

# Media *is* Development

A f g h a n i s t a n M e d i a a n d C i v i l S o c i e t y F o r u m

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## Report of Proceedings



The analysis and views expressed in this report are not necessarily those of The Killid Group or Inter Press Service or the donors who supported the conference.

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## CONTENTS

ABOUT THE KILLID GROUP	v
ABOUT THE IPS – Inter Press Service	ix
FOREWORD	xiii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	xv
ABBREVIATIONS	xvi
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	xvii
FORUM DECLARATION (Excerpt)	xxii
THE STATE OF THE MEDIA IN AFGHANISTAN	1
The media law	2
Broadcast media	2
Media coverage	3
Threats against journalists	4
Sustainability concerns	5
CONCEPT NOTE	7
Background	7
Objectives	10
The process	10
Methods	11
Outputs	12
CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS	13
INAUGURAL SESSION	13
Key messages	13
THE MEDIA FORUM	16
DAY ONE, SESSION A	16
Session A: Brief summary of presentations and discussions:	17

DAY ONE, SESSION B	23
Session-B: Brief summary of presentations and discussions	24
CONCLUDING REMARKS, DAY ONE	28
THE CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM	30
DAY TWO, SESSION C	30
Interaction with ministers	35
CONCLUSIONS	35
DECLARATION OF THE AFGHANISTAN MEDIA AND CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM	36
Appendix I: Content analysis of selected media, August 2006	40
Background	40
General conclusions	41
Comments and recommendations	42
Possible interventions to change the situation	43
Appendix II: List of speakers and participants at the Forum	46
A. Speakers	
Inaugural session	46
SESSION A: State of the Afghan Media	46
SESSION B: Government, donors and the media	46
SESSION C: The Civil Society – Public service providers or conscious but excluded socio-political mediators?	47
B. Government	47
C. Donors/Embassies	48
D. International participants	49
E. Media participants (Kabul-based)	49
F. Media participants (provincial)	50
G. Civil Society participants	50
H. International media - coverage	51
I. Local media - coverage	51

## **ABOUT THE KILLID GROUP**

The Killid Group ([www.thekillidgroup.com](http://www.thekillidgroup.com)) is a public interest initiative of the Development and Humanitarian Services for Afghanistan (DHSA), a registered Afghan not-for-profit, non-governmental organization.

The mission of DHSA and The Killid Group is to significantly improve literacy and educational services and public awareness levels by increasing opportunities for education and access to independent media. TKG's corporate philosophy is to inform, educate, entertain and encourage broad civic participation and accountability through research and communication for development.

DHSA prides itself on more than 15 years of service to the people of Afghanistan. Its highly qualified staff and volunteers have led the design, implementation and evaluation of projects ranging from education and preservation of cultural heritage to social and economic re-integration and infrastructure development.

Since 2002, DHSA has done ground-breaking work in primary education through accelerated learning and training of teachers. Its work in the field of cultural heritage include the rehabilitation of two historic sites in Kabul, the 19th century Bagh-e-Babur Pavilion and Gardens and the 17th century Mullah Mehmood Mosque.

The Killid Group has undertaken major initiatives for the development of independent media, public outreach and communication. DHSA and its media and communication arm – TKG - played a crucial role in civic

education activities during the constitution making process and presidential and parliamentary elections. Our education, media and public outreach and communication work are examples of both our ability to deliver nationally and to deliver quality outputs.

DHSA's media and public communication activities were launched in 2002. TKG owns and operates Radio Killid, broadcasting on 88 FM in Kabul (also reaching neighboring provinces) and Herat. It has over six million listeners. The station also provides content to and re-broadcasts via 30 provincial radio stations reaching many more millions. The group also publishes the country's most popular cultural quarterly magazine, *Sapaida* and two national weeklies. *Killid* (25,000 copies) and *Mursal* (15,000 copies), a women's magazine, reach every province.

*Nye Express* is a key institutional capacity in Afghanistan with nationwide reach distributing, among other products, independent press and media resources. It has capacity to distribute goods in all of Afghanistan's 34 provinces.

In 2005 and 2006 TKG worked with three Afghan media outlets and an international news agency to improve coverage of key development issues in Afghanistan, foster media industry sustainability and break the country's isolation. The initiative was led by TKG. The project partners included Centre for International Journalism (CIJ), *Pajhwak Afghan News* (PAN), *Sayara Media and Communications* and *Inter-Press Service* (IPS). (Details on the project are available at: [http://www.thekillidgroup.com/c/highlights/highlights\\_media\\_capacity.html](http://www.thekillidgroup.com/c/highlights/highlights_media_capacity.html)).

Late last year, TKG successfully completed a one-year media campaign on family/domestic violence alongside other civil society groups. The European Commission supported the project. The activities undertaken by TKG include the production and broadcast of a series of public service announcements and radio dramas, organization of roundtables and publication of special editions of the *Killid* and *Mursal* weeklies aimed at raising awareness on the impact of domestic violence on Afghan society. These outreach programs also suggested ways of addressing the is-

sue both within households and at the community level. The radio programs were broadcast nationwide by Radio Killid and 30 affiliated stations. (Details on the project are available at: [http://www.thekillidgroup.com/c/highlights/highlights\\_domestic\\_violence.html](http://www.thekillidgroup.com/c/highlights/highlights_domestic_violence.html).)

Radio Killid's oral history project "*Afghanistan in the Last Four Decades*" has been on air for nearly two years and continues to be one of the most popular radio programs in the country. The program began with a series of roundtable discussions produced and broadcast by Radio Killid in the run up to the presidential elections of 2004.

The objective is to produce a public record of Afghanistan's recent history, giving all those who participate in the program a chance to share their views and experiences in a way that has never been attempted before. As expected, crimes committed in the past and the need to hold perpetrators to account came out strongly in the discussions. The issues raised prompted us to launch an awareness campaign on transitional justice in partnership with the Afghanistan Justice Project.

Our goal for 2007 is to compile our history programs into a multi-CD collection for national distribution via 30 local and regional radio network partners and the state-owned Radio Afghanistan, thereby maximizing reach – and hopefully the impact. A related plan is to compile the discussions into a multi-volume book, which we hope to make available in Dari, Pashto and English.

In late 2006 TKG produced and broadcast a series of radio programs on transitional justice and accountability for past and continuing human rights abuses. The programs included debates and discussions, mini-dramas, public service announcements and first-hand accounts of the victims of abuse. The project was implemented at a time when neither the international community nor the Afghan government was serious about dealing with and addressing the human rights abuses committed in the past. The project allowed ordinary Afghans to have a say in the process. Through the participation of victims, alleged perpetrators, experts and human rights advocates, the project deconstructed the issues and took

the debate to the ordinary man and woman helping breakdown the suffocating silence on transitional justice.

In 2007 TKG and the Crimes of War Project would be implementing a year-long program to raise awareness on human rights and humanitarian laws. The project is funded by the Open Society Institute and Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC). The project aims to improve the understanding of human rights and international humanitarian law by producing and disseminating content nationally and internationally. The messages would be aimed at reaching journalists, politicians/decision-makers, civil society, human rights defenders and the general public. The overarching goal of the project is to ensure that violators of human rights are made accountable for their (mis)deeds.

## **ABOUT THE IPS – Inter Press Service**

### **Organization**

IPS- Inter Press Service is a non-profit international non governmental organization dedicated to communication and development cooperation. Its core business is a global news agency producing independent news and analysis about events and global processes affecting economic, social and political development, especially in the South.

The approach of IPS journalism is to give specific and overt prominence to the voices of the marginalised and the vulnerable, to reflect the views of civil society, and to mainstream gender in all reporting. Examining the impacts of globalisation and its governance is a priority. IPS puts issues and perspectives usually missing from the global news map onto the agenda.

The IPS audience encompasses media, civil society and the international community, reached both by traditional and new communication mediums, (print, radio, email, Internet and publications). IPS has significant experience of training journalists, and project partnerships with NGOs, social movements and broader civil society.

IPS- Inter Press Service is a registered as an international, not-for-profit non governmental association with its headquarters in Rome, Italy; it has 'general' NGO consultative status with ECOSOC at the United Nations, and the OECD status of "ODA eligible international organization". Its main implementation agency in the media market is the IPS International News Agency, a non-profit co-operative consortium registered in Rome (Italy) with regional desks in Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and North America.

IPS derives income from the market, is a beneficiary of multi-lateral and national development co-operation programmes and receives project financing from NGOs, foundations, the EU, the UN and others.

### **Rationale for the IPS approach**

Being invisible and unheard has long been both a major cause, and effect, of poverty. IPS is convinced that information and communication are essential to effective, accountable and empowering development, and thus contribute directly to poverty reduction.

IPS is about keeping the voices and concerns of the poorest on news agendas, South and North. Strengthening the voices of women is an important dimension of this commitment. Africa is where many of the development challenges are starkest and IPS reflects that.

Good journalism can empower citizens and their leaders to act for change. The public is often ahead of its leaders. Major social changes from ending slavery to bringing down regimes and walls have come about, at least in part, through a critical mass of people power. Polling exercises in both rich and poor countries have revealed that citizens want their governments to be more active in the fight to eradicate poverty. IPS is about informing and involving those citizens so they are equipped to act for change.

Forming strong communication bridges and platforms with civil society is vital as they have a pivotal role in proposing, implementing and critiquing official poverty reduction strategies, and backstopping community efforts.

Making sure that targeted, relevant information reaches the desks of those with power is essential to good decision-making. In this respect IPS makes a critical contribution to good governance and accountability – a key role of free media in any society.

IPS recognises the Millennium Development Goals as an important anchor and reference framework for development reporting. IPS has taken the lead amongst news agencies in developing extensive reporting

strategies, communication products and networks, partnerships and training about the MDGs.

### **IPS Niche**

IPS content within the communication sector is different in the following ways:

The global, daily news service offers wide-spectrum, independent coverage focused on development issues:

- IPS is an independent, international news agency, but almost all of its journalists and editors in the South are actually from the country or region concerned. Many of the staff writing and editing for IPS in the North are from developing countries.
- IPS news is written with a globalised perspective, distinguishing it from other national, local or regional news services.
- IPS gives specific emphasis to reporting the concerns /views of civil society.

IPS has identified a unique set of constituencies and audiences, in order for it to have the maximum impact in its field:

- IPS targets citizens through reaching out through the mass media, and increasingly directly through the Internet.
- IPS targets civil society as a key development actor and bridge between citizen and leader
- IPS targets decision-makers in the international community.

Other media or NGOs target some of these audiences. IPS is innovative in being a professional media organization, with all that implies in terms of the resonance of its material, but it also has a direct relationship with civil society and with decision-makers.

IPS is an actor in media development and supporting free expression:

- IPS organises training workshops for journalists in the South, as well as offering mentoring, internships, on-line training and thematic training manuals. In 2007 IPS is establishing a specific centre of excellence in this field.

- IPS reflects upon and analyses the role of information and communication regionally, globally and within specific forums, and fosters effective and innovative partnerships.
- IPS is a source of independent, professional journalism to free media in the South.

## FOREWORD

Neither democracy nor sustainable development can work unless people are driving the process and feel that they are involved. A free and accessible media can provide the link between the people and state which is needed for enhancing ownership and involvement in the process. This was the philosophy guiding The Killid Group and IPS-Inter Press Service in the organisation of the two-day, “Media is Development - Afghanistan Media and Civil Society Forum.”

The conference had three objectives. We wanted to reflect on the crucial role played by the media and civil society in the democracy-building process in Afghanistan; review the increasingly hostile political and security environment facing the sector; and to flag-off the dangers that could result from a decline in neutral funding for the independent press.

The conference took place at a time when an Afghan media worker, Sayed Agha, had been beheaded by Taliban fighters, while another was still in captivity. Two weeks after the Forum, another media worker Ajmal Naqshbandi was beheaded. These deaths are cruel reminders of how civil society becomes the first victims of war and violence.

There are also other obstacles to carrying out the profession. Independent reporting and verification of facts on the ground have been limited where NATO and the Afghan forces have been fighting the Taliban. Access of Afghan reporters to independent sources of information is also shrinking. As result, no real dialogue for peace-making is taking place as this would require serious discussions and negotiation with the people at all levels of society. Peace therefore may remain a mirage as

long as the parties in conflict continue to harass and threaten civil society, including the messengers - the independent media.

I believe that the conference has succeeded in encouraging a better understanding of how independent media can contribute towards making a better-informed civil society and how the society can help itself in the building of more stable, equitable and peaceful Afghanistan for all its citizens, and for the world.

Shahir Zahine  
Chairman, The Killid Group  
Kabul, Afghanistan  
May 2007

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We are grateful to The Asia Foundation for financial and technical support to the Forum, the European Commission for providing the original funding, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung for sponsoring the report “Content Analysis of Selected Afghan Media,” and UNAMA for providing technical support. We also thank the Steering Committee of the Forum and all speakers and chairpersons, international participants, media and civil society organizations and the government and donor representatives. We would not have been able to organize the Forum without their participation and support.

We also thank our staff, the wonderful people at Killid, including Najiba Ayoubi, Afsana Rahimi, Daad Noorani, Shafi Atal and many others. Outside of Killid, we extend special thanks to Ricardo Grassi, Binod Bhattarai, Massoumeh Torfeh and Roya Aziz.

Finally, we thank the Afghan and international media organizations who were able to see “news” in the effort by media and civil society groups to try to create a fairer and broader working space for all who believe in the freedom of information. The media organizations that believed in our cause and helped us spread the word that need to be specially thanked are IPS, Pajhwak Afghan News, Radio Killid, Killid and Mursal weeklies, RTA, Shamshad TV, Good Morning Afghanistan, Ariana TV, Tolo and Lemar TV, BBC and the VoA.

## ABBREVIATIONS

ADA	Afghanistan Development Association
ANJU	Afghanistan National Journalist Union
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BIA	Bakhtar Information Agency
CHA	Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance
CI	Counterpart International
CIJ	Center for International Journalism
CPAU	Cooperation for Peace and Unity
CSO	Civil Society Organization
EC	European Commission
DHSA	Development and Humanitarian Services for Afghanistan
ERTV	Educational Radio and Television
FES	Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung
IDRC	International Development Research Centre
IPS	Inter Press Service
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
JICA	Japanese International Cooperation Agency
MP	Member of Parliament
MSPA	Media Support Partnership Afghanistan
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	Non Governmental Organizations
OSI	Open Society Institute
PAN	Pajhwak Afghan News
PSM	People's Science Movement
RTA	Radio Television Afghanistan
SAFMA	South Asian Free Media Association
SOAS-LSE	School of African Studies - London School of Economics
TKG	The Killid Group
UNAMA	United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UNESCO	United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization
USAID	US Agency for International Development
VOA	Voice of America

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The independent media is not just an isolated success story in post-Taliban Afghanistan. Instead, it has been the main contributor to all other achievements made in the road to peace after the change in regime in late 2001.

The country's media law remains one of the freest in the region. Afghanistan has dozens of independent broadcast outlets and print publications, and more media companies are entering the market. Still Afghanistan remains one of the world's most insecure places for the media. The insecurity is not only related to threats of physical harm, it is more about sustainability of the media organizations because advertising alone cannot support the media in a country where economic growth has been slow and has a still "hesitant" advertising culture. The independent media continues to be threatened and attacked and various state agencies (including the security forces) have continued to use every means to exert more control on the press. The general lawlessness in a state that is still very weak, and the continuing Taliban insurgency, have also resulted in violence against the media.

After the fall of the Taliban regime, the focus of foreign aid was on providing funds for "quick impact" projects aimed at addressing the short-term communication needs of the donor agencies. Five years later the same donors have cutback direct funding to the independent media which threatens not just the sustainability of the media but also continuity of the communication effort (and the resulting benefits).

The European Commission and USAID are two donors that have dramatically reduced direct funding to the media. The cumulative budget

for supporting the independent media was US\$30 million between 2002 and 2006. Funding had been cut down to US\$6 million for the period between 2007 and 2010 – a 80 percent reduction. A recent decision to establish new radio stations and upgrade existing stations resulted in allocation of additional US\$ 5 million, bringing the total funding to US\$ 11 million. The European Commission’s strategy for Afghanistan 2007 to 2013 does not include direct funding to the media. As result there is a strong possibility that many of the media organizations that had been around to facilitate the transition with informed coverage in the local languages could collapse or be forced to seek support of powerful individuals and political parties and compromise their independence. Such a scenario can be averted through continuous – targeted and well-monitored – support to the media. Continuing support to the media is justified by the public support it can help to build for the peace process, which a majority of Afghans want to see ending in lasting peace.

The Afghan media remains as the last line of defense of public interest in a country that is still dominated by factionalism and violence. More so in a situation where civil society still remains confined to the capital and other cities that are deemed to be “safe”. Continued investment in the media is investment for peace and the growth of civil society.

### **Main themes discussed at the “Media *is* Development” Forum:**

#### **The media law**

The media law, issued as decree in December 2005, was being reviewed by the Lower House of Parliament when the Forum was held. (It was being discussed in parliament when this report was published). The media law was therefore a major issue discussed at the conference. Many speakers expressed concerns on the proposed amendments. The general fear among media advocates was that the changes parliament was considering would limit the media’s editorial independence and freedoms. Government and parliament members at the meeting either tried to defend their plans or tried to reassure media leaders saying that both government and parliament would uphold media freedoms.

### **Donor assistance to the media**

Although sustainability of media organizations was a shared goal of donors and media organizations, the conference concluded that the media was still far from reaching that ideal. The participants said there has been no coordination between donors and implementing agencies for supporting media projects for lack of a commonly agreed strategy. Speakers argued that Afghanistan was not a “post-conflict” country yet and therefore there still was the need for both long- and short-term programs on media development to prevent the country from slipping into instability. They called on donors and media leaders to re-engage and re-think their relationship.

Two of the main donors that had supported media in Afghanistan, USAID and the European Commission, participated in the Forum. The EC pledged assistance for reforms at the RTA, provided the government made appropriate legislation for making it a public broadcaster. The representative of the EC said it could continue funding media through sector programs – governance, health and rural development, etc. – but not as a separate sector. Others suggested that the media needed to think of and propose creative solutions and alternatives, such as subsidies on newsprint for the print media, to tackle the issue of declining donor funds. Diplomats at the meeting said that the issues of public morality are best decided by Afghans but the right to criticize state policies and government officials is a fundamental, non-negotiable, right of all citizens in a democracy.

### **RTA reform**

Radio Television Afghanistan (RTA) is supposed to be overseen by an independent commission. However, the commission has been ineffective and the Ministry of Culture and Youth Affairs has been controlling the state broadcaster. The participants noted that RTA needs to transform into an independent public service broadcaster, according to the media law and demanded that the process should move forward without further delays.

### **Attacks on the independent media**

Threats against the media made up a major conference theme. In 2006 there were 50 recorded cases of harassment, beating and other threats.

The number of unreported cases is much higher. In 2007 two media workers were killed and several more were threatened as a result of Taliban violence and actions by foreign military forces. The participants condemned the attacks and urged for greater international moral support and diplomatic pressure on the government and other anti-media actors.

### **Media capacity**

Media representatives agreed that more training and capacity-building was needed, especially in the areas of business development/marketing, management training and beat-specific journalism, including investigative journalism and economic reporting. The general opinion was that while content quality has improved, there is room for improvement and professionalism – and informed and improved media content can help ease the transition.

### **Provincial media**

The general opinion was that freedom of the press and freedom of speech were more restricted in the provinces where media workers are more vulnerable to attacks and face greater obstacles in terms of access to information. Support to provincial media has been limited. The decline in funding, coupled with non-existent markets in most rural areas where community radio exist, has made it extremely difficult for the stations to continue broadcasting. In some cases, local radios are unable to compete with military-funded stations or Kabul-based FM content rebroadcast via satellite. Furthermore, there is also a need to clarify the ownership of the “community radios” set up by NGOs. The provincial print media remains weak.

### **Regional cooperation**

The domination of information dissemination by Western media organizations and almost non-existent interest of the regional media has led to one-dimensional perspectives and limited understanding about Afghanistan and its development. Afghanistan’s role in the region and the region’s role in Afghanistan, have been rarely explored. There was general consensus on the need to increase reporting and coverage, and cooperation, among South Asian media organizations.

### **Civil society**

Civil society organizations are not a new phenomenon in Afghanistan. The earliest forms of civil society groups such as the *shoras* or *jirgas* (councils) existed before the modern Afghan state was created. Because of the inflow of aid money, dozens of new civil society groups and NGOs have been set up in the last five years. These groups have largely been service and emergency aid deliverers for international donors. Today, many act as “contractors” of programs that were planned without their direct input. This top-down approach between donors and civil society groups is detrimental to building a self-sustaining Afghan civil society. There was agreement on the need for actions for mobilizing the public around political and social issues for engendering real and increased participation of the people.

### **Civil society and the media**

Both the representatives of media and civil society agreed that much greater cooperation was needed in order for the two groups to play greater roles in the Afghan process. Civil society representatives said the media can serve as messengers to carry development messages and also help provide feedback on progress and obstacles. There was general agreement that civil society had been undermined over the past years and there also existed a misperception among the public that they were only conduits for disbursing donor funds. The media and civil society agreed on the need to work closely in order to bring about transparency in the spending process and to clarify the role of civil society in the development process – including, monitoring of foreign assistance.

## FORUM DECLARATION (Excerpt)

The Forum adopted a declaration that was prepared and discussed prior to approval. The Declaration of the Afghanistan Media and Civil Society Forum commits to:

Organizing the “Media *is* Development Forum” at least once every year to evaluate progress and discuss ways to address new challenges;

Developing a Code of Conduct for media to self-regulate the production and dissemination of content;

Working 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;

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

Seeking the 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.

The forum recommended:

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 the freedom of information and facilitate the activities of the media, while ensuring the immediate release of all media workers 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.