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**SUBCOMMITTEE ON STATE, FOREIGN OPERATIONS,  
AND RELATED PROGRAMS  
COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS  
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**MARCH 12, 2019**

Madam Chairwoman, I am very honored to appear today on behalf of Internews. I appreciate the opportunity to testify on the importance of citizen access to trusted, quality, and locally relevant news and information, and I urge the Committee to include language in the Committee's fiscal year 2020 report supporting continued funding for media and civil society development programs through the U.S. Department of State and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

We request that the Committee:

- Increase investment in democracy, human rights, and governance programs broadly, with independent media and supporting moderate voices as a critical element of this broader goal.
- Continue to support and expand access to independent media, information communication technologies, and supportive laws and policies.
- Continue to support and expand the Internet freedom agenda, ensuring that citizens of the world enjoy safe access and use of the Internet.
- Continue to support global health projects that deliver high quality and culturally and contextually appropriate health information to combat and contain epidemics and pandemics.
- Continue to support local media development and information systems in Afghanistan, Central America, Venezuela, Burma, Ukraine, and other regions and countries as they go through critical social and political transitions.
- Continue to support humanitarian media and information projects to stabilize the fragile and potentially explosive circumstances of the more than 68 million refugees, migrants, and internally displaced people around the world.
- Increase investments in efforts to engage women, youth, and religious and ethnic minorities in media and information globally.

We are very grateful for the Committee's leadership and support for programs that advance America's interests through the creation of stable, accountable, and participatory civic life around the world.

Internews, an international non-profit organization headquartered in California, has been working to improve the flow of civic-minded, locally-produced news and information for more than 35 years. We have worked in more than 100 countries and trained more than 100,000 people in journalism, media, and business skills. Today we are active in 84 countries, working with local partners in pursuit of a better world.

## **INFORMATION UNDER ATTACK**

The world today is characterized by dramatic threats to trusted information ecosystems around the world. Repressive and authoritarian governments are restricting citizens' access to information. Intimidation, attacks, and policy clampdowns are making it harder for journalists to do their jobs securely.

The rise of malign actors and the swiftness of internet technology has made misinformation and disinformation more pernicious and prevalent than ever. Additionally, market realities and consolidation have made the business of public-interest information nearly untenable for local, community-based news outlets.

The need for action is urgent and widespread. A few examples:

- In Mexico and Guatemala, violence against journalists from organized and criminal groups is equivalent to working in a war zone, and impunity for these crimes and attacks is at 98%.
- In Burma, hate speech, rapidly spread on social media and online news sites, has flamed the Rohingya crisis, directly contributing to the devastating genocide there.
- Direct government censorship has taken a new path in the internet age, as we see a dramatic rise in something we assumed would be so unpalatable it would not be pursued – full internet shutdowns and completely cutting off access to information – in places like Cameroon and India.
- In the Philippines, where journalists are under tremendous threat, voices of hope such as the digital-native news site *Rappler* are struggling to stay in business, not only from a direct push to stifle their work, but due to collapsing business models.

These are only a few of the places where Internews works. We focus on building the capacity of partners in these countries – local media, content producers, and digital activists – to ensure that all people have access to the locally-relevant information they need to make good choices for their families, shape their communities, and to hold their governments accountable.

## **PROGRESS: BUILDING TRUSTED INFORMATION SPACES**

Last year I visited Kabul, where Internews began working in December 2001, just as the Taliban fell. When we first arrived, we faced a complete information desert, with only one creaky, state-run radio station functioning. We started working in communities that had never experienced their own media, including generations that had never even publicly listened to music.

But we found media enthusiasts and entrepreneurs and helped them to create a whole new network of radio and TV stations that reach all 34 provinces of Afghanistan. The radio stations we have supported are community owned and community run. The newscasters and journalists come from the community and are the voice of the community.

Seventeen stations are women-led, and I am most proud of our ability to support the brave and courageous Afghan women who work in media. Afghan women media leaders struggle against significant challenges and show tremendous resilience and determination in their persistence.

Because of the hard work of Afghanistan's home-grown journalists and information advocates, media has become the second most trusted public institution in the country, just after religious leaders. According to a report by Edelman this year, only 43% of citizens in 28 countries trust their media. In Afghanistan this figure is 65%.

Trust in media begins with inclusion. When people feel that their issues are covered, and their voices are heard, trust can flourish. However, women are underrepresented across the board in media, both in newsrooms and in the news. Worldwide, only 27% of the top management jobs in the media sector are occupied by women. Among reporters, 36% of the jobs are held by women. Globally, women hold just one third of full-time media positions, and even fewer work in ICT (Information and Communications Technology) and media management positions.

In Iraq, our *Women's Voices* project has brought together a coalition of human rights defenders and journalists with the express goal of reducing sexual and gender-based violence. They approach this goal by raising awareness and increasing accurate, sensitive coverage on the disparities affecting women in the country.

In Ukraine, we have worked with and invested in local partners for decades, and now have some of the smartest and most effective organizations working to combat disinformation worldwide. Through a major focus on critical thinking, our partners' fact-checking sites have taken off, contests to identify paid political content have become popular, and media organizations have worked with the Ministry of Education to integrate media literacy into teaching core social science disciplines.

Over time, partially as a result of these efforts, our annual survey of media consumption in Ukraine revealed a 16% year-over-year increase in Ukrainians' ability to spot paid-news or fake news. In 2018, the survey showed Ukrainians trusted their media more than they did in 2017, reversing a downward trend in trust seen in polls in the previous two years.

At Internews, we believe the most important tool in combating misinformation is to invest in real news: trusted, local, relevant, and actionable news and information.

## **SOLUTIONS IN PARTNERSHIP**

Our commitment to this work does not waver. Even in these challenging times, there is hope in places, that despite the odds, are opening and changing. This year's May 3<sup>rd</sup> World Press Freedom Day events will be held in Ethiopia – a location that would have been unthinkable just a few years ago.

In Malaysia, press freedom became a platform issue of the government elected in 2018, which repealed a repressive press policy three months after taking office.

This kind of change does not happen overnight. Our work supports not only individual journalists, but the business models, the legal frameworks, and the technical tools needed to preserve the potential of news and information in free societies.

Last year, in more than 80 countries, we supported more than 1,000 local partners. That work strengthens, piece by piece, the information ecosystems that make it possible for people everywhere to access quality, trusted, local information.

We are proud to work in partnership with USAID and the US Department of State on a vision of access and freedom, in contrast to the rise of authoritarian models of information control. We believe that a major goal of U.S. foreign policy should be universal access to reliable information.

We urge the Committee to include language in the Committee's fiscal year 2020 report supporting continued funding for media and civil society development programs.

Local media, internet freedom, citizen media, and civil society institutions empower and stabilize communities while supporting American development, diplomacy, and national security goals.