UNESCO
United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

IPDC THE INTERNATIONAL PROGRAMME
FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF COMMUNICATION

**Why free, independent and pluralistic media deserve to be
at the heart of a post-2015 development agenda**
(Executive Summary of the Discussion Brief: "*Free, independent and pluralistic media
in the post-2015 development agenda: a discussion brief*", available at:
http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CI/CI/pdf/news/post_2015_agenda_brief.pdf)

1. Introduction

As the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) come under review in 2015, the world has a new opportunity for articulating clear goals and targets for post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals. In turn this prompts an updated assessment of the contribution of free, pluralistic and independent media to development, thereby establishing a contemporary case for its inclusion in the new agenda. In the more detailed Discussion Brief that accompanies this summary, UNESCO advances three arguments as to why the international community needs to acknowledge the connection between free, pluralistic and independent media, and sustainable development. The arguments include:

(i) The evolving *empirical* correlation between free, pluralistic and independent media, and national development monitoring and priority-setting.

(ii) The past and emerging recognition of unfettered media, across all platforms, as an integral part of *governance* that in turn is a prerequisite for sustainable development.

(iii) The broad global consensus on the *normative* functions of a free, independent and pluralistic media system in relation to the normative discourse of sustainable development.

2. A correlation between free media and sustainable development is empirically demonstrated

The evidence base for placing free and independent media at the core of sustainable development is both a conceptual and empirical matter:

- Conceptually, there is need to have a clear framework as to how to understand the contemporary meanings of "sustainable development", "media", and "free, pluralistic and independent".

- Empirically, each of the three dimensions of media – *freedom*, *pluralism* and *independence* – can be demonstrated to contribute towards sustainable development.

"Sustainable development" today is widely understood as a holistic view of processes which promote optimum linkages between economic growth and issues such as poverty reduction, social mobility, social cohesion, environmental protection, gender equality, peace and political stability amongst others.

"Media" refers to the technical platforms and social arrangements that enable human communication, particularly in regard to public issues. "The media" formerly referred to a limited number of platforms and specialised institutions built around them, and while these remain important, the Internet and cellphones have opened the field to individuals and a range of social organisations. All users of media are entitled to freedom of expression, and the correlative of press freedom.

Media "freedom" means the safety of a society and its institutions to speak freely in the formulation of public policy. There should be no fear in highlighting a range of anti-social blocks to development such as corruption and human rights abuses. Media freedom provides for the watchdog role of the media. Empirically, the link between media freedom and development has been well established. For example, the work of Pippa Norris shows a statistical correlation between a free press and democratisation, good governance and human development. This is reinforced by others such as Joseph Stiglitz, Nobel Prize laureate, who recognised that lack of information has adverse political as well as economic effects. In a book published by the World Bank Institute which addresses the role of mass media in economic development, Stiglitz and other authors marshalled evidence to demonstrate that better and timelier information results in better, more-efficient resource allocation with free and critical media playing a crucial role.

The second aspect of media, namely "independence", entails a situation of self-regulation whereby media professionals themselves are responsible to uphold the high ethics of public interest which they voluntarily profess to follow. It also entails that any regulatory institutions (such as those licensing broadcasters or internet service providers) are also independent of political and economic power. The ethics of accuracy and fairness are key to media's contributions to democracy and development. These ethics also check against abuses of freedom of expression that violate rights or encourage hatred, and they promote a contribution to peace and non-violence which are important ingredients of sustainable development. In societies with effective independence mechanisms, journalists have been shown to uphold professional standards against a range of pressures that would otherwise distort the normative ideals of public interest information. Again, these points have been demonstrated through a range of empirical research (more details in the Discussion Brief).

The third element of media, namely "pluralism", is especially important for development and democracy and their interrelationship. For UNESCO, this means a variegated media landscape of institutional and ownership forms and roles: in particular, public, private and community media sectors and their respective primary (albeit not exclusive) 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 communication in which citizen empowerment is a key variable. Where a pluralistic media landscape exists along these lines, a diversity of content has given representation to public voices and enabled informed development choices to be made. As with media "freedom" and "independence", there is a large body of evidence that a "plurality" of media correlates with sustainable development processes.

In summary, free, independent and pluralistic media have been shown to be significant, and this is due to the multiplicity of roles performed by such media.

3. *Free, pluralistic and independent media are increasingly recognised as central to inclusive politics and governance*

The recognition of free, pluralistic and independent media as an integral part of the development process and especially in terms of governance is not new. UNESCO member states have given political recognition through support for the Windhoek Declaration which highlighted the principles underpinning a free, pluralistic and independent media. To varying degrees, many national constitutions acknowledge freedom of expression and press freedom, as a key tenet of democratic governance, within a vision of national development. The same is true of the various regional conventions

collectively acceded to by governments. The right to freedom of expression, apart from being recognised as a basic human right in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, also finds political expression in the European Convention on Human Rights, the American Convention on Human Rights and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. As such, it lends itself to universal political recognition and application.

These declarative principles have, in as far as the discourse of sustainable development is concerned, found a clear political articulation in the 2013 report of the UN Secretary-General's 27-member High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda. The report emphatically calls attention to "good governance and effective institutions". It links good governance to such democratic fundamentals as people enjoying freedom of speech, association, peaceful protest and access to independent media and information; increasing public participation in political processes and civic engagement at all levels; guaranteeing the public's right to information and access to government data; and reducing bribery and corruption and ensuring officials can be held accountable.

The Report thus provides an opportunity for framing sustainable development in terms of good governance. In turn, good governance is made empirically manifest in policies that uphold free, independent and pluralistic media. At the core of the relationship between sustainable development, good governance and free, independent and pluralistic media are the universally shared democratic values of openness, participation, accountability, and transparency – governance values which Csaba Kőrösi, Co-Chair of the UN Open Working Group on the post-2015 development agenda, says will be critical to implementing any negotiated package for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

4. *Free, pluralistic and independent media are a global norm relevant to development norms*

Within the UN System, from the founding of the United Nations in 1945, and later of UNESCO as a specialized agency in 1946, the role of the media in bringing about peace and a just world was already globally acknowledged. Article 1(3) of the UN Charter upholds the promotion of and respect for "human rights and fundamental freedoms for all". Such fundamental freedoms extend to freedom of expression and its corollaries of access to information and freedom of the press – all of which are key to enabling people to actively participate in, as the UN Charter states, "solving international problems of an economic, social, cultural, or humanitarian character". This is reinforced by the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), where Article 19 reads: "*Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers*".

Over the years, these positions have been further elaborated. UNESCO in particular has consistently promoted as a global norm the right to freedom of expression, and an understanding of press freedom as encompassing media freedom, independence and pluralism. UNESCO's 37th General Conference in 2013 acknowledged the notion that human rights apply to online as well as offline media.

This strong linkage between these realms of international norms has been further bolstered by civil society. Almost 200 civil society groups joined hands in February 2014 to urge the UN OWG to put government accountability and independent media at the centre of a new framework for global development. In a joint statement, coordinated by ARTICLE 19 and the Global Forum for Media Development (GFMD), the advocacy organisations argued that access to information and media freedom are vital elements for a future development plan, as they help to allow people to hold governments accountable in their efforts to achieve economic growth, social equality and environmental sustainability. This ground swell of global civic activism concerning international norms represents strategic momentum towards the recognition of free, independent and pluralistic media as a significant factor of the development equation.

5. Policy implications

Sustainable development, as an interlinked process of human development, is increasingly recognising the value of free, independent and pluralistic media. Free, pluralistic and independent media have been, and can continue to be, empirically

tested for their role in attaining and sustaining development gains, and their prerequisite status in regard to good governance. Against this backdrop, three policy recommendations can be made:

1. UNESCO Member States can regard sustainable development as an interlinked system of development options that is underpinned by overall governance efforts;

2. Taking into account the above consideration, the Member States can also develop national media policy goals which enshrine a free, independent and pluralistic media system as an integral part of governance for sustainable development, in the manner that the report of the Eminent Persons has advised the UN Secretary-General.

3. Furthermore, Member States can institutionalize in practice within their own national jurisdictions, the principles of a free, independent and pluralistic media through appropriate policy and legislative actions.

To these ends, stakeholders can develop targets and indicators for media development, and for assessing the contribution of free, independent and pluralistic media in sustainable development.