

WPFD 2016

GOAL 16

A Message from H.E. John Dramani Mahama, President of the Republic of Ghana

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Twenty six years ago, a new nation was born and with it, new hopes and visions. Within one year of its liberation, Namibia hosted in its capital city of Windhoek a major world changing event which history has recorded as the *Windhoek Declaration*.

The Declaration spoke eloquently about the vital role a free, independent, pluralistic press plays in human development and progress, and with that, the United Nations was called upon to set aside a day to observe press freedom.

World Press Freedom Day (WPFD) came into being, and 25 years on, has grown to encompass the wider freedoms of expression and access to information.

A globally observed event, World Press Freedom day is a platform to celebrate advances in press freedom, including the defence of media professionals from attacks on their independence, and more sobering, the day commemorates those who have lost their lives in an attempt to preserve our fundamental right to seek and receive information.

This year we observe WPFD under a new UN development flagship, the Sustainable Development Goals or SDGs; a global aspirational agenda to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure prosperity for all. The preamble to the SDGs challenges us to “leave no one behind” as we transform the world into a more equitable and sustainable one. The media is central to raising awareness and providing a better understanding of the SDGs and the future we want for ourselves and our children’s children.

SDG 16 *specifically* enjoins all member states to “ensure public access to information and protection of fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements.” SDG 16 links human development and progress to the prioritisation of accountable and fair practises.

A key ingredient to the democratic process is a knowledgeable and empowered citizenry that participates in open and informed debate. The promotion of public participation in political discourse can be encouraged by a free press.

This is not a whimsical supposition, because millennia of human activity have shown that societies that have nurtured the freedom of expression and free flow of information, have also seen the flourishing of creativity, innovation and productivity – ultimately the cornerstones of human progress.

From a Washington Post news article in 1974 that led to the resignation of a sitting President to the call made in a print media outlet to “Occupy Wall Street” in 2011- a call which was inspired by a movement born 10,000 km away in Tahrir Sq. Egypt – the capacity of a free press to spread ideas and establish common interests is boundless.

Even as WPFD is dedicated to the press, it benefits us all. The press are only custodians of this common resource and that is the message of SDG 16, which bids us to mainstream the ideal of a free press in all our development paradigms and strategies.

As we observe WPFD 2016 and the role of UN SDG 16, we must also pause to question what press freedom must not do: It cannot be used to promote gender violence, to extol terrorism, to deny human rights, to encourage religious or racial bigotry and above all to be a tool for genocide...

It is all too easy for governments, businesses, political and criminal organizations, and lately terrorists groups to scapegoat practitioners of freedom of expression – the press - while they are, unfortunately, sometimes the very people who are wont to manipulate the media to their desired, if sometimes undesirable ends.

For those who wish to control the public narrative, the media is a mouthpiece to advance hostile interests. From Bosnia-Herzegovina, to Rwanda, the groundwork for these atrocities were laid by use of media organizations that exposed the public to inflammatory rhetoric, propaganda and bias. The other side of the coin is to under-report criminal activity and abuses against humanity, and to deny the voiceless the opportunity to be heard.

Target number 10 of SDG 16 fortunately calls for actions that will swell the number of nations that adopt statutory guarantees of freedom and combat corrupt intentions by facilitating openness and information exchange.

SDG 16 can thus be described as the mother of all the other Goals because without the right environment for the cross fertilization of ideas, the exchange of insights, the open critique of methods and methodologies, it would be almost impossible to determine progress or retrogression.

There is an African proverb that says that when weeding a path, you cannot tell how straight or crooked the path is, it takes someone observing you from behind to point you in the right direction. That is the role of SDG 16.

Combined therefore, the SDGs and WPFD focus us on a common goal: the use of media as a development tool and a force for good that informs and holds us all to account, in our common quest to eradicate poverty and save our planet for future generations. And 26 years on from the declaration that ushered in the observance of WPFD, let us be reminded of the importance of upholding the universal right of every woman, man and child to freedom of expression.

The theme of WPF 2016, “Access to Information and Fundamental Freedoms: This Is Your Right!”

Many national constitutions already have provisions for freedom of expression and other legislation that operationalize that freedom. What SDG 16 does is to directly link human development and progress to those freedoms.

Goal 16 was not arrived at without the pushing and shoving of the many press freedom alliances around the world. These alliances have advocated and crusaded over the years, some with broad objectives and others with niche interests, with the aim of promoting and advancing the freedoms that Goal 16 now takes custody of. The time therefore, has come for them to join hands in this unified global plan of action. The mission and vision statements are generally singing from the proverbial same hymn book.

GFMD

The Global Forum for Media Development (GFMD), which has played a lead role in the inclusion of Goal 16, “is an international membership network of media assistance groups that highlights the importance of independent, pluralistic and sustainable media in social and economic development. GFMD members share a common goal: to foster free, professional and pluralistic media, leading to more open societies, greater transparency and enhanced freedom of expression.”

ARTICLE 19

Envisages a world where people are free to speak their opinions, to participate in decision-making and to make informed choices about their lives. For this to be possible, people everywhere must be able to exercise their rights to freedom of expression and freedom of information. Without these rights, democracy, good governance and development cannot happen. We take our name from Article 19 of the UDHR: “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.”

CPJ

The Committee to Protect Journalists, CPJ, promotes press freedom worldwide and defends the right of journalists to report the news without fear of reprisal. CPJ ensures the free flow of news and commentary by taking action wherever journalists are attacked, imprisoned, killed, kidnapped, threatened, censored, or harassed.

IFJ

The International Federation of Journalists IFJ, promotes international action to defend press freedom and social justice through strong, free and independent trade unions of journalists. The IFJ is opposed to discrimination of all kinds and condemns the use of media as propaganda or to promote intolerance and conflict. The IFJ believes in freedom of political and cultural

expression and defends trade union and other basic human rights. The IFJ is the organisation that speaks for journalists within the United Nations system and within the international trade union movement.

AMI

African Media Initiative, AMI, has been shaped by the most comprehensive research and consultation process ever conducted on the media in Africa. This was done under the auspices of the BBC World Service Trust and the UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) and is included in the 2005 G8 Gleneagles and Commission for Africa recommendations. All relevant regional stakeholders, from the African Union Commission, the African Development Bank and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa through to every significant African media structure (owners, editors, journalists) have formally endorsed AMI, suggesting a powerful consensus that a healthy media sector is a requirement for improved growth, governance and accountability.

MFWA

The Media Foundation for West Africa, MFWA, is a regional independent non-governmental organization. It is the biggest and most influential media development and freedom of expression advocacy organisation in West Africa with national partner organisations in all 16 countries of the region. The MFWA is also the Secretariat of the Continental Network of the most Prominent Free Expression and Media Development Organisations in Africa, known as the Africa Freedom of Expression Exchange (AFEX) Network. In the last 18 years, the MFWA and its partners have successfully promoted freedom of expression rights, media professionalism, and media-led advocacy for peace building, and participatory governance across West Africa.

These are just a half dozen of this rich basket of freedom of expression alliances. What a powerful voice that would be if they joined forces under the umbrella of Goal 16. In a world dominated by football, Goal 16 would most definitely find resonance as a rallying call!

Control/Security/Compliance

The landscape though, is not without landmines – from insult laws to the arguments for security and safety. It is a delicate balancing act. Not yet resolved – though the FBI succeeded in cracking the iphone code – is the standoff between Apple and the FBI, on just how far freedom of expression and protecting individual rights can co-exist with the equally legitimate need to protect people from harm.

The Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) recently put out a statement in which it “is urging stakeholders in all 16 West African countries to resist all attempts by governments and regulators to limit freedom of expression online or control internet use.” In its own words, “The MFWA’s call follows findings from an internet rights monitoring exercise conducted by the Foundation from October - December 2015.”

The findings, according to the Foundation, revealed that in the last quarter of 2015, two major countries in the sub-region “passed and introduced bills that have potential for curtailing free expression online.” In an even more recent statement, the Foundation said: “A total of 142 incidents of free expression violations were recorded across West Africa in 2015. Almost 90 percent of the incidents were violations against journalists and media organisations, a development that further highlights the important issue of safety of journalists in the region. The press freedom violations were predominantly in the form of arrests, attacks, threats, suspensions and censorship among others.” It is within these kinds of environments that Goal 16 has to dribble and score.

Challenges

Writing last year on the SDGs, Bill Orme, the UN Representative of the GFMD, said, “The next challenge is to ensure that the indicators chosen by the UN to monitor SDG16.10 will actually ensure public access to information. That’s not yet certain. UN member-states still have to agree on a set of indicators to monitor the sustainable development agenda's goals and targets.” A task that has been assigned to a committee of member-state statisticians known as the Inter-Agency and Experts Group, or IAEG.

But Bill is upbeat: “The SDGs aren't legally binding – they are, after all, only 'goals,' inherently aspirational and voluntary in nature. But the experience of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) shows that most countries take these global goals quite seriously, filing annual progress reports to the UN, which were then reported online, publicly and globally. Through press reports and academic monitoring and civil society vigilance, the pace of MDGs achievement became national news in most developing countries over the past 15 years.”

Deliverables and outcomes

With the full participation, cooperation and solidarity of the world’s freedom of expression alliances, Goal 16 should fare even better. They should rally, using the SDGs’ time horizons and targets to prosecute and achieve the outcomes envisaged by the Goal.

Thank you.

Presented by HE Alhaji Abdul-Rahman Harruna Attah, Ghana’s High Commissioner to Namibia and Botswana