that needs assessment would be required before implementing such initiatives.

The meeting also highlighted the importance of journalist safety and security, as well as financial stability within the media landscape.