



**Presentation Paper: Media, Development, and Poverty Eradication.**  
**World Press Freedom Day**  
**Sri Lanka**  
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The relationship between press freedom and poverty eradication is the theme for the 2006 UNESCO World Press Freedom Day. In the last decade, an international consensus has emerged regarding the strong link between supporting press freedom and alleviating poverty. Studies examining the successes and failures of development efforts have lead development agencies, NGOs, and state actors to structure development around local participation, recognizing that without the empowerment and understanding of local actors, even the most well-supported development plans tend to produce negligible or unsustainable results. In this calculus of poverty eradication, free and independent media is a central priority. First, free and independent media serves as an information conduit to facilitate good governance, creating and developing the relations between an informed, critical, and participatory population and responsive elected officials. Second, free and independent media brings with it a basket of goods, including the recognition and strengthening of basic human rights, a hardier civil society, political transparency, and sustainable economic development, which have all repeatedly demonstrated their importance in the alleviation of poverty. This is why development agencies maintain that, “A skilled and viable independent media sector is a society’s most promising tool for providing citizens the information they need to bring about and sustain government reform and poverty reduction.”<sup>1</sup>

At this year’s World Press Freedom Day celebration, UNESCO invites participants to consider both the links between free media and poverty alleviation as well as the critical factors that impact these links. This paper details some of the work already concluded on the topic of media and poverty eradication, and identifies and explores three ways in which free media is conducive to human development: first, through the empowerment of disadvantaged peoples and groups; second, by contributing to sustainable economic development through improved communication between different stakeholders and levels of society; and third, by increasing transparency, accountability, and good governance. Finally, the paper suggests some specific areas where UNESCO can continue to develop strategies and programs to encourage media independence as well as to ensure that the media are able to fully realize their potential in promoting human development. By bringing together media professionals, development agencies, economists and academics, World Press Freedom Day should contribute to the increasingly robust dialogue of how protecting the right to a free press and freedom of information can reduce poverty, as well as help set a course for how diverse aid agencies and media organizations can best work together to enable the media to fulfill its critical role in the endeavor to meet the MDGs.

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<sup>1</sup> Ann Hudock, “Hearing the Voices of the Poor: Encouraging Good Governance and Poverty Reduction through Media Support,” World Learning (2003)

## **I: Developing the Links between Free Media and Poverty Reduction**

*At its heart and put simplistically, unless the media is able to play the role of guardian of the public interest, unless that public is seen as the whole population of developing countries and not just those who constitute a market for advertisers; and unless those who have most to win or lose from development debates – close to half of mankind; unless these things happen, people will die. They will die, as they are dying now, not in their hundreds or thousands but in their hundreds of millions.*<sup>2</sup>

The United Nations Millennium Declaration of 2000 globally united diverse NGOs and bilateral donors in the pursuit of several delineated goals, with poverty eradication foremost among them. The first goal of the Millennium Declaration (MDG) is that by 2015, the number of people living in extreme poverty should be reduced by one half. In the wake of the international community's coalescence around the MDGs and their fulfillment, several conferences have focused on how to enable media to play its necessary role. In 2003, in Bellagio Italy, a number of media freedom and media advocacy organizations met to discuss the links between media and poverty eradication. The conference aimed to take stock of the current situation in media circles after the fractious debates of the 1980s over the same topic. During those debates, factions bitterly squared off over what was perceived as a contest between either yoking the media to the needs of the poor, and thus infringing upon basic media freedoms, or ignoring the needs of massive numbers of people living in the most dire conditions. While areas of contention remain, the Bellagio Conference produced a unanimous statement regarding the centrality of media to poverty alleviation and sustainable development.

One year later, donor and multilateral organizations reconvened at Bellagio for a conference on Communication and the MDGs. The conference generated a statement emphasizing that knowledge, communication and participation are essential to realizing the MDG of halving extreme poverty and hunger by 2015. The conference further concluded that while, "[c]ommunication is fundamental to helping people change the societies in which they live.... such strategies remain a low priority on development agendas, undermining achievement of the MDGs."<sup>3</sup>

Discussions initiated at the Bellagio conferences continued at the Global Forum for Media Development, held in Amman, Jordan, in October 2005. There more than 600 media professionals, NGOs, international organizations and government representatives met to discuss issues including the role of media in development, further developing ideas about how media and poverty reduction are linked and how media's potential can be strengthened. In 2006, after World Press Freedom Day, the World Bank is scheduling a Communication and Development Congress in Italy in October. The World Bank has also produced an excellent volume *The Right to Tell: The Role of Mass Media in Economic Development*, discussing how media impacts development under different

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<sup>2</sup> James Deane, "Why the Media Matters" GFMD October 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Bellagio Statement on the Role of Communication in Meeting the Millennium Development Goals (2004)

circumstances, and presenting evidence on specific factors that can allow media to foster economic and political markets as well as to empower those who are disenfranchised.

## **II: The Three Main Areas Where A Free Media Impacts Poverty Reduction**

Reducing poverty through achieving sustainable development is the key objective of UNESCO programs. UNESCO joins those organizations that highlight support for a free and independent media as the cornerstone for successful poverty eradication, as well as for meeting the MDGs. The recognition and protection of human rights forms the core of the UN system, and as such, UNESCO bases its activities within a human rights framework.

The right of expression that a free media protects is a fundamental political right. The right to alleviation of poverty is a fundamental social right. Among rights activists, a debate between political and social rights has long simmered. European and North American human rights groups often prioritize the first, arguing that protecting civil and political rights empowers people to identify and protect their social, economic, and cultural rights. Representatives of many developing nations, however, argue that the basic needs represented by social rights are fundamental to life itself; freedoms of speech or movement are of no use to a person who is hungry, impoverished, or denied expression of her identity. Developing an understanding of the links between a free press and poverty reduction helps reconcile these two competing rights frameworks, furthering our understanding of how strengthening certain human rights inherently promotes others, and how protections within a rights structure are interrelated.

A rights focus is also central to discussing the potential the media offers in attempts to eradicate poverty, because without it, we lose sight of why it is necessary for the media to be *independent*. A press that is not independent can achieve some of the steps towards eradication of poverty already enumerated: a state-sponsored press can increase literacy and provide white collar jobs, for example, and it can spread information. But only an independent press can act as a government watchdog, empowering the people it serves through the provision of information and the assurance that their participation matters. Only an independent press can strengthen civil society by ensuring that a plurality of opinions enters the public marketplace of ideas for further consideration amongst that market. It is an independent press that can best represent local positions, offering the opportunity to turn passive recipients into central participants. Finally, it is the openness and empowerment within civil society brought by free and independent media that fulfills the promise of Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of freedom of expression and information.

### 1) Empowerment

*“When people do not have a voice in the public arena, or access to information on issues that affect their lives, and where their concerns are not reasonably reflected in the media, development tends to be undermined and catastrophes such as famines are less likely to be averted.*

*Lack of access to communication undermines the capacity of the poor to participate in democratic processes. Frustration and alienation over lack of means of expression lead to disaffection with the political process resulting in apathy or violence.”*<sup>4</sup>

In Amartya Sen’s groundbreaking work, *Development as Freedom*, he measures poverty not in terms of income, but rather as a level of capability deprivation, the inability of a person to pursue a meaningful life. Following this definition, low income is but one of many factors that may result in making a person poor. It is, in Sen’s phrase, an *instrumental*, as opposed to an *intrinsic*, characteristic of poverty.<sup>5</sup>

In promoting local ownership of development strategies, development agencies are following a strategy of furthering peoples’ abilities to pursue meaningful lives- which is to say, lessening their capability deprivation- through both direct and indirect forms of empowerment. By giving local people a voice, development agencies receive a more accurate understanding of the problems facing the sector their efforts are designed to assist. These immediate benefits to development agencies of local empowerment can also be directly measured within a local populace, as individual involvement in development assistance groups creates local jobs and other life opportunities.

Local ownership also provides benefits more far-reaching than those individuals and agencies directly involved in the development process, indirectly empowering people throughout the impacted society. Through the spread of information – about initiatives, politics, or circumstances - people feel more ownership over the events and currents shaping their lives. This participation and inclusion helps people recognize themselves as rights-bearing individuals. When people come to feel that the rights recognized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights- two of which are the right to information and freedom of speech- also apply to them, they feel empowered to make more demands that these rights be respected. An empowered person is able to press for the resources and opportunities that she needs. Providing an individual with the means to express herself thus builds freedom of expression.<sup>6</sup>

Across the world, poverty most frequently correlates with gender; simply being a woman gives one a 50% chance of being poor.<sup>7</sup> In the world’s 49 least developed countries, illiteracy among women averages 56%, and 16% of children die before their fifth birthday.<sup>8</sup> The indirect empowerment brought by support for a free press, and its concomitant emphasis on rights, offers particular benefits for groups traditionally excluded from civil society, specifically women, minority groups, and youth. Moreover, free media can provide the social and political platforms necessary to change social norms about women, minority groups, and the poor. In short, free media provide several

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<sup>4</sup> Bellagio Symposium on Media, Freedom and Poverty, Statement point 4 (2003)

<sup>5</sup> Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (2001) p 87.

<sup>6</sup> Sen at 53.

<sup>7</sup> SIDA, [http://www.sida.se/sida/jsp/sida.jsp?d=110&language=en\\_US](http://www.sida.se/sida/jsp/sida.jsp?d=110&language=en_US)

<sup>8</sup> UNDP, “UNDP Thematic Trust Fund: Poverty Reduction” (2001)

of the essential tools that members of traditionally disadvantaged groups require to change their status, most importantly information and a voice.

## 2) Sustainable Economic Development

*“Free and independent media are important development tools. They have a positive influence on economic and social practices, good government, the fight against corruption and access to the essential social services.... Giving a voice to the poor entails increasing the economic and political opportunities available to them in order to ensure that their opinions and preoccupations are taken seriously by governments – but also so that the poor people themselves can take the initiatives that are indispensable to overcoming their problems.”*<sup>9</sup>

International organizations, development agencies, and government donors have coalesced around the idea that the greatest chance for sustainable economic development is to provide those services that the poor themselves identify as most necessary, in a manner in which the recipient countries and communities participate in and direct the aid that they receive. Through Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs), development agencies are seeking to bring decision-making to the local level, to give the poor a voice in the development strategies designed to assist them. While the international aid community has agreed that PRSPs represent the greatest chance of assisting the poor and providing sustainable economic development, as well as of meeting the MDGs, the success of PSRPs relies on one central assumption, which is that there is communication between aid organizers and aid recipients. However, several studies have demonstrated that targeted populations even in the most information-saturated regions are largely unaware of what PSRPs are, and what specific PSRPs aim to achieve in their areas. As an information conduit, therefore, free and independent media are central to the success of aid efforts towards sustainable economic development.

The information conduit that media provides flows in two directions- both from local populations to governments and aid agencies, and also from those agencies and governments back to local populations. There is yet another information flow, which is from local and regional communities to the international community and back. One criticism of media which has echoed since the 1970's is that the press does not devote sufficient resources to covering poor people's issues and circumstances; in a market responsive industry, those who can afford media consumption drive the substance of that media to some real degree, while the poor and globally remote do not see the issues most critical to their lives reflected in much mainstream media coverage. Without revisiting this debate, it is important to note that the media plays an undisputedly large role in shaping public awareness and opinion. Supporting the development of free media particularly in the poorest regions typically underserved by existing media offers the chance to introduce the issues of salience within these communities to the larger global community. This awareness and interest of the global community offers a further promise of sustained development.

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<sup>9</sup> Luc-Joel Gregoire, Chief Economist, UNDP “Why Development Needs Good Journalism” WPF 2005

Education is central to successfully sustaining development, and media freedom plays a large role in furthering educational opportunities. Free media highlight the potential for local civic involvement, and necessitate prioritizing education in order to participate in civic life. Education is of course essential in training a workforce and in enabling people to participate in a market economy, all necessary elements of sustainable development.

One of the greatest threats to sustained development is violent conflict. Poverty and conflict co-exist in a terrible cycle; poverty can lead to violent conflict, and violent conflict always leads to poverty, destroying economic and social networks even as it takes lives. Media is an essential tool in the prevention of violent conflict, as it creates a platform for non-violent discussion and issue resolution. By giving individuals and groups a voice, free media alleviates the sense of ostracism and hopelessness that often precedes violence. It can serve to inform governments of issues simmering among populations in order to direct the state's resources towards potential dissatisfaction and unrest; at its best, investigative journalism can become the foremost tool through which a state gauges the success of its own social and political initiatives.

Finally, the development potential of a free media and its repercussions in the struggle to eradicate poverty is not limited to the developing world. The past year has demonstrated the powerful effect free media have in combating the poverty displayed in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and during the unrest in the Paris suburbs. Global and semi global news media, such as CNN and the BBC and powerful regional media such as CBA, Al Jezeera and MISA have tools to offer, and UNESCO invites a discussion of how regional and semi-global media help create and define communities, and how this in turn impacts awareness of and action against poverty.

### 3) Transparent, Accountable, Non-Corrupt Government

Good governance is recognized as central to poverty eradication, and free media comprise a necessary condition for good governance. Last year, World Press Freedom Day examined the essential role that a free press plays in good governance. The Dakar Declaration, endorsed by the UNESCO general conference in 2005, held that free media and the good governance that it encourages are central to poverty reduction strategies.

Amartya Sen has famously shown that democracies do not suffer famines, demonstrating the link between freedom of information and more tangible material benefits. The central reason for this is transparency; where a free media exists, threatening social conditions are more likely to become topics of political conversation and attention, and the actions of political officials are more likely to be known and followed by the population they are elected to serve. As an information conduit between corporations, government, and the populace, free media acts as a watchdog against government malfeasance, while at the same time directing government responses towards problem areas.

Transparency also helps guard against corruption, a social ill that disproportionately damages the poor. Corruption brings many negative consequences, among them the inefficient allocation of scarce resources, the destruction of predictability and the hope for the future, and the hindrance to development. Independent media offer the greatest challenge both to acts of corruption as well as the social norms surrounding corruption which make it permissible and expected. In the fight against corruption, there is no more efficient or effective weapon than a free press.

Supporting free media also ensures that importance is attached to development and poverty eradication issues, while at the same time strengthening the institutions responsible for promoting the overall development of society. By providing reliable information to the poor, it allows them to take informed decisions about their own lives and well-being, as well as encouraging civic participation in either electing or themselves becoming government representatives.

### **III: Moving Forward: Prospects for Strengthening the Impact of Free and Independent Media on Poverty Eradication**

*“In the modern globalizing world, information sows the seeds of prosperity, and those who are without access to information are at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to building a better future for themselves and for their children.”<sup>10</sup>*

UNESCO was founded to further understanding among humankind and to benefit those universal goals and rights expressed by UNESCO’s member nations, summarizable as the reduction of poverty, the avoidance of conflict, and the support of good governance throughout the world. Press freedom is the nexus of these goals. At this year’s World Press Freedom Day, UNESCO encourages participants to discuss not only the conceptual and observable links between press freedom and poverty reduction, but also to discuss concrete steps that the aid community should continue to take to meet the MDGs.

#### a. Access, ICTs, and Communication Generally

In 2002, UNESCO initiated a research project to explore if and how ICTs can be used to reduce poverty. Based on reviewing the experiences of 9 ICT projects across south Asia, the study found that ICTs have the potential to empower people in myriad ways, addressing the marginalization, oppressive social norms, powerlessness and voicelessness that is central to poverty.<sup>11</sup> UNESCO found:

The communicative ecologies of poor communities already include ICTs in at least one profoundly important sense: an almost universal belief that ICTs and ICT skills are increasingly central to surviving or thriving in the modern world, and that these technologies increasingly define their children’s future – globally, regionally, nationally, and locally. At the same time, these are considered to be

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<sup>10</sup>Shashi Tharoor, United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information, Keynote address, Global Form for Media Development, Amman, Jordan 2005.

<sup>11</sup> Don Slater and Jo Tacchi, “Research ICT Innovations for Poverty Reduction,” UNESCO (2004)

prestigious technologies, associated with educated people and local and global elites. From the perspective of poor communities, ICTs are understood both as essential to them and as ‘not for people like us.’<sup>12</sup>

UNESCO invites further discussion of the potential for ICTs to alleviate poverty at World Press Freedom Day 2006.

#### b. Measurement Techniques: How to Show What We Know

UNESCO and many of its partner organizations recognize that a free and independent media plays an essential part in sustainable economic development and poverty reduction, even while the role it plays is often difficult to measure as benefits are usually demonstrated over time or indirectly. Prioritizing media freedom in the quest to eradicate poverty is challenged by some detractors, however, who argue that poverty eradication is best realized through the provision of basic services. This argument holds that sharing knowledge that will increase crop yields, for example, or administering vaccines to reduce illness has a more measurable impact than encouraging freedom of expression and the press, and is therefore a better strategy to follow when investing limited aid resources.

While the development community has outlined indicators to measure poverty reduction, as well as indicators to measure press freedom, we have not yet developed indicators that measure press freedom’s impact on poverty alleviation. Developing such measurement methods is important, both in order to better understand in what precise ways press freedom facilitates poverty eradication, as well as to structure programs that facilitate and magnify the impact that free and independent media have on poverty eradication.

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<sup>12</sup>Slater & Tacchi, *Research: ICT Innovations for Poverty Reduction*, UNESCO 2004

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