

# Media, discussion and attitudes in fragile contexts

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## Executive summary

Goal 16 of the Sustainable Development Goals throws down a challenge to work out ways to promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development. BBC Media Action believes in the power of media to play an important role in delivering that goal, bringing people together and providing platforms for resolving difference peacefully. BBC Media Action supports national debate and discussion shows in both Kenya and Nigeria that broadcast regularly to regular audiences of nearly 13 million people. These shows support inclusive, balanced, moderated discussion that incorporates multiple viewpoints in robust debate.

This report uses data from nationally representative surveys gathered around those programmes to contribute to the small but growing evidence base on media and conflict. At the centre of the analysis is an examination of discussion. The report explores how discussion programmes – where a diverse audience, representing the whole of society, is engaged in fair and balanced debate – can stimulate both private/interpersonal discussion and public discussion in either a community setting or one hosted by local government. It then goes on to examine whether discussion can, in turn, affect conflict-related attitudes at scale, whether attitudes towards other groups in society or attitudes towards violence. The basic idea is that regular engagement in the sort of media programmes our organisation seeks to provide can help to mitigate conflict in fragile settings by increasing understanding of the other, facilitating compromise and ultimately engendering less recourse to violence.

Data collected by BBC Media Action in Kenya and Nigeria is used to test the hypothesis that media-induced discussion is associated with attitudes that are related to conflict and fragility. The results reveal a rich but complicated picture. We find relatively consistent evidence in both countries that our discussion-oriented media programmes are strongly linked to private discussion among family, friends and others. Evidence from Kenya also suggests that exposure to debate-style programming is potentially linked to public political discussion, but that this relationship is likely to be mediated through other variables such as private political discussion. Finally, in both cases, both private and public discussion is strongly associated with individual attitudes towards conflict. However, the relationship is a complex one and bears further examination.

These findings are not meant to be either definitive or exhaustive. Rather, they constitute an initial attempt to examine the connections between media, discussion and attitudes using previously unpublished data. This study can thus be seen as a preliminary attempt to test our assumptions, identify relevant controls and begin to consider our models more carefully as we move towards a theory of change about the relationship between media and conflict.

The paper concludes by summarising some of the more interesting empirical findings emerging from this exercise and mapping out areas for future research. We need, for example, to better understand the different forms that private and public political discussion can take and to assess more carefully the qualitative nature of the discussion in question. We also need to better understand the sequencing of these effects and especially how private and public discussion interact with one another. Finally, one aspect that also played a significant role in predicting attitudes was region, and this argues for a more considered and comprehensive understanding of the institutional and cultural environment that shapes attitudes towards both inclusion and violence.

In sum, we are not yet in a position to claim that media can affect attitudes towards violence at scale. We are, however, in a position to highlight the importance of discussion as a predictor of conflict-related attitudes and the need to fully examine context, as the sector attempts to develop an evidence-based understanding of the drivers of conflict. Going forward, we need to gain a better understanding of the conditions under which media can support the positive dimensions of discussion and ameliorate the negative ones in order to guide our media support projects and those of others. What is clear from a programming standpoint is that we cannot simply assume that all discussion is good at all times and that variables, such as efficacy and participation, always go hand in hand with more tolerant attitudes. Instead, we need to continue to test our assumptions by evaluating the individual components of these arguments and how they inter-relate, and then take context into account.