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

March 3, 2015

Madam Chairwoman, on behalf of Internews, I appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony for the record to the Subcommittee on the importance of access to trusted, quality, local news and information. We are very grateful for the Subcommittee's leadership and support for programs that strengthen global civil society and improve access to information. We urge the Committee to continue funding such media and civil society development programs through the Department of State and the U. S. Agency for International Development (USAID) in fiscal year 2016. We request that the Subcommittee:

- Continue to support and expand access to independent media, information communication technologies, and supportive laws and policies.
- Increase support for humanitarian information programming for internally displaced people in eastern Ukraine desperately in need of life-saving and accurate information.
- Increase investments in efforts to engage more women in media and information globally.
- Continue to support local media development and information systems in Afghanistan, Burma, Pakistan and Ukraine as they go through critical social and political transitions.
- Continue to support and expand on the Internet freedom agenda, ensuring that citizens of the world enjoy access and use of an affordable and safe Internet.
- Increase investment in independent media as a tool for addressing global health issues such as Ebola.
- Increase investment in the democracy, human rights and governance programs broadly, with independent media and supporting moderate voices as a critical element of this broader goal.

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 30 years. We have worked in over 90 countries and trained more than 90,000 people in journalism, media and business skills. Today we are active from Afghanistan to Ukraine to South Sudan to Burma, working with local partners in pursuit of a better world.

TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE THROUGH INVESTING IN DEMOCRACY

The world is facing major transitional issues in the coming years and investing in transformational programming supported by democracy funding is an essential part of the US government's ability to engage with these transitions. The number of elected democracies in the world has grown from approximately 35 in 1970 to 125 in 2015, though due to weak governance institutions, lack of rule of law, attacks on freedom of expression, corruption and inequality, many of these countries are facing challenges in consolidating democratic practices and are increasingly vulnerable to having development gains reversed.

Independent media and information systems are essential to democracy building in the 21st century. With over 6 billion cell phones on the planet and over 2 billion people on the internet, these issues have become even more complex and challenging. With support from USAID and the U.S. Department of State Internews programs create platforms for dialogue and enable informed debate which brings about social and economic progress in pivotal countries such as Ukraine and Afghanistan.

Media is a critical player in shaping citizen perceptions of governance, the electoral process and their role in civic life. Genuine citizen participation, government accountability, and effective civil society advocacy require that information be accessible and that it be easy to understand and apply. Internews' experience has shown that both traditional and new media can act as a powerful tool to raise citizen voices – particularly youth who may feel disenfranchised – and ensure they feel they matter and can impact the political process.

Internews' work in Ukraine is a strong example of how important a vibrant and robust media can be in a time of crises and war. In Ukraine, Internews continues to support courageous journalists on the front lines of war who risk their lives to report the truth on what's happening in the east.

We ask that the Committee consider increasing US government support for democracy programs, through funds provided for the U.S. Agency for International Development and the Department of State, in fiscal year 2016.

DELIVERING ESSENTIAL INFORMATION TO IDP'S IN EASTERN UKRAINE

There are currently nearly one million internally displaced people in eastern Ukraine. Many of them fled their homes in the dead of winter with little more than the clothes on their backs, taking refuge in Ukrainian controlled areas. In some towns, the displaced outnumber locals by three to one. Most of the displaced are women, children, and the elderly and startling numbers of them are in need of psycho-neurological care.

Life for these refugees has become a harsh and bewildering limbo filled with new, changing, and conflicting information. They struggle with an urgent need to know what is going on. For those in Ukraine, the prolonged and sophisticated information war that has accompanied

the conflict is now profoundly complicating the question of where to turn for reliable and potentially life-saving information

As the conflict drags on and the ceasefire remains elusive, it is vital that humanitarian response efforts include not just physical assistance but also timely, accurate and actionable humanitarian information for displaced people and the communities that are sustaining them. Information about entitlements, rights, legal assistance, eligibility criteria and available aid are essential for people to recover some sense of agency over their own lives and make informed decisions about their future.

Whether the ceasefire holds or not, displaced people face a raft of difficult decisions about where to go and what to do. Supporting credible independent media outlets to provide the local population with “news-you-can-use” is one of the best ways to enable the Ukrainian media to build the much-needed trust they will need to support the reforms that have been set in motion.

ENGAGING MORE WOMEN IN MEDIA AND INFORMATION GLOBALLY

When women’s voices are heard, and when women produce the news, the information we all consume improves. Additionally, when women have access to accurate, trusted, relevant locally produced information, they make better decisions for themselves, their families and their communities.

Throughout the world, these needs and conditions are not being met. Women represent only one third of full time journalism staff, only 13% of all news stories focus on women, and only 21% of women in the developing world have access to the internet.

With USAID and U.S. State Department funding, Internews has worked in over 90 countries investing in efforts to engage more women in media and information globally. Internews works to help women reach parity in media management, content creation, policy making and safe access to information.

Two great examples of this work include Internews’ work in Afghanistan where Internews has trained thousands of women in computer and multimedia skills, and has helped build and support five women owned, women run radio stations. In Myanmar, Internews mentors and trains young women in new tech, media and entrepreneurial skills to launch their own innovative solutions to solve local issues.

QUALITY NEWS AND INFORMATION IN AFGHANISTAN

A critical contributing force to last year’s successful transition in Afghanistan beyond elections is an independent and self-sustaining pluralistic media sector capable of serving as a watchdog of government accountability. With USAID supported programing, Internews has been providing essential support to the media sector in Afghanistan since 2002.

Internews has supported and partnered with 59 Afghan-owned local radio stations in all 34 provinces that have provided much needed news, information and entertainment. This is not something the Afghan people take for granted. Under the radically oppressive and intolerant Taliban, news and information were repressed. This is no longer the case. The broadcast of these local voices has opened up a critical platform for public dialogue across the country.

In 2012, the Internews-founded local media organization, Nai launched the accredited Nai Media Institute (NMI), offering the first two year vocational Diploma in Media course in Afghanistan.

We ask that the Committee continue US government support, through funds provided for the U.S. Agency for International Development and the Department of State, for local, independent media and information systems in Afghanistan for fiscal year 2016.

EXPANDING THE INTERNET FREEDOM AGENDA

The Internet brings unprecedented opportunities for freedom of expression and access to information. It is driving down geographic, economic and cultural barriers and is supporting political and economic development worldwide. The Internet's promise, however, remains unfulfilled and under threat due to persistent gaps in governance, access, affordability and safety. This is a critical moment for the development of one the world's richest resources.

Internews, in partnership with the U.S. State Department, is helping give people the ability to freely and safely access information and make their voices heard around the world, including in some of the most digitally dangerous places in the world. Leveraging venture capital-style investment in cutting-edge technologies, Internews helps to grow internet access in safe and secure ways for millions of Internet and mobile-phone users. A new wave of cyber threats, too, bring unprecedented challenges for journalists and civic leaders, requiring new tactics and strategies that must be continuously developed and deployed to ensure online safety.

No efforts to build and support reliable and safe media and communications are worthwhile however, without the internet and telecommunication backbones that make it all possible. A multipronged effort to empower civil society and business sectors in 20 + countries is expanding their ability to engage in public policy dialogues and advocacy on issues of essential relevance to Internet freedom. They are also bringing previously unknown voices to the international policy discussion dealing with Internet governance and infrastructure development.

We ask that the Committee continue US government support, through funds provided for the Department of State, for Internet freedom programs for fiscal year 2016.

HARNESSING MEDIA TO RESPOND TO EBOLA AND IMPROVING GLOBAL HEALTH

To date, the deadly Ebola outbreak has claimed more than 9,000 lives. In a public health emergency like this one, people need reliable, trustworthy, and actionable information about the disease and how to prevent it. While rumor and misinformation are exacerbating outbreak, Internews is working with local media in West Africa to address the urgent information needs of the population, including how to identify early symptoms, prevent transmission, and where to seek treatment.

In Liberia we are on the ground supporting local media, ensuring two-way communication with the affected communities, and facilitating accurate Ebola-related information flows between local media, government and health agencies.

In nearly a decade of work in Sub-Saharan Africa, Internews has seen the critical impact that accurate information has on public health. Supported by USAID and U.S. State Department, our projects have stimulated accurate, responsible, and effective local media coverage on Ebola HIV/AIDS, malaria and pandemic health issues.

In Kenya, Internews trained and mentored journalists to educate the public on effective HIV prevention and treatment methods. Over time, these journalists matured into some of the best on the continent and in fact three of them were nominated for CNN's Journalist of the Year award.

CONCLUSION

We believe that a major goal of US foreign policy should be universal access to quality, local and accurate information. Local media, citizen media, and civil society institutions armed with communications technologies can empower communities and amplify American approaches to development, diplomacy and national security.