

Is a Free Media Essential for Development?

Is a free media essential for development? This was one of the key questions discussed at the first World Congress on Communication for Development, which was held in Rome, Italy, in October this year. Organised by the World Bank, the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations and the Communication Initiative, the Congress aimed at illuminating the role of media in securing a country's socio-economic development. As such, the Congress was the first of its kind and aimed in general to examine how communications work can support broader development activities.

Chaired by Mr. Stephen Sackur, BBC World journalist and host of the programme HARDTalk, an expert panel with representatives from the World Bank, African Development Bank, Nigerian Television, the CIVICUS World Alliance for Citizen Participation and the former Malaysian Government vividly exchanged views and experience on media's role in developing countries, its pros and cons and future challenges.

Poverty is defined by many as not having a voice, said Ms. Hilde Frafjord Johnson in her initial statement. As former Minister of International Development, Norway, she is today the Senior Advisor to the President at the African Development Bank. "Media's role is a triple one in these countries: it is the

voice, the watchdog and the accountability," she stresses. "Only through a free media, can governments be held accountable for whether promises made are actually kept."

But as the moderator sharply pointed out, this equation – diminished corruption in government thanks to a free media – does not always work out as gloriously as it is sold, directing the discussion toward Dr. Tonnie Osa Iredia, the Director General of the Nigerian Television Authority. "How come Nigeria claims to have a free media and free TV news service and still ranks very low on Transparency International's list of non-corrupt countries?" Mr. Iredia's reply: "...you know this is because the corrupted people in Nigeria have their allies in other Western countries..."

And indeed, finding and rooting out corruption is a central task that many link to the role of media. Media as a free-acting component in a country has been considered a prerequisite for a functioning democratic system. And it is not only therefore that the conference delegates in their recommendations from the Congress pointed out the need of legal mechanisms to guarantee the access to information. The creation of public spaces where access and training on new technologies is accessible to all is of critical importance according to the delegates.

But even a vast diversity of media is essential. "Should even that be introduced by legislation? The risk could be that you go from one control to the other," demurred Mr. Kumi Naidoo from CIVICUS World Alliance for Citizen Participation. "Media should talk about the basic needs of humans; there is a serious misjudgement about what people want to see and read about, and there is no guarantee that private owned media offer a better alternative." Probably, as all delegates expressed in their recommendations, an enabling environment for a plurality of voices is the most appropriate guarantor for a balanced and fair media role with a clear separation of ownership and control.

Especially in extreme situations, however, a free media without any control may even worsen tragic events such as during the Rwandan genocide in 1994, which claimed more than 800,000 lives. The free radio stations in the fragile state contributed to escalating the crisis. Media, as any other component within a separation of elements of power, also needs some sort of ethical control, the panel agreed upon. Yet, as Mr. Iredia from Nigeria indicated, "at least Nigeria



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Mr. Jacques Diouf, Director-General of FAO at the Opening Ceremony of the World Congress on Communication for Development, Rome, Italy, 25-27 October 2006.



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has little to learn from Western journalists. And it is far too simple to say that the Western world does not have a media problem.”

So where to go then? Should donors consider the individual media situation in a country before granting any development aid? Mr. Daniel Kaufmann, Director of Global Programs at the World Bank is sceptical. “It could be an option for bilateral agreements but I hardly find this feasible for multi-donors such as the World Bank or the African Development Bank.”

And obviously, just the notion of “conditional aid” is sensitive enough. Might there be a hope then, that with growing internet and mobile phone technology, a future debate of this type will turn out to be unnecessary? “The challenge is that all this new technology needs to be accessible. We need to be aware of the digital divide and we should also review our notion of what actually is news,” the panel concluded. And there is a risk otherwise, that the voice to the individual, which Ms. Frafjord Johnson arrogated as a key to combat poverty, will remain unheard.

For further information about the Congress please visit www.devcomm-congress.org.

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Official Recommendations from the World Congress on Communication for Development

In order to make much more significant progress on the very difficult development challenges that we all face we recommend that policy makers and funders do the following:

1. Overall national development policies should include specific communication for development components.
2. Development organisations should include communication for development as a central element at the inception of programmes.
3. Strengthen the communication for development capacity within countries and organisations at all levels. This includes: people in their communities; communication for development specialists and other staff including through the further development of training courses and academic programmes.
4. Expand the level of financial investment to ensure adequate, coordinated, financing of the core elements of communication for development. This includes budget line[s] for development communication.
5. Adopt and implement policies and legislation that provide an enabling environment for communication for development – including free and pluralistic media, the right to information and to communicate.
6. Development communication programmes should be required to identify and include appropriate monitoring and evaluation indicators and methodologies throughout the process.
7. Strengthen partnerships and networks at international, national and local levels to advance communication for development and improve development outcomes.
8. Move towards a rights-based approach to communication for development.

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Environmental Conflicts and the Role of Media



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Is the Journalist an objective observer or an agent of change? Some 60 journalists and 40 civil society representatives engaged in a lively discussion on the subject at the 2006 World Water Week in Stockholm. In developed countries, they said, the former is truer; elsewhere, the latter was not uncommon. Necessity and working conditions are the determinants.

The seminar, entitled “Environmental Conflicts and the Role of Media,” was arranged by the International Federation of Environmental Journalists and the Swedish Association for Environmental Journalists with support from the Swedish Water House (SWH).

Presentations by journalists from Nigeria, the Philippines, India and Ghana highlighted the different roles that members of the media actually have during environmental conflicts such as forced migration due to dam-building or poisoning of local populations through air and water pollution discharges. The seminar concluded that environmental issues are “hard to sell.” Public media today seems to care more about beauty contests, sex and terrorism in order to sell more copies. The modern media culture is a problem, for environmental journalism and for journalism in general.