



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

Communication and Information Sector

Dialogue with Permanent Delegations to UNESCO on the future Medium-Term Strategy 2022-2029 (41 C/4)

- Pillar 3 of UNESCO's Strategic Transformation -

12 July 2019

Introductory note

I. Global, regional and cross-regional trends and initiatives

Freedom of expression in general, and **media development** in particular, are core to [UNESCO's constitutional mandate](#) to advance “the mutual knowledge and understanding of peoples, through all means of mass communication” and to promote “the free flow of ideas by word and image”.

Through their reporting, and by providing access to information, **media and digital technologies** have key roles to play in responding to global challenges, including climate change, natural disasters, conflict, migration, urbanization, and the digital transformation.

The digital revolution continues to transform our societies and economies, with clear implications for our futures. According to the [2018 Report of the Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development](#), now over half the world's population (51.2%) have access to the Internet. However, **digital and knowledge divides persist**.

As the [UN Secretary-General's Strategy on New Technologies](#) noted, “New and rapidly developing technologies such as artificial intelligence, biotechnology, material sciences and robotics hold incredible promise for the advancement of human welfare. They also hold the potential to generate more inequality and violence.”

All this calls for foresighted, inclusive and human-centered approaches.

Abuses of expression in the form of disinformation, hate speech and incitement to violence are mounting. In the process of responding to curb this harmful content, some state and non-state actors risk violating freedom of expression. In this context of rapidly evolving digital and media landscapes, developing critical thinking skills, through intersectoral action on media and information literacy, remains essential to navigating content online and off-line.

UNESCO's [World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Developments: Global Report 2017/2018](#) recorded a **global decline in freedom of expression**, press freedom and civic space, with public trust in media eroding in many places, audiences unable to separate truth from fiction, and journalists facing increasing risks in the exercise of their work.

Threats to journalists' physical, psychological and digital safety remain alarmingly high, with an average of one journalist killed every five days for bringing news and information to the public. An alarming trend concerns the on-line sexual harassment of women journalists.

There has been **growing recognition of the right to universal access to information**. According to the [Sustainable Development Goals Report 2018](#), 116 countries have adopted freedom of information laws and policies, with at least 25 doing so in the last five years, including 10 in Africa. However, the implementation of said policies, as well as unequal access to technologies, remain a challenge.

In addition, **barriers to access to information for women and girls, persons with disabilities, minority language speakers and other marginalized groups** call for inclusive approaches. As over 50% of the 6,700 languages spoken today are in danger of disappearing, the availability of information and digital tools in multiple languages is essential to ensure access for all. In addition, international momentum has mounted in recognizing the potential of open educational resources (OER) and open access to scientific information.

According to UN DESA figures, youth aged 15-24 made up one out of every six people (1.2 billion) in 2015, a figure projected to grow to 1.3 billion by 2030. These **youth will require the skills needed to succeed in increasingly digitalized societies**, including in Africa, where the [World Population Prospects 2019](#) reports that by 2050, 52% of the population in Africa will be under age 25.

While there is increased awareness of gender issues in media, **progress remains to be made in achieving gender equality in both the structure and content of media**. The share of women within the media industry continues to be quite low, with women making up only one out of four decision-makers and one out of three reporters. **Women and girls also remain significantly underrepresented in the technology sector**.

Finally, SDG target 11.4 calls for strengthening “efforts to protect and safeguard the world’s cultural [...] heritage”, and SDG target 16.10 focuses on ensuring public access to information and protecting fundamental freedoms. Ensuring **the preservation and accessibility of documentary heritage** contributes to achieving these aspects of sustainable development. Digital preservation efforts now take into account the value of software source code as an important component of our heritage that can be preserved and harnessed to catalyze sustainable development.

II. The findings and recommendations of relevant UNESCO and international meetings and reports, as well as of recent evaluations and audits

The 2018 external evaluation of the project on “*Promoting democracy and freedom of expression*” (2014-2017) recommended that UNESCO “continue to make maximum use of its special status as the UN body with the mandate to work for free speech and access to public information, by acting as a facilitator of dialogue between governments and local and international activist organizations.”

The [MOPAN 2017-2018 assessments report of UNESCO](#) found that “there is increasing demand for the organisation to demonstrate the intersectoral relevance of its work in communication and information and in culture, which it is doing.”

The UN High Level Panel on Digital Cooperation released its [report](#) in June 2019 calling for the development of new digital cooperation architectures to ensure shared values for development of Digital

cooperation. Among its recommendations for how the UN can add value in the digital transformation, it identifies UNESCO's initiative on artificial intelligence as an opportunity for "providing a space for debating norms and values".

III. Recalling global commitments and pertinent decisions taken by the governing bodies of UNESCO

- The [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#) recognizes the contribution of freedom of expression and public access to information to building peace, justice and strong institutions (Goal 16). These enabling rights are also crucial for reaching the Agenda's overall goal to leave no one behind, as well as for achieving the aspirations set out in other global frameworks, including the [African Union's Agenda 2063](#), the [Paris Agreement on Climate Change](#), the [UN Youth 2030 Strategy](#), and the [Sendai Framework on Disaster-Risk Reduction](#).
- UNESCO is the lead UN Agency that promotes freedom of expression, press freedom, access to information and the safety of journalists:
 - In the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, UNESCO has been designated as the custodian agency for reporting on SDG indicator 16.10.2 (public access to information) and a contributing agency for reporting on SDG indicator 16.10.1 (safety of journalists).
 - Stakeholders have called for UNESCO to continue to promote the adoption and application of laws and frameworks to support sustainable and independent media institutions. The signing of a Memorandum of Understanding with the [Ibero-American Judicial Summit](#) in 2016 and the [African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights](#) in 2018, as well as ongoing discussions with the ECOWAS Court of Justice, represent opportunities for strengthening freedom of expression and the rule of law.
 - UNESCO serves as the **lead agency** in implementing the [UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity](#). This initiative was reinforced through the reactivation of the UN focal points network and through partnerships such as the Groups of Friends on the Safety of Journalists and the [AU Working Group on Safety of Journalists](#).
 - Since 2012, the United Nations and UNESCO have adopted 15 resolutions and decisions regarding the safety of journalists and the issue of impunity.
- UNESCO serves as a **leading agency** in the use of digital technologies for sustainable development and for building inclusive knowledge societies:
 - In 2015, UNESCO's General Conference (GC) endorsed the [CONNECTing the Dots Outcome Document](#), including the concept of [Internet Universality](#) and the ROAM principles (for a human Rights-based, Open, Accessible and Multi-stakeholder-shaped Internet).
 - The same year, the [UN General Assembly extended the mandate of the World Summit of the Information Society \(WSIS\)](#) and the associated Internet Governance Forum until 2025. UNESCO serves as lead / facilitator of : Access to information and knowledge (C3); E-learning (C7); E-science (C7); Cultural diversity and identity, linguistic diversity and local content (C8); Media (C9); and Ethical dimensions of the Information Society (C10).

- The 40th session of the General Conference will consider the desirability producing a non-binding standard-setting instrument in the form of a Recommendation on the ethics of AI.
- As part of its mandate to advance universal access and preservation of universal access to information and knowledge, the following developments are relevant:
 - In 2015, the 39th session of the General Conference adopted the [*Recommendation Concerning the Preservation of, and Access to Documentary Heritage, Including in Digital Form.*](#)
 - The [UN General Assembly proclaimed 2019 as the International Year of Indigenous Languages](#) and UNESCO was requested to serve as the lead agency for Organization of the International Year.
 - The 40th session of the General Conference will consider the adoption of a *Recommendation on Open Educational Resources*, and the preparation of a *Recommendation on Open Science* is also underway.

IV. Indicative questions for the dialogue

The following questions intend to simulate discussions at the forthcoming meeting on 12 July:

- a) In your view, what are/will be the key global, regional, or essential national trends, opportunities and challenges of relevance to CI's mandate over the next 10 years?
- b) Where do you see opportunities for a more integrated and interdisciplinary UNESCO approach with CI's involvement?
- c) How can the CI Sector better reflect Global Priority Africa in our programme and organizational culture?
- d) How can CI strengthen and institutionalize the promotion of Global Priority Gender Equality in our programmes?