

Entry points for media development to support peaceful just and inclusive societies and Agenda 2030 – a background discussion note¹

Introduction

The 2030 Agenda, with its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), provides a vision for an integrated and sustainable approach to development. This note argues that the SDGs, and especially SDG16², provide a critical entry point through which an independent, professional, diverse and pluralist media, operating in a safe environment, can contribute to the progressive vision articulated in the 2030 Agenda. Additionally, the principles underlying Agenda 2030, including the need for inclusive multi-stakeholder approaches; partnerships, accountability (through open monitoring and reporting) and the imperative to “leave no-one behind” provide important entry points for media actors to engage with broader development interventions for enhanced impact. International actors can help promote this by supporting media development³, including encouraging national media actors to engage with such processes.

Desk research indicates several elements. There has been limited involvement by media or media development actors in these processes to date. Independent media is not usually perceived as a central contributor to Agenda 2030 and a prerequisite to its overall achievement. Discussions on the media’s role in achieving the SDGs too often focus narrowly on target 16.10⁴, not on its relevance to the broader SDG 16, nor across the whole of the 2030 Agenda. Media actors⁵ (as country-level stakeholders) are usually missing from the processes and spaces put in place in countries for adapting, implementing, monitoring and reporting on the SDGs. Among development practitioners, there is a widespread perception of media development as a specialist area, operating in siloes. The important multiplier effects of media development for the realization of SDG 16 and of Agenda 2030 more broadly are not adequately leveraged.

¹ This note was prepared by UNDP’s Oslo Governance Centre, and UNESCO’s Division for Freedom of Expression and Media Development, as a contribution to the discussion at the meeting “Confronting the Crisis in Independent Media: Strategic Approaches for International Donors” 31 Jan – 1 Feb, 2019, Paris. The views contained do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations or its Member States.

² SDG16: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.

³ Media development is understood here as the part of international cooperation aiming at enabling a more independent, pluralist, professional, gender-sensitive, diverse and sustainable media sector, online and offline, including freedom of expression and safety of journalists. Actions in this field cover among other things efforts to promote conducive legal and regulatory frameworks as well as initiatives aimed at strengthening the capacity of media actors.

⁴ SDG Indicator 16.10.1: Number of verified cases of killing, kidnapping, enforced disappearance, arbitrary detention and torture of journalists, associated media personnel, trade unionists and human rights advocates in the previous 12 months; 16.10.2: Number of countries that adopt and implement constitutional, statutory and/or policy guarantees for public access to information

⁵ Including media outlets and representatives as well as media-relevant specialised NGOs promoting media freedom, media development and universal access to information

The 2019 UN High-level Political Forum (HLPF), which is the main platform for follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, provides an important opportunity to promote understanding of media development in support of SDG 16. The topic of the HLPF's annual [Thematic Review](#) for 2019 is 'Empowering People and Ensuring Inclusiveness and Equality'. It will review five SDGs in depth, including SDG 16 on peaceful, just and inclusive societies.

This note reflects on how the multiplier effects of media development might be harnessed. Firstly, the note looks at substantive issues and examines how a free, independent and pluralist media sector can contribute to more just, inclusive and peaceful societies, briefly analysing media's potential contribution across some SDG 16 targets. Secondly it reflects on process issues – considering how media actors could engage through the mechanisms put in place at the country level for implementation of the SDGs, including adaptation; implementation; monitoring and reporting (including any specific SDG 16 processes).⁶

Media's role in supporting SDG 16

At its most fundamental, a free, independent and pluralist media sector is a prerequisite to the creation and sustaining of functioning democracies, supporting the creation of peaceful, just and inclusive societies. Those arguments have been made for decades. More specifically, however, media can, in different ways, support achievement across all SDG 16 targets and hence support acceleration of the entire 2030 Agenda.

The discussion below identifies key roles for media across relevant targets of SDG 16 and is designed to be illustrative, rather than comprehensive.

16.1: Significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere

Independent, diverse and professional media sectors have the potential to be actors for peace and development through:

- avoiding and reducing the spread of hate speech and disinformation leading to violence.
- providing conflict-sensitive reporting, informing on root-causes of conflicts and peaceful solutions.
- offering a platform for dialogue and, as a trusted infomediary, supporting broad-based social cohesion, rather than being a vehicle for reinforcing identity politics.
- fostering two-way communication on developmental and humanitarian issues, according to good practices in communication for development
- providing gender-sensitive reporting on issues such as violence against women.

16.3: Promote the rule of law at the national and international levels and ensure equal access to justice for all

Media actors can help by:

- Covering the problem of impunity
- Informing the public (and population groups) on access to justice and human rights issues
- Realizing universal access to information held by public bodies
- Acting as a watchdog and holding the executive and judiciary powers accountable

⁶ The challenges around the evolving media landscape are critical to this discussion, but they have been well rehearsed elsewhere and will not be repeated here. Suffice it to say that in a world of political and economic pressures on media and journalism, their role within growing 'information disorder' becomes ever more important.

16.4: By 2030, significantly reduce illicit financial and arms flows, strengthen the recovery and return of stolen assets and combat all forms of organised crime

- Investigative journalism has been influential in uncovering and forcing action on large-scale illicit operations in recent years (e.g. Panama Papers, Paradise Papers)

16.5: Substantially reduce corruption and bribery in all their forms

Independent media, including investigative journalism:

- has been closely associated with corruption control across countries in various ways at different levels of development, as recognised by the resolutions and decisions adopted by the Conference of the States Parties to the United Nations Convention against Corruption, as well as by UNESCO’s declaration on “Free Media Contribute to Good Governance”, and by a growing body of research. The important role of the media was also included in the UN commitments made at the London Anti-Corruption Summit in May 2016 and included in the Joint Statement by the High Level Segment at the 18th International Anti-Corruption Conference in Copenhagen in October 2018.
- can also facilitate efforts to mobilize citizens around anticorruption agendas and help citizens voice their concerns

16.6: Responsive and accountable government and public institutions

Professional journalism and other media output has a central role to play as an agent of accountability, by providing information that is verified and salient for citizens:

- Increasing the availability and accessibility of verified information—such as generating evidence on the performance of public officials
- Leverage universal access to information held by public bodies
- Aligning the targeting and timing of information with the political process—this can be a fundamental first step towards promoting greater accountability and government responsiveness.
- Supporting open government
- Enhancing the responsiveness of government by channeling feedback
- Raising awareness of citizens’ rights vis-à-vis public institutions and provide information about services and entitlements
- Fact-checking, countering and exposing the sources of disinformation

16.7: Ensure responsiveness, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels

The media can:

- Promote political participation, through reflecting and hosting national/community conversations on governance. Research has shown that this both increases knowledge of governance issues and participation in politics.
- Help reinforce democratic and other progressive norms through making available accurate and credible information from trustworthy sources. This reduces information asymmetries and may increase citizens’ willingness to punish incumbents for poor performance and bad practices such as corruption.
- Reflect and act as a conduit for the voices of population groups that have been historically at the margins of public debates
- Provide balanced, independent and timely coverage during election periods – informed voters are essential to an electoral democracy
- Support the integrity of elections
- Promote citizens’ media and information literacy.

16.10: Ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements.

This target directly supports public access to and use of information, in order to support SDG 16 and the broader 2030 Agenda. The indicators serve to highlight the important role of journalists and others in using that information as well as the need for journalists and media workers to be safe to carry out that vital work.

Media development interventions to support 16.10 can (among other aspects)⁷:

- Strengthen a conducive enabling environment for free media actors through advocacy and policy advice
- Support training for independent media professionals so they can make the freedom of information requests necessary for investigative journalism, and for all areas of development reporting, including reporting on the progress made in achieving the SDGs.
- Promote and protect freedom of expression
- Promote and protect safety of journalists and the end of impunity for crimes against journalists
- Support the development of public service journalism
- Support coverage by the media of progress or regress on guarantees for access to information and safety of journalists.

The selective list above shows that the media, and thus media development, can be important actors in more holistically supporting the achievement of SDG 16. Additionally, SDG 16 can provide a useful framing for improving policy and program coherence in media development initiatives, by focusing on the intended development outcomes and enabling a shared language and objectives around which media stakeholders, media development actors, and development professionals can collaborate.

Media Engagement in achieving Agenda 2030: adapting, implementing, monitoring and reporting

Beyond the specific contribution of media to SDG16 targets, media actors can play an important role in processes of SDG implementation and monitoring, including follow-up and review. The 2030 Agenda is a demanding and progressive framework agreed by Member States, and media – in full respect of their independence - could work alongside other stakeholders (parliaments, civil society organisations, academics, trade unions and so forth) to support the implementation of national commitments and hold governments accountable for implementation across the Agenda. The in-country mechanisms which support the 2030 Agenda may provide entry points for engagement in more politically restricted environments where discussions around inclusive governance, peace, security justice and human rights are more constrained.

⁷ More information on evidence-based recommendations for detailed interventions can be found in UNESCO's sets of relevant indicators: Media Development Indicators for Media, Gender Sensitive Indicators for Media, Journalists' Safety Indicators, and Internet Universality Indicators

Some entry points for media engagement, related to key phases in SDG implementation are highlighted below:



Adapting the SDGs to national development policies/plans, including establishing national targets;

- Media can raise awareness of the SDGs among the population and other key stakeholders, explaining what the SDGs are and what they mean for the country and across the country. Independent and community media, as well as social media are critical to give voice to those who are often not heard. Formal media institutions can also do so through providing professionally verified information and informed opinion.
- Media can also report on government policies and programmes for SDG implementation.
- Media can support “national conversations” to inform the prioritisation of issues in the country, including through advocating for or reporting on national indicators.

Implementing the SDGs

- Media actors can directly support the implementation of several SDG 16 targets as outlined above (as well as targets across all goals), examining reasons for shortfalls, stasis or progress.

Monitoring: indicators and data;

- Media can contribute to consultations on indicators and data, including the choice of national indicators. In some contexts, the media can also support the provision of information on population groups that are left behind or at risk of being left behind.
- Media actors, with sufficient data literacy, can support conversations around the government data and reporting, helping broader analysis and reporting to citizens.
- Journalists can provide verified information as a complement to official statistics on the effectiveness of policy implementation

Reporting on progress on the SDGs

- Member States have committed to inclusive review processes at all levels as part of the follow up and review framework for Agenda 2030 (para 72ff). A key role for media is to

report on where SDG commitments are and are not being met, and hence support accountability in that process.⁸

- To support reporting at global level, media actors can comment on and raise awareness of countries' presentation of their Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) at the HLPF.
- At the regional level, media can follow and report on reviews organised by regional organisations.
- Media can engage in national processes to report on the SDGs – whether they lead to VNRs or not – by calling for and engaging in consultations and validations of national progress towards the SDGs.

Recommendations

This brief note has indicated areas where media actors are critical for supporting both the peace and governance objectives of SDG16, as well as support the processes of broader 2030 Agenda implementation, monitoring and review. Media development initiatives should therefore be supported as a way to enhance media's ability to play both these roles.

Those seeking to support inclusive, responsive and accountable governance, human rights and peacebuilding should:

- Raise awareness of the pivotal contribution of independent media and media development to the achievement of Agenda 2030.
- Deepen the analysis of the role of media and steps needed, focusing on urgent knowledge gaps among development practitioners.
- Use the upcoming opportunity of HLPF19 which is reviewing SDG 16 to press forward with this agenda, ensuring that SDG 16 reports, events and discussions prominently feature the role of media.
- Insist that specific media development programmes engage with and support the broader implementation of the 2030 Agenda and its related processes
- Advocate that other processes and programmes related to SDG16 and the 2030 Agenda should take into account the need for media development in their strategies, programmes and tools.
- Use the 2030 Agenda as a framing mechanism for global and country-level media development initiatives to help to bring disparate groups of development and governance actors together, enhancing impact for both.

⁸ Examples of this will be context-specific but might include, stories about indicators such as: proportion of population living below the poverty-line; proportion of target population covered by all vaccines (especially important in the face of extensive misinformation in this area); discrimination against women and girls; renewable energy-share and reduction of carbon-emissions; migration policies; physical and sexual harassment; sustainable tourism strategies; sustainable management of forestry, and so forth.