

Burma Media Conference

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**Speech by Thomas Hughes, IMS Deputy Director on
Media Development, Press Freedom and Partnerships**

1. Introduction

I've been asked today to speak about the IMS approach to media development, and will focus on the important inter-linkage between media development and press freedom, as well as benefits of the creation of strategic partnerships.

There is an increasing body of literature on media development and peace-building. Only last year saw the publication of the World Bank's CommGAP report called 'Towards a New Model: Media and Communication in Post-Conflict and Fragile States', which uses the O'TI experiences as a basis for outlining some lessons learnt. In October, the United States Institute for Peace published a briefing paper entitled 'Media, Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding: Mapping the Edges', which focuses on different types of content and the need for regulation. Many frameworks for assessing media development, including those used by IMS, take similar structures based around the core areas of content and professional standards, infrastructure, policy, and networks/ institutions. Although publications like these contribute to the wider debate, I think there is one crucial issue missing which is press freedom.

Press freedom or 'Freedom of Expression spaces' are a necessary precursor for media development, ranging from infrastructure support to professional training. Without such freedoms, these activities will have a significantly reduced impact and not produce substantive results. In this context, too often standard media development activities, such as training, are taken from transitional and democratisation contexts and 'reused' in societies with severe press freedom restrictions, where the media is unable to use the skills and resources they are given.

Unless the local media are able to freely communicate with the public, they will not be able to play their role as the fourth estate. Any support given to them is therefore 'preparation in waiting' for a time when they can write and say what they wish. If the goal is to bring broader dialogue and greater awareness to a society, then there must be press freedom. In some regards this perspective is a 'rights based approach' to media development.

Discussions around media development do often focus more on content than structure. This mainly concerns Communication for Development or Behaviour Change Communication, such as generating dialogue around development goals, raising awareness, and encouraging long-term behaviour change. The majority of donor funding is reportedly spent on this field, rather than structural support to independent media or press freedom activities.

The second premise I want to raise today is the need for ever closer coordination amongst national and international actors working on supporting the media on a country by country context. Such coordination and division of work amongst specialised actors increases impact and reduces duplication.

2. Press Freedom

The defence of freedom of expression and press freedom should be closely linked to supporting media in conflict or under censorship. In this regard, to advocate for press freedom at the national and international level can both complement and facilitate media support activities through pressing and encouraging authorities to respect these freedoms and create more conducive environments for local media to participate in and carry forward media support activities at the grass-roots level.

Where state repression of press freedom is particularly harsh, advocacy activities at the international level may also be the most productive approach for pursuing change and demonstrating support for the national media community.

However, the interaction between the press freedom community and media development community is not clearly established or functional. Traditional thinking dictates that where the work of the press freedom group ends (i.e. with the improvement of the press freedom environment), so begins the work of the media development group (i.e. to develop the media through strengthening professional skills and technical resources). Such a view is to simplify the complex relationship between the two fields, where more often than not the two overlap and fluid interaction between them is required.

As a media support organisation with a focus on short-term activities in severe conditions where press freedom is likely to be most weak, IMS tries to span the two fields thereby tying the monitoring and rapid reaction required for dealing with press freedom together with a project based approaches for longer-term development. In this regard, IMS seeks to explore options beyond alerts and public awareness campaigns through combining such activities with media support and development activities.

The media community's role in crisis and conflict situations are also numerous and an often less discussed aspect is the role that the media plays as an element in civil society. In this context the media community, like any other professional body such as teachers or lawyers, have also in the past been a driving force for the defence of press freedoms and broader democratic rights through their own advocacy efforts, including public demonstrations.

A typical IMS advocacy activity might include creating a partnership or grouping around a specific country context, facilitating a joint mission to the country to undertake advocacy and explore project activities to support that advocacy process, partake in any subsequent joint press freedom monitoring and encourage longer-term engagement in the country by national and international partners.

3. Partnerships

Furthermore, where conditions of conflict and severe human insecurity exist it is likely that a complex range of challenges are present. In situations characterized by the widespread degeneration of a media environment, it is often not possible to address one issue in isolation without also tackling other interlinked issues.

If single interventions are therefore to be successful, they have to be part of a broader multi-track approach demanding coordinated action by national and international organisations. To combine expertise and funding can create greater effectiveness and impact than if individual organisations work alone. In addition, collective approaches to donors can help highlight needs more convincingly and secure funding for the immediate and longer terms.

If one is seeking to raise awareness and influence change through advocacy and lobbying activities, then combined approaches will also invariably carry more weight. Moreover, advocacy requires sustained vigilance and rapid responses, so ‘sharing’ the workload can allow for sustained focus.

IMS seeks to build partnerships around specific issues, countries and regions. However, we do not act solely as a coordinating entity, but also pursues activities within the context of the country or region in question.

A typical partnership approach may involve identifying a situation that requires a multi-track approach, establishing dialogue to canvas support amongst both national and international organisations, coordinating an assessment or lobbying mission, publishing a report outlining the mission findings and recommendations, working together with partner organisations to design and implement project-based activities, calling for periodic coordination meetings, and helping to source funding options for other the involved organisations.

The dynamic and flexible funding structure of IMS also makes us well suited to facilitating partnerships, because small-scale funding can be quickly sourced to assist other organisations allowing them to participate in joint missions and paving the way for longer-term engagements through their own funding channels.

4. Nepal and Sri Lanka: Case Examples

In both Nepal and Sri Lanka, IMS has become involved in press freedom as a precursor for any substantive support to the media, as well as sought to coordinate a wider group to maximise the impact. This has taken place under the umbrella of the International Press Freedom Mission.

In Nepal this group started off as a response to the Royal coup in 2005 and was actively engaged on press freedom issues up until the Rhododendron revolution one and a half years later. Now the group is more focused on longer-term media support activities.

In Sri Lanka, this group is even now increasing its efforts in response to the deteriorating press freedom situation, marked by the increasing attacks on media and self-censorship.

The actions of this group in both countries have followed similar patterns. In this regard, the components for the joint actions taken in both countries have consisted on the following points:

1. National advocacy based around missions and support to local media and FoE advocates
2. Regional and international advocacy, that includes lobbying donor governments and multilateral organisations
3. Safety for journalists working inside of the country
4. Support to journalists and FoE advocates forced into exile
5. Support to alternative information flows and independent media

5. Priorities for Burma

Processes targeting press freedom in conjunction with media development are underway in a number of countries, and this is something that can be utilised in Burma as well.

Although the outright pursuit of press freedom in Burma at the moment would be hard, it is nevertheless important that until press freedom exists within the country, there must be a focus on supporting those exiled media able to produce independent content and that this support must be predictable and long-term to allow these media to plan for the future to improve both the standards of their content and the delivery mechanisms, as well as to improve their own income generating activities.

Press freedoms must also be kept high on the agenda of ASEAN, the UN and the wider international community so that when demands are made of the Junta that press freedoms are amongst the key issues.

FoE spaces within Burma also need to be supported and further expanded where ever possible to ensure those within the country that want to contribute to the debate can do so, both through producing their own content, as well as being able to access independent content form other sources.