

Welcome remarks by

Guy Berger, Director for Freedom of Expression and Media Development, UNESCO

Academic Conference on the Safety of Journalists – World Press Freedom Day 2019

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I hope you all know my favourite mantra. It is SDG 16.10 which recognises a target of “public access to information and fundamental freedoms” and the safety of journalists as an associated benchmark of change. Unfortunately, the people who attack journalists do not subscribe to this vision. And each day, journalists pay a price – as does the public. And women doing journalism get an extra dose of threat and intimidation.

Ideally, each individual government should take seriously the matter of monitoring of the range of crimes against journalists - as part of their signing-on to the SDG agenda. Some are indeed doing so. This means that academic researchers on journalists’ safety have an opportunity for huge relevance over the next ten years of what is called the Sustainable Development Agenda. And for those of you who are not researchers or academics, what I have to say to you is: the work that researchers do is really important if you care that journalists should be able to work free of fear, and if you see that knowledge is really important to achieving this.

The SDG indicator linked to 16.10 and relevant to safety also unpacks “safety” as covering “verified cases of killing, kidnapping, enforced disappearance, arbitrary detention and torture of journalists, [and] associated media personnel.” It creates a benchmark to assess if there are changes each year.

Data on these types of listed attacks – killings through to arbitrary detention and torture - could be sourced from court-records, criminal justice institutions and from relevant civil society statistics. They also correlate with codes for crimes used under the International Classification of Crime for Statistical Purposes (ICCS), and which could be drilled down into, to see if journalists can be disaggregated from the whole – or at least contextualised within wider trends.

As we know, there are also many other kinds of attacks beyond those cited in the indicator that are being perpetrated against journalists. There is currently momentum in the UN, following a resolution at the Human Rights Council, to refine the current wording to add the phrase “other harmful acts”, so that the indicator would read “killing, enforced disappearance, torture, arbitrary detention, kidnapping and *other harmful acts*”.

These other kinds of acts could cover recognised ICCS crimes such as sexual violence, threats, coercion, intimidation, harassment, invasion of privacy. They could also include additional ICCS recognised crimes like bullying in the workplace, bullying outside the workplace, cyber-bullying and cyber-stalking.

Interpreted even more broadly, the phrase “other harmful acts” could include attacks such as forcing a journalist into exile, and seizure/confiscation of kit.

Tabulating all these attacks, and assessing the extent of the problems, as well as changes for better or worse, requires research.

It is self-evidently very challenging to monitor such a wide range of attacks across all countries. UNESCO itself currently monitors killings and levels of impunity, primarily on a quantitative basis. Beyond this, qualitative insights and case studies are added in our bi-annual report called World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development.

But the global monitoring also depends on the local. Academics have a real opportunity to get involved in measuring and analysing journalistic safety at country-level.

In this, you researchers can work in concert or in parallel with official monitoring of the SDG 16.10.1 indicator – and in narrow or wider scope of the types of attacks. The more you develop a community of research in this area, the more you can impact on if and how governments monitor journalists’ safety under the SDGs, and if, what and how steps should or are being taken to make progress in this area.

Where academics respond to this opportunity offered by the SDGs, your research output can really have policy relevance. The UN system can put it to good use. So too can stakeholders in your country.

With the support of Lithuania and other members of the Group of Friends of Safety of Journalists, comprising many diplomatic missions to the UN General Assembly, UNESCO hopes to present experiences in monitoring SDG 16.10.1 during a side event to July’s High Level Political Forum on SDG progress in New York. This is under auspices of UNESCO’s International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC) which contributes UNESCO data to the UN Secretary General’s overall report and database about SDG progress.

Interested researchers can also approach the SDG window of relevance through adapting UNESCO’s detailed Journalism Safety Indicators, that have been applied in 10 countries to date. These indicators cover not only issues like the extent and types of attacks, but also what different actors – like governments, media, NGOs, international organisations – are doing or not doing in response.

On the basis of this, UNESCO has also developed a basic template for governments to voluntarily adopt for their official SDG reporting, and for civil society groups that may want to do joint or shadow reports. This template is currently being disseminated by UNDP as part of overall voluntary guidelines for monitoring SDG 16.

A further resource for academics, which can enable you to angle research according to interest (eg. audience studies, newsroom sociology, political economy), is the UNESCO research agenda on the safety of journalists, developed in 2015 after wide consultations.

In other words, not only is the need there to research safety of journalists; some data is there – in courts, civil society, the ICCS system. Further, a number of indicators and approaches are on offer. Most of all, the opportunity is there with the SDG 16.10 indicator.

All that’s needed is sustained and expanded engagement by academia.

This conference, now the fourth in its series, mirrors mounting momentum in this field elsewhere. In particular, I refer to the OSLO-Met University's annual conference on the subject, and the research network initiated by Sheffield University's UNESCO Chair on Media Freedom, Journalism Safety and the Issue of Impunity which also organises annual panels at the IAMCR conference.

With these remarks, I commend everyone who helped organise this event, and not least the researchers who are presenting today. Please keep going from strength to strength. All efforts are needed to protect journalism in these difficult times, and your research is a significant part of the picture.