

Terms of Reference

Supporting Expanded Newsroom Sustainability and Engagement (SENSE)

**December 18, 2024**

# Introduction

Internews is a media support nonprofit working in 100+ countries. Internews trains journalists, tackles disinformation, and helps media outlets become financially sustainable so that everyone has trustworthy information to make informed decisions and hold power to account.

Internews is seeking an external evaluator or firm to lead the final evaluation of the Supporting Expanded Newsroom Sustainability and Engagement (SENSE) project. The SENSE project is an initiative designed to improve the financial sustainability and editorial capacity of independent regional media outlets in Moldova, outside of Chisinau. The project, initiated in August 2021, seeks to support local media through capacity building, technical assistance, and mentorship in editorial, business, and technological areas.

This evaluation will primarily be conducted remotely, with the possibility of limited in-person interviews if feasible. The evaluation is expected to span approximately two months, with all activities and the final report to be completed by February 2025. The estimated budget for this evaluation is 10,000 USD, including taxes.

# Project Background Information

***Purpose and Objectives of the SENSE Project***

The SENSE project aims to *strengthen independent regional media in Moldova, focusing on enhancing their financial sustainability and improving the production of fact-based, locally relevant content*. The program's primary objective is to *improve the financial sustainability of local newsrooms and expand their ability to produce fact-based, locally relevant content*. Key expected outcomes include:

* Increased institutional, business, and editorial capacity and/or techniques among beneficiaries.
* Expanded audience and improved audience engagement across a multitude of platforms.
* Increased regional media revenues and financial diversification leading to sustainability.
* Strengthened reporting and management capacity, including access to media sales expertise.

The project’s Theory of Change is: IF regional media outlets in Moldova are able to strengthen their business models and capacity to produce quality content on locally-important issues AND IF they are able to effectively engage their communities THEN they will be able to counter the existing advertising duopoly, survive crisis situations, and expand their audience reach AND THEN Moldovan citizens will have access to a variety of objective perspectives on relevant issues that will allow them to make informed decisions in their daily lives.

***Program History***

Launched in August 2021, the SENSE project has provided tailored mentorship and support to six independent regional media outlets using a media-specific assessment methodology. The project also includes other activities designed to promote long-term media sustainability and address the shortage of professionals in regional media, introducing initiatives such as Passion Projects, a Citizen Journalism School, Rising Stars, and a Sales Academy.

# Scope of the evaluation

***Purpose and objectives***

This purpose of this evaluation is not only to assess the performance, achievements, and impact of the SENSE project in supporting regional media outlets in Moldova, but also to provide insights that will inform future media development programming.

Specifically, the evaluation will:

* Assess the relevance and effectiveness of SENSE activities in addressing the needs of regional independent media in Moldova.
* Evaluate the achievement of expected project outcomes, including improved overall outlet performance, enhanced financial sustainability, improved quality and relevance of content, use of new formats, and increased audience engagement, among others.
* Assess the potential sustainability of the project’s results, including any early signs of long-term impact.
* Analyze underlying factors beyond Internews’s control that affected the achievement of the project results.
* Identify lessons learned and any unintended results, and provide actionable recommendations for future projects or interventions.

***Intended Users and Uses of the Evaluation***

This evaluation is primarily intended for the SENSE project team, Internews, and the project donor. The findings will be used internally and, possibly, by the donor, to inform future programming decisions, improve project implementation processes, and assess the effectiveness of current approaches in supporting regional media sustainability.

***Activities to Be Evaluated***

The evaluation will focus on the following activities and their outcomes/results:

* Long-term capacity-building support provided to Key Partner media outlets through:
	+ Organizational Capacity Assessments and tailored capacity-building plans.
	+ Technical assistance (ex. trainings and consultations) in editorial, business, and technological aspects of media sustainability.
	+ Grant assistance and other service provision (ex. software subscriptions)
* Short-term grant assistance to non-Key Partner media outlets
* Specialized training programs designed to develop and nurture local media talent
* Experience-sharing events

***Time Period Covered***

The evaluation will cover the full duration of the SENSE project, from its launch in August 2021 through to the expected conclusion in March 2025.

***Geographical Focus and Target Groups***

The evaluation will focus on project-supported regional media outlets in Moldova, specifically the Key Partners and other independent regional media outlets that participated in project activities. The evaluation will also target participants in SENSE training and development programs, such as the Citizen Journalism School, Rising Stars, and Sales Academy.

# Evaluation Questions

For the final evaluation, below are proposed evaluation questions, in line with the SENSE project’s purpose and objectives. These can be adapted or refined by the evaluator in consultation with Internews:

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| Criteria | Questions |
| Relevance | * Which specific needs of regional media outlets outside Chisinau have the SENSE project addressed effectively, and which needs remain unmet?
* What changes in the media landscape affected regional outlets during the project period, and how did the SENSE project adapt to address these challenges?
* To what extent are the objectives and activities of the intervention consistent with beneficiaries’ requirements and country needs?
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| Effectiveness | * To what extent has the SENSE project achieved its desired outcomes:

a) What improvements in revenue generation and financial management have participating media outlets achieved?b) How has the quality and reach of content changed among participating outlets?c) What changes in institutional development have media outlets demonstrated?d) How have participating outlets improved their audience engagement strategies?* How effective were the organizational capacity assessments and tailored capacity-building plans in strengthening the editorial, business, and technological capacities of the KPs?
* What specific skills have media professionals gained through SENSE training programs, and how are they using these skills in their work?
* What positive or negative unexpected changes have occurred in participating media outlets during the project period?
* How effective was the coordination and learning between Internews, the Key Partners, and other participants throughout the project?
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| Sustainability | * What specific practices or systems implemented through the SENSE project are media outlets continuing to use independently?
* What resources and capacities do participating media outlets now have in place to maintain their improved operations after the project ends?
* Which improvements in financial sustainability and content production are most likely to continue without project support, and why?
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| External Factors | * What external factors (e.g., political instability, economic conditions, regulatory changes) beyond Internews’ control have influenced the achievement of the project’s results, and how have these factors impacted the overall success and challenges faced by the project?
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| Adaptability and Future Interventions | * What recommendations can be made for future interventions in similar contexts or with similar objectives, particularly in strengthening independent regional media in politically and economically unstable environments?
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# Evaluation Approach and Methodology

To address the evaluation questions effectively, the evaluator will design an evaluation approach that best captures the SENSE project's contribution to regional media development in Moldova. The success of this evaluation depends on close collaboration with Internews throughout the process, from methodology design to final reporting.

The evaluator has flexibility to propose methods that will best answer the evaluation questions and fulfill the evaluation's purpose. The approach should combine both primary and secondary data collection, while ensuring robust evidence gathering through:

* Phase 1 - Document Review, that may include analysis of project documentation (quarterly reports, M&E data, grantee reports), review of media outlets' performance data, assessment of regional media context, initial staff interviews, etc.
* Phase 2 - Primary Data Collection: qualitative interviews with participating media outlets, staff, and partners, stakeholder consultations, review of content quality and reach improvements, analysis of financial and operational changes, etc.

The evaluation methodology will be jointly developed by Internews and the evaluator through a collaborative process. Once agreed upon, the evaluator will be responsible for implementing it independently and objectively

***Evaluation Timeline and Deliverables***

***Estimated timeframe: Approximately 27-35 working days:***

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| **REQUIRED TASKS** | **DELIVERABLES** | **ESTIMATED LOE** | **PERIOD/DEADLINE** |
| 1. **DESK REVIEW & INCEPTION REPORT**
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| Conduct desk research of existing project materials  | *List of analyzed materials* | 2-3 days  |  |
| Draft, agree upon, and finalize inception report, that will list:* Final Evaluation Questions
* Evaluation Matrix
* Data collection tools and sampling,
* Estimated calendar plan
* Format/structure of final report and mandatory annexes etc.
 | *Inception report drafted based on agreed template* | 5-6 days  |  |
| Debrief of Inception report with Internews representatives. | *Revised Inception report* | 1-2 day(s)  |  |
| 1. **DATA COLLECTION**
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| Conduct KII with key stakeholders and others agreed and listed in the inception report methods | *List of conducted KIIs.* | 10-12 days  |  |
| 1. **DRAFT & FINAL REPORT**
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| Analysis of information collected, completion of first draft and submit for Internews review (to be offered during max 5 working days) | *A comprehensive final narrative report in English (20-30 pages) drafted according to previously agreed upon report format.* | 6-8 days  |  |
| Drafting and submitting the final evaluation report summarizing main findings, conclusions, and recommendations and presentation for Internews. | *PowerPoint presentation (EN) of key findings.* | 3-4 days  |  |

***Budget and Payment***

The evaluator will be paid based on the milestones outlined in the contract. Payments will be made upon the completion of key tasks (e.g., data collection, submission of the draft report, and final approval). The total budget for the evaluation is 10,000 USD, including taxes.

# Evaluation Principles and Values

The evaluation will adhere to principles of transparency, partnership, cultural sensitivity, and gender awareness, ensuring inclusivity, openness, and respect for all stakeholders. Ethical standards will be maintained throughout the evaluation process, with a focus on confidentiality and impartiality.

# Roles and Responsibilities

Internews will provide access to documents, facilitate stakeholder engagement, and manage the evaluation process.

The Evaluator will contribute to the design of and implement the evaluation, collect and analyze data, and produce the inception report, evaluation report, and presentation.

The success of this evaluation is contingent on close collaboration with Internews at every stage of the process, including the design of the methodology, the crafting of the inception report, and the development of the final report and other relevant materials.

# Evaluator qualifications

***Required Experience and Competencies:***

* Previous experience in evaluating international development projects, with a strong focus on media and journalism-related programs.
* Familiarity with the specific challenges faced by regional media in Eastern Europe, especially in the context of media sustainability and content production.
* Demonstrated expertise in both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis methods (e.g., surveys, interviews, focus groups, document review, etc.).
* Expertise in using monitoring and evaluation (M&E) tools and methodologies to track progress and inform adaptive management.
* Strong facilitation skills for conducting interviews and focus group discussions, and the ability to synthesize complex information.
* Excellent writing and communication skills for producing clear, concise evaluation reports and presenting findings to diverse stakeholders.
* Fluency in both written and spoken English, Romanian, and Russian.

***Ethical Standards and Approach:***

* Commitment to conducting the evaluation in a way that upholds the principles of [Belonging, Dignity, and Justice (BDJ](https://internews.org/careers/working-at-internews/)), ensuring all participants’ voices are respected and heard.
* Adherence to ethical procedures throughout the evaluation process, ensuring transparency, accountability, and confidentiality of data and findings.
* Sensitivity to cultural and gender dynamics, ensuring that evaluation methods and interactions respect the local context and promote inclusivity.

# Procedures and proposal submission guidelines

Applications will be reviewed on a rolling basis with preference for applications submitted by January 10th, 2025, to in-chisinau@internews.org.

Applications should include the below documentation:

* A 2–3-page statement of interest/technical proposal, describing how your profile meets the qualifications outlined above and highlighting how your methodological approach will address the scope planned for this evaluation.
* A short cost justification (not included in the 2–3-page limit)
* CV or resume for each person on the evaluation team
* Evidence of evaluation work (e.g., link to evaluation reports or PDF attachments), highlighting evaluation theories and approaches.
* If you move forward in the selection process, be prepared to share the names and contact information of two references (these should be clients for whom you have conducted external evaluations previously)