Addis Ababa Declaration

World Press Freedom Day 2019

"Journalism and Elections in Times of Disinformation"

We, the participants at the UNESCO World Press Freedom Day International Conference, held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 1-3 May 2019,

Recalling Article 19 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR), which states: "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers";

Further recalling Article 21 of the UDHR, which states: "The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures";

Reaffirming Aspiration 3 of *Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want*, which envisions "An Africa of good governance, democracy, respect for human rights, justice and the rule of law";

Further reaffirming that UN Member States are responsible for organising, conducting and ensuring transparent, periodic and genuine electoral processes, and that in the exercise of their sovereignty, Member States should involve all electoral stakeholders including the media throughout all electoral operations;

Cognisant of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Target 16.10 which calls on States to "ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements";

Acknowledging the "Joint Declaration on Freedom of Expression and "Fake News", Disinformation and Propaganda" adopted by the UN, the OAS, African and OSCE special rapporteurs on freedom of expression in March 2017, that called attention on the use of public statements to denigrate, intimidate and threaten the media, which increases the risk of threats and violence against journalists, undermines public trust and confidence on journalism as a public watchdog, and may mislead the public by blurring the lines between disinformation and media products containing independently verifiable facts;

Reaffirming the fundamental importance of election processes to the integrity of democracy and the fact that both rest upon a free flow of information and ideas, as well as uninterrupted means of communication, as guaranteed by Article 19 of the UDHR;

Recognising that respect of fundamental freedoms, including the right to freedom of expression, including press freedom, is a necessary element to a safe, inclusive and conducive environment for electoral participation;

Reaffirming the central importance of freedom of expression, a free, independent, pluralistic and safe media, and respect for democratic principles, to promoting peace and reconciliation, including in societies suffering from conflict;

Emphasising that informed citizens, who have access to diverse and independent media sources and who benefit from Media and Information Literacy skills, are more likely to feel empowered to exercise their democratic rights and to accept the outcomes of credible, free and fair elections;

Recalling that free, independent and pluralistic journalism – both online and offline – serves an essential role in democracies by strengthening accountability, by facilitating peaceful, credible, inclusive, transparent, free and fair elections, and by ensuring that citizens are informed about issues of public interest, including those being debated in elections;

Convinced that respect for the public's right to information, the expansion of Media and Information Literacy, and ensuring the safety of journalists, with cognisance of the particular threats to women journalists, and others exercising their right to freedom of expression, are key to addressing current challenges to elections;

Further recognising the tension between, on the one hand, the enormous potential of ICT innovations to deepen and broaden electoral processes and, on the other hand, the increasing threat posed by malicious actors' efforts to collect and manipulate data - and use social media and social messaging, to interfere with citizens' capacity to make informed decisions and undermine the fairness of elections;

Concerned about the growing prevalence of disinformation as well as hate speech, which may undermine elections, as well as the challenges in finding appropriate regulatory and other means of addressing such speech while respecting the right to freedom of expression;

Recalling that the State's responsibility to prevent any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence, as well as the "Rabat Plan of Action on the prohibition of advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence" adopted on 5 October 2012.

Now therefore:

Call on each UNESCO Member State, including their Electoral Management Bodies, to:

- **Create, strengthen and/or implement**, as agreed in various conventions, an enabling legal and policy framework in line with international standards to guarantee respect for freedom of expression and privacy, to foster a diverse, independent media sector, and to ensure that relevant officials are properly trained so as to abide by that framework in practice;

- **Adopt and/or** implement right to information laws and policies and the required mechanisms to give effect to them, as per Sustainable Development Goal 16.10**;**

- **Put in place** transparent and effective systems to protect journalists, including press cartoonists, artists, 'artivists' and others who are at risk of attack for exercising their right to freedom of expression, thereby ensuring that they can carry out their public watchdog role effectively, including during elections;

- **Remove** existing legal obstacles, and avoid adopting broad and vaguely-worded regulatory responses to the problems of disinformation, and repeal measures that fail to respect international standards of legality, legitimate purpose and necessity, or which otherwise risk unduly restricting the right to freedom of expression;

- **Consider releasing** imprisoned journalists by assessing their cases in terms of international standards for freedom of expression such as the requirements of necessity and proportionality for any limitations of this right, and review related laws under which such journalists may be held;

- **Refrain from** imposing Internet or other general communications shutdowns, as well as other measures that unduly or disproportionately limit the exchange of information, including via systems of filtering or blocking of content, platforms or applications;

- **Abstain** from delegating, legally or through political pressure, the regulation of online content to internet companies in a manner which goes beyond what is permitted under international law (privatising censorship);

- **Invest in** Media and Information Literacy among the general public, with a particular focus on the youth, in various ways, including by incorporating these competencies into formal, informal and non-formal education programmes;

- **Protect** voters' registration data and secure critical election infrastructure, including voting equipment, ensuring that election-related measures and practices are underpinned by integrity, as well as protect and respect freedom of expression, press freedom and privacy as it relates to data protection;

- **Explore and implement** effective ways to ensure a level playing field for electoral contenders and the free flow of information and ideas during election campaigns and voting days, including through transparency and regulation related to electoral campaigns' spending and political advertising, while ensuring that any such measures respect international guarantees of freedom of expression and citizens' privacy as it relates to data protection;

- **Avoid** making, sponsoring, encouraging or further disseminating statements which they know or reasonably should know to be false (disinformation) or which demonstrate a reckless disregard for verifiable information (propaganda), as well as statements that undermine the credibility of journalists and media or label them as enemies, liars or opposition;

- **Promote** a code of conduct among political actors to avoid the use of disinformation campaigns in electoral processes and the establishment of accountability mechanisms related to the violation of such a code;

- **Foster** and use academic and scientific research on social media and social messaging effects, as well as safety of journalists, in order to guarantee that institutional and state responses are based on rigorous and extensive public analysis;

- **Advocate** for ethical and safe spaces for disseminating and receiving verified information and enabling peaceful dialogue to strengthen democracy;

- **Promote** multistakeholder dialogue with the players of the electoral ecosystem such as electoral authorities, political parties, intermediary platforms, media regulatory authorities, information and data protection authorities, media outlets, journalists, civil society organizations, parliamentarians, among others in order to address disinformation while respecting international commitments on freedom of expression and privacy.

Call on UNESCO and the rest of the UN to:

- **Encourage** the development of electoral assistance strategies aiming at building trust between all electoral stakeholders, including the media, throughout all electoral operations in order to build ownership and capacity for the delivery of credible, inclusive and transparent elections;

- **Further encourage** Member States, especially those undergoing peaceful transition towards democracy, to ensure that all proper constitutional and institutional guarantees are in place to guarantee that elections take place with due process and inclusion of all stakeholders in order to ensure public trust and acceptance of election results;

- **Continue** to provide leadership in the implementation of the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity, and strengthen impunity accountability mechanisms and relevant stakeholder coalitions and networks of focal points, and within Member States where appropriate;

- **Work with** media organisations, NGOs, electoral management bodies and other stakeholders to share good practices on the media's role in elections, including by supporting the work of the Inter-Agency Coordination Mechanism for UN Electoral Assistance (ICMEA);

- **Monitor** and where necessary, proactively discourage, the potential over-regulation of digital electoral communications that can disproportionately limit freedom of expression and privacy;

- **Continue,** through regional and country offices, and in co-operation with media organisations, to train journalists on ethical and professional election reporting, including in relation to journalists' safety, electoral laws and to identify, debunk and investigate disinformation;

- **Continue** to monitor the implementation by States of SDG 16.10 on public access to information and respect of fundamental freedoms, including by supporting the collection of data regarding the two Indicators under this SDG Target;

- **Disseminate** good practices on fact-checking techniques of media content and transferring relevant skills to the relevant stakeholders;

- **Further reinforce** Media and Information Literacy programme initiatives;

- **Collaborate** with regional IGOs, as well as with Member States, civil society and other interested stakeholders, to find ways to ensure a level electoral playing field and the free flow of information during elections which respect the right to freedom of expression;

- **Collaborate** with academic institutions and networks, as well as other educational centres and think tanks, to enhance research in and understanding of freedom of expression and media development issues, drawing on UNESCO's research tools such as the Journalist Safety Indicators and the Media Development Indicators;

- **Carry out independent analysis** of disinformation campaigns during election processes and their impact on elections;

- **Enhance** capacity building strategies, such as UNESCO's Judges Initiative, in order to offer to relevant players updated knowledge in the application of universal freedom of expression standards to the issue of disinformation;

- **Support** training for journalists and other media workers in order to challenge gender stereotyping and misrepresentation of women in the media, and to sensitize the media and the electorate on the need and benefits of women in leadership positions.

Call on regional Intergovernmental Organisations to:

- **Strengthen** existing governance mechanisms such as the Africa Peer Review Mechanism, as well as the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance which provides for democratic, credible and peaceful elections managed by impartial and independent electoral management bodies under conditions that guarantee press freedom, access to information and safety of journalists;

- **Share good practices** such as the "Guidelines on Access to Information and Elections in Africa" which cover the roles of authorities responsible for appointing the Election Management Bodies; Election Management Bodies; Political Parties and Candidates; Law Enforcement Agencies; Election Observers and Monitors; Media and Online Media Platform Providers; Media Regulatory Bodies; and Civil Society Organisations;

- **Further share** good practices such as Resolution 48 of the 2018 General Assembly of the OAS reaffirming the right to freedom of opinion and expression as essential ingredients during electoral periods to achieve accountability from political actors, as well as to strengthen open debate and the right of citizens to receive information from a plurality of sources in order to exercise their political rights;

- **Adopt** mechanisms such as the emerging African protocol on safety of journalists, as well as strengthen the implementation of the UN Plan of Action on Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity, and implement systems of focal points for the safety of journalists.

Call on journalists, media outlets, electoral practitioners, Internet intermediaries and social media practitioners to:

- **Ensure** that media and internet companies respect the human rights of their users and others;

- **Work to** ensure that the public is provided with a diverse range of accurate information about parties, candidates and issues, and about any efforts to manipulate or influence the election, so that voters can make informed electoral choices;

- **Make public** the ownership, editorial line and political position of a media house, and maintain a separation between verified news on the one hand, and comment and opinion on the other;

- **Support** effective and accelerated systems of self-regulation, whether at the level of specific media sectors (such as press complaints bodies) or at the level of individual media outlets (such as ombudsmen or public editors), which include standards on striving for accuracy in the news and which offer a right of correction and/or reply to address inaccurate statements in the media;

- **Consider** adopting revised ethical and operational guidelines for reporting in times of elections and make them widely available to their staff so as to support the provision of comprehensive, accurate, impartial and balanced news coverage of elections and electoral issues;

- **Develop** guidelines and policies for the use of artificial intelligence tools in content creation and distribution by media organisations and internet companies, taking into account the impact that this form of automation may have on freedom of expression and human rights in general;

- **Consider** exposing disinformation and propaganda, particularly during elections, in fulfilment of a journalistic watchdog role in society and the news media's mandate to contribute to debates on matters of public interest;

- **Explore** putting in place fact-checking tools that identify whether or not news is verified, and clearly identify whether or not a news story has been fact-checked;

- **Allocate** efforts and resources to strengthen journalism and address the online filter-bubbles and the viral spread of disinformation and other content that undermines human rights, ensuring respect for the right to freedom of expression;

- **Consider** mechanisms to ensure that digital advertising, including political advertising, makes the source clear, and avoids the misrepresentation of identities and invisible funding;

- **Improve** the transparency of internet companies' terms of service and other policies, in relation both to their content and the way these are applied in practice, and put in place systems which respect due process guarantees, including, where appropriate, by establishing independent external oversight mechanisms;

- **Support** systems of self-regulation among political parties and other electoral practitioners to address disinformation and hate speech which, amongst other impacts, may undermine elections;

- **Make** an effort to give greater prominence on online platforms to news content that is verified through independent journalism, and promote the credibility of edited and verified sources of information.