

**Beyond the Bonn process:
strengthening independent Afghan media**

VENRO, the umbrella organisation of development non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Germany and its member organisations working in Afghanistan, together with journalists.network, held a bi-lateral seminar for Journalists from Afghanistan and Germany on Nov. 30th/Dec. 1st in Bonn. The seminar aimed to identify problems and root causes that free and independent media in Afghanistan is facing today and how to protect and strengthen them. The initiative comes at the eve of the Bonn International Afghanistan Conference on Dec. 5th – a crucial event, where the course of the transition and peace process will be further determined. Five Afghan media managers and journalists and ten German journalists and editors from various national media participated in the meeting.

The encounter took stock of the current situation of media in Afghanistan:

Ten years after the Petersberg conference, the emergence and development of independent Afghan media is a success story. However major achievements are coming under pressure. The parties in conflict constantly restrict access to information to journalists. Women continue to face restrictions and to be harassed as female media actors. Independent media continue to suffer from imbalanced and short termed investment of the international community. None of the past international development pacts or conferences had a clear focus and proper mechanisms in support of the media sector. Media ownership in the hands of doubtful powerbrokers and warlords are an obstacle on the way to full freedom of speech and media. With the increase of the military conflict from 2006 onwards, media is targeted as a tool of war, with Taliban and international military forces hijacking the public arena. The ongoing conflict exposes Afghan journalists to harsh and life threatening conditions with often no protection for their physical safety. Intimidation, self-censorship and lack of journalism security remain sources of grave concern.

Participants concluded with the following set of recommendations to the Afghan state institutions and the international donor community:

- ✧ all political and social achievements of the past ten years are not negotiable, including freedom of speech and media, human rights including political participation of women;
- ✧ the urgent need to revise the existing media law including a definition of the public media sector (existing non-profit media actors) in order to safeguard and strengthen those independent media that have proven essential over the past decade for the Afghan civil society;

- ✧ establish a trust fund with the purpose to support the media sector that would be administrated by an transparent and independent body;
- ✧ help the establishment of a Afghan managed journalism Institute to replace short term trainings by academic curriculum;
- ✧ support the passing and implementation of the 'access to information act'.

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