

Exploratory Report

# Mapping and Recommendations for UNDP Efforts to Fight Against Mis- and Disinformation

August 2023

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**Table of Contents**

Abstract ..... 3

Executive Summary ..... 3

I. United Nations Capacity Analysis and Disclaimer ..... 5

II. Background ..... 6

III. Methodology ..... 9

IV. Research Insights & Substantive Gaps ..... 11

V. Taxonomy ..... 16

VI. Results ..... 18

VII. Recommendations ..... 24

VIII. Partnerships ..... 25

IX. Conclusion ..... 25

X. Appendix ..... 26

**Abstract: *This report is the culmination of six months' work by a team of five master's students at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA) and their faculty advisor. The priority was to map the different interventions by the UNDP Accelerator Labs aiming to use local solutions to tackle the problem of online mis- and disinformation in their own countries. The report addresses the myriad of interventions and recommends greater coordination between the UNDP Accelerator Labs to different entities within the United Nations.***

## **Executive Summary**

The rapid and pervasive spread of mis- and disinformation across the globe threatens to erode our information ecosystems and disrupt progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). New technologies like language processing models, AI-generated deepfakes and algorithms that spread targeted disinformation have exacerbated an already urgent problem, and efforts to combat highly sophisticated mis- and disinformation are slow to keep up. Importantly, mis- and disinformation undermines good governance practices, disrupts confidence in full and fair elections and inhibits the green transition. Failure to address mis- and disinformation threatens to undermine decades of progress on the part of the United Nations and countless dedicated partners.

To this end, the SIPA Team was asked to construct a Portfolio of Solutions to address mis- and disinformation in the Global South. The product of this report is 1) an assessment of knowledge gaps in addressing mis- and disinformation, relative to the United Nations and UNDP, as well as other institutions and organizations around the world; 2) a taxonomy of efforts to address mis- and disinformation; 3) a Portfolio of Solutions that compiles innovative types of interventions to mis- and disinformation which can be applied across social and cultural contexts; and 4) recommendations to the United Nations and UNDP on next steps to address global mis- and disinformation in a synchronized manner and to build strategic partnerships to facilitate those recommendations.

To start, the Team identified four Knowledge Gaps within and outside the UN system. First, while there is a wealth of focus on online interventions to address mis- and disinformation, there is less attention paid to the ways that mis- and disinformation spreads offline and how to counteract it. Second, while there are several initiatives within the United Nations system to address mis- and disinformation, there is a need for more coordination to avoid redundancy at a national level. Third, there is a lack of regulatory power in the Global South to implement many supply-side solutions and hold digital platforms accountable for the content they display and promote. Fourth, the misinformation ecosystem in the Global South is highly complex and involves sophisticated tools like artificial intelligence, microtargeting algorithms and encrypted messaging services like WhatsApp. This complex ecosystem is difficult to penetrate and requires similarly complex responses.

Second, the Team categorized solutions for mis- and disinformation using Dr. Anya Schiffrin's proprietary taxonomy of solutions.<sup>1</sup> It separates interventions by supply-side and demand-side impacts. Put simply: demand-side solutions emphasize the role of the consumers and supply-side solutions emphasize the suppliers of information. The supply-side solutions can be further broken down into two parts: 1) suppressing poor quality/dangerous or illegal information and 2) creating and/or promoting high quality information.

Third, the Team constructed a Portfolio of Solutions to address mis- and disinformation in the Global South. This Portfolio is inspired by innovative interventions to mis- and disinformation found both within the United Nations system and from external partners around the world.

Finally, this report includes recommendations on the role of the United Nations and UNDP in combating mis- and disinformation in the Global South, as well as guidance for building effective partnerships to address mis- and disinformation. The Team recommends that the United Nations accompany efforts of Member States in the Global South to more effectively strengthen their capacity to manage and counteract mis- and disinformation on digital platforms and to promote healthier information ecosystems by coordinating the various UN Agencies and initiatives toward a common goal. The Team's recommendation to UNDP is to coordinate these efforts as the primary points of contact in-country via UN Country Teams. Additionally, the UNDP Accelerator Labs should continue to experiment with local and regional partners on novel interventions to mis- and disinformation.

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<sup>1</sup> Schiffrin, Anya. 2020. "Mis/Disinformation Online: a Taxonomy of Solutions." University of Navarra, Doctor of Philosophy.

## **I. United Nations Capacity Analysis and Disclaimer**

The SIPA Team acknowledges that the Solutions outlined here will require coordination and collaboration between UNDP, Member State governments, local and regional governments, and external partners as needed. Therefore, all of these recommendations are presented with the assumption that they are to be implemented in locations where the United Nations and UNDP can effectively collaborate with aforementioned stakeholders who have positively expressed interest in addressing mis- and disinformation. In particular, when it comes to infringements on freedom of expression and legitimate speech, and would only be supportive of inclusive, human rights-based legislation developed with the participation of civil society, the media, the private sector, and is representative of different demographic groups within the population. This Report does not advocate for any intervention outside of UNDP's mandate nor where intervention is requested by Member States.

## II. Background

In November 2022, the SIPA Team was asked by the UNDP to support and inform their current portfolio of solutions tackling mis- and disinformation in the Global South. The SIPA Team was tasked with looking at the UNDP Accelerator Labs Network to determine effective interventions as well as conducting desk research to identify potential interventions that UNDP can add to their portfolio. The SIPA Team began researching the 91 Accelerator Labs and scoping potential external partners and experts.

The SIPA Team studied the public blog posts of all 91 Accelerator Labs to identify which Labs are currently publishing details of their efforts on mis- and disinformation. The SIPA Team categorized their findings and interviewed several experts in the field of mis- and disinformation.

### ***UNDP & UNDP Accelerator Labs Network***

The United Nations Development Programme is the United Nations' leading agency in international development. Operating in 170 countries and territories with more than 22,000 personnel, UNDP works to build institutional capacities, develop policies, facilitate partnerships and reduce inequality toward achieving the SDGs.<sup>2</sup>

Established by the United Nations General Assembly in 1966, UNDP focuses on three areas: sustainable development, democratic governance and peacebuilding, and climate and disaster resilience.<sup>3</sup> To accelerate progress on these focus areas and to achieve the SDGs in time, the UNDP Accelerator Labs were established in 2019.<sup>4</sup>

Today, 91 UNDP Accelerator Labs operate in 115 countries as part of UNDP's Country Offices. Each Accelerator Lab consists of three team members — Head of Solutions Mapping, Head of Experimentation and Head of Exploration — and taps into local innovations to create actionable insights and reimagine sustainable development for the 21st century.<sup>5</sup>

### ***What is Mis- and Disinformation?***

In an age where information is more accessible than ever, people can easily stay tuned with the rest of the world by listening to podcasts, scrolling through 30-second videos and reading news digests from social media. An estimated 5.3 billion people, or 66 percent of the world's population,

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<sup>2</sup> "About Us," UNDP, <https://www.undp.org/about-us>;

"Personnel by Organization," UN System Chief Executive Board, <https://unsceb.org/hr-organization>.

<sup>3</sup> "About Us," UNDP, <https://www.undp.org/about-us>.

<sup>4</sup> "About Us," UNDP Accelerator Labs, <https://www.undp.org/acceleratorlabs/aboutus>.

<sup>5</sup> "About Us," UNDP Accelerator Labs, <https://www.undp.org/acceleratorlabs/aboutus>;

"The Fast and the Curious: Our Story So Far," UNDP Accelerator Labs, June 9, 2020, <https://www.undp.org/acceleratorlabs/publications/fast-and-curious-our-story-so-far>.

used the Internet to access information in 2022.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, worldwide smartphone ownership has surpassed 83.07 percent of the world’s population while nearly half of all households worldwide have a computer.<sup>7</sup>

Such an influx of inexpensive and timely information has significantly improved digital life, but also brought confusion, deception, chaos and violence. Despite mis- and disinformation being a root cause for many of these pervasive problems, the exact definitions of mis- and disinformation have not been agreed on. However, scholars have agreed that although both misinformation and disinformation are inaccurate and detrimental, the former is not intentionally created to cause harm, but the latter is.<sup>8</sup>

In a report published by the Council of Europe, researchers Wardle and Derakhshan define *misinformation* as “information that is false, but not created to cause harm,” and *disinformation* as “a rhetorical strategy that produces and disseminates false or misleading information in a deliberate effort to confuse, influence, harm, mobilize or immobilize a target audience.”<sup>9</sup> Similarly, media historian and theorist Caroline Jack with the University of California San Diego sees *misinformation* as “information whose inaccuracy is unintentional,” and *disinformation* as “information that is deliberately false or misleading.”<sup>10</sup> For example, *misinformation* could be information reported in error, such as when the Chicago Daily Tribune called for a premature presidential win for Dewey in 1948 based on inaccurate statistical predictions.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, *disinformation* occurs in situations like when the previous Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte intentionally spread rumors about his political opponents and the free press on Facebook and Twitter.<sup>12</sup> For this workshop, the SIPA Team adopts Wardle and Jack’s definitions, as they provide a holistic view of mis- and disinformation’s (often unwanted) consequences.

Accordingly, mis- and disinformation encompasses various forms of information across various media platforms. This includes, and is not limited to, videos or pictures fabricated by deepfakes, or digitally altered synthetic media, depicting disturbing scenes on TikTok, unverified “scientific research” with appalling conclusions from group chats, and politicians’ subjective opinions (or lies)

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<sup>6</sup> ITU. “Measuring Digital Development: Facts and Figures 2022.” ITU Hub, November 30, 2022. [https://www.itu.int/hub/publication/d-ind-ict\\_mdd-2022/](https://www.itu.int/hub/publication/d-ind-ict_mdd-2022/).

<sup>7</sup> Turner, Ash. “How Many People Have Smartphones Worldwide (Dec 2022).” <https://www.bankmycell.com/blog/how-many-phones-are-in-the-world>.

<sup>8</sup> Spies, Samuel. “Defining ‘Disinformation,’ V1.0.” MediaWell, Social Science Research Council, October 22, 2019. <https://mediawell.ssrc.org/literature-reviews/defining-disinformation/versions/1-0/>.

<sup>9</sup> Wardle, Claire, and Hossein Derakhshan. “Information Disorder: Toward an Interdisciplinary Framework for Research and Policymaking.” *Shorenstein Center* (blog), October 31, 2017. <https://shorensteincenter.org/information-disorder-framework-for-research-and-policymaking/>.

<sup>10</sup> Jack, Caroline. “Lexicon of Lies.” Data & Society. Data & Society Research Institute, August 9, 2017. <https://datasociety.net/library/lexicon-of-lies/>.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Japhet, Quitzon. “Social Media Misinformation and the 2022 Philippine Elections.” <https://thediplomat.com/2021/11/social-media-misinformation-and-the-2022-philippine-elections/>.



branded as truth on major broadcasting channels.<sup>13</sup> Noticeably, among these platforms, social media is becoming particularly infected with mis- and disinformation since the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in the Global South.<sup>14</sup> Despite some efforts in content moderation, mis- and disinformation continues to become more widespread with the development of digital architecture and algorithmic amplification. And as more audiences become unconscious consumers of mis- and disinformation, they begin to doubt the legitimacy of science, question the necessity of sustainability, and grow intolerant towards views differing from their own beliefs.<sup>15</sup>

### ***Oslo Governance Centre: Information Integrity***

Beginning in 2020, the Oslo Governance Centre (OGC) began working to combat information pollution, particularly with respect to the COVID-19 pandemic. It has since developed strategic guidance to support access to reliable information and identified that information pollution is a global problem which poses an “existential risk to humanity.”<sup>16</sup> Their research extends across topics including gendered disinformation in Ukraine and Moldova, the mapping of disinformation in the European Countries and Independent States (ECIS) region, a Kenyan multi-stakeholder pilot in the context of electoral processes, and in 2020, OGC launched an Information Pollution Mapping Programme.

### ***The Impacts of mis- and disinformation on the Global South***

While the fabrication and impact of mis- and disinformation have effects globally, there are particular characteristics in some countries. Without intending to generalize, we note that some countries where UNDP operates have underdeveloped media literacy education programs and displayed regional tensions over politics or racial/ethnic/religious divisions.

According to Reuters, in 2021, people in Africa and Latin America reported some of the highest levels of concern about mis- and disinformation in the world, with more than 65 percent of these regions’ respondents stating that they were concerned about what news is real and what news is false on the Internet, compared to 63 percent of respondents in North America, 59 percent in Asia and 54 percent in Europe.<sup>17</sup>

Among the countries surveyed, Kenya and Argentina are particularly notable. In Kenya, over half of the sample indicated that they had come across false or misleading information about health/COVID-19 (56 percent) or about politics (63 percent) in the week before the survey, one of

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<sup>13</sup> Synthetic media in which a person in an existing image or video is replaced with someone else's likeness, usually with AI technology.

<sup>14</sup> “Infodemic.” <https://www.who.int/health-topics/infodemic>.

<sup>15</sup> Schwartz, A. Brad. “Opinion | Orson Welles and the Birth of Fake News.” The New York Times, October 30, 2018, sec. Opinion. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/30/opinion/orson-welles-war-of-the-worlds-fake-news.html>.

<sup>16</sup> “Information Integrity | United Nations Development Programme.” UNDP, <https://www.undp.org/policy-centre/oslo/information-integrity>.

<sup>17</sup> Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. “Digital News Report 2021.” <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2021>.



the highest among all countries surveyed.<sup>18</sup> In Argentina, only 36 percent of the sample surveyed found news credible, and even fewer respondents trusted well-known news brands. This is partly due to the polarized nature of media coverage, and partly due to Argentina's competitive media industry wherein large, medium and small media groups all compete to win readership.<sup>19</sup> Kenya and Argentina are also currently notable for their political landscape, as Kenya held a presidential election in August 2022 and Argentina's general elections are in October 2023. While electoral integrity is not the central focus of this report, both countries could provide valuable insights for further research on the topic.

### III. Methodology

The SIPA Team's methodology consisted of 1) uncovering the underlying questions and objectives as the scope of this work, 2) defining the key output concepts, and 3) employing three phases of research methods to accomplish the first two.

#### 3.1 Objectives

We sought to accomplish the following major objectives:

- ❖ Identify existing knowledge gaps in the Global South that inhibit action to address mis- and disinformation
- ❖ Identify a taxonomy to categorize different solutions to address mis- and disinformation
- ❖ Construct a Portfolio of Solutions that compiles innovative types of interventions to mis- and disinformation which can be applied across social and cultural contexts
- ❖ Provide recommendations on the role of the United Nations and UNDP in addressing mis- and disinformation based on the knowledge and solution gaps identified.
- ❖ Outline a toolkit for building strategic partnerships in this space.

#### 3.2 Key Output Concepts

The SIPA Team identified three output concepts to employ in identifying and categorizing a Portfolio of Solutions:

**3.2.1 Taxonomy:** In the first phase of the work, the SIPA Team conducted desk research on publications across the 91 UNDP Accelerator Labs and academic literature on mis- and disinformation. This work was necessary to clearly visualize how the 91 Accelerator Labs are addressing mis- and disinformation and if any of the Accelerator Labs have found unique and innovative approaches, especially in the Global South. The output of this desk research, informed by Dr. Anya Schiffrin's research, was a taxonomy that categorizes and showcases — going from broad to narrow — where each of the 91 Accelerator Labs contributes.

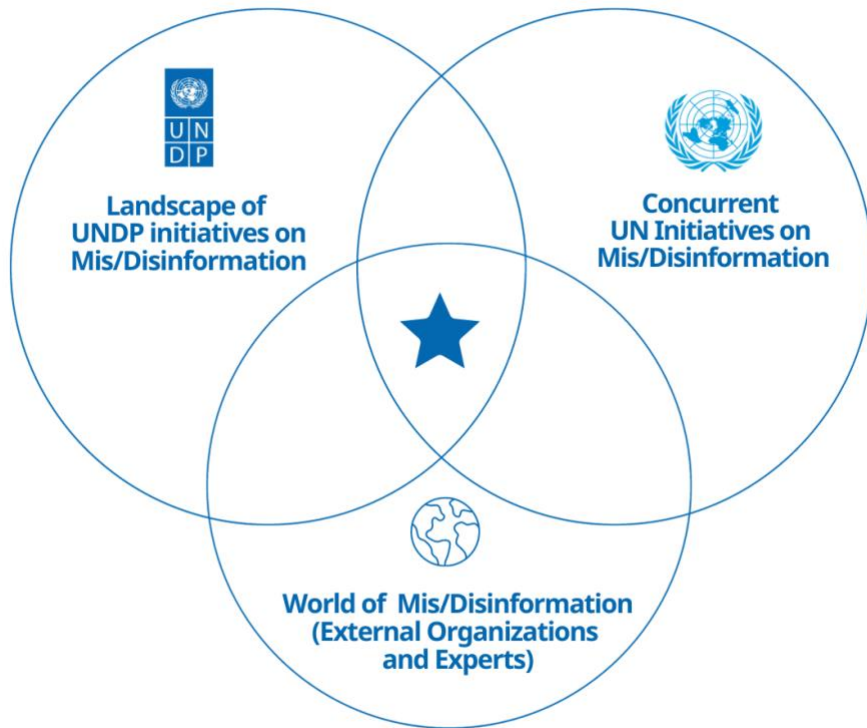
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<sup>18</sup> Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. "Digital News Report 2021 -Country and Market Data -Kenya." <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2021/kenya>.

<sup>19</sup> Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. "Digital News Report 2021 -Country and Market Data -Argentina." <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2021/argentina>.

**3.2.2 Ecosystem Mapping:** Related to building a taxonomy, the SIPA Team created an ecosystem map in the second phase of the work to visualize where the efforts of the 91 Accelerator Labs fit into the broader portfolio of the UNDP.

**3.2.3 A Portfolio:** To bolster existing United Nations efforts, the SIPA Team employed a portfolio consisting of a toolkit of complementary recommendations and analyses of knowledge and solutions gaps, to better address the global ecosystem of misinformation.



### 3.3 Research Methods & Tools

This report is based on:

**3.3.1 Desk Research:** Understanding the general milieu of mis- and disinformation and relevant work from UNDP Accelerator Labs. The SIPA Team looked into the publications and research from 91 Accelerator Labs, as well as academic literature on mis- and disinformation. This also included reports and studies put forth by the following, among others:

- Tech for Democracy: Promoting information integrity in elections<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> "Information Integrity in Elections." Tech for Democracy, <https://techfordemocracy.dk/action-coalitions/information-integrity-in-elections/>.

- Digital Public Goods Alliance<sup>21</sup>
- UNDP’s strategic guidance on Information Integrity: Forging a pathway to Truth, Resilience and Trust<sup>22</sup>

The SIPA Team also consulted a comprehensive, internal Airtable with all existing organizations categorized by the UNDP Oslo Governance Team.

### **3.3.2 Field research into UNDP/Accelerator Labs and day-to-day observations:**

Understanding on-the-ground perspectives of remedies to mis- and disinformation for social innovation, the SIPA Team was divided into two teams and traveled to Buenos Aires and Nairobi to talk to both countries’ Accelerator Labs and local partners from the mis- and disinformation ecosystem to understand the scope of this problem in their respective country’s contexts. The complete list of interviews conducted in Buenos Aires and Nairobi can be found in the Appendix.

**3.3.3 Expert Interviews:** Understanding contemporary trends in mis- and disinformation. Over the course of this project, the SIPA Team interviewed academic and institutional experts to better understand the scope of the problem. The complete list of interviews conducted can be found in the Appendix.

## **IV. Research Insights & Substantive Gaps**

The following substantive gaps represent the collective insights afforded by undertaking a comprehensive literature review, speaking with SME experts and traveling to engage with country experts. The first two can be categorized as “response gaps” that currently exist – this includes disparities in solution offerings and structural impediments in streamlined programmatic efforts. The latter two can be categorized as “environmental gaps” which include the current status quo of regulatory power in the Global South and the increasing propensity of the mis- and disinformation ecosystem.

### **4.1 Response Gap 1: Fewer Offline Solutions vs. Online Solutions**

The SIPA Team examined a variety of solutions targeting global mis- and disinformation online. While the solutions offered can help block the spread of information pollution, field research uncovered gaps and a need for emphasis on offline solutions.

In conversations between the SIPA Team and country experts, the term “opinion leaders” was introduced. Opinion leaders are people in small locales that are influential and trusted voices within the community, such as political leaders, religious figures and other respected members.

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<sup>21</sup> Addressing the Information Pollution Crisis with the Power of Open Source » Digital Public Goods Alliance. <https://digitalpublicgoods.net/blog/dpgs-information-integrity/>.

<sup>22</sup> “Information Integrity: Forging a Pathway to Truth, Resilience and Trust | United Nations Development Programme.” UNDP, <https://www.undp.org/publications/information-integrity-forging-pathway-truth-resilience-and-trust>.

Approaching these opinion leaders and “micro-credentialing” them, by offering training on accurate information identification and general media literacy, is a potential avenue for tackling mis- and disinformation that the SIPA Team’s research had identified as a current gap.

The SIPA Team also notes that radio is still a widely used source of news and information, especially in smaller communities. In addition, many smaller radio stations are being broadcast in hyperlocal languages, as opposed to widely spoken or national languages. This form of linguistic diversity allows space for small-scale offline initiatives to be extremely effective in fighting the spread of mis- and disinformation in places where larger online solutions may not be as impactful.

Finally, over one-third of the world population does not have access to the Internet, particularly in the Global South.<sup>23</sup> In rural and isolated communities, the lack of Internet connectivity has and can result in significant information gaps. Without the ability to confirm or verify information, whether heard over the radio or from local news and information sources, individuals risk not knowing if they’re being exposed to mis- and disinformation and have limited access to digital literacy tools. This digital divide means that solutions to mis- and disinformation which are effective in online spaces will not reach a third of the world population. For this reason, we emphasize the need to innovate in the offline information ecosystem.

#### ***4.2 Response Gap 2: Limited Coordination among United Nations Initiatives at a National Level***

The problem of mis- and disinformation has amassed a global audience and there are several United Nations initiatives working to combat the problem. Despite these global initiatives already underway, in-country implementers communicated that they are not always made aware of the strategies and objectives of other in-country players, which frustrates efforts and can be duplicative. Country experts requested increased communication within the United Nations ecosystem to better coordinate mis- and disinformation initiatives at a national level as it would allow partners to support and contribute to solutions.

The following list is a collection of some of the initiatives within the UN system that have been deployed to tackle mis- and disinformation. This list is by no means exhaustive and other initiatives not discussed within this report should be similarly considered:



- **Verified** is an initiative of the United Nations in collaboration with the social impact agency Purpose, that was launched in 2020 in response to the global COVID-19 pandemic. Its mission is to promote and provide accurate, verified information for people, with a focus on combating misinformation.

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<sup>23</sup> “Nearly 3 Billion People Have Never Used the Internet, U.N. Agency Estimates,” The Washington Post, December 1, 2021. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/12/01/global-internet-usage/>.



- **iVerify** is UNDP's automated fact-checking tool used to identify and prevent the spread of false information. It provides national actors with a support package that includes digital tools, capacity building modules, partnership opportunities and communication and outreach strategies.



- **UNESCO Global Conference Internet for Trust** has a main objective of developing a regulatory framework for digital platforms to secure information as a public good through a multi-stakeholder approach. Prior to the conference, UNESCO conducted a series of bilateral and collective consultations to develop a draft of the regulatory framework. The final framework was launched on World Press Freedom Day in May 2023.



- **Code of Conduct on Information Integrity of Digital Platforms** is an initiative introduced in May 2022 in the Committee on Information by the Department of Global Communications to draft a code of conduct to promote integrity in public information while urging it to incorporate mainstream multilingualism into its activities.



- **Global Digital Compact** was proposed by the Secretary-General in September 2021 in the release of the report *Our Common Agenda*. The Digital Compact seeks to outline shared principles for an open and free digital future by addressing digital connectivity, application of human rights online, and introducing accountability criteria for discrimination and misleading content. It is set to be agreed upon at the Summit of the Future held in New York in September 2024.



- **Digital Public Goods Campaign** is an initiative by the Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Technology to encourage and invest in digital public goods. It seeks to build digital public good platforms to share data sets, engage talent, promote robust human rights and governance frameworks, and open-source software, artificial intelligence models and content.



- **eMonitor+** is a UNDP platform that began in 2019 as part of UNDP Tunisia's electoral assistance project. It monitors digital media platforms using AI to perform big data analysis in identifying misinformation, hate speech, violence against women, electoral campaign violations, and political pluralization and polarization.

#### **4.3 Environmental Gap 1: Imbalanced Regulatory Power in the Global South**

Country experts communicated that it's important to consider the power imbalance at play between countries in the Global South and large tech platforms. The majority of the Global South

does not have an equivalent of the European Union, which wields the market influence of 27 member states to effectively set global standards without needing to forcibly impose those standards. While there are comparable federations of sovereign states like the African Union (AU), the AU does not currently maintain the institutional force necessary to impose and enforce digital platform regulation.<sup>24</sup>

Regulatory coalitions within the Global South such as the African Communication Regulation Authorities Network (ACRAN) and the Mediterranean Network of Regulatory Authorities (MNRA) have affirmed their commitment to developing coherent regulation systems across regions.<sup>25</sup> However, there must be due consideration for the immense amount of resources that regulating digital platforms will require and the multifaceted approaches that countries will undertake given the varied historical, cultural and political histories of countries within the Global South. In addition, there is also the risk that regulation intended to protect free and quality information could be repurposed by bad actors to censor and curtail fundamental human rights.

#### **4.4 Environmental Gap 2: Highly Sophisticated mis- and disinformation Ecosystem**

The SIPA Team was also made aware of the highly sophisticated mis- and disinformation ecosystem in the Global South that does not yet have equally sophisticated responses to mis- and disinformation available. Particularly in Africa, sophisticated forms of mis- and disinformation — AI-generated disinformation, deepfake photos and videos, and encrypted messaging services — are heavily employed by those with strong political or economic interests in deceiving the public. Across the Global South, political parties, fossil fuel companies and foreign powers — to name a few — circulate highly sophisticated disinformation in locales that lack the institutional power or built-up digital literacy to combat it.

mis- and disinformation circulated in hyperlocal languages presents another challenge. Digital content platforms use advertisement-based business models, meaning that content moderation efforts will occur in languages where showing ads to users earns the most profit. This means that information circulating online in hyperlocal languages is unlikely to be monitored as closely for mis- and disinformation or other harmful content compared to dominant languages due to the lack of monetary incentives for platforms. Both “Facebook Files” whistleblower Frances Haugen<sup>26</sup> and TikTok content moderator whistleblower Gadear Ayed<sup>27</sup> have discussed that digital content platforms do not invest enough in moderating minority languages and it allows for mis- and disinformation and harmful content to remain online.

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<sup>24</sup> Imoedemhe, Ovo. “The AU and Issues of Institutional Capacity and Enforcement.” *The Emergent African Union Law: Conceptualization, Delimitation, and Application*, edited by Olufemi Amao et al., Oxford University Press, 2021, p. 0. Silverchair.

<sup>25</sup> Networks of Regulatory Agencies Join Forces in Supporting UNESCO Guidelines on Regulating Digital Platforms | UNESCO.

<sup>26</sup> “Your Undivided Attention: Real Social Media Solutions, Now — with Frances Haugen on Apple Podcasts.”

Apple Podcasts, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/facebook-whistleblower-frances-haugen-in-conversation/id1460030305?i=1000538907802>.

<sup>27</sup> “New Research: Disinformation on TikTok Gaslights Political Tensions Ahead of Kenya’s 2022 Elections.” Mozilla Foundation, June 8, 2022, <https://foundation.mozilla.org/en/blog/new-research-disinformation-on-tiktok-gaslights-political-tensions-ahead-of-kenyas-2022-elections/>.

The prevalence of encrypted messaging apps like WhatsApp also makes mis- and disinformation flows difficult to track, and there is currently little research conducted on the impact of WhatsApp and other encrypted messaging services on the information ecosystem in the Global South. In the book "Disinformation in the Global South," the roles of WhatsApp user motivation and trust in messaging group members were evaluated by a group of researchers.<sup>28</sup> They found that group trust was associated with a lower perceived risk of misinformation exposure and greater levels of correcting others who pass misinformation along. While further research is needed, these results demonstrate that informal social verification networks may help to break down the enigmatic mis- and disinformation flows on WhatsApp. If left unaddressed, however, mis- and disinformation that originates on WhatsApp and other platforms transitions to circulate via offline channels of information like radio, local news and word-of-mouth.

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<sup>28</sup>Wasserman, Herman and Madrid-Morales, Dani. "Disinformation in the Global South." 2022. John Wiley & Sons, Inc.



## V. Taxonomy

By Anya Schiffrin

The SIPA Team categorized proposed solutions for mis- and disinformation using a taxonomy of solutions.<sup>29</sup> There are many different approaches and proposals of how to address the problem, but for an overall understanding of the different ideas about solutions, the economics terms “supply side” and “demand side” provide a useful framework for understanding. Media scholar Guy Berger, who was previously Director for Freedom of Expression and Media Development at UNESCO, notes that the creation and dissemination of information lies on a continuum that includes production, transmission, reception and reproduction, and many of the efforts aimed at fixing the problem emphasize one part of the continuum over another.<sup>30</sup> However, for simplicity’s sake, solutions herein are categorized as demand-side solutions and supply-side solutions.

Demand-side solutions emphasize the role of the consumers, and include efforts to teach media literacy, promote community engagement, and verification efforts such as labeling and fact-checking. These solutions emphasize audience demand and the role of individual choice.

Supply-side solutions emphasize the supply of information and refer to controlling what information is shown through algorithms and content moderation. The supply-side solutions can be further broken down into two parts: 1) suppressing poor quality/dangerous or illegal information and 2) creating and/or promoting high-quality information.

<b>Taxonomy of Solutions – Supply vs Demand Side</b>	
<b>Demand</b>	<b>Supply</b>
<b><u>Raising Awareness</u></b> Reporting on the platforms so people understand the effects of mis- and disinformation and can be more discerning	<b><u>Information Provisioning*</u></b> Counter speech and providing more speech, e.g., by supporting media pluralism and quality news, including local news support and covering big tech
<b><u>Community Participation</u></b> Can include journalists’ efforts to build trust in and engagement with quality information as well as citizen journalism	<b><u>Changing Incentives*</u></b> e.g., advertising boycotts

<sup>29</sup> Schiffrin, Anya. “Mis- and disinformation Online: a Taxonomy of Solutions,” 2020. University of Navarra, Doctor of Philosophy.

<sup>30</sup> Posetti and Bontcheva. 2020. Author interview, Guy Berger 2019.

<p><b><u>Fact-Checking</u></b> Includes labeling and browser extensions that audiences can use <i>(overlaps with Supply side)</i></p>	<p><b><u>Algorithms*</u></b> Suppression, downranking of content, removal of bots, de-platforming</p>
<p><b><u>Researcher Safe Harbor Laws</u></b> Protect academic research <i>(overlaps with Supply side)</i></p>	<p><b><u>Transparency*</u></b> Universal Ad Transparency, Public Data Transparency</p>
<p><b><u>Media Literacy Training</u></b> So that audiences can better distinguish what is true and what is false</p>	<p><b><u>Regulations*</u></b> i.e., hate speech laws, intermediary liability. Banning or taxing microtargeting. Content Moderation, Facebook Supreme Court.</p>
	<p><b><u>New Facebook**</u></b> Build new platforms or break up existing ones</p>

*\*Supply Side: Blocking Poor Quality Information*

*\*\*Supply Side: Creating Good Quality Information*

## VI. Results: A Portfolio of Solutions to Address mis- and disinformation in the Global South

The SIPA Team has constructed a Portfolio of Solutions to compile innovative interventions to mis- and disinformation from around the world. These solutions are categorized according to the above taxonomy and include details of the environments in which they have been successfully implemented and by whom. The solutions in this Portfolio come from a variety of contexts; they have been chosen for their effectiveness across different types of mis- and disinformation on a variety of subjects.



Figure 1: A map of successful examples of the most innovative solutions found in this Portfolio

### Supply-Side Solutions

Type	Project	Location(s)	Organization(s)
<b>Within UNDP Accelerator Labs</b>	Public-Private Partnerships to Provide Quality Information	Pakistan	UNDP

<b>UN Initiatives</b>	Guidelines for Regulating Digital Platforms	Paris	UNESCO
	Global Digital Compact	New York	United Nations
	Digital Public Goods Campaign	New York	United Nations
<b>External Stakeholders</b>	Content Regulation	Germany, Europe	Federal Republic of Germany, European Union
	Age Restrictions on Digital Media Platforms	United States, Utah	YouTube, Meta, State of Utah

❖ **Public-Private Partnerships**

- UNDP Pakistan Accelerator Lab<sup>31</sup> is partnering with a telehealth startup, the *Ministry of National Health Services*, and local phone providers to replace dial tones with quality public health information on COVID-19. It also directed patients to receive health consultations, which resulted in more than 300,000 consultations being done.

❖ **Guidelines for Regulating Digital Platforms**

- The guidelines, currently in development by UNESCO,<sup>32</sup> aim to support regulators, governments, legislatures and companies to deal with content that potentially damages human rights and democracy, while protecting freedom of expression and the availability of accurate and reliable information.

❖ **Global Digital Compact**

- The Global Digital Compact<sup>33</sup> is expected to “outline shared principles for an open, free and secure digital future for all.” The Common Agenda report suggests topics it might cover, including digital connectivity, avoiding Internet fragmentation, providing people with options as to how their data is used, application of human rights online, and promoting a trustworthy Internet by introducing accountability criteria for discrimination and misleading content.

<sup>31</sup> UNDP. “How Telemedicine Is Helping in the Fight against COVID-19 (and Why It Should Be Here to Stay) | United Nations Development Programme.” Accessed April 26, 2023. <https://www.undp.org/pakistan/blog/how-telemedicine-helping-fight-against-covid-19-and-why-it-should-be-here-stay>.

<sup>32</sup> “Guidelines for Regulating Digital Platforms | UNESCO.” Accessed April 26, 2023. <https://www.unesco.org/en/internet-conference/guidelines>.

<sup>33</sup> “Global Digital Compact | Office of the Secretary-General’s Envoy on Technology.” Accessed April 26, 2023. <https://www.un.org/techenvoy/global-digital-compact>.

❖ **Content Regulation**

- Content regulation laws<sup>34</sup> and regulations govern the content that can be published online. These laws vary from country to country, but they generally aim to protect people from harmful or offensive content. Some common examples of content regulation laws include: Laws against hate speech, child sexual abuse materials, copyright infringement and defamation. Germany and the European Union have been leaders in this effort.

❖ **Age Restrictions on Digital Media Platforms**

- Age restrictions on digital media platforms are designed to protect children from harmful or inappropriate content. These restrictions vary from platform to platform, but they generally require users to be at least 13 years old in order to create an account. It is easier to build consensus on regulating digital content from the perspective of ensuring the safety of children. For example, protecting underaged children is the basis for the UK’s Online Safety Bill.<sup>35</sup>

**Demand-Side Solutions**

Type	Project	Location(s)	Organization(s)
<b>Within UNDP Accelerator Labs</b>	Media Literacy Training	Kenya, Togo, Morocco, South Africa, Argentina, Lebanon, Uruguay	UNDP Accelerator Labs, UNDP Governance Team
	Gamified Media Literacy	India, Timor-Leste, Cabo Verde, Morocco	Accelerator Labs in the respective countries
	Crowdsourced Content Moderation	Argentina, Kenya, Lebanon, Morocco, Togo, Sudan, Iraq, Namibia	UNDP, TED
	Paid ad campaigns	Kenya	UNDP, Google
	Advocacy	South Africa	UNDP
	Automated Information Tracking	Tanzania, Uruguay	UNDP

<sup>34</sup> Browne, Ryan. "EU Agrees on Landmark Law Aimed at Forcing Big Tech Firms to Tackle Illegal Content." CNBC, April 23, 2022. <https://www.cnbc.com/2022/04/22/digital-services-act-eu-agrees-new-rules-for-tackling-illegal-content.html>.

<sup>35</sup> GOV.UK. "A Guide to the Online Safety Bill." Accessed April 26, 2023. <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/a-guide-to-the-online-safety-bill>.

	Business Challenges	Cambodia	UNDP
<b>UNDP</b>	iVerify	Global	UNDP
	eMonitor+	Global	UNDP
<b>External Stakeholders</b>	Hyperlocal community Engagement	United States, Kenya	Aga Khan University
	Fund grassroots journalism	Global	Internews
	Centralized Content Moderation	Kenya	Communications Authority of Kenya, Media Council of Kenya, National Cohesion and Integration Commission
	Fact Checking	Africa, Latin America, United States	AfricaCheck, Factchequeado, Pesa Check

❖ **Media Literacy Training**

- Media literacy is the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and create media in a critical and informed way. It includes the ability to understand the nature of media messages, the techniques used to create them and the ways in which they can influence our thinking and behavior. Multiple UNDP Accelerator Labs including Kenya, Togo, Morocco, South Africa, Argentina, Lebanon and Uruguay have and continue to conduct successful workshops in literacy.<sup>36</sup>

❖ **Gamified Media Literacy**

- UNDP Accelerator Labs in India, Timor-Leste, Cabo Verde and Morocco developed or adopted a pandemic-themed game<sup>37</sup> to provide quality public health education. As of January 2021, the two games reached more than 6 million young individuals.

❖ **Crowdsourced Content Moderation**

<sup>36</sup> UNDP. "Promoting Information Integrity in Elections: Global Reflections from Election Stakeholders | United Nations Development Programme." Accessed April 26, 2023. <https://www.undp.org/publications/promoting-information-integrity-elections-global-reflections-election-stakeholders>.

<sup>37</sup> UNDP. "The Learning Network Effect: Gamification to Counter COVID-19 Misinformation | United Nations Development Programme." Accessed April 26, 2023. <https://www.undp.org/acceleratorlabs/blog/learning-network-effect-gamification-counter-covid-19-misinformation>.

- UNDP partnered with the *Healthy Internet Project*,<sup>38</sup> a project incubated at TED that provides a browser extension for users to flag harmful content. The tool has been adopted in at least eight Accelerator Labs and is now available in English, Portuguese, Spanish, Arabic and French.
- ❖ **Paid Ad Campaigns**
  - UNDP Accelerator Lab in Kenya started a social media campaign under the title “#SpreadInfoNotPanic.”<sup>39</sup> The campaign was designed to engage the public to tackle the infodemic and promote quality information.
- ❖ **Automated Information Tracking**
  - UNDP Accelerator Labs in Tanzania and Uruguay partnered with AI companies to monitor public sentiment on COVID-19 and/or COVID-19 vaccines<sup>40</sup> on social media to understand the scope of the infodemic.
- ❖ **Advocacy**
  - Accelerator Labs in South Africa and Uruguay<sup>41</sup> released several videos to educate the public on mis- and disinformation and advocated for a better approach to understand the harms it could cause.
- ❖ **Business Challenges**
  - The UNDP Accelerator Lab in Cambodia engaged a group of local and international journalists<sup>42</sup> to remodel the business model of the press in Cambodia, in order to make more media groups achieve sustainability in a competitive market.
- ❖ **iVerify**
  - An ongoing UNDP initiative<sup>43</sup> that allows users to verify the accuracy of information online through a web-based platform.
- ❖ **Inoculation Strategies**
  - Inoculation Strategies identify the targets of mis- and disinformation and provide them preemptively with quality information. Following the onset of the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022, a “pre-bunking” strategy, developed in the 1960s by social scientist William McGuire, was used to counter disinformation surrounding Ukrainian migrants. Through a series of short videos introducing the type of false claims and tactics that disinformation actors may manipulate them with, Central

<sup>38</sup> UNDP. “Tackling Digital Misinformation with the Healthy Internet Project | United Nations Development Programme.” Accessed April 26, 2023. <https://www.undp.org/acceleratorlabs/blog/tackling-digital-misinformation-healthy-internet-project>.

<sup>39</sup> UNDP. “Tackling Coronavirus Misinformation in the Digital Age - #SpreadInfoNotPanic | United Nations Development Programme.” Accessed April 26, 2023. <https://www.undp.org/kenya/blog/tackling-coronavirus-misinformation-digital-age-spreadinfonotpanic>.

<sup>40</sup> UNDP. “The first year of the UNDP Accelerator Lab in Uruguay | Programa De Las Naciones Unidas Para El Desarrollo.” Accessed April 26, 2023. <https://www.undp.org/es/uruguay/blog/first-year-undp-accelerator-lab-uruguay>.

<sup>41</sup> UNDP. “Let Us Challenge Fake News to Beat COVID 19 | United Nations Development Programme.” Accessed April 26, 2023. <https://www.undp.org/south-africa/press-releases/let-us-challenge-fake-news-beat-covid-19>.

<sup>42</sup> UNDP. “UNDP Media Alternatives Project Business Challenge The Winners | United Nations Development Programme.” Accessed April 26, 2023. <https://www.undp.org/cambodia/publications/undp-media-alternatives-project-business-challenge-winners>.

<sup>43</sup> UNDP. “iVERIFY | United Nations Development Programme.” Accessed April 26, 2023. <https://www.undp.org/digital/verify>.



and Eastern European individuals were warned in advance and able to defend themselves against manipulation.<sup>44</sup>

❖ **Hyperlocal Community Engagement**

- Organizations such as KPCC Laist,<sup>45</sup> a California-based newsgroup, engaged local key opinion leaders to promote the distribution of trustworthy information by building offline communities.

❖ **Fund Grassroot Journalism**

- Organizations such as Internews<sup>46</sup> train journalists and digital rights activists, tackle disinformation, and offer business expertise to help media outlets become financially sustainable. They do this work in partnership with local communities.

❖ **Centralized Content Moderation**

- This solution emphasizes the need for a centralized moderating entity. While in some cases a government can act in this capacity, the emphasis must be on the autonomy and complete independence of the moderating entity and therefore does not necessarily need to be state funded. Kenya is a prime example of state-funded entities, as the Communications Authority of Kenya, Media Council of Kenya and National Cohesion and Integration Commission share responsibilities for centralizing these efforts.

❖ **Fact Checking**

- Organizations such as Africa Check,<sup>47</sup> Chequeado,<sup>48</sup> and PesaCheck<sup>49</sup> verify the accuracy of statements and claims. Fact-checkers like these typically examine claims made in news articles, speeches, and other public statements. They also investigate rumors and hoaxes in their efforts to mitigate mis- and disinformation.

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<sup>44</sup> Jigsaw. "Defanging Disinformation's Threat to Ukrainian Refugees." Jigsaw (blog), February 14, 2023. <https://medium.com/jigsaw/defanging-disinformations-threat-to-ukrainian-refugees-b164dbbc1c60>.

<sup>45</sup> LAist - NPR News for Southern California - 89.3 FM. "Homepage." Accessed April 26, 2023. <https://www.kpcc.org/>.

<sup>46</sup> Information Saves Lives | Internews. "Home," March 2, 2023. <https://internews.org/>.

<sup>47</sup> "Africa Check | Sorting Fact from Fiction." Accessed April 26, 2023. <https://africacheck.org/>.

<sup>48</sup> "Home - Chequeado." Accessed April 26, 2023. <https://chequeado.com/>.

<sup>49</sup> PesaCheck. "PesaCheck," April 26, 2023. <https://pesacheck.org/>.

## **VII. Recommendations**

The following recommendations are made based on the insights identified by the SIPA Team during their desk and field research into UNDP and the Accelerator Labs and are further informed by expert interviews. These recommendations should be considered with respect to the limitations outlined in the above “United Nations Capacity Analysis and Disclaimer” section.

### ***United Nations***

The key recommendation for the United Nations is to take steps to address gaps in Regulatory Power in the Global South and United Nations’ Initiatives. First, the United Nations should collaborate with Member State governments to support the implementation of UNESCO Guidelines for Regulating Digital Platforms where appropriate and requested by Member States. Additionally, it will be important for the United Nations to organize United Nations Agencies to coordinate their efforts to support this implementation across their various mandates at both a national and local level.

### ***UNDP***

UNDP should, where requested, facilitate on-the-ground support to address capacity gaps to manage and counteract in the Global South. This will include supporting Member State governments via UNDP Country Teams and should leverage its scope and influence to find and engage local and regional partners. Finally, UNDP should continue to engage and emphasize its commitment to coordinate with Member State governments who are seeking proactive and sustained elections support.<sup>50</sup>

### ***UNDP Accelerator Labs***

Among the four response gaps identified in this report, the UNDP Accelerator Labs appear to be best suited to contribute towards efforts to address gaps in Online vs. Offline Solutions and the Highly Sophisticated misinformation Environment in the Global South. UNDP, through the Accelerator Labs, should form thematic and long-term partnerships with strategic local and regional allies and practitioners – the cornerstone of this strategy should be hyperlocal and focused on deeper relationship building in microcosms of information flow (i.e., cities, villages, religious communities, etc.). For a comprehensive list of potential partners for the Accelerator Labs to strengthen local relationships with, please see the Appendix. In addition to building partnerships, the Accelerator Labs should also keep testing interventions on novel forms of misinformation.

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<sup>50</sup> As per the above “United Nations Capacity Analysis and Disclaimer” section, UNDP may only engage in electoral support when requested by Member States and mandated by the United Nations, and thus support of related governance objectives could look like information integrity support outside of electoral cycles.

## **VIII. Partnerships**

There is an opportunity for UNDP to leverage partners in order to better implement recommendations with the support and guidance of local expertise. The SIPA Team has identified the following primary sectors where partnerships would be beneficial. A complete list of recommended partners can be found in the Appendix.

### ***Government Partners***

Within the boundaries established by UNDP's mandate, UNDP should work with and support member state governments to address the "Substantive Gap 4.3 Imbalanced Regulatory Power" mentioned above. The UNESCO Guidelines for Regulating Digital Platforms could be a helpful tool. However, adapting the proposed regulation to the specific capabilities and structure of different governments will be essential. Existing legislative entities may already be equipped to adopt regulatory powers to curb mis- and disinformation and would lessen the burden of resources required for building a new entity. Please review the above "United Nations Capacity Analysis and Disclaimer" section outlining limitations to UNDP in working with government partners.

### ***Community Partners***

UNDP should look to address the "Substantive Gap 4.1 Fewer Online v Offline Solutions" mentioned above by partnering with existing community organizations. Identifying and leveraging "opinion leaders" will ensure that capacity-building and media literacy programs are designed to best support the specific needs of a community. In addition, it will ensure that trust is being built between UNDP and the target groups which encounter mis- and disinformation.

### ***Private and Corporate Partners***

Private and corporate partners will be best equipped to support UNDP in its effort to combat the "Substantive Gap 4.4 Highly Sophisticated Information Ecosystems" mentioned above. These partners are most likely to have the resources necessary to conduct rigorous research into solutions for mis- and disinformation. In addition, UNDP should continue to engage with tech platforms to promote robust company content moderation policies and encourage transparency into the primary and outsourced efforts these companies deploy to stop the spread of mis- and disinformation on their platforms.

## **IX. Conclusion**

The Portfolio of Solutions presented herein is by no means comprehensive and should be considered supplementary to existing solutions and initiatives undertaken by numerous organizations — many of whose work supported the insights identified by the SIPA Team in this Report. The spread of mis- and disinformation is a global problem and combating it will require a concerted, international effort to engage in both demand-side and supply-side solutions.

## X. Appendix

### SME Expert Interviews:

Name	Title & Organization
Joan Donovan	Researcher & Author of <i>Meme Wars: The Untold Story of the Online Battles Upending Democracy in America</i>
Melissa Fleming	Under-Secretary-General for Global Communications, United Nations
Alison Go	Former Product & Strategy Executive, Civic News Company
Sarah Lister	Head of Governance, UNDP Bureau for Policy and Programme Support
Philip Howard	Professor and Director of the Programme on Democracy and Technology, Oxford University
James Fahn	Executive Director, Earth Journalism Network

### Country Expert Interviews: Buenos Aires, Argentina:

Name	Title & Organization
Claudio Tomasi, Karina Carpintero, Nora Luzi	UNDP Argentina Leadership Team
Lorena Moscovich, María Verónica Moreno, Cesar Zarrabeitia	UNDP Accelerator Labs
Tamar Hanh	Director, UN Information Centre for Argentina and Uruguay
Felicitas Carrique	Executive Director, News Product Alliance
Laura Zommer & Olivia Sohr	Director & Projects Coordinator, Chequeado
Damián Loreti	Lawyer and Tenured Professor in Media Law, School of Social Sciences, University of Buenos Aires
Natalia Aruguete	CONICET Researcher and Professor at the National University of Quilmes and the Austral University

Diego Rossi	Advisor to the Commission of Communications and Information Technology of the Honorable Chamber of Deputies of the Argentine Nation
Rosaura Audi	Undersecretary of Public Media in the Secretariat of Media and Public Communication of the Argentine Nation
Mora Matassi	Researcher in Communication, Technology, and Digital Culture at University of San Andres
Natalia Vinelli	Deputy Director of Special Projects at ENACOM

### Country Expert Interviews: Nairobi, Kenya:

Name	Title & Organization
Roly Davila	Chief Technical Advisor, UNDP Deepening Democracy Project
Jane Serwanga	Project Manager, UNDP Elections Team
Lilian Njoro	Head of Experimentation, UNDP Accelerator Labs
Alykhan Peermohamed	Head of Training, Aga Khan University Graduate School of Media and Communications
Hesbon Owilla	Media and Communication Trainer, Aga Khan University Graduate School of Media and Communications
Rosemary Mwaga	Communications Authority of Kenya
Liz Orembo	KICTANET
Eric Mugendi	Meedan

### Proposed Partnerships:

#### Global Partners

- Internews
- Oxford University's Program DemTech
- National Savings Fund (Norway)
- USAID (US)
- Canadian Development Agency (Canada)
- European Commission (EU)
- PeaceTech Lab (Washington DC)

- National Democratic Institute
- International Symposium on Online Journalism
- Tech Firms: Meta, Google, Twitter, YouTube, and Microsoft

### **Regional Partners**

#### Argentina / LATAM

- AFP
- NewsProduct
- Factchequeado & Latam Chequeado
- Government Arms dedicated to public media, technology, and information
- Regional Universities including University of San Andres and University of Buenos Aires

#### **Kenya / East Africa**

- Aga Khan University (East Africa, Central Asia, South Asia)
- AfricaCheck
- PesaCheck
- Africa Women Journalism Project
- Mozilla Foundation