DIIS Brief

UN-LED STRATEGIES FOR MEDIA AND COMMUNICATIONS IN CONFLICT PREVENTION AND PEACE BUILDING

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Media have contributed significantly to the escalation of violent conflicts, but also have a strong potential for contributing to peace building and conflict transformation.

The sooner the first steps are taken towards changing the existing media the cheaper and more efficient this process will become. The need for boosting the rapid deployment is evident.

The brief suggests the establishment of a rapid deployment facility bridging crisis-, mid- and long-term media and communication strategies. Whether the hosting organisation should be UNDPI, OCHA UNDP, UNESCO, or the secretariat of the new Peace Building Commission depends on a continued analysis and discussion among the stakeholders.

Media play an important role in the escalation of conflicts. This is the lesson from the recent case about the Mohammed-cartoons, but already in the 1990s the wars in former Yugoslavia and the genocide in Rwanda made this apparent. At this point also media were used as important tools for the rulers to acquire popular support for the conflicts.

Similarly, media and communication strategies are among the most important instruments during the process of peace building and prevention of recurrent conflicts. To ensure a

long-lasting peace it is essential that media function as a platform for dialogue, critical control and provider of information for citizens so they are enabled to take actively part in democracy and development. Many international actors are involved, and this brief focuses particularly on the possibility for the UN-system to provide a minimum of guidance and coordination between these actors in order to maximise the efficiency of media and communication strategies in conflicts.

This brief discusses the UN's legitimacy, capability and structure for contributing to media interventions in the dynamics of conflict. To illustrate the strengths and weaknesses of the UN I consider cases where the UN, with or without the mandate by the United Nations' Security Council (UNSC) has intervened in the media field. My analysis of the capacity of the UN-Secretariat in collaboration with other actors is based on interviews carried out in the Secretariat's departments for Political Affairs (DPA), Peace Keeping Operations (DPKO), and Public Information (DPI).

The brief suggests a mechanism for a coherent international strategy for operational and structural conflict prevention. Besides the UN Secretariat, it is clear that several other actors within the UN family like UNDP and UNESCO are significant actors in the long term perspective for the pre- and post-conflict periods of violent conflicts. It is also essential to include other stakeholders like national donors, international media-NGOs and regional organisations like the European Union and the African Union.

Public Information, Media, and the Mandate
The UN has become increasingly aware of the importance of public information and media development in its peace-making and peacekeeping missions, as well as in the peace-building process. How directly and thoroughly the responsibility for Public Information and media is incorporated into the mandate depends very much on the context.
The UN Secretariat's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) sends missions to countries experiencing conflicts or disasters but their work is carried out with-out any UNSC mandate. In situations,

where governments request for UN assistance to pre-vent or settle a conflict, the UN may send a Chapter 6 mission in agreement with the respective government. With mandated missions, governments must formally accept the man-dates the UNSC gives, but the reality might prove different.

In East Timor, for example, the Indonesian authorities as well as the militia supporting the integration of East Timor made it very difficult for the United Nations Mission to East Timor (UNAMET) to manage an information campaign prior to a referendum about the future status of the region. The obstruction happened in spite of written agreements between the UN and the foreign ministers of Indonesia and Portugal. The example proves the importance of detailed mandates and agreements with the government in question.

The UN has a solid legal basis when it exercises its authority to restrict media through man-dates from the UNSC, prohibiting propagating war, advocating national, racial or religious hatred, inciting to discrimination, hostility or violence and it can ultimately decide to intervene or close such media. These are also the rights and duties of local governments and the UN in cases of genocide.

Depending on the mandate given to the UN following a peace treaty, it is not only possible to deal with local abuses of the media, but also to deal constructively with the support to new sources of information across enemy lines. As in the UNSC mandate for Congo, it is possible to include the facilitation of national dialogue and reconciliation, which should by all means be strengthened through the use of existing and new media.

The link to media development

As there had not been a national broadcaster in Congo for a decade the United Nations Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUC) and the Swiss NGO *Hirondelle* jointly established *Radio Ocapi*, based on the mandate to facilitate national dialogue. Besides broadcasting news and informative programmes, Radio Ocapi produces everyday programmes focusing on dialogues between people across conflict lines and it sets new standards for accuracy and independence in other Congolese media (DPKO, 2003, p. 47). What is left, however, is to buttress the long term sustainability of the service.

Another example of a rapidly deployed post conflict initiative was the Good Morning Afghanistan programme at Radio Afghanistan, carried out

by the European Commission jointly with the Danish NGO Baltic Media Centre (BMC) in Afghanistan[1] in coordination with other actors. The radio programme has recently turned into an independent non-profit radio, still using Radio Afghanistan's transmission time.

The experience from former Yugoslavia was a lot more pessimistic because of intense fights between American and European interests in media development. The Americans only wanted private, commercial media, while the Europeans also wanted a public service system. With a minimum of coordination and mutual understanding between the donors, the new media structures would have developed sooner and probably also had a better result seen from a peace building perspective.

It has never been the formal responsibility of the UN DPKO or DPI to design the media landscape or build a country's media capacity, but the two cases illustrate their important capacity as catalysts. In Congo they created an entirely new national media structure, and in Afghanistan they developed a joint international vision for the media landscape later sup-ported by the European Union, UNESCO, UNDP, and a number of national donors.

By bridging the strategies for immediate post conflict communication and media development with the mid- and long-term strategies important steps could be taken relatively easily towards independent media reflecting the entire society and strengthening the active involvement of the people in a process towards democracy and lasting peace.

Capacity to and Responsibility for rapid deployment

The need in all peacekeeping operations for effective public information and communication strategies was already stressed in the *Comprehensive review of the whole question of peace-keeping operations in all their aspects,* written in 2001 by a high-level panel chaired by Lakhdar Brahimi (Brahimi, 2000). However, there are still several shortcomings:

The Rapid Deployment Team system does not ensure sufficient staff capacity to engage rapidly in new missions. This is partly because staff and management at Headquarters are hesitant to send the experienced staff on new missions for three months, and partly because it is difficult to have new external experts in place as substitutes after the three months.

The DPKO is the core operational department within the UN. As such, the DPKO carries out all peacekeeping missions, but due to its very limited public information capacity it relies heavily on the DPI's expertise for effective public information and communication strategies.

The DPI is a sizeable department with substantial expertise from public information and media activities. However, only four people are employed within the Peace and Security Section. Its resources for rapid and pre-mission deployment would obviously need to be in-creased if the DPI is to be the overall coordinator in this area.

OCHA is often on the spot before the arrival of the DPKO peacekeeping mission, and prioritises media and humanitarian information as a strong and important function. However, OCHA often leaves the post-conflict situation before DPKO leaves and would need additional capacity should it be responsible for bridging its immediate crisis focus with mid- and long-term media and communication strategies.

The DPI would be an obvious agent for bridging the crisis, short- and mid-term approaches to public information and media strategies. However, the DPI's present role is significantly reduced because its rapid deployment may only be used in conflicts covered by a UNSC mandate and not in other conflicts.
Other UN-agencies working without a UNSC mandate are UNDP and UNESCO which both deal with media in conflict. UNDP has reformed its programme to include a conflict prevention and peace-building dimension with capacity to become involved in the immediate post-conflict phase. Similarly, UNESCO in its Division for Freedom of Expression, Democracy and Peace has often collaborated with international media NGOs and established offices in early post-conflict scenarios in Afghanistan and a few other countries.

An increased cooperation and coordination between the departments of the UN Secretariat, UNDP and UNESCO should to be efficient besides regional organisations and donors also include the large international media NGOs.

Conclusions

The bricks for a sustainable media development are already in place when the UN - through OCHA, DPKO, DPA or DPI – intervenes in a conflict. In an immediate post-conflict situation, influencing the policy and development of the local media is very easy. The sooner the first steps towards changing the direction of existing media are taken the cheaper and more efficient this process will prove to become.

Changing media requires strategies developed with and adapted to the interests of the other actors working with medium and long-term media support to peace-building and conflict prevention. For the UN, this coordination would at least involve the DPI, OCHA, UNDP and UNESCO. Apart from the UN, the international media NGOs, the European Union, other regional organisations and significant national donors should be involved.

When moving beyond peace making to peace building and conflict transformation a substantial change of the media landscape, the legislation, content and ethics of the media and journalists is called for. There is a difference between what the UN-secretariat, UNDP, UNESCO, the European Union, national donors and international media-NGOs, can do in the media field before and after conflicts, whether they work with or without a UNSC mandate.

Obviously, the number of humanitarian crises and protracted conflicts in which UN-organisations, international media-NGOs and donors can work without a UNSC mandate exceeds the number in which the UN works covered by such a mandate. Their much broader general mandates give them the option of working directly with civil society organisations, community, private and state media with a humanitarian, human rights or development perspective. This relative freedom make them important complementary partners to the UNSC-man-dated UN missions.

As a first step towards a media landscape, suitable for a democratic development, the UNSC mandates should ensure that existing or new media platforms based on recognised professional journalistic standards distribute accountable and impartial news and information and contribute to increased dialogue and building of relationships across enemy barriers. Should indigenous media not exist, the establishment of the UN's own broadcasters would be needed.

The need to boost the capacity for rapid deployment is evident. This is particularly the case for the DPKO and DPI, but it is certainly relevant for the humanitarian organisations like OCHA, WFP and others as well as for UNDP and UNESCO.

One impediment is the lack of up-to-date knowledge about the indigenous media landscape, the current political, civil society and conflict-building actors, as well as the potential entry points for public information, dialogue or strategy for media development. Through collaboration with the DPA as well as a network of media development NGOs, this knowledge should be systematized and made available at very short notice.

Another impediment is the lack of strategy, methodology and capacity to link the public in-formation efforts into mid and long term media development.

It is logical and feasible for a rapid deployment facility to be responsible for the development of joint strategies for interventions in countries and regions. A continuous exchange of experience and development of general as well as country-adapted methods, tools and strategies may be located in the same facility.

Whether the hosting organisation should be UNDPI, OCHA UNDP, UNESCO, or the secretariat of the new Peace Building Commission depends on a continued analysis and discussion among the stakeholders.

[1] At a meeting called and chaired by the UNDPI for four key media-NGOs and the UN-family in Afghanistan it was agreed to collaborate with a minimum of joint media policy principles. The meeting also agreed on inputs for a Consolidated Appeals Process through the UNDP.

Sources:

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