

World Press Freedom Day 2023
Shaping a Future of Rights
Freedom of expression as a driver for all other human rights
Draft Concept Note

In 1993, the UN General Assembly proclaimed 3 May as World Press Freedom Day. This proclamation marked the beginning of substantial progress towards enabling a free press and freedom of expression around the world – with the proliferation of independent media in many countries and the rise of digital technologies enabling the free flow of information online. Three decades have passed, with advancements in the respect for human rights and in related international frameworks. However, media freedom, safety of journalists and freedom of expression are increasingly under attack, which impacts the realization of other human rights.

The international community faces multiple crises; conflicts and violence, persistent socio-economic inequalities driving migration, environmental crises and challenges to the health and wellbeing of people all around the world, while disinformation and misinformation online and offline proliferate with serious impact on the institutions underpinning democracy, the rule of law and human rights.

Polarised political and societal discourse; erosion of trust; impositions of states of emergency and internet shutdowns; crackdown on critical voices and independent media; news desertification due to the collapse of traditional media business models; and tackling hate speech and online harms that disregard international standards, pose new threats to freedom of expression, and the fundamental role of human rights.

It is exactly to counter these critical situations and threats, that press freedom, safety of journalists and access to information take centre stage. The right to freedom of expression, enshrined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is a prerequisite and a driver to the enjoyment of all other human rights.

This year's Special 30th anniversary celebration of World Press Freedom Day is therefore a call to recentre press freedom, as well as independent, pluralistic and diverse media, as necessary key to the enjoyment of all other human rights. This anniversary coincides with the 30th anniversary of the Vienna Conference and its Declaration and Programme of Action on Human Rights, which established important institutions safeguarding human rights, and with the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. On this occasion, the global community will debate and set the agenda for both the development of human rights and how to protect them in an everchanging world, and World Press Freedom Day will serve as an opportunity to put a strong focus on freedom of expression within the overall human rights agenda.

World Press Freedom Day 2023 is thus an occasion to organize events that spotlight the link between press freedom, freedom of expression and other rights. The press freedom multistakeholder

community is invited to celebrate the day for instance by teaming up with organizations promoting environmental causes, women's rights, children's rights, indigenous rights, digital rights, the fight against corruption and others.

As we enter the last years to meet the ambition of all countries achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and to fulfil the commitments made by every Member State of the United Nations to the future of the Planet, let us engage together to protect press freedom, reaffirm the vital importance of freedom of expression, and shape a future where human rights are at the centre of decision making at the global, regional and national level.

Freedom of expression: a driver of other freedoms and human rights

Four fundamental freedoms are outlined in the [Preamble of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#): freedom of speech, freedom of belief, freedom from fear, and freedom from want. It is not incidental that freedom of speech comes first: this fundamental freedom is one that enables all others.

In the Universal Declaration, freedom of opinion and expression has been further detailed in Article 19 as the right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

In the 75 years since the adoption of the Universal Declaration, the right to freedom of expression has been further affirmed and enshrined in numerous international instruments; the [1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#), the [1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child](#), and the [2006 Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#), among many other global and regional standards.

While all human rights are universal, interdependent, indivisible and interrelated; freedom of expression's function as an enabler for other human rights has been further explored by relevant United Nations treaty bodies and committees in charge of international instruments, who published their interpretation of provisions in the form of general comments or recommendations.

For instance, [General Comment No. 21](#) on the [1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#) underlines how freedom of expression underpins the right to participate in cultural life. [General Comment No. 34](#) on the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) stresses the interdependency of the rights to opinion, expression and participation in public affairs; as well as the fact that *"freedom of expression [is] a necessary condition for the realization of the principles of transparency and accountability that are, in turn, essential for the promotion and protection of human rights"*.

The complementarity of freedom of expression with other human rights has similarly been acknowledged in the [1993 Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action on human rights](#), whose 30th anniversary is commemorated this year, and which underscores linkages between freedom of expression, the rule of law, the administration of justice, freedom of thought and religion, and participation in decision-making processes. The adoption of this Declaration and Programme of Action

also led to new measures to protect the rights of women, children and indigenous peoples, and permitted the establishment of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights the same year.

With media freedom as an essential part of freedom of expression, 2023 also marks the 30th anniversary of the proclamation of [World Press Freedom Day](#) by the 48th UN General Assembly, following a resolution by UNESCO's 26th General Conference. Over the course of the last three decades, the global movement celebrating World Press Freedom Day has grown in scale and provided an inclusive platform to reaffirm the fundamental role of free, independent, pluralistic media; to take stock of the challenges facing media freedom and the safety of journalists; to raise awareness and foster partnerships to defend media from attacks; as well as to pay tribute to journalists who have lost their lives in the exercise of their work.

Furthermore, recalling that 1993 saw a landmark alignment of multilateral consensus around the importance of human rights, press freedom and freedom of expression, 2023 will also mark the 30th anniversary of the establishment of the mandate of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression by the United Nations Commission on Human Rights.

On the 30th anniversary of these important landmark events, and as we venture into the last decade for the fulfilment of the [Sustainable Development Goals of Agenda 2030](#), World Press Freedom Day 2023 provides an opportunity to emphasize the role of freedom of expression and media freedom as enablers of all other human rights, and to underscore the indivisible, interdependent and interrelated nature of all human rights.

Looking ahead, now is the opportune time to address the future of human rights and shape how the challenges to freedom of expression will be met in the digital ecosystem and rapidly evolving information environment. World Press Freedom Day will gather the outcomes of the UNESCO Global Conference on Internet for Trust and the Guidance for Regulating Digital Platforms for Information as a Public Good, and reflect on the way the digital transformation and technological advancements call for a renewed emphasis on freedom of expression as a key driver and an enabler to enjoy all other human rights. Moreover, the events and the agenda will connect strongly with the overall UN activities and strategies, Our Common Agenda and the Summit for the Future.

Press freedom as a keystone of freedom of expression's enabling role

The right to freedom of expression and its corollary, the right to access information, allow us to seek, receive and impart information, ideas, concepts and beliefs across borders and cultures. And in this exercise, the media and journalists play an essential role: they help verify and disseminate facts, they create spaces for ideas to be debated and for the voiceless to be heard, and they render complex matters intelligible for the public at large.

"Without facts, you can't have truth. Without truth, you can't have trust. Without trust, we have no shared reality, no democracy, and it becomes impossible to deal with our world's existential problems: climate, coronavirus, the battle for truth."

Maria Ressa, recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, 2021

Through their various platforms, media organizations, journalists and media workers can reach wide audiences, including the most isolated and marginalized communities, and inform them about their fundamental freedoms, and how to exercise them. This way, communities who might otherwise have limited access or might be inundated with disinformation can obtain the information they need to exercise rights such as access to health, education, and justice, or to fight against gender and economic inequalities.

Likewise, through their journalistic investigations and fact-checking, media outlets and journalists inform us about current issues and how these can impact our rights. Investigative journalism around the world uncovers criminal activities and wrongdoings that affect the human rights of citizens. The journalistic work has a track record in ensuring for instance the right to health or to life and has exposed violations of rights through misuse of public funds, human trafficking, illegal surveillance acts, matters of discrimination and many more. Issues illuminated through research by investigative journalists have led to meaningful policy changes for the benefit of society. Investing in independent public interest journalism is an investment in resilient and informed societies.

Freedom of expression is also closely connected to other rights under the UNESCO mandate, namely the right to education, which relies on access to credible information as well as the right of scholars and teachers to freely express themselves. Furthermore, cultural rights such as the right to artistic freedom and creative expression are deeply entwined with freedom of expression.

In light of the imminent threat to human life posed by climate change and the need to protect the environment, freedom of expression also plays an important role. Access to verified information on environmental issues is crucial for all citizens. Particularly, environmental activists and journalists need to be able to freely report on threats to the environment and call out actors causing harm.

"Free speech and a free press not only make abuses of governmental powers less likely, they also enhance the likelihood that people's basic social needs will be met. Secrecy reduces the information available to the citizenry, hobbling people's ability to participate meaningfully. Essentially, meaningful participation in democratic processes requires informed participants."

Joseph Stiglitz, recipient of the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences, 2001

Without a free flow of information, and the help of the media in this effort, most cases of malpractice, corruption and human rights violations would remain hidden. And without collective awareness of these violations, we would not be able to act to address them.

The crucial importance of press freedom in upholding human rights and the impact of its limitations on all fundamental freedoms has been made particularly clear during recent emergencies that have affected the world, ranging from the COVID-19 pandemic to electoral crises, armed conflicts, or environmental issues. Yet, attempts to silence the media continue to multiply around the globe, with old methods of censorship, violence and harassment being accompanied by increasingly pervasive digital attacks.

"No famine has ever taken place in the history of the world in a functioning democracy."

Amartya Sen, recipient of the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences, 1998

When freedom of expression and media freedom are stifled, all of our freedoms are at risk. Freedom of expression, the free flow of information and press freedom are therefore preconditions for the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals of Agenda 2030: without them, we cannot eliminate poverty and hunger, preserve biodiversity and promote sustainable development, or build transparent institutions. They are indispensable in the fight for the rights of minorities and marginalized people, to combat all kinds of discrimination, to build diverse and inclusive civic spaces, and to uphold resilient democracies.

Over the past 30 years, World Press Freedom Day celebrations have led us on a journey giving prominence to the right to free expression, and emphasizing different angles of the relevance of press freedom. This journey around the world evolved from discussing the role of media in conflict settlement (2000, Switzerland) to combating racism (2001, Namibia), from the role of media and terrorism (2002, Philippines) to the right to information (2004, Serbia), from media and good governance (2005, Senegal), mutual understanding and reconciliation (2009, Qatar), gender equality (2015, Latvia), and SDG 16 (2017, Indonesia), to most recently, information as a public good (2021, Windhoek, Namibia) and digital attacks on journalism (2022, Punta Del Este, Uruguay). This journey has taken us to the very place where World Press Freedom Day was originally proclaimed, the UN Headquarters, signifying the strong connections within the UN system and the way UNESCO and the whole UN family contribute to Our Common Agenda. Therefore, we welcome everyone to join for the 2023 topic of Shaping a Future of Rights: Freedom of Expression as a driver for all Other Human Rights.