PANOS London

Bellagio Symposium on Media, Freedom and Poverty

STATEMENT

The Bellagio Symposium on Media, Freedom and Poverty came together to explore the links between and develop a better understanding of current media trends and poverty. This meeting was in part an attempt to bridge differences in approach among organisations involved in media freedom, media pluralism and social advocacy. While we have differences in perspective, we agreed on the following points.

We are particularly concerned that in the World Summit on the Information Society some of the measures being considered run counter to freedom of expression; that insufficient attention is being paid to the crucial role of the media, and to the importance of poverty reduction; and that there is inadequate mapping of development objectives against the proposed actions.

We believe that urgent attention needs to be brought to bear on issues of media and poverty in ways that are rooted in the principle of freedom of expression.

1. Freedom of expression, as expressed in Article XIX of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is a fundamental right which underpins all other human rights, and enables them to be expressed and realised. The eradication of poverty is essential to the realisation for all peoples of the aspirations in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

2. People living in poverty face particular obstacles to achieving freedom of expression and access to the media which are associated with the conditions of poverty. These obstacles include economic, social, educational, logistical, and political factors. Economic obstacles include the cost of equipment for production, distribution and reception, and the costs of licences and operation; social obstacles include gender and language; educational obstacles include literacy and language; logistical obstacles include transport, physical access and electricity; political obstacles include repression and lack of will of many states to allow democratic expression and to give voice to the most marginalised groups, as well as censorship by government, commercial and social interests.

3. The interests and concerns of people living in poverty are not sufficiently exposed in the media. Economic and market pressures on the media are tending to deprioritise journalistic investigation and reporting on issues of social and public concern. Because the poor often do not constitute a viable market, issues of concern to them are increasingly and particularly marginalised. New strategies, which address these issues and reinforce freedom of expression, need to be devised. Threats to media freedom and freedom of expression continue to come from undue political influence but we are also concerned about issues of economic control and pressure.

4. We recognise that these obstacles need to be overcome in the interests of society as a whole, and not only because in many societies poor people are the majority. 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.

5. Realisation of freedom of expression for people living in poverty requires: media pluralism and diversity, including diversity of forms of ownership; more equitable access to communication; support for cultural and linguistic diversity; and promotion of participation in democratic decision-making processes.

6. **Action points**

   i. There is a growing number of initiatives taken by the media, by people living in poverty and by other actors to address poverty reduction, including issues of voice, content and access to information and communication. These should be encouraged and actively supported. Best practices should be publicised and exchanged.

   ii. Access for the disadvantaged to information and communication should be an integral part of any strategy to reduce poverty. Such a strategy should include participatory media.

   iii. Community media should be specifically encouraged, including through access to licences and spectrum allocation. Frequencies should be allocated in a balanced way amongst community, commercial and public service media. Broadcast licensing should be administered by independent and transparent regulatory bodies.

   iv. There is a need for increased resources, better coordination and targeting of training programmes; including training journalists in poverty related issues.

   v. Involvement of media in education, and the development of media literacy, should be promoted.

vi.   Public service broadcasting mandates should include obligations to provide information and education to address issues of poverty; and to ensure that public service broadcasters provide universal service.

vii.   National communication policies should be developed that address access to communication for people living in poverty. Such policies should be developed and implemented in a transparent and participatory manner.

viii.   Professional standards and ethics of journalism, as defined by journalists themselves, should be supported and encouraged. The journalistic ethic should include sensitivity to issues of poverty.

ix.   Journalists should be provided with living standards and working conditions which enable them to realise these professional standards.

x.   South-South and South-North exchanges between media and journalists should be encouraged, including personnel, training, equipment and content.

xi.   Support should be provided for civil society organisations in working with the media.

xii.   Mechanisms should be encouraged for making newspapers more affordable and more available to the disadvantaged, including measures to cut the price of newsprint and equipment.

xiii.   The use of ICTs to provide the media with more diversity of information sources should be promoted; together with combinations of traditional and new information technologies to facilitate better access to communication for people living in poverty.

xiv.   Resources should be provided, including by public authorities, to address shortcomings in communication access for those living in poverty and to remove cost and other barriers, in ways that do not compromise freedom of expression.

xv.   More research needs to be undertaken on the implications of current media trends for poverty reduction.

5th October, 2003

This statement was agreed by:

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Article XIX

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All participants attended the meeting as representatives of their organisations, and the statement represents a consensus of all who participated. However, this statement has not been through a formal approval process by all of these organisations and therefore signatories should be taken to have approved this in their personal capacity.

This meeting was organised by the Panos Institute, London, in association with the Communication for Social Change Consortium and the Rockefeller Foundation. Financial support was kindly provided by the Rockefeller Foundation. The meeting was one of series of "Frati Dialogues on Media and Social Change" organised at the Rockefeller Foundation's Bellagio Conference Centre in Italy. The meeting built on work carried out at the Global Knowledge Media Forum, a joint activity between Panos and the Global Knowledge Partnership.

For further information, please contact Kitty Warnock (conference organiser) at the Panos Institute (kittyw@panoslondon.org.uk).