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Unfinished Business: Effective Partnerships for Human Security
and Sustainable Development**

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**The Role of the Media and Communications Technology
in Achieving the MDGs**



Text of panel remarks

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It's a privilege and pleasure to be part of this meeting, and I want to thank the organisers for giving me this opportunity.

My pleasure is doubled by the fact that I am returning to UN-DPI's home after 11 years. In the Fall of 1995, I spent several weeks in New York, under the DPI training programme for broadcasters and journalists, studying the United Nations system.

The impressions and insights I carried back have propelled me in my professional work in the past decade. I stand here today as the Director of Television for Education - Asia Pacific, a regionally operating non-profit media organisation that works across the Asia Pacific. We use television, video and new media to tell authentic, powerful stories on the full spectrum of issues, concerns and challenges that we collectively call 'development'.

We both produce and distribute editorially independent content on development. We use a variety of formats - ranging from documentary and animations to PSAs and TV shorts. We work with broadcasters, civil society groups and educational institutions to get these out to Asian audiences. We have a slogan which sums up our vision: *Moving images, moving people*.

As we all know, moving people is not easy: many individuals, communities and governments are resistant to change. This makes communicating for social change both an art and a science. And few of us have mastered it well -- there is much that we can learn from each other.

Earlier this year, we marked the 10th anniversary of our organization, and we used that occasion to look back and look forward. Our reflections resonate with the theme of this session: how can information and communications technologies (ICTs) help our pursuit of the Millennium Development Goals, or MDGs.

TVE Asia Pacific was founded in response to many communication challenges and opportunities in the Asia Pacific. During the 1990s, older and newer ICTs proliferated in our vast region, creating new platforms and pathways to reach more homes, schools and communities than ever before. For example:

- airwaves saturated with dozens of TV and FM radio channels;
- VCDs and DVDs fast replaced video tapes as a distribution medium;
- mobile phones moved from being elite gadgets to everyday tools; and
- Internet access became more widely available and affordable.

Gaps in coverage

Yet, we were acutely aware of many large gaps in that coverage: media liberalisation and ICT proliferation were not matched by a corresponding increase in the public sphere -- the area that accommodates and nurtures wide ranging discussion and debate on matters of public interest. And even today, the poorer sections of Asian societies are not part of the 'global conversation' that has been opened up by the march of technology and capital.

In a decade, we have had our share of accomplishments and accumulated a rich and varied set of experiences. But we are well aware of the unfinished business - in the Asia Pacific and elsewhere.

- How can the power of the media and communications be harnessed to overcome economic and social disparities?
- And in what ways can ICTs to reduce poverty and improve lives everywhere?

The notion of mobilising gadgets to solve real world problems has given rise to a development subset now known as ICT for development (inspiring the inevitable acronym: ICT4D).

It's important here to remember that the term 'ICT' covers a broad range of technologies. The UN definition of ICTs includes fixed phones, radio and television -- all of which we've had for decades -- as well as the newer technologies such as mobile phones, Personal Computers, PDAs, Internet and satellite communication. The older ICTs may no longer have a high tech appeal, but they still have far greater outreach and influence, especially in the developing world.

A few weeks ago, I had the opportunity of participating in the inaugural meeting of the newly launched United Nations Global Alliance for ICTs and Development, or UN-GAID. The meeting, held in the Malaysian capital of Kuala Lumpur, was attended by a few hundred representatives of governments, civil society, industry, media and academia. It opened with a high-powered panel addressing national ICT strategies for achieving MDGs.

C is for communication

For a while, speakers were talking mostly in terms of computers and Internet. Then Dr Abdul Wahid Khan, UNESCO assistant director general for communication and information, brought us back down to earth. "The 'C' in ICT stands for communication, not computers," he said. He added: "As far as marginalised communities are concerned, it doesn't matter what tool or gadget is used. They need to access information and be able to express themselves."

As UNESCO data confirm, we have more radio and television sets on the planet than computers. The airwaves are brimming with content that titillates than educates, but that's part of our common challenge.

In spite of their limitations, broadcast radio and TV are still the most effective way - and sometimes the only way - that people in many parts of the developing world access information.

So this is one big partnership we have to work on.

- We need to mobilise the airwaves against poverty, under-development and corruption.
- We must use every media platform also to counter the many types of fundamentalism and extremism that threaten to tear apart our societies.

Is this all too idealistic in the world of corporatised media? Am I day-dreaming here?

Well, we know it's not easy. But it did happen, for example, when the Asian Tsunami struck some 20 months ago.

On that occasion, the media rose to that challenge amazingly and in a variety of ways. Political divides and corporate bottomlines were momentarily forgotten as the national, regional and global media covered the multiple scenes and impacts of the disaster. Especially the national and local media in affected countries went beyond traditional reporting to help find missing persons and to play Good Samaritan.

Media's coverage inspired donations totalling over 13 billion US Dollars for relief, recovery and rebuilding.

We have since seen a similar media response other disasters, such as hurricane Katrina and the earthquake in Pakistan.

But we also know how quickly these and other disasters become yesterday's news. This is the enormous challenge that confronts us: how to keep alive the stories of human survival and human security in our mass media.

The silent tsunamis

Here, I recall the words of Secretary General Kofi Annan to the World Electronic Media Forum, which was part of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in Tunis last November. Acknowledging the major role played by broadcasters in the aftermath of the Asian Tsunami and the Pakistan earthquake, he said: *"I urge you to find the words and images that will draw attention to the silent, daily tsunami of poverty, hunger, disease and environmental degradation."*

This is very much the case when we look at Asia. The news media frequently portray Asia as being on the move -- rising middle classes, techie gizmos, more leisure travel. All that's true: Asian has some of the fastest growing economies in the world. And in the past 15 years, some 300 million Asians have moved out of poverty.

But the glass is barely half full. Asia has more people living in poverty than in all other developing regions combined. To cite just one stark statistic, *every single day*, approximately 14,000 Asian children die needlessly from preventable diseases. *That's the equivalent of the Asian Tsunami's cumulative death toll every three weeks.*

Why isn't this story hitting the headlines?

There are several 'silent tsunamis' unfolding at any given time, hardly registering on the news media's radars.

I suggest that we should persuade our friends and colleagues in the broadcast industry to get back into 'tsunami mode' again. They can then play a greater role in our struggle against poverty and human deprivation that MDGs symbolise.

This needs to happen in Asia and everywhere else.

And this time, we need the media to stay in the 'tsunami mode' all the way to 2015.

Poverty as a copyright free zone

Here I would like to repeat another proposal that I first made in an op-ed published on the MediaChannel.org a few weeks ago. *I called upon the world's broadcast media and film-makers to make poverty a 'copyrights free zone'.*

The idea was to have broadcasters and other electronic publishers release copyrights on TV, video and online content relating to poverty and development issues -- at least until 2015.

My own organisation, TVE Asia Pacific, knows very well how powerful these images can be. Used strategically, such moving images can move people to change lifestyles, attitudes and behaviour.

Imagine, for a moment, that these moving images are made available for free use by educators, civil society groups and development activists. Such material can help fuel social change and, ultimately, combat poverty.

Alas, most of the time these copyrights are far too restricted. It's lawyers and accountants, not journalists or producers, who now decide which footage and material are allowed to be used under what conditions. I personally know several award-winning film-makers who are not allowed the educational use of their own creations by leading western broadcasters who co-financed their productions.

If the audio-visual media and the broadcast industry are to play a meaningful role against poverty, HIV, corruption and other scourges, they need to break free from this mentality. We must encourage broadcasters to allow greater access to their vast visual archives, gathered from all over the world.

I realise this is easier said than done, but let us remember that it has happened in some other sectors.

- Confronted with the global HIV pandemic and the very high cost of anti retroviral treatment, a few pharmaceutical companies in India, Brazil and South Africa started manufacturing generic versions of the same drugs but at much lower prices. This helped to achieve drastic reductions in cost of treatment.
- The free and open source software (FOSS) movement is another example - countering the market domination by proprietary software producers.

Of course, both these were accomplished amidst much initial resistance from the industries concerned. But these breakthroughs enabled a greater sharing of benefits especially for those who are least able to pay for it. And the industries concerned have belatedly come around to acknowledge this.

I'm not suggesting that all copyright controls are suspended. But let us at least call for an end to the shameless commercial exploitation of the images of misery and suffering that are routinely gathered from the developing world. Currently, these trade for tens of dollars a second.

And let us encourage our friends in broadcasting and film-making to consider alternative approaches to managing their intellectual property -- such as the Creative Commons framework.

This is the one idea that I would like to leave with you today.

I urge all of you to take this idea back with you, and encourage broadcasters in your countries and regions to adopt news ways of sharing their image resources with educational and civil society groups.

Thank you.

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Full agenda of the conference and speaker biographies found at:
http://www.ngodpiexecom.org/conference06/conference_printable.html