

REPORT OF THEMATIC SESSION III

“ACCESS TO THE MEDIA AND POLITICAL PLURALISM”



THEMATIC SESSION III: ACCESS TO THE MEDIA AND POLITICAL PLURALISM

The participants emphasised the strategic role of the media in building democracy, leading public opinion against undemocratic ideas. Free, public and diverse information represents the best way to open up public space to debates that characterise democratic pluralism. In that respect, they emphasised the responsibility of all media in the promotion of democratic debate, citizens' participation and civic education, as well as its role in promoting transparency in all spheres of social life.

Several participants, however, noted that, within the context of societies widely affected by illiteracy, State control of radio and television – which play a predominant role in the creation of public opinion – can distort democratic interaction and disrupt the level playing field between political actors. Within that context, the opening up and liberalisation of public broadcasting space in participating countries would be an asset and an additional guarantee with a view to strengthening the processes of democratic development.

By emphasising the predominant role of media in political communication and the creation of public opinion, the participants noted the perceptible evolution in the countries of the region. In particular, the increase in satellite channels has contributed to the diversification of information sources.

However, it was stressed that, despite the evolution of the media and the facilities provided by new information technologies (such as satellite television channels and the internet), national public television and radio remain essential vectors of political communication that cannot be ignored in the countries of the region, particularly within the electoral context. Therefore, it is important to take and implement measures to ensure equal access to public media and to encourage it to promote equity among different political groups.

Those measures should ideally be in keeping with the framework of a global system that protects freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and freedom of the press. In addition to political actors, journalists have the obligation to use these freedoms responsibly. On that issue, the participants emphasised the importance of strengthening the capacity of information professionals in general, at the technical level as well as at the conceptual level.



Given the above, the participants in Thematic Session III on “*Access to the media and political pluralism*” concluded that:

1. Free, public and diverse information represents the best way to open up the public space to debates that characterise democratic pluralism;
2. The opening up and liberalisation of public broadcasting in the countries of the region would be an asset and an additional guarantee to strengthen the democratisation process. The issue of independent media funding should also be addressed;
3. Given the strategic role of public broadcasting in the countries of the region, it would be useful to implement measures to ensure equal access to public media and to encourage the media to promote equity among different political groups;
4. The strengthening, in particular through training, of the capacity of media operators, at both the technical and conceptual levels, can contribute to enhancing the quality of the media and thus can broaden the basis of democracy;
5. Governments should allow for a credible and effective monitoring system to be established in order to assess the progress made in respect of promoting media freedom. The need to protect journalists from all forms of mistreatment should also be addressed by putting all the necessary judicial safeguards in place. There should also be a legal framework to ensure that the media operates responsibly;
6. Dialogue among governments and civil society organisations with a view to sharing experiences and exchanging best practices on media-related issues should be further encouraged and supported so that an effective partnership can be established at the national, regional and international level;
7. Governments and non-state actors in the region should devise together national strategies to identify the problems affecting media freedom and lay out comprehensive plans of action, preferably with clear timelines and benchmarks, to redress them effectively.