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USAID Projects Support Citizen Journalists to Protect Civic Space and Promote Under-Reported Development Issues

Impact Story

The USAID MADANI Civil Society Support Initiative works to improve the ability of civil society organizations (CSOs) to conduct outreach and advocacy to ensure government accountability and transparency, and to raise the voices of minority and marginalized groups and counter misinformation and disinformation. Collaborating with the USAID Media Empowerment for Democratic Integrity and Accountability program (MEDIA), MADANI has sponsored a series of citizen journalism trainings that have empowered CSOs and community members to communicate their local needs and make change.

Ordinary citizens' reporting of newsworthy happenings in their neighborhoods is an essential ingredient to a democratic society, as people exercise the right to raise their community's voice, including

those of marginalized groups. This content often illuminates realities that may differ from the narrative of the mainstream news, or shed light on areas where there lacking media presence. As an alternative platform

GPP Jember has broadcasted weekly public service announcements from citizen journalists and hosted talk shows

for sharing these stories, social media has revolutionized the role of citizens as journalists, accommodating their voices in conveying real-world problems and encouraging communities and governments to act on pressing issues. However, as is evident by now, social media carries risks as well, including of

cyberbullying and the spread of fake news, and encouraging its responsible has become of paramount importance to maintaining its positive role in democracy.

Since 2021, MADANI has collaborated with MEDIA to inspire citizens to speak up, tell their stories, and be critical of how issues are being handled in their communities. MADANI and MEDIA collaborate in the districts of Jember (East Java) and Luwu Utara (South Sulawesi), where the two projects co-support CSO partners through citizen journalism training.

Beginning in August 2021, MADANI's civil society partner *Gerakan Peduli Perempuan* (GPP) in Jember hosted several citizen journalism trainings and mentoring sessions. GPP Jember invited senior journalists from local news outlets as mentors to train members of the Jember citizen journalist community

As part of the citizen journalism training, guest speakers that represent GPP, the local government, and a legal aid institute (LBH) took part in a talkshow at RRI Jember Pro FM radion station about the importance of reproductive health education among youth.



Photo: RRI Jember

to improve how they cover news stories related to mother and child health (MCH). The virtual trainings have paid off handsomely: GPP Jember has broadcasted weekly public service announcements from citizen journalists and hosted talk shows with them on MCH issues in cooperation with the national *Radio Republik Indonesia* (RRI).

“We want ordinary people to speak up, but we need to guide them on certain ethical reporting standards,” said Sri Sulistiani, Director of GPP Jember. “This way, they can tell their stories and share important information in a reliable and meaningful way while avoiding spreading misinformation.”

GPP Jember also teamed up with the award-winning Independent Journalist Alliance (AJI) and women’s rights activists from the non-profit Legal Aid Institute (LBH) to host a series of trainings for other CSOs in Jember that shared techniques to improve news story writing, including on gender-related issues. Sri Sulistiani continued: “Our participants also learned about ethical writing, legal issues, and how to influence their audiences.”

“Citizen journalism is cool. Citizen journalism increases my understanding about social issues that can be shared to my colleagues in Fatayat and can be useful for society,” said Nurul Hidayah from Fatayat NU, during one MEDIA-supported citizen journalism training. “I will continue to learn to write good things to prevent hoaxes and false information that weakens tolerance among diverse communities.”

As of September 2022, trainees have published more than 280 articles and videos, available on the CSO websites, Facebook, YouTube channels, and on the Atmago.com web platform that is popular among activists. Additionally, they have organized more than 90 discussions, podcasts, and exhibitions,



Participants engage in a discussion during a citizen journalism training in Jember District that was co-organized by MADANI, MEDIA, and GPP.

Photo: GPP Jember

and conducted reportages in collaboration with local newspapers and broadcasting channels. The stories’ focuses include child marriages, maternal and child health, youth reproductive health, disability, the environment, and paralegal support opportunities, among many other popular topics.

At the same time, in Luwu Utara, MADANI CSO partner Wallacea and other local CSOs have been trained by MEDIA on how to effectively voice their concerns and ideas on the transparent and inclusive use of village funds (*Dana Desa*) – a priority issue for the district. The aim is to restore citizens’ interest in oversight

As a result of citizens’ feedback, Pincara Village used village funds to widen the entryway to the government office and added a ramp to improve accessibility

of the planning and management of village development through quality journalistic coverage of the issue.

Wallacea and CSO partners successfully organized live podcast episodes, garnering thousands of views. The series of audio recordings on Facebook and YouTube touched on topics about the village funds’ transparency, inclusivity, and

legislators’ perspectives.

Already, examples are arising of village funds’ use benefitting from citizen engagement. In the village of Pincara, one of the MADANI’s focus areas, as a result of the citizens’ feedback into the village fund process, in August 2022 Pincara used the funds to widen the entryway to the government office and added a ramp to improve accessibility. Since then, they have actively shared their experiences and best practices with nearby villages in the hopes of replicating their model of an inclusive village.

“We are seeing the changes in our village,” said Pincara Village Head, Musibar. “Especially since we have involved vulnerable groups in our dialogues as an effort towards creating an inclusive village.”

The ability to write opinion pieces and news articles and photo-documenting social issues have become very important skills for citizens and activists in the digital era. The skills taught during the MADANI and MEDIA supported technical assistance to CSOs and citizen journalists has empowered citizens and activists to voice their ideas to bring about social and political change, and, ultimately, to grow the citizen journalist community in their districts advocating for greater government accountability and communal tolerance.