

Beyond 2015: Media as democracy and development

Building on the Thematic Think Piece by UNDESA, UNDP and UNESCO¹, this discussion paper seeks to conceptualise the interconnection between free, independent and pluralistic media and governance and development. The intention is to continue to inform the ongoing debate on the post-2015 development agenda being forged within the United Nations System and elsewhere.

In much of the developing world, any talk of governance is incomplete without reference to development. On the other hand, to be sustainable, democratic governance is ideally underpinned by development. Each without the other offers human beings only half the satisfaction of the rights to which they are entitled.

From the vantage point of development, democratic governance can be a major supportive component, as is outlined below. At the same time, development conceived in the socio-economic sense does not inevitably drive democratic governance, contrary to the stages of growth “modernisation” perspectives.² Similarly discredited is the view that media development is a key agent of modernity to help “traditional” societies to graduate into “modern” societies.³

In contrast, there is a view – shared by UNESCO – that holds that democracy is the right of all peoples, and as such a value in and of itself. And at the same time, the view further holds that this right (not least when applied in the media arena) is conducive to development.

It is for this reason that a number of scholars and activists see the media as a potential enabler of the kind of civic participation and empowerment that promotes human development. For example, noting this connection between democracy and the prevention of development disasters, the Nobel laureate Amartya Sen observes:

¹ UNDESA, UNDP, UNESCO. 2012. *Governance and development: Thematic Think Piece*. UN System Task Team on the Post-2015 UN Development Agenda.

² See, for example, Rostow, WW. 1960. *The stages of economic growth: a non-Communist manifesto*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

³ See for example, Rogers, EM. 1962. *Diffusions of innovations*. New York: Free Press.

*In that context, we have to look at the connection between political and civil rights, on the one hand, and the prevention of major economic disasters, on the other. Political and civil rights give people the opportunity to draw attention forcefully to general needs and to demand appropriate public action. The response of a government to the acute suffering of its people often depends on the pressure that is put on it. The exercise of political rights (such as voting, criticizing, protesting, and the like) can make a real difference to the political incentives that operate on a government.*⁴

Such a merging of political and economic rights is evident in participatory approaches to mediated communication. For example, Denis McQuail's notion of the 'democratic participatory' role of the media focuses on media's 'centrifugal' tendencies towards diversity, plurality and change,⁵ emphasising the links between cultural identity, democratisation and participation at all levels of society. This conception often manifests in a rights-based development strategy echoed by the Millennium Development Goals themselves, given the focus on 'local ownership and participation'.⁶

Here, there is a clear paradigm shift in development thinking towards linking the attainment of development to the expansion of people's 'entitlements', and the 'capabilities' that these entitlements generate. Such entitlements transcend income and include the totality of rights and opportunities that people face. For this reason, then, Amartya Sen sees the expansion of freedom both as the primary end and primary means of development. He calls for social development – enhanced literacy, accessible and affordable health care, the empowerment of women, and the free flow of information – as necessary precursors of the kind of development most economists are concerned about, namely: increase in gross national product, rise in personal incomes, industrialisation, and technological advance.⁷

At the heart of how democratic governance contributes to development is the right to freedom of expression. This right is recognised as a basic human right in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the European Convention on Human Rights, the American

⁴ Sen, A. 1999. *Development as freedom: human capability and global need*. New York: Knopf: 6.

⁵ McQuail, D. 1987. *Mass communication theory: an introduction*. 2nd edition. London: Sage: 94-96.

⁶ See, for example, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). 2006. *Media, development and poverty eradication*. Paris: UNESCO: 7.

⁷ Sen, A. 1999. Democracy as a universal value. *Journal of Democracy* 10(3): 3-17.

Convention on Human Rights and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. As such, it lends itself to universal recognition and application. The right further subsumes freedom of information, and press freedom.⁸ The importance of the former to transparency and the concept of the Knowledge Society is self-evident.⁹ The importance of the latter lies in the kind of democratic media landscape it prescribes: one that is **free, pluralistic and independent**.

Thus, UNESCO's position is that media can play an essential role in realising both democratic and developmental rights, on the basis of supporting legal, institutional and professional characteristics conducive to such a media landscape:

- The category of *media freedom* means the safety of a society and its institutions to speak freely in the formulation of public policy and the courage to highlight anti-social blocks to development such as corruption and human rights abuses. This category affords the watchdog (or surveillance) function of the media. The work of Pippa Norris on the statistical correlation between a free press and democratisation, good governance and human development, although its focus is fundamentally on liberal conceptions of media, democracy and development, must be noted as contributory to evidentiary arguments for linking media to the realisation of democracy and development.¹⁰
- The category of *independence* means a situation of self-regulation whereby media professionals themselves are responsible to uphold the high ethics of public interest which they profess to follow. This category affords the accuracy and fairness of media in contributing to democracy and development. It also checks against the media fostering violence, and instead promotes a contribution to peace.
- The category of *media pluralism* is especially important for development and democracy and their interrelationship. For UNESCO, this such means a variegated

⁸ Hamelink, CJ. 1998. Human Rights: the Implementation Gap. *The Journal of International Communication* 5 (1&2): 54-74.

⁹ For example, see Banda, F. 2007. Radio listening clubs in Malawi and Zambia: towards a model of participatory radio broadcasting. *Communicare* 25(2): 130-148, whose study of radio listening clubs in Malawi and Zambia unearthed mediated possibilities for rural development.

¹⁰ Norris, P. 2006. *The role of the free press in promoting democratization, good governance, and human development*. Paper presented at the Midwest Political Science Association Annual Meeting, 20-22nd April, 2006, Chicago, Palmer House.

media landscape of institutional and ownership forms and roles: in particular, public, private and community media sectors and functions. The public service media provides important citizenship service to all people, irrespective of wealth, age, language or rural location. The private media grows the sector economically, providing employment and bridging sellers and buyers through carrying advertising. Community media especially exist to offer a platform for *participatory* mediated in which citizen empowerment is a key variable. However, it is worthwhile to recognise that this function can – and should – be performed in varying degrees by all the above media forms.

The ‘empowerment’ especially availed by community media should be seen as a move to inform and motivate the community to advance development in a way that is far from what writers like Rensburg¹¹ criticise as ‘paternalism’, a ‘de-empowering’ phenomenon which entails ‘acting out a fatherly role by limiting the freedom of the subject by well-meant rules, guidelines and regulations’. Participatory mediated communication entails a great deal of emphasis on what Rensburg calls ‘grassroots participation’. Community media in this context enables grassroots people to set their own priorities and develop solutions which may be unique to local problem situations.

Overall, using this framework of a free, independent and pluralistic media, we can paraphrase Peter Dahlgren¹², who refers to the ‘empirical dimensions’ of civic culture, to highlight in more detail four of the defining features of the contribution by such media to both democracy and development. These are:

1. ***Providing an inclusive, pluralistic public sphere for imparting relevant knowledge and competencies to citizens about their own role in the processes of good governance and sustainable development:*** Free, independent and pluralistic media afford citizens the opportunity to participate in public life. People must have access to reliable reports, portrayals, analyses, discussions, debates and so forth about current affairs. Here the media’s role is central. The sources of knowledge and the materials for the development

¹¹ Rensburg, R. 1994. Community development: essential contribution or paternalistic communication? *Dialogus Online* 1(1). [Web] Available: <http://www.unisa.ac.za/dept/kom/d11radio.html> [Date of access: 12 December 1998].

¹² Dahlgren, P. 2000. Media, citizenship and civic culture. In J. Curran & M. Gurevitch (Eds.). *Mass media and society*. 3rd edition (pp. 310-328). London: Arnold.

of competencies must be understandable, communicated in ways that connect with different groups of people, enabling them to fully participate in public decisions that flow from the necessary social, political and economic contestations in their societies.

2. ***Inculcating loyalty to democratic values and procedures and thus cultivating civic virtue (participation, solidarity, tolerance, courage, etc.):*** Democracy will not function if such virtues as tolerance and willingness to follow democratic principles and procedures do not have grounding in everyday life. Even support for the legal system (assuming it is legitimate) is an expression of such civic virtue. Just what are the best or real democratic values, and how they are applied, can be the grounds for serious dispute. The media can reinforce the commitment to democratic values by giving sustained attention to them. As such, they can potentially help to cultivate a culture of respect for the rule of law in which just laws are upheld by all. The media also foster an environment of civic inclusivity in which citizens can help shape the development agenda of their societies, and express solidarity with other societies as well where persons live in poverty or suffer human rights abuse. This can be done if the media themselves use their freedom of expression to exhibit the democratic-civic values of respect, integrity, inclusiveness, plurality and courage. In other words, the media help to build the culture of democracy and serve the role of democratic and developmental enculturation.
3. ***Personifying the practices, routines, traditions associated with democratic citizenship and sustainable developmental paths:*** Democracy and development must be embodied in concrete, recurring practices – individual, group, and collective – relevant for diverse situations. Such practices help generate personal and social meaning to the ideals of democracy and development, and they must have an element of the routine about them, if they are to be a part of a civic culture. The interaction among citizens is a cornerstone of the public sphere, and the kinds of established rules and etiquette that shape such interaction either promote the practices of public discussion or contribute to their evaporation. Across time, practices become traditions, and experience becomes collective memory; today’s democracy and development both need to be able to refer to a past, without being locked in it. The media obviously contribute here by their representations of ongoing political and economic life, including its rituals and symbols, yet increasingly also take on relevance as more people make use of newer interactive possibilities and incorporate these as part of their civic and development practices.

4. ***Fostering the construction of the kinds of plural identities associated with democratic citizenship:*** How we define citizenship is inseparable from how we define democracy and the good society. One can say that the formal status of citizenship conceptually frames much of political life in modern democracies. The media can do much to strengthen public perceptions of what it means to be a citizen in a democracy in the context of a pluralistic and uneven global dispensation. The media can reinforce notions of participation, accountability, solidarity, tolerance, courage, etc. which define democratic citizenship, and at the same time counter extremism, xenophobia and gender discrimination.

The above aspects of the democracy-development functionality of the media in conditions of freedom, independence and pluralism imbue media workers with sufficient agency to influence the social context in which they operate. In these conditions, media is an important variable in the interplay between democratic governance and human development.¹³ For these reasons, media goals should not be overlooked in the post-2015 UN developmental agenda.

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¹³ See also Trappel, J, Nieminen, H & Nord, L 2011. (eds) *The media for democracy monitor: a cross national study of leading news media*. Göteborg: Nordicom.