

The Declaration of the Afghanistan Media and Civil Society Forum

“Media is Development: Afghanistan Media and Civil Society Forum” provided the first all-Afghan platform for civil society and media representatives to discuss their role in the Afghan process in the presence of and with participation of representatives of government, donor and regional and international organizations;

We the representatives of media and civil society met as Afghanistan faced the possibility of regressing, fully aware that the process could be accentuated in the absence of Afghan-led confidence-building efforts facilitated by the media and civil society, and conscious of the need to build stronger partnerships in the country and beyond national borders. The meeting was also an opportunity to discuss the Mass Media Law being debated in parliament and to provide inputs to the committee debating the amendments;

We discussed the role played by the media and civil society and the challenges they still face in their quest to facilitate a smooth transformation of the war-torn country towards a democracy rooted in the social and cultural specificities of Afghanistan; and

We dedicate this unique Forum to the media and civil society workers who have lost their lives in Afghanistan and around the world in their quest to improve the lives of others.

We affirm that

The conference slogan, “Media *is* Development”, embodies the ultimate truth and that there can be no democracy or development unless the voices of all sectors are reported and disseminated in order to contribute in the decision-making process;

Local ownership, sustained production and dissemination of Afghan content can contribute towards enriching the debate for deepening democracy and development;

Media has been facilitating nationwide, regional and international dialogue needed for informing and building public opinion for facilitating the changes taking place, and will be better able to perform this role as its capacity is enhanced;

The Afghan civil society has played a substantial role in the reconstruction of Afghanistan, working in one of the most hostile environments in the world, while much of their social, economic and political contribution and impact remains unrecognized or ignored;

Both the media and civil society need to improve their ability to communicate and support each other in communicating the experiences of civil society

organizations by developing appropriate skills and access to tools for improving dialogue among themselves, with their communities and other stakeholders in the Afghan process;

The civil society and media are both constituents and change agents in the Afghan process and also a source of information, knowledge and opinion that comprises the collective voice of the Afghan people;

The media and civil society must cooperate and assist each other in the collection, articulation and dissemination of information, knowledge and opinions of Afghan society for ensuring that the reconstruction underway will lead to a stable society;

The Afghan government, parliament and the international community need to recognize civil society and media as social and political constituents of the Afghan process for ensuring democracy, pluralistic development, good governance and accountability; and

Both media and civil society can perform best only in an enabling environment created through policy and legal frameworks that cherish and support free flow of information and plurality of opinions and ideas;

There can be no restrictions in the constitutional right of the Afghan people to be informed, and inform;

All state, government, international military forces and opposition groups are duty bound at all times to respect the independent nature of journalism and refrain from threatening or restraining their activities.

We conclude that...

There is no alternative to free flow of information and ideas in a democracy because this is the basis for informed dialogue for participation and ownership of development;

The Afghan process and development must be based on dialogue using a broad range of tools and methods for listening to others, building trust, sharing knowledge and skills, preparing policies, debating and learning for sustained and meaningful change;

Civil society institutions provide the forum where people can participate in decisions that affect their lives; the media can take this dialogue beyond the immediate locality and involve larger society in the development process;

The civil society needs to better exploit the opportunities to communicate within their constituencies and outside and within the media sector, there is need for enabling media managers and editors to take on greater roles in leading their sectors for improving reportage on Afghanistan.

We commit to...

Organize this Forum at least once every year to evaluate progress and discuss ways to address new challenges;

Develop a Code of Conduct for media to self-regulate the production and dissemination of content and to abide by the code;

Work towards the institutionalization of the Afghan Media and Civil Society Forum to follow-up on progress and engage in dialogue with the government and parliament and the international community on issues affecting media and civil society;

Expand and enrich the partnerships developed among Afghan media organizations and their international partners in the past and work towards joint programs for media development and for enhancing Afghan influence in international coverage;

Seek means needed to improve awareness and skills of journalists and media managers and to develop the communication skills of the civil society organizations through a capacity building process that is locally owned and empowering.

And recommend

The creation of a policy and legal environment that guarantees freedom of the press, independent regulation and the creation of a Public Service Broadcaster to support and encourage increased engagement of media and civil society for taking Afghanistan towards peace, democracy and development;

That all sides involved in armed conflict must protect and respect journalists' freedom and facilitate their activities where possible, while at the same time ensure the immediate release of those in captivity; and

The recognition of the media as an involved and important partner in the Afghan process as first step towards the creation of a Special Fund for supporting its development and growth.

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