

Addressing Communication and Information Poverty in the Context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGS)

Abordando la pobreza de comunicación e información en el contexto de los objetivos de desarrollo sostenible (ODS)

Enfrentando a pobreza da comunicação e da informação no contexto dos objetivos do desenvolvimento sustentável (ODS)

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Abstract: Drawing on learnings from WACC consultations with 92 organizations and academic institutions working on communication-related issues, this document examines the United Nations' 2030 Agenda from a communication rights perspective.

Keywords:

communication; development; sustainable development goals; social change

Resumen: Basándose en los aprendizajes de consultas de la WACC con 92 organizaciones de la sociedad civil e instituciones académicas que trabajan en cuestiones relacionadas con la comunicación, este documento examina la Agenda 2030 de las Naciones Unidas desde una perspectiva de los derechos a la comunicación.

Palabras clave:

comunicación; desarrollo; objetivos desarrollo sostenible; cambio social

Resumo: Com base nas aprendizagens das consultas da WACC com 92 organizações da sociedade civil e instituições acadêmicas trabalhando em questões relacionadas à comunicação, este documento examina a Agenda 2030 das Nações Unidas sob a perspectiva do direito à comunicação.

Palavras-chave:

comunicação; desenvolvimento; objetivos desenvolvimento sustentável; mudança social

1. Introduction

Millions of people on every continent lack access to communication platforms, are underrepresented or misrepresented in the media, have low levels of media literacy, have limited access to relevant and accurate information and knowledge, are excluded from participation in decision-making processes, and live in contexts with limited media freedom. These issues can be encapsulated as communication and information poverty, a form of poverty that contributes to people's inability to make themselves heard, one of the most prevalent manifestations of poverty (Narayan et al., 2000).

WACC and its partners around the world believe that addressing these types of communication and information issues is critical in order to achieve the vision of the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. These issues impede people's full participation in development processes, especially for the poorest and most marginalized members of society. This belief echoes the findings of a 2013 report published by the UN Development Group on the post-2015 development agenda, which called for "putting people — their rights, aspirations and opportunities — at the centre of development" (United Nations Development Group, 2013).

Tackling communication and information poverty is not always part of development agendas. This can partly be attributed to the fact that communication and information issues are less tangible than other development priorities, such as food security or access to life-saving medication. Nevertheless, information and communication considerations must be part of development agendas as they help enable the achievement of a range of other development objectives, and can enhance the sustainability of some development outcomes, such as health-related behavioral changes (Sugg, 2016).

The 2030 United Nation's 2030 Agenda does shed light on a number of communication and information issues. For example, SDG 5 highlights the importance of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) as tools for women's empowerment, while SDG 9 promotes universal internet access. ICTs are also mentioned in SDG 4 and SDG 17. SDG 16 calls attention to the importance of access to public information legislation and to the imperative of protecting journalists and human rights defenders.

Despite this progress, WACC and its partners believe that further integration of communication and information issues into the SDGs would have strengthened the vision of Agenda 2030. While it is clearly no longer possible to suggest changes to the SDGs, we believe that it is indeed possible to integrate communication and information issues into the implementation of programs aimed at advancing a number of Goals.

This document, the condensed version of a more in-depth framework on communication and information poverty and the SDGs, is the result of a process that involved consultations with 92 of WACC's partners around the world. It presents a series of recommendations to address communication and information poverty in relation to SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure) & SDG 17 (Partnership for Goals), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions).

2. Why Communication?

2.1 Communication and information poverty

Communication and information poverty, a form of poverty that goes hand-in-hand with economic and social poverty, needs to be addressed in order to achieve sustainable development. Communication and information are "essential conditions for development and affect every aspect of life. [Therefore], communication and information poverty, despite being only one dimension of poverty, affects all other dimensions" (Daza et al. 2007). The drafting of this document was guided by an understanding of communication and information poverty as arising from structural deficits that prevent people from fully participating in decision-making processes about issues that affect their lives.

Key manifestations of communication and information poverty identified during the consultation process include: lack of access to communication platforms to meaningfully raise concerns about issues that affect one's life; under/misrepresentation in media content;

low levels of media literacy; limited access to relevant information, including public information; exclusion from decision-making processes; restrictions to freedom of expression, association and assembly; and the absence of an independent, inclusive, and pluralistic media sector.

2.2 Communication and information poverty

The relationship between communication and development has taken many forms over the years, though the notion of communication and information poverty has not always been at the center of this exchange.

Two main approaches have historically shaped the role of communication in development. On the one hand is an understanding of communication as a linear process of information transmission that causes social change in terms of knowledge, attitudes and behaviors (Servaes, 2006). This understanding is connected to the view of development as modernization, which emphasizes the replication of Western paths to progress. This approach tends to overlook issues of local culture, local access to media, and people's ability to participate in decision-making.

On the other hand, there is the view that 'communication is a complex process that is linked to culture, and that is connected to global and local economic, political, and ideological structures. This idea is conceptually linked to views of development as the empowerment of marginalized communities and challenging power relationships (ibid) (Melkote and Steeves, 2001). This approach tends to understand communication and information from a rights-based perspective and addresses key communication and information poverty issues such as the existence of platforms for genuine participation, media literacy, and cultural and linguistic relevance.

Today, there is growing consensus that communication-based development interventions should abide by principles such as inclusion, locally-driven development, gender equality, community empowerment, participation, and respect for human rights. This evolution in the field reflects the increasing acceptance of the need to address key communication and information poverty issues in order to achieve meaningful change through communication and information-based development interventions.

2.3 A rights-based view of communication

WACC and its partners believe that addressing communication and information poverty through development interventions should be done from a rights-based perspective. A rights-based approach provides development practitioners with a common lens to understand and address communication and information issues.

The right to freedom of expression, enshrined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948), is the starting point to taking a rights-based approach to communication and information. “It is regarded as a central pillar of democracy, protecting the right to call our rulers to account, vital to preventing censorship, an indispensable condition of effective and free media” (CRIS Campaign, 2005). However, power among people in any given society both enables and limits access to information and communication, which may in some cases undermine freedom of expression.

As a result, the right to freedom of expression is best guaranteed when promoted *alongside* a number of other rights. This is particularly important today, as communication ecosystems are becoming increasingly complex due to rapid technological change, different levels of access to platforms, multi-layered and often transnational media governance processes, growing dependence on digital technology, and the emergence of media as a key space to advance inclusion and social change (Couldry and Rodriguez, 2015).

Other rights that help “construct the environment in which freedom of expression may be fully consummated” include “a right to participate in one's own culture and language, to enjoy the benefits of science, to information, to education, to participation in governance, to privacy, to peaceful assembly, to the protection of one's reputation” (CRIS Campaign, 2005, pg. 23) all of which are part of the International Bill of Rights (OHCHR, 2003). Other crucial elements include diversity of media content and ownership, press freedom, diverse and independent media, and democratic access to media (CRIS Campaign, 2005).

And last, but certainly not least in today's digital age, there are vital questions to address around the need for strong legal standards for data protection and data security; privacy; and reliable and affordable connectivity via global net neutrality. In addition, the development of artificial intelligence (AI) raises what AccessNow (2017) describes as “some of the most challenging issues of the 21st century for human rights, ethics, accountability, transparency, and innovation.”

3. How communication poverty undermines the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Transforming our World: Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development is the United Nations framework for development between 2015 and 2030. It is a universal agenda, including both developed and developing countries, that seeks to balance economic growth, environmental sustainability, peace, and human development. It sets 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) dealing with a wide range of development issues.

WACC and its partners maintain that the vision of Agenda 2030 cannot be achieved unless communication and information ecosystems enable people to participate in decision-making related to sustainable development. During the consultation process that led to the drafting of this document, WACC and its partners identified SDGs 5, SDG 9, SDG 16, and SDG 17 as the Goals where the intersection with communication and information poverty is most evident.

3.1 SDG 5 - Gender equality

Agenda 2030 recognizes the importance of addressing gender inequality as a central component of achieving sustainable development. Goal 5 seeks to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls; its 9 Targets and 14 indicators address critical gender issues such as discrimination against women and girls, violence against women and girls, harmful practices such as early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation, women's unpaid work, women's access to economic resources, and access to sexual and reproductive health, among others.

Gender inequality is a key dimension of Communication and information poverty because gender issues affect how women and girls are represented in the media, have access to media platforms, and gain information and knowledge. Gender inequality also undermines the ability of women and girls to exercise their right to freedom of expression, which in turn prevents them from fully participating in decision-making processes about matters that affect their lives.

Four targets in particular under Goal 5 highlight the relationship between communication and information poverty and gender equality. The first being **Target 5.1**.

End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere. As WACC's own research has shown (Macharia et al. 2015), women are under and misrepresented in media content, a form of discrimination that exacerbates, perpetuates, and normalizes other forms of discrimination against women and girls.

The second target under Goal 5 is **Target 5.2. Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public sphere, including trafficking and other types of exploitation.** Many women and girls around the world face violence when exercising their right to freedom of expression. This is particularly the case for women journalists, as many face gender-based violence at work according to a 2017 survey from the International Federation of Journalists (International Federation of Journalists, 2017).

The third target under Goal 5 is **Target 5.5: Ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life.** The link to communication and information issues is evident as women need to have access to communication platforms and to relevant information in order to enjoy full and effective participation. The reference to equal opportunities for leadership, also reflected in indicator 5.5.2, is also important as it reinforces the need to promote women's leadership within the media sector.

The fourth target under goal 5 is **Target 5.B: Enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology, to promote the empowerment of women.** As mentioned earlier, one of the key manifestations of communication and information poverty is the limited access to communication platforms and resources. Having greater access to a mobile phone, as Indicator 5.B.1 for this Target states, would certainly help address a number of communication and information needs for many women.

Working towards the achievement of these targets is critical to help address communication and information poverty as experienced by women and girls. Nevertheless, as the 2015 Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) report argues, there is significant work to be done to promote gender equality in the media and communication. Despite considerable efforts by activists, allies in the media, media training institutions and others, achieving gender equality in and through the media remains a formidable task. The

GMMP's statistical evidence points to a loss of traction in narrowing media gender disparities over the past decade and regression on some indicators (Macharia et al, 2015).

At the same time, public awareness about the relationship between communication, gender, and development has grown in recent years. For example, the UNESCO-led Global Alliance for Media and Gender (GAMAG) was founded in 2013 to accelerate the implementation of recommendations on 'Women and the Media' contained in Section 'J' of the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action. Similarly, the 62nd session of the Commission on the Status of Women, held in 2018, had as its review theme the "Participation in and access of women to the media, and information and communications technologies and their impact on and use as an instrument for the advancement and empowerment of women".

WACC and its partners applaud the inclusion of Targets related to communication and information issues within Sustainable Development Goal 5. However, WACC and its partners calls on donor governments, national governments, international institutions, and civil society, to:

- Recognize that gender inequality has an impact on the way people access communication and information, which in turn limits their ability to improve their lives.;
- Support initiatives to enable and enhance women and girls' ability to participate in development processes, including access to media platforms and opportunities for women's groups to establish their own media;
- Strengthen research and advocacy related to the representation of women and girls in media content;
- Promote women and girls' access to learning opportunities about media literacy, particularly in relation SDG 4 (Quality Education);
- Promote wide access to public information, particularly in ways that take into account the gendered dimension of access to information;
- Support efforts to make all media outlets "safe spaces" for women and girls;
- Promote and strengthen networks of media professionals working for gender equality;
- Encourage the recognition of the work of women through public communication via traditional and digital media platforms;

- Support efforts to tackle patriarchal cultural practices and social norms at all levels, particularly at the grassroots level, through media and communication;
- Build the capacity of women and women's rights organizations, particularly at the grassroots level, to articulate the ways in which women experience gender inequality;
- Support media training of women to help enable their participation in the media sector as journalists, editors, and managers;
- Help eliminate gender stereotypes and hate speech from public media, and continually promote gender equality in the media;
- Incorporate gender-sensitivity, local history and cultural diversity in the education and training of professionals in the field of communications in order to increase gender sensitivity of reporting and help eliminate misogynist media content;
- Ensure freedom of expression for women and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender groups;
- Strengthen the visibility of women and girls from marginalized groups and their ability to be part of media content production and news making; and
- Develop and promote media tools for gender sensitive reporting (gender sensitive language, databases of experts, journalist codes) and continually monitor implementation.

3.2. SDG 9 - Industry, innovation, and infrastructure & SDG 17 - Partnership for the goals

In the United Nation's 2030 Agenda SDGs 9 and 17 recognize the need to enable people everywhere to benefit from access to the internet and to mobile telephony. This represents undeniable progress from a communication and information perspective as increased access to relevant technology can help equip people with the tools to participate in the information society, have their voices heard, and contribute to the production and dissemination of knowledge. This is especially relevant as it is estimated that about 3 billion people today lack access to the internet and about 2 billion do not have access to a mobile phone (We Are Social, 2018).

Goal 9 highlights the issue of access to Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and the Internet under **Target 9.C - "Significantly increase access to information and communications technology and strive to provide universal and affordable access to the Internet in least developed countries by 2020.** For national governments, this Goal

reinforces their obligation to provide universal access to basic telecommunication services to their citizens, including to those living in remote areas. It also creates an opportunity to promote more democratic models for the development and ownership of communication infrastructure, as exemplified by community-managed telecommunication company *Telecomunicaciones Indígenas Comunitarias* (TIC) in Oaxaca, Mexico (Ó Siochrú, 2017) (Lakhani, 2016).

Goal 17 focuses on the finance, technology, capacity, trade, effectiveness, monitoring issues related to the implementation of Agenda 2030. Under the “technology” Target area of this SDG, two Targets focus on internet access. **Target 17.6 -Enhance North-South, South-South and triangular regional and international cooperation on and access to science, technology and innovation, Indicator 17.6.2 Fixed Internet broadband subscriptions per 100 inhabitants, by speed;** and **Target 17.8 Fully operationalize the technology bank and science, technology and innovation capacity-building mechanism for least developed countries by 2017 and enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology, Indicator 17.8.1 Proportion of individuals using the Internet.** Increased access to the internet can have a significant impact on communication and information needs, especially at the grassroots level (Rey Moreno, 2017), particularly as access to services in many parts of the world is increasingly internet-mediated.

WACC applauds the focus on access to ICTs and Internet services in Agenda 2030. Nevertheless, WACC and its partners believe that at a time when digital communication is becoming increasingly prevalent and policymakers in many countries are developing the digital infrastructure and governance models of the future, it is critical to move beyond the mere celebration of access in order to address more structural issues. Questions about human rights, ownership, regulation, privacy, and illegal surveillance of civil society actors must be central elements of the conversation about ICTs in development. Some of these issues have been raised by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression, Mr. David Kaye (2015, 2016, 2017), in his office’s reports.

Furthermore, greater access to the internet and digital platforms alone will not be sufficient to contribute to sustainable development. It is essential to promote the use of

these new tools in such a way that communities most often excluded achieve greater participation and that helps create the political will in public opinion to implement public policies that contribute to greater equity and inclusion. This use of digital platforms must occur within a framework of rights that help generate genuine opportunities for free and informed participation to promote true sustainable development.

WACC and its partners call on donor governments, national governments, international institutions, and civil society, to

- Support community-initiated efforts to develop and/or manage telecommunications infrastructure in order to increase access to mobile telephony and internet services;
- Develop and implement policies to ensure that digital communication stakeholders abide by existing human rights frameworks. This is especially important as innovations in digital communication continue to emerge in a rapidly changing communication ecosystem;
- Encourage public conversations around ethics in relation to digital communication;
- Promote initiatives that link established community media platforms to ICTs, especially in ways that promote interactivity and participation;
- Facilitate the formation of networks of citizen communicators and journalists belonging to marginalized communities and social movements;
- Advance research about the relationship between access to ICTs, community participation, and development;
- Promote inter-sectoral partnerships to address violations of human rights online, such as online violence and illegal surveillance;
- Develop digital media production training for marginalized and excluded communities, including women and girls;
- Support digital media literacy among the marginalized and excluded communities, including women and girls;
- Build the capacity of marginalized and excluded communities, including women and girls, to develop and use open-source software;
- Build the capacity of civil society organizations to participate in policy making processes related to communication infrastructure, policy, and digital rights; and Promote digital tools that help enable community participation in decision-making.

3.2 SDG 16 - Peace, justice, and strong institutions

The 2030 Agenda, within the framework of Goal 16 recognizes that democracy, good governance and the rule of law play a fundamental role in achieving sustainable development. Open and democratic access to communication and information underpins the achievement of all these objectives as it can help promote social inclusion, peaceful conflict resolution, advance the rule of law, shed light on corruption, promote trust in institutions, and enable participation. It is also directly linked to fundamental freedoms such as freedom of expression and freedom of association. A number of Targets within this goal have a direct link to communication and information issues.

Target 16.1 Significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere is strongly linked to media and communication issues. Open and trust-based communication has the potential to help ameliorate conflict situations, promote a culture of dialogue, and advance non-violent conflict resolution. Peace-oriented media can also create spaces for meaningful exchange among perceived adversaries. Responsible and ethical media coverage of conflict can help counter hate speech, change perceptions and behaviours, and ensure access to information on conflict prevention.

Target 16.3 Promote the rule of law at the national and international levels and ensure equal access to justice for all is intimately linked to information and communication issues. Media freedom, access to information, and freedom of expression is essential to keep institutions, including justice institutions, in check, as well as to promote trust in the justice system.

Target 16.5 Substantially reduce corruption and bribery in all their forms has a strong relationship to media freedom issues, as media outlets and investigative journalists need the necessary protection and safeguards to ensure they can carry out their work effectively. It would be difficult to reduce corruption when the media is concentrated in a few hands and journalists do not have the freedom to investigate cases of corruption.

In relation to **Target 16.6 Develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels**, it is clear that freedom of information and other communication rights are essential to promote transparency and accountability within public institutions. The media must reflect the views of all sectors of society, especially the views of the most

disadvantaged people in society, in order to achieve greater transparency and effectiveness within public institutions.

Target 16.7 Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels has multiple connections to communication and information issues. An essential element of exercising communication rights is the opportunity for people to participate in decision-making, especially in relation to issues that directly affect their lives. This requires access to information, particularly public information. People must also be able to exercise their right to freedom of expression, have access to relevant means of communication, and be guaranteed their right of reply and redress. People also have the right to participate in the “formulation and governance of the communication sphere... at the national level, but also in the context of international relations” (CRIS Campaign, 2005, pg. 42).

Target 16.10 Ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements has numerous connections to communication and information issues. The two Indicators under this Target reflect that: **Indicator 16.10.1 Number of verified cases of killing, kidnapping, enforced disappearance, arbitrary detention and torture of journalists, associated media personnel, trade unionists and human rights advocates in the previous 12 months** and **Indicator 16.10.2 Number of countries that adopt and implement constitutional, statutory and/or policy guarantees for public access to information**. The inclusion of this Target and Indicators in Agenda 2030 is commendable. Even as an indicator related to freedom of expression would have strengthened this Target, especially related to the reference to “fundamental freedoms”, this Target is still central for all those working on addressing communication and information poverty.

Target 16.B. Promote and enforce non-discriminatory laws and policies for sustainable development can also be examined from a communication and information perspective. Numerous groups in society face discrimination and other barriers in relation to communication and information. For example, many indigenous people are unable to access public information in their language, preventing them from participating in society.

In sum, the explicit references to communication and information issues within Goal 16 are limited to access to public information and to the protection of journalists and other

human rights defenders. In this sense, the Goal fails to reference pivotal issues such as freedom of expression, linguistic rights, and media concentration that are strongly related to peace, justice, and strong institutions. Nevertheless, the many instances in which communication and information issues implicitly intersect with the Targets of SDG 16, as listed above, represent valuable opportunities for those working to address communication and information poverty. These intersections allow groups working in fields such as community media, media monitoring, advocacy on access to information, participatory communication, and citizen journalism to make direct links to specific SDGs in order to highlight the importance of their work and to gain broader support for their work.

WACC and its partners call on donor governments, national governments, international institutions, and civil society, to:

- At the national level, support an audit of existing communication and information laws and regulations in order to identify systemic policy and legal issues that undermine the rule of law, the struggle against corruption, trust-based relationships between citizens and institutions, participatory decision-making, fundamental freedoms, and the fight against discrimination;
- At the national level, convene a summit of key stakeholders (civil society, public sector, media and communication organizations) to discuss communication and information poverty issues based on the national audit described above;
- Develop awareness-raising campaigns about the ways in which communication and information poverty undermines peace, justice, and strong institutions;
- Support community media, particularly community radio, as it can be an effective communication platform to enable individuals and communities to participate in decision-making and access relevant information;
- Protect journalists and media workers, including those linked to community media outlets, most of whom lack the support of established media organizations;
- Strengthen the role of independent public service media as one of the cornerstones of a diverse and pluralistic media systems;
- Support the integration of media literacy into education systems, including adult education initiatives, in order to equip people with the knowledge and skills to demand accountable institutions and be able to participate in decision-making;

- Support interpersonal communication efforts for development. Peace, access to justice, and more productive relationships between citizens and institutions can be greatly advanced through interpersonal communication processes;

- Highlight the experience of marginalized communities in public communication from a pluralistic perspective. This can help to address under and misrepresentation, a phenomenon that undermines peaceful coexistence, fair treatment, and social cohesion;

- Build the strategic communications capacity of civil society organizations in order to enable them to better effect change;

- Promote a diverse, open, free, accountable, and democratic media system;

- Defend the rights of freedom of assembly and association, including in online spaces, in order to enable people to participate in decision-making, hold institutions and decision-makers to account, and advance human rights; and

Build the capacity of civil society organizations to participate in policy-making processes, particularly in relation to communication and information issues

4. Conclusions

As the world of communication continues to change, and as development issues such as climate change and inequality continue to challenge us, we must remember that communication and information issues, particularly when examined from a rights-based perspective, are intrinsically connected to human dignity. In practice, this entails working together to ensure that those who suffer marginalization and exclusion, and whose voices should be at the heart of any effort to advance sustainable development, are able to participate in the decision-making processes that will ultimately affect their lives.

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