

Post-2015 MDGs: Freedom of Expression and the Media

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Access to information, freedom of expression and an independent media are important for a sustainable future. They should be explicitly included in a future framework describing UN development goals for the years beyond 2015. We discuss two options: firstly, integration of “information access and freedom of expression” as one of the new Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). And secondly, “good governance” as a new goal in which transparency, accountability and free media are considered.

The members of the “High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons” chose a very engaged approach when they prepared in 2013 their report for the UN post-2015 development agenda. An approach we usually see in journalism: They travelled widely and listened to the views of different people and organisations – women and men, parliamentarians, civil society organisations, indigenous people, governments, local communities and many more. “We listened directly to the voices of hundreds of thousands of people from all over the world, in face-to-face meetings as well as through surveys, community interviews, and polling over mobile phones and the internet.” And in their report they then stress, among other things, openness, transparency, access to information, freedom of speech and the media. In this paper we focus on these issues and discuss how they can be included in a future framework describing UN development goals for the years beyond 2015.

Importance of information rights and media

If we look at public communication and the media from a human rights perspective, two aspects are key: access to information and freedom of expression. These fundamental rights are described in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and their importance certainly has not diminished with the advent of new digital technology. Young Egyptian protesters can send tweets in order to guide wounded fellow-protesters to the field hospital in a tent on Tahir Square in Egypt. Quechua speakers in the heart of Bolivia can share and document the heritage of their traditional

songs through their community radio. Patients in a hospital in northern Uganda can complain to a newspaper reporter about a shortage of malaria drugs and urge the health authorities in Kampala to act.

These examples stand for three different functions of the media:

1. Information provider: data, knowledge, orientation, ideas and education
2. Platform for cultural expression: strengthening of identity, values and cultural cohesion
3. Platform for empowerment: giving a voice to individuals as well as underprivileged groups and minorities

But these are not all the functions of the media. Journalists moderate public discussions and they play a special role in facilitating the events before and after democratic elections. And they also take on the role of the fourth estate. For example, a reporter in China writes a book on problems concerning baby food safety and urges the government to act. Or the “Times of India” informs its audience about corrupt employers at the urban housing administration who are not prosecuted although the new anti-corruption bodies had them cornered. Another example are journalists from all over the world who have joined forces to sift through leaked documents on more than 100,000 secret companies, trusts and funds in offshore finance centres. These reporters take part in the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists. The aim of this network is to make hidden information available for everyone on the internet.

From these examples we can add to our list of media functions:

4. Moderator of debates: offering forums for discussion between different actors
5. Democratic facilitator: in the processes of political discourse and elections
6. Independent advocate of human rights, democratic values and a pluralistic society
7. Observer and critic of policy-making and legislation
8. Watchdog and provider of transparency: scrutiny of those in power, exposure of individual wrongdoings as well as systemic dysfunctionality

Mass media are not information channels that merely spread given messages. Journalists have their own, specific societal functions to fulfil, and they work with their own routines and standards. Professional journalism can continuously observe relevant issues in society, build independent expertise and seek the truth. And with the power of its organisations, it can withstand the influence of other actors.

It should be mentioned here that the terms “media” and “journalism” have become more and more difficult to define over the past years. Since the advent of the digital revolution it is hard to say exactly what comprises the media and who should be called a journalist. We do not attempt to solve these problems here. But we certainly are aware that the media are not only newspapers, radio and TV. And journalists are not the only actors who systematically communicate. Today different groups and communities get together, take their own stand and find new channels of communication. The internet and mobile devices offer many people opportunities for information access, expression and interaction. And new processes of accountability and transparency become possible through these open forms of communication. But in most countries, these functions of the media are not developed to their full potential. According to Freedom House’s “Freedom of the Press” index, less than 14 percent of the world’s citizens live in countries that enjoy a free press. In authoritarian states, the fundamental rights of information and expression are often severely violated through censorship, state control of the media sector and physical and legal threats. Also the opportunities to use mass media and new digital technologies are not equally available to different population groups, for example, citizens in the capitals and those in rural areas.

In general these issues are as relevant in industrial countries as they are in developing countries and emerging economies. It takes a global partnership to meet today’s communicative challenges, such as data security and data privacy on the internet, the transparency mechanisms for extractive industries, or the physical threats reporters and whistleblowers face.

And development is not only a national challenge; it is a complex and systemic global process. If we want to shape this interdependent process as a global community, people will need to understand how they are connected and how the sustainability of our planet depends on their behaviour. Therefore we need men and women who follow the consumption and production patterns along the commodity chains from the producers to the consumers: Reporters telling the stories of how we are all affected by our choices in the markets and what consequences our daily actions may eventually have.

So there are reasons why international development should work intensively on freedom of expression and the media. In this paper we make the case for an explicit mention of these issues in a future global development agenda. But before we specify our suggestions, we need to review the current debate on the future of development.

Debate on old and new MDGs

In the year 2001, a new era of development cooperation began when the world agreed upon eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). With these objectives set for the year 2015, the development community focused its attention on a limited number of crucial issues.

Millennium Development Goals (MDGs, until 2015)

1. *Eradicating extreme poverty and hunger*
2. *Achieving universal primary education*
3. *Promoting gender equality and empowering women*
4. *Reducing child mortality rates*
5. *Improving maternal health*
6. *Combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases*
7. *Ensuring environmental sustainability*
8. *Developing a global partnership for development*

More than a decade later there is a wide consensus among development experts that this set of goals needs revision. The MDGs are incomplete in various aspects. Firstly, although they are mostly aimed at the well-being of individuals, they do not focus enough on the poorest and most excluded people. Secondly, they neglect a number of important aspects of individual well-being, such as secondary and vocational education or personal safety or freedom of expression. Also goals related to good governance, such as transparency or political participation, are not part of this agenda.

A third line of review comes along with the Rio+20 process and the search for sustainable development. In 2012 a UN working group started to focus more on global benefits like environment and climate protection, peace or stability of financial markets. Their objective is to put forward Sustainable Development Goals, SDGs. With these the emphasis would be more on global common interests, long-term sustainable development instead of quick results.

The “High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons” now emphasize in their report a need for “freedom of speech and the media, open political choice, access to justice and accountable government and public institutions.” On top of this, they call for a “data revolution” for sustainable development: They would like to see citizens accessing better statistics and information through new technology – so they can themselves make active use of the information available.

It is with these different elements of dedicated communication that people’s participation in processes of development can be enabled. Through the media it is possible for individuals and organisations to understand global trends and their local implications. They can voice their concerns and take part in discussions on what is being done and what needs to be done.

But how can freedom of speech and the media be included in a future framework for global development goals? In the following we discuss three possible approaches to this question: (1) No explicit mention of freedom of expression and the media, (2) freedom of expression as a new Millennium Development Goal, (3) good governance as part of a new agenda, including freedom of expression, transparency, accountability and free media.

Approach 1: No explicit mention of the media

It is possible to imagine, post 2015, a new set of MDGs that includes neither freedom of expression nor the media. In that case the goals would most probably be limited to a relatively narrow understanding of individual well-being: poverty reduction, improvements in health, environment and education. The argument would most probably be that a small number of understandable goals would make things easier for the international community. And it may also help the negotiations to have goals that can be agreed upon relatively quickly.

Unfortunately, freedom of expression and access to information do not belong in this category. It certainly would not be easy to win the commitment of authoritarian regimes to such an agenda and even less so with a set of measurable and concrete targets.

So the strategy according to this first approach would be to keep issues of information, expression and the media outside the spotlight. They could still be dealt with however.

Media and information rights could be regarded as an important supporting process for the other development goals. Even without explicit mention, the old and new forms of individual and mass communication would be needed. The problems in health and environment, for example, cannot be solved through the health and environment sectors alone. Besides growth of economies and responsible governments, it requires free media and an active civil society to inform people on these issues, to question wrong developments and to discuss new ideas.

Maybe an improved definition of education goals could be of help here. Media literacy could be strengthened, as well as an active understanding of human rights and democratic processes. People in developing countries as well as developed countries certainly need a better understanding of the communicative and political processes in our changing world and their own role in it.

But overall this approach remains rather conservative and limited in its ambition. It regards the physical survival of humans and their education as the ultimate objectives of all development efforts. Meanwhile freedom of expression, a basic human right, would go largely ignored. And the potential of the media and civil society as strong powers for the development of democratic processes might not be recognised.

Approach 2: Freedom of expression as a new Millennium Development Goal

An alternative approach would be to integrate “information access and freedom of expression” as one of the new Millennium Development Goals after 2015. This would be a big step. International attention would promptly be shifted towards human rights and communication.

And yet this extension would not alter the original MDG approach. Freedom of expression as a new development goal would be easy to understand, and it would, just as most of the old goals, have a focus on individuals: getting hold of diverse information, to express one’s opinion and culture, is equally as important as being healthy. And the media could be supported in fulfilling the basic media functions (1.-3.) discussed above.

This explicit mention would also stress that people being informed and expressing their views is not just useful for development or a necessary act in a democracy. The right to know what is going on in society and to voice one’s thoughts is an important and valuable benefit in itself.

But mentioning freedom of expression among the goals would also link it to other domains: New efforts towards freedom of expression would have implications and repercussions in many governance processes towards open and



plural societies in which human rights are respected. For example, in transition countries like Egypt and Tunisia the advancement with regard to freedom of expression could be visible early on, while the processes of new governance would still be taking shape. So a new MDG for freedom of expression would not only show progress with respect to individual well-being – it would also serve as an indicator for a broader societal change process.

As far as media development is concerned, the new Millennium Development Goal would also bring a new international focus: The media would be encouraged to improve their service to citizens, particularly to the poor and marginalized. It would be emphasized that all citizens have a right to access a basic service: Timely, relevant, comprehensible and continuous information from a variety of sources and perspectives, and the option of participating in public discourse, of expressing oneself freely. Development organisations would focus more on supporting citizens through media-related projects instead of supporting media for their own sake. The media would be strengthened so they can inform people and give them a voice that is heard.

Approach 3: Good governance as part of a new agenda, including transparency, accountability and free media

The third approach we would like to discuss here consists in describing “good governance” as a goal in which transparency, accountability and free media would be explicitly mentioned. Such a goal would not focus on individual well-being, and it would therefore fit less well into the old MDG-approach. Instead it would be better placed within a new, broader agenda, where targets can also be named at a societal or global level.

There are good reasons for such a renewal and they are currently being widely discussed. The European Development Report 2013 points out that in the old framework, urgent questions were excluded, e.g. climate change, migration, peace, security, conflict resolution, social injustice and governance.

The authors stress that this new agenda should not only focus on final goals but also concentrate on processes and enabling instruments. While the old MDGs describe final goals from the perspective of individuals the new suggestion here is to add important processes that advance society. This thought is also reflected in the UN Secretary General’s report to the UN member states on the MDGs and the development agenda beyond 2015, “A life of dignity for all”. And in the Annex of their report, the UN “High Level Panel of Eminent Persons” propose just such a process as a goal: “Ensure Good Governance and Effective Institutions”. It includes basic

human rights of expression, as well as public participation, transparency and accountability (See box 3): All citizens should be able to see exactly how governments spend taxes and other revenues. And they should have the opportunity to take part in public discourse and hold those in power accountable. The authors also add in their discussion of this goal the following sentence: “Promoting a vibrant, diverse and independent media can further support governments to translate commitments into action.” And yet some of the unique functions of the media we listed above are not mentioned by the High Level Panel: The media functions 4.-8. are missing.

We therefore suggest taking this one step further. The roles of watchdog and facilitator of informed debate and democratic processes should be considered and, as a consequence, the media should be explicitly included as actors in their own right in the new agenda by adding the following part F) to the High Level Panel’s list:

New MDG-Goal: Ensure Good Governance and Effective Institutions

A-E: suggestions by the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons, 2013 (Annex II, Goal 10). F: additional suggestion by the authors.

- A** Provide free and universal legal identity, such as birth registrations
- B** Ensure that people enjoy freedom of speech, association, peaceful protest and access to independent media and information
- C** Increase public participation in political processes and civic engagement at all levels
- D** Guarantee the public’s rights to information and access to government data
- E** Reduce bribery and corruption and ensure officials can be held accountable
- F** Strengthen the independence and mutual accountability of societal institutions: political parties, parliament, the judiciary, civil society and the media.

In the case of the media it is the news organisations and the work of their professional journalists that can fulfil the second list of functions we mentioned at the beginning):



facilitation of informed debate and democratic process; observation, critique, watchdog and provider of transparency, advocacy for human rights. Journalists in professional news organisations are able to follow up continuously on relevant issues. They can systematically build contacts, conduct in-depth research and provide audiences with independent, plural and informative products of good quality. Where necessary they can scrutinise those in power, and they can withstand external attempts to influence their work.

It goes without saying that other actors such as parliament or civil society also play important roles in good governance. These roles are different from that of the media but there certainly is an overlap: for example, via the internet civil society actors such as bloggers, whistle-blowers or other activists offer information, advocacy and appraisal. Modern transparency mechanisms enable political or economic actors to inform the public about their work, their earnings and spending. All these new forms of communication come in addition to what classical journalism in media organisations is able to provide.

In a nutshell, the media's special functions can be integrated within the processes of good governance as part of a broader framework. Good governance as a Sustainable Development Goal is not simply an end goal for the well-being of individuals. Rather, it is an important societal process that should have an influence on other sectors. And it should enable the achievement of other goals, too.

Measuring new communication and media goals

But how can the two new goals suggested here be measured? Fortunately some preparatory work has already been done and some basic definitions and systems are in place.

Freedom of expression is described among UNESCO's media development indicators, with a focus on "a system of regulation conducive to freedom of expression, pluralism and diversity of the media". This includes laws and regulations to protect the independence of the media as well as the application of these rules in practice. Also included are editorial independence, protection laws for reporters and their sources as well as the participation of the public and civil society in the shaping of public policy towards the media. The UNESCO-indicators have already been assessed in a first set of countries. And a world-wide effort could learn from these experiences.

Instruments also exist for the evaluation of the media as part of governance processes: Besides the UNESCO-indicators, there are several institutions that have developed global media-indices, among them IREX, Freedom House and Reporters Without Borders.

There is, of course, still some challenge for future research. We do not have a clear indicator that can measure the access to information and the possibilities of freedom of expression on an individual level. And we would need a better understanding of the relationships and influences between individual freedom of expression rights, different aspects of good governance and other development indicators. But as a start, it would be possible to quickly set up a global system for the assessment of freedom of expression, media and governance indicators.

Conclusion

It may be easier to define and agree upon a new set of development goals without explicit mention of freedom of expression, information rights and the media. But such a choice would also mean avoiding an answer to the challenges the world faces today. A new MDG agenda that focuses on poverty, health, environment, gender equality and education only would neglect essential elements of human rights as well as governance processes with all their potential influence on other development sectors.

We have suggested two entry points for communication and media: Firstly freedom of expression as an individual goal that could fit under the old roof of the MDGs. If the next framework should again be a lean and focused approach towards final goals, then the freedom of expression right would probably be the best fit. Secondly, we propose transparency, accountability and free media as an explicit part of a "good governance"-goal.

Ideally, both elements would be integrated into a new agenda: On the one hand, the final objective of freedom of expression, a right that every human being should enjoy. And on the other hand, the societal process of good governance as an enabling process for society which includes the specific functions only civil society and the media can provide.

For the next steps towards a post-2015 agenda, communication is key: access to information, inclusion of different actors, the expression of opinion and the provision of public forums. And it is the media that will make an important contribution to sustainability here. They will hold the leaders of the world accountable for their promises, as they do with the current MDGs. They will bring in the perspectives of millions of people by reporting on their needs and views. And they will provide open, transparent, reliable and responsible information that can be used by different people trying to define the road ahead.



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