

Media *is* Development: Afghanistan Media and Civil Society Forum

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(Organizers: The Killid Group and IPS-Inter Press Service)

Speech by Dr Hansjörg Kretschmer

I commend the Killid Group and IPS for this opportunity for representatives of the International Community and stakeholders from within the country to address the role of media and civil society in Afghanistan and their relevance for the development process.

Civil Society and media are key to any development process through their function of advocacy, transparency, education, contribution to finding solutions, engaging the people which must be part of the process in order to make it a success. The role of the people in this political process cannot be limited to casting a vote once every four or five years.

Equally, civil society and media are an essential element of good governance, through the raising of important issues, stimulating debate, searching for solutions, and holding office holders accountable.

That is our conviction and we have come to this country to help the citizens of Afghanistan and their representatives to build a stable, peaceful country, a country its citizens can be proud of, a country the authorities of which in the eyes of its citizens have legitimacy because they are seen to care, effectively to offer essential services such as security, health and education and a viable framework for licit economic activity. And media and civil society play an important role here, they permit citizens to voice their concerns and engage in debate with their authorities. The existence of 50 private radio and 11 private TV stations licensed in Afghanistan is a sign that this has been understood.

I suppose, these concepts and ideas with which we are so familiar in our "Western" countries are relatively new in Afghanistan, and I know that we have to be careful and sufficiently sensitive not to try to impose our models on a country which obviously has very different values, traditions, customs and way of thinking from our Western ones. On the other hand, the achievements which we have seen after 2002, a progressive constitution which offers the possibility to found civil society organisations and guarantees the freedom of expression, the election of a President and Parliament and setting up of a responsible and responsive government are absolutely admirable and very encouraging, given the recent history and the short time span since 2002.

These institutions are the very base of a functioning democratic system which the Afghan people have engaged in establishing and which we are here to support.

While we can see that democratic principles are beginning to take root, our advice to our Afghan partners is to devise a media law which further supports this process of democratisation. There can be no true democracy without freedom of the media and absence of censorship. But, as I said, we have to proceed carefully here.

Although I am aware of the problems of such a distinction in practice, I would distinguish between freedom of the media in terms of voicing political opinions and discussing issues of public interest, also of criticising policies or the general state of affairs, where liberalisation has happened and must continue, and issues relating to morals, traditions, customs. I personally would accept that in this latter respect, liberalisation may come but if it comes it will be gradually and should not be forced. Lack of respect for a culture and deep rooted traditions and feelings would probably cause a serious back lash.

But irrespective of this distinction, any oversight over the media should be exercised by bodies representative of Afghan society, including civil society, religion, parliamentarians, academics etc., and not by the government or even an individual Ministry. Governments have inevitably the tendency to promote their policies and to make them immune from criticism and that would be contrary to any democratic spirit. Any oversight by whomever should respect, however, the paramount right of freedom of expression which is key to any democratic political process.

I should like to mention here the provision on 'prohibited broadcasts' in the draft media law: it contains vague formulas like: "information disrupting public opinion". These carry a big risk for the freedom of expression and the media. Restrictions exist everywhere but they are more precisely defined and subject of a set of refined jurisprudence under the auspices of the high value of freedom of expression. Special care is necessary here.

The European Commission has in many countries helped to establish a viable media scene through technical assistance and financial support. We have supported private media where these were under threat to be closed down or silenced, and we have supported public broadcasters, including here in Afghanistan.

And it is in this respect that we hope we can continue to be engaged here, based on valuable experience in other countries: I personally have gained experience in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where we supported the establishment of a new type of public broadcaster.

Of course no country is strictly comparable to another. However the conversion of a state broadcaster run by government to a public service broadcaster (PSB) which we did so successfully in Bosnia and Herzegovina could in my view only have positive effects in Afghanistan in the sense of strengthening the democratic process, enabling nation wide engagement of citizens in public debate about the country's political, economic and social future.

We would therefore like to help transform RTA into an effective and editorially robust PSB, catering for the diverse educational, entertainment and information needs of the audience across the country. This broadcaster should account for the diversity and

cultures of the people and act as a means of communication across sectors regardless of ethnicity, gender, religion or race.

We consider that a strong PSB would play a vital role in the national reconstruction process - explaining the new political system to the people, reporting on government policies and agendas and ensuring that politicians and government authorities respond to citizens' needs and priorities. While all media in principle can help in conflict resolution through dialogue and the nurturing of a public sphere, and foster understanding across tribal, political and regional boundaries, spreading the plurality of ideas and opinions, a strong PSB would be the cornerstone of such a process, not being dependent on commercial revenue and not being subject to the editorial policies of the private media owners.

On the path towards such a PSB three important issues have to be settled: Regulatory reform including an enabling media law, engaging with audiences by enhancing Afghan programming output and content in the sectors of education, information and entertainment, and thirdly people development : professional training, leadership, human capacity building.

The European Commission is ready to engage in such a process. A second point regarding the latest draft of the media law I wish to mention here. The body under which the PSB should operate should not be the government or a Ministry, but a body representative of Afghan society as I explained above.

Only if the said diversity is ensured can we speak of a PSB which will be able to operate as an integrating element for this society and thereby as an important contribution to the building of a stable and peaceful Afghanistan to which all its citizens feel loyalty and attachment, which is an objective on which all in this room can probably agree.

Thank you.