International seminar
“Afghanistan, good governance and the media”

Address by

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Your Excellencies,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to speak at this important seminar on Afghanistan, good governance and the media. The title of this session is addressing the needs of the «Afghan media and Culture industries», but I would like to start with a sort of “rewind” to that recent era, just one decade ago, when there were no Afghan media and little cultural industry, despite of course the demand from the Afghan citizens to have both. As his Excellency, Minister of Information and Culture, Said Makhdoom Raheen, here present, knows very well, back in those days in early 2002 when a “window of opportunity” for changes was open, there was an enormous amount of work to do.

I am pleased to say that UNESCO has been actively involved in media development since the early days of reconstruction, including co-sponsoring the first-ever conference on independent and pluralistic media in the autumn of 2002. UNESCO, together with the international community of NGOs, donors and specialized organizations, started to tackle those needs. Between 2003 and 2005, UNESCO co-chaired with Minister Raheen the Consultative Group on Culture and Media
where all involved stakeholders met to exchange information. There were many achievements, sometimes mistakes, sometimes overlapping, but ultimately an entire new generation of professional journalists was trained, national, community, local media proliferated, Journalists School upgraded and media professionals organized themselves in associations. There was also substantial support to the digitalization of the Afghan cinema and broadcast archives. Probably one of the most complex processes was however the one to achieve a new media law and policy framework conducive to freedom of expression which was eventually established.

Today, journalism remains a hazardous pursuit in the context of Afghanistan’s insurgency and continuous conflict. Safe zones exist, especially in the national capital of Kabul and the other principal cities, where journalists can seemingly proceed with their normal work routines without serious concern. However, the constraints on reporting are becoming more onerous. The emerging power-sharing compact among the country’s more powerful political figures seems premised upon each of them having a stake in the media industry. Though growing rapidly, the media in Afghanistan remains dependent on some form of subventions for survival, either from international donor agencies or local power elites.
UNESCO’s role is to foster free flow of information and promote wider and better balanced dissemination of information, without any obstacle to freedom of expression, as explained in our mandate. We support Member States in various ways by fostering development of a free, independent and pluralistic media system. It is vitally important because of the role the media plays in promoting good governance. All aspects of good governance are facilitated by a strong and independent media within a society. When journalists are free to investigate and criticize the public administration’s policies and actions can good governance take hold and that is where we see the concrete link between the functioning of the media and good governance. Independent and pluralistic media are essential for ensuring transparency, accountability and participation as fundamental elements of good governance and human rights-based development.

There is one more crucially important point I wish to bring to this seminar today and it is the inclusion of women. We must promote basic human rights in order to transform our societies and lay the foundations for equitable and sustainable human development. In countries so deeply damaged by conflict like Afghanistan, it is particularly important to support women in their efforts to take an active part in their society’s reconstruction.
UNESCO believes that all forms of discrimination on the basis of gender are violations of human rights, and a significant barrier to peace, sustainable development and the achievement of all internationally recognized development goals. A large number of Afghan women are currently working in journalism and communications and have a leading role in the fight for human rights in their country. All of them are formally protected by Afghanistan’s 2004 Constitution. However, Afghan women journalists still face societal barriers and cultural restrictions, hindering their work and participation in the public life. They still face the risks of being threatened, maltreated, detained or even killed. One of them was Zakia Zaki, a reporter and a radio manager, whose portrait was presented in the film “If I stand up”. This film was a part of UNESCO’s flagship project to train the first group of Afghan camerawomen.

There is a clear reason to raise serious concerns of safety of journalists and especially safety of women journalists in Afghanistan. The safety of journalists is essential to protect the right of all citizens to reliable information and the right of journalists to provide it without fearing for their security. It is an obligation of the State and of the society to create and maintain good conditions for these fundamental human rights. UNESCO expresses publicly and systematically its outrage when a
journalist or media worker is killed. UNESCO’s Director General had been condemning the killings of journalists and media workers since 1997, in line with Resolution 29 adopted by its General Conference. Last year, the Director-General made 62 public condemnations against killings of journalists.

UNESCO is vigorously committed to assist women journalists in Afghanistan, within our broader efforts to promote women’s engagement in conflict resolution, peace-building and reconstruction. UNESCO, in cooperation with the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) and other major stakeholders, has prepared the first draft of Gender Sensitive Indicator’s in Media. This set of indicators is a tool to assess gender mainstreaming in media. If media is a mirror of society as it should be, it should certainly reflect gender equality as a fundamental human right.

It is clear that Afghanistan still suffers from a chronic lack of good governance. The media has an important role in improving governance by involving the public in debates and discussion. Therefore I would like to extend my deep thanks to the organizers of this seminar to keep the debate ongoing. Much work has been done in Afghanistan but there are still more work to do.
Thank you.