

UNESCO's work on the journalist safety and countering impunity: Proposals for inter-UN cooperation

View from the UK National Commission for UNESCO

The continuing and widespread assassination of journalists for exercising their profession and the impunity which often surrounds such crimes has been repeatedly condemned by UNESCO through the General Conference, Executive Board, Director-General and IPDC, as well as by many other UN and international organisations. It is a growing concern that the number of killings not linked to conflict situations is growing dramatically.

While UNESCO is the only UN agency with a mandate to defend freedom of expression and press freedom, other parts of the UN regularly deal with these issues as part of their broader remit. If UNESCO is to better fulfil its mandate and stated objectives around the safety of journalists and countering impunity, it is essential that it coordinates more closely with other parts of the UN.

Inter-UN meeting

The need for inter-UN cooperation across UNESCO's work is not a new concept, having been repeatedly emphasised by UNESCO Member States and the UNESCO Secretariat. In March 2010, at its 27th session, the Intergovernmental Council of the International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC) adopted a resolution to help progress inter-UN cooperation and dialogue around journalist safety. The resolution reads:

The Intergovernmental Council of the IPDC, [...] requests the Director-General of UNESCO to consult with Member States on the feasibility of convening an inter-agency meeting of all relevant UN agencies with a view to formulating a comprehensive, coherent and action-oriented approach to the safety of journalists and the issue of impunity.

To date, no formal meeting has been convened. We call on this resolution to be implemented as a matter of urgency. As part of UNESCO organising or taking part in such a meeting, we advocate that UNESCO should assess how it can have the greatest impact and influence on this issue given the organisation's funding, governance and reporting structure, brand, networks and remit as a UN Specialised Agency. This will require a coordinated assessment by both UNESCO itself and its sister UN bodies.

Reporting by the UN

One of the UN's most important tools for progressing human rights are its regular reports and statements on the state of human rights around the world. In many of the reports which have journalist safety within their remit, the issue does not figure as prominently as the troubling global trend of journalist deaths suggests may be appropriate.

UNESCO should work to strengthen reporting on this subject across the UN. By providing data for UN reports and statements on the subject, such as the Universal Periodic Review and the UN Secretary General's reports on civilian casualties in armed conflicts, UNESCO can help produce comprehensive and compelling UN reports.

Proposals

The following are proposals for action by UNESCO to help build a coherent and comprehensive cross-UN approach to the safety of journalists:

1. UNESCO should undertake a mapping exercise of UN mandates, current action and reporting mechanisms and international humanitarian law relating to the safety of journalists and the countering of impunity. Mapping this complex field will help:
 - identify the parts of the UN with a remit touching on these issues and help to create a comprehensive network for proposed cooperation
 - identify UNESCO's specific added value in this area vis-à-vis other parts of the UN
 - identify potential gaps in the UN and UNESCO's current approach to these issues
 - provide consolidated evidence for an informed discussion with other UN agencies
2. UNESCO should take a more pro-active role in providing information on journalist safety to other parts of the UN for use in UN reports, statements and initiatives.

UK National Commission for UNESCO
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ANNEX 1

UN agencies, mechanisms and inter-governmental bodies dealing with the safety of journalists and issues of impunity (*non-exhaustive list*)

- UNESCO
- UN Human Rights Council
 - o Human Rights Council Complaints Procedure
 - o Human Rights Council Advisory Committee
- Special Procedures mandate holders, particularly the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression
- Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)
- UN Security Council
- UN Treaty Bodies

Regular UN reports with journalist safety remits (*non-exhaustive list*)

- Universal Periodic Review
- Report of the Secretary-General on the protection of civilians in armed conflict
- Report of Special Procedure holders, particularly the report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression

These proposals have been developed as a basis for further discussion and cooperation among all interested stakeholders, including National Commissions for UNESCO, Member States and NGOs.

We would welcome your feedback on these specific proposals and how the issue of inter-UN cooperation in support of journalist safety and countering impunity may be progressed. To comment, please contact Ian White, UK National Commission for UNESCO on iwhite@unesco.org.uk or +44 (0)207 766 3492.