

Global Forum for Media Development: Views and recommendations for implementation and financing of the post-2015 SDGs

13 March 2015

Civil society has mobilized in support of the inclusion of a commitment to public access to information and independent media in the UN's new Sustainable Development Goals

The inclusion of a clear 'access to information' commitment in the SDGs has been consistently supported by civil society participants in post-2015 consultations as well as by the UN's expert advisors on the new global goals, including in the reports of the Secretary General's High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons and Independent Expert Advisory Group on the "Data Revolution for Sustainable Development."

In June 2014, a coalition of more than 200 national, regional and international civil society organizations dedicated to freedom of expression and support for independent media sent a joint statement to the summarizing their shared position on this critical issue to the General Assembly's Open Working Group on the post-2015 global development agenda. (<http://gfmd.info/en/site/news/386/Freedom-of-Expression-and-Access-to-Information-Post-2015-Measurable-Targets-for-Goal-16.htm>)

In August 2014, the Open Working Group proposed 17 SDGs to the General Assembly, in which Target 10 of draft SDG 16 would require UN member states to "ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements." In November 2014, the Global Forum on Media Development (GFMD) presented a paper to the General Assembly's 'Friends of Governance' group identifying available factual indicators for UN monitoring of this target in the SDGs. (<http://gfmd.info/en/site/news/?ls-art15=10>)

In December 2014, the GFMD issued a statement welcoming Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon's endorsement of guarantees for freedom of information in his "synthesis" report on the UN's post-2015 development agenda, in which he stated that "press freedom, access to information and freedom of expression" are essential "enablers of sustainable development." (<http://gfmd.info/en/site/news/730/UN-Secretary-General-Freedom-of-Information-and-Media-Needed-For-New-UN-Global-Development-Goals.htm>)

The General Assembly is now deliberating on the final set of SDGs to be presented to world leaders for their approval at the UN Sustainable Development Summit in September, based on the recommendations of the Assembly's post-2015 Open Working Group. **The GFMD strongly supports proposed Target 16.10, the sole provision in the proposed new goals that would explicitly require member states to provide the public with the information needed to demonstrate if any of the agreed new global goals are in fact being achieved.**

The GMD recognizes that to ensure compliance with this access-to-information commitment in the SDGs, many countries will require financial and technological assistance to strengthen capacities to gather and provide needed human development, budgetary and programmatic information in a timely and publicly accessible manner. **This should include support for independent media development** and the enabling

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legal, political and technological environment required for open dissemination and discussion of all information and ideas relevant to sustainable development.

Action is needed to scale up mobilization of financial resources from all sources

An essential yet often overlooked requirement for ensuring sustainable development financing is **open access to information about public and private sector financial transactions** between and within countries. Recent initiatives such as improved OECD accounting of ODA disbursements and the 'Publish What You Fund' Aid Transparency Index are commendable, but still provide only partial information about bilateral development assistance, little from the regional and global intergovernmental financial institutions, and almost nothing at all on international private capital transactions, which in aggregate dwarf official development financing in scale and impact.

Most of this information is available to but undisclosed by national governments and international financial institutions. This is another reason why the SDGs must include a clear, unambiguous guarantee of public access to information, with indicators monitoring the needed enabling legal environment for freedom of expression and media and broad affordable digital availability of official and nongovernmental information, to ensure compliance with the policy, programmatic and funding commitments entered into by UN member-states when the new Goals are adopted in September.

Greater transparency and accountability from all development actors is needed to improve efficiency and effectiveness in the use of available resources for sustainable development

There is a broad consensus from the many UN post-2015 advisory bodies and consultations that universal public access to accurate development information and independent analysis – for which free press and free speech are preconditions -- will be essential to the success of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Greater transparency and accountability is required of all actors of development, providers and recipients of resources alike. This requires in turn that governments ensure both open public access to and **open public discourse about information of all kinds and from all relevant sources, through independent media and academia and civil society as well as public officials and institutions.**

The Secretary-General's Independent Expert Advisory Group on the "Data Revolution for Sustainable Development" has urged international policymakers to recognize the need for **sustained funding and capacity-building support for access-to-information and open-data initiatives in developing countries**, a position which GFMD strongly supports.

The Independent Expert Advisory Group further stressed that in order for this "data revolution" to succeed, the rights to freedom of expression for media, academia, civil society, official statisticians and members of the public in seeking, disseminating, and discussing this data "should be recognized and protected." Adopting, implementing and ensuring compliance with these legal guarantees on the national level will require training, technical and information systems assistance in many Less Developed Countries which are committed to putting these principles into practice.

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This must include sustained support for independent media development. Without an independent press freely obtaining and openly analyzing and widely disseminating information relevant to the SDGs, a pro forma legal guarantee of 'access to information' would have little practical impact.

This understanding is implicit in the draft language of Target 16.10: The 'fundamental freedoms' it cites include freedom of expression, as enshrined in Article 19 of both the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights and its legally binding International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights, which state that all people in all countries should be free to 'seek, receive and impart information, through any media, and regardless of frontiers.'

Measures and actions to ensure an effective domestic enabling environment and enhance the ability of developing countries to implement the post-2015 development agenda

In order to make the promise of Article 19 a practical reality for people everywhere, further infrastructural investment will be required to ensure access to either free or affordable digital information services, under fair, transparent regulatory regimes which promote and protect public access to information and freedom of expression as fundamental human rights.

Freedom of information and media has little meaning of ordinary citizens cannot easily access public information and independent media. Universal Internet access to public data and independent information sources can and should be achieved by or before 2030. Providing the resources needed to make this happen is a sound and necessary investment in long-term human development.

As advocates for commitments to freedom of information and media in the SDGs, GFMD members recognize that substantial external resources will be required for many countries to meet their post-2015 commitments and ensure that all people have the access to the information and channels of communication that will enable them to fully exercise their rights as national and global citizens.

More details: <http://gfmd.info/en/site/pots2015/185/About-our-campaign.htm>

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The Global Forum for Media Development (GFMD) is an international network of media assistance groups working together to support independent, pluralistic, professional and sustainable media in all regions of the world. GFMD members share a common commitment to more open societies, greater transparency, strong media ethics, and freedom of expression and the press for all people everywhere.

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