

## **Economic and Social Council**

### **Civil society hearing on the longer-term positioning of the United Nations development system**

#### **Statement submitted by the Foundation for Responsible Media, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council**

Our experience as a small media NGO in India has been that the media work of UN agencies (except UNICEF) lacks innovative approaches and is still steeped in an old-fashioned framework. By and large, media products are conference or annual report oriented and stay on the shelf, unless designed for some short-term television advocacy campaign. There is no vision for appropriate utilisation of media for long-term engagement with general or targeted stakeholders / groups. This impacts suitable dissemination of achievements by the UN system that can inspire action by citizens and grass root organisations. External individual effort to change this is difficult because of the overall non-responsiveness and lack of engagement or communication / intellectual exchange with the UN bureaucratic system.

A major hurdle is the time gap in responses or in several cases, the total lack of it. For NGOs working on a project-to-project basis, functionally, this is a burdensome experience in terms of planning ahead.

In terms of co-ordinated effort, there is a clear lack of interest in supporting each other among UN agencies themselves. For a major national-level UNESCO-GAPMIL global initiative in India, nine country-head-level representatives were approached. Only one responded to the email but eventually no one attended the National Consultation on Media & Information Literacy. This lack of engagement has a direct impact on how to move ahead with the national government. It also reiterates what has been clearly stated in the DFID-Panos (London) report, 'At the Heart of Change'. One of the fundamental reasons we have not achieved the MDGs is because policymakers and development experts do not recognise the essential role that information and communication play in development.

It would be refreshing to see changes in the time-consuming bureaucratic structures, as well as complete transparency - not just in letter but in spirit - in the UN system. Officials across the board need an intellectual modernisation process that makes them proactive, communicative, responsive and accessible. The gaps in UN achievements can be bridged with sustained and dedicated efforts in this direction.

It may not be amiss to suggest that the European Union system (like EuropeAid) can offer a good set of lessons learnt. This is applicable for interlinkages between alignment of functions, funding practices, governance structures, capacity and impact of the United Nations development system, partnership approaches and organizational arrangements.

The partnership approaches / organisational arrangements need review towards becoming research-oriented and exploring new territories instead of remaining on old, often redundant familiar ground, especially dysfunctional government agencies, woven into the cocktail circuit.

It may be late to suggest but 'cultural' should be a specific fourth dimension of the SDGs. Culture is the most critical victim, the first to be impacted when there is change with development, causing worldwide crises of identity / diversity.

It is now fashionable to talk of the bottom-up approach, even if the UN system is still in a quagmire of a top-down bureaucracy. It must change to friendly communicativeness, if impact is what the UN is looking for.