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## Goal 16

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# World Press Freedom Day

3 May



Image credit: UNESCO

## UNESCO Needs to Rethink Freedom of Expression

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Viewpoint by Kalinga Seneviratne

SYDNEY, 3 May 2023 (IDN) — At a time when the West has weaponised human rights, the United Nations body that promotes freedom of expression need to rethink what it means.

Every year **UNESCO** (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation) mark World Press Freedom Day (WPF) on May 3 with a particular theme and this year is its 30th edition.

UNESCO has mainly provided a platform through their WPF to civil society (NGO) groups that are funded by western agencies to shape the free speech agenda. With many countries in the Global South seeing these groups involved in so-called “colour revolutions” as a security threat, it is time, as an inter-governmental organisation, UNESCO paid some attention to the views of its member states who are not of the western alliance.

This year’s theme is ‘Shaping of Future Rights: Freedom of Expression as a Driver of all other human rights’.

UNESCO has given four special briefs in their website for campaign action on the day. First of which is the “misuse” of the judicial system to attack freedom of expression. It focuses on the use of criminal defamation to silence journalists, but no mention at all about how the UK and US judicial systems are being used to silence Julian Assange of Wikileaks.

Yonden Lhatoo, the Chief News Editor of the Hong Kong based South China Morning Post in a recent videolog made a powerful indictment regarding the Assange case.

“There is no limit to the insufferable hypocrisy of these gangsters in glass houses,” he said referring to the US, UK and Australian government action against Assange. “They defecate all over on human rights and press freedom in the name of national security, when it suits them, calling it ‘justice’, when a country they don’t like do something of that sort, its ‘repression’—how convenient”.

Safety of foreign journalists and those covering protests are two other issues, while the fourth UNESCO brief is about journalism and whistleblowing.

The 16-page UNESCO brief on whistleblowing talks about the new electronic means of leaks to media and publishing of such information. It mentions “Pub/Leaks” and “Latamleaks” in Latin America but no mention of Wikileaks. It also argues that whistleblowers and publishers must have guarantees of protection and that their actions do not lead to negative consequences, such as financial sanctions, job dismissals, undermining their family members or circles of friends, or threats of arbitrary arrest. But, no mention whatsoever about the Assange’s case including western financial institutions blocking donations to Wikileaks[1].

The document seems to distance itself completely from this case because the US considers Assange a computer hacker not a journalist. The brief talks about the benefits to society from whistleblowers that “allow people to get information and evidence of acts of corruption, human rights violations, or other matters of unquestionable public interest” but no direct reference to war crimes, that Wikileaks exposed through whistleblowers like Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden.

Unfortunately, today, it is okay to talk about war crimes if the Russians are doing it but not when the Americans, NATO or Australians are involved.

In June 2019, the Australian Federal Police raided the newsroom of Australia’s national broadcaster ABC after they have exposed Australian forces’ war crimes in Afghanistan. They took away the laptops of some journalists in an attempt to trace the whistleblowers describing the action as a “national security” operation.

Today human rights arguments have lost credibility because of these double standards. Thus, it is interesting to note how China is now pushing a new human rights agenda via the United Nations.

In July 2021, China succeeded in getting a resolution adopted at the 47th session of the UN Human Rights Council on development rights[2]. It affirmed that the eventual eradication of extreme poverty must remain a high priority for the international community and that international cooperation for sustainable development has an essential role in shaping our shared future.

The resolution was adopted by 31 votes to 14 against. Interestingly those voting against were 12 European countries plus Japan and South Korea. While joining China in voting for it were Russia, India, Pakistan, Cuba, Indonesia, Philippines and Fiji, plus a number of African and Latin American countries.

The vote itself gives a good indication of the new trends in the human rights agenda promoted by the Global South.

This brings us to the question of where freedom of speech stands in this human rights agenda.

Human rights according to this agenda are what is prescribed in the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals(SDGs). Providing clean water and sanitation to the people, a good education, developing and nurturing sustainable systems of agriculture to provide food security to people, protecting the environment and protecting communities from the impacts of climatic change, empowering women, providing proper housing and healthcare to people, and so forth and so on.

Governments should be held accountable to providing these rights to people, but that cannot be achieved by the media always accusing governments of corruption, or people coming out to the streets shouting slogans or blocking roads or occupying government buildings.

Reporters need to go out to the communities talk to the people and find out how they live, what is lacking and how they think these services could be provided by governments. Journalist could even become a facilitator of a dialogue between the people and the government.

Human rights is a marvellous concept on paper, but its practice is today immersed in double standards and hypocrisy. Media has been a party to this.

In 2016-17, I was part of a team at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok to develop curriculum to train Asian journalists in what we call “mindful communication for sustainable development”. It was funded by UNESCO, and we used Asian philosophical concepts in designing the curriculum, to encourage journalists to have a compassionate mindset in reporting grassroots development issues from the peoples’ perspective.

We want to develop a new generation of communicators, who would not demand rights and create conflicts, but work with all stakeholders, including governments, to help achieve the SDGs in a cooperative manner rather than confrontation.

It is time that UNESCO listen to the Global South and rethink about why we need to have freedom of speech and for what purpose.

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