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Moema Freire: Afternoon to all the participants. Welcome. This is a joint webinar by UNDP, Global Forum for Media Development, and Search for Common Ground on media actors and the deconstruction of the other. We will explore insights from the last Human Development Report from UNDP for innovative governance programming.

Moema Freire: This is the second of a four-part webinar series on insights from the Last Human Development Report for innovative governance programming. So, I would like to welcome all the participants and our speakers invited today. The objectives of this webinar are threefold.

Moema Freire: We will provide conceptual clarity on what media development is in the context of the Human Development Report recommendations. We will raise awareness on how partnerships with media can be strengthened to enhance citizens' trust in public institutions, reduce polarization, and strengthen democracy. We will also amplify lessons emerging from inspiring practices of media as conveners of dialogue in highly polarized societies from selected countries that will demonstrate how innovative methods and approaches can be applied.

Moema Freire: Our webinar today will be divided into key segments. In the first one, we will interact with specialists who will share key concepts and insights related to the topic we are discussing. Then, we will have a second segment where key country experiences from the field will be presented, and we will learn the key lessons and recommendations from those experiences. We will have two moments of Q&A during our webinar. So, I invite all our participants to introduce themselves in the chat. The chat is enabled for you to interact and share your comments and questions.

Moema Freire: To start our discussion today, I would like to welcome Roberto Tapia. Roberto is the Research and Strategic Partnership Advisor of the Human Development Report Office from UNDP. So, Roberto will give us an introduction to the Human Development Report. Welcome, Roberto. The floor is yours.

Heriberto Tapia: Thank you so much for the invitation. For me, it's a pleasure to be here. So, I'm going to share with you just some brief insights about the latest Human Development Report. I have just a few minutes. I'm going to share some slides. I hope you can see them.

Heriberto Tapia: Just very briefly, the latest Human Development Report is about breaking the gridlock and reimagining cooperation in a polarized world. The idea of the gridlock is

that we are in a situation where we are facing many problems caused by people, such as climate change, the challenges of artificial intelligence, and conflict, and we are not being able to address them. So, precisely when we have these common challenges that require us to act united, we are more divided and polarized.

Heriberto Tapia: One of the key findings of the report, and I'm going to be very selective about just a few points, is that the way in which we are making decisions is not working. We see that there is some sort of democracy paradox that takes the following form: on the one hand, people express value for democracy, but at the same time, they express support for leaders who might undermine democracy. This is what we see in this chart. In the horizontal axis, you see the percentage of people (these are global averages) that express support for democracy, and this is very high, around 90% of the population. In the vertical axis, we have the percentage of people who express support for leaders that might undermine democracy. These are strong leaders that might bypass elections and Parliament. So, we see that over time, the support for democracy remains high, but little by little, the support for these strong leaders that undermine democracy has been rising. In the last measurement, it went beyond 50%.

Heriberto Tapia: Why is this important? Because this is something that people are telling us. Often, when we think about the rise of authoritarianism, we tend to focus on the leader. The leader is a problem, and that's probably the case. But here we are seeing something more structural in countries where they don't have such a strong leader on the ballot, but people are still longing for this type of leadership. So, this is a point that I would like you to consider. There is something that is not working.

Heriberto Tapia: The second point that the report is raising is about what is not working for people in a key aspect of development, which is agency. Agency represents the ability of people to control their own lives, set objectives, and make commitments based on their own values. When we measure what we call the agency gaps, or the lack of agency, we found very important results. On the one hand, in the individual dimension, around half of the population feels that they are not in full control of their own lives. This is a fundamental issue for people if they have this perception that they cannot lead their lives in the way they want. Second, in the more social dimension, people express that they don't have the ability to influence what is happening with their countries in terms of their political processes. Seven in ten people report that they have little influence in the decisions of their government. So, this is a big agency problem. Again, it's related to the democracy paradox that I showed you before.

Heriberto Tapia: What is behind these agency gaps? In the report, we discussed that inequalities are important, the perception of human insecurity is important, and social

norms are important. I cannot go into the details, but I want to stress the last part: the lack of spaces for deliberation. Here, the role of media could be very significant.

Heriberto Tapia: The last point that I want to highlight, just to trigger the conversation hopefully, is that in this context of polarization, often there is an issue of misperceptions. Something that we require in order to cooperate is to have certain alignment of expectations. What we document in this report is that people often have a natural inclination to cooperate even beyond self-interest. But many people present the characteristics of a conditional cooperator—they want to cooperate, but only if others cooperate. Here we have problems of information. For instance, if we ask people about their willingness to support climate action through some financial sacrifice, 69% of people are willing to cooperate through this mechanism. But their perception is that only 43% are willing. This is a barrier to their ability to cooperate. Again, the role of media in bridging this gap could be fundamental in addressing some of the consequences of polarization.

Heriberto Tapia: I'm going to stop here, but I will be happy to come back if necessary. Over to you, Moema. Thank you.

Moema Freire: Thank you very much, Heriberto, for sharing with us these important insights and recommendations on how polarization is impacting the Human Development Report in different regions of the world. To continue our conversation, I would like to invite Sarah Lister. Sarah is the Head of Governance at UNDP. So, Sarah, in light of the findings that Heriberto has just presented, why is it important, in your vision, for development actors to engage with media in the context of governance work?

Sarah Lister: Thank you, Moema, and good morning, good afternoon, good evening to you all, and welcome to this wonderful webinar with such a rich series of speakers and experiences. It's good to see many names that I know in the chat and many that I don't know in the participants list.

Sarah Lister: The presentation by Heriberto has highlighted how decision-making in societies is not working in terms of people's agency and influencing political processes, and that lack of space for deliberation and issues of misperception. All of these are related to the importance of information in our societies and how a lack of high-quality, accurate information, or too much inaccurate or inflammatory information, can drive polarization. It hinders the way we make decisions, the way we're able to implement public policy, and it can foment violence.

Sarah Lister: At UNDP, we think of engagement with media in the context of our broader work on governance, rule of law, and peacebuilding. We take a systemic approach to how the different actors, institutions, and processes are working together towards development

outcomes. We talk about an open and inclusive public sphere characterized by effective dialogue and inclusive participation. We see that as foundational to democratic governance, which is why SDG 16.10 addresses these issues.

Sarah Lister: The quality of information available to different actors and the way people access it has a significant impact on the quality of dialogue, political processes, democratic governance, and development outcomes. We support access to quality information in four ways, and our work with media is an intrinsic part of these ways. We look at public communication and transparency, addressing information pollution (misinformation, disinformation, malinformation), media development (including the promotion of a free, independent, and pluralistic media sector), and addressing information fragmentation. Media outlets are key enablers of public debate, providing people with knowledge about a range of public matters and being a space where public debate can play out.

Sarah Lister: For many decades, there has been a separation between those who work in media development, media for development, information and communication issues, and those who work on governance, democratic governance, rule of law, and peacebuilding issues. These have been parallel communities, and I don't think that has served us well. I see these communities increasingly coming together, understanding the issues as interlinked. That's part of the purpose of webinars such as this, to gain understanding of opportunities to work in this space. Thank you.

Moema Freire: Thank you very much, Sarah. Could you tell us more about some of the main challenges of this work and how an organization like UNDP might address them?

Sarah Lister: Yes, there are many challenges in this area, and I think the other speakers will speak to many of them. Briefly, it's important to put on the table at the outset that media are major actors within what we call the public sphere, with the ability to significantly affect the outcomes of political and other processes and public policy processes. This is important in itself. Media outlets are owned by specific individuals, corporations, institutions, and states, and therefore inherently represent specific interests and worldviews. This has always been the case, but we have seen significant consolidation of media ownership in recent years, very prominently in some regions. In some cases, the media is controlled by the state, in others by proxies, and much of the information in societies is now effectively controlled by a handful of powerful tech companies with limited or no public interest mandate and very limited accountability.

Sarah Lister: We need to be cognizant of this as a challenge. We see weakened legacy media in recent years through the erosion of business models caused by the platforms.

There is a huge funding crisis for independent media. We see media amplifying information pollution, increased editorial bias, self-censorship, and an erosion of core journalistic principles. We also see significant and increasing attacks on media and journalists and a very alarming shrinking of civic space. Many colleagues online will be speaking to that.

Sarah Lister: How do we address these? We need good analysis and to put the role of information and media into that analysis. We see the challenge as an ecosystemic one, so we need to work closely with partners and have different entry points to address the outcomes depending on the country context. In some places, we work with government ministries, in others with media regulators, electoral management bodies, parliaments, civil society media partners, and other UN agencies as appropriate. We are also an active member of the UN Network on the Safety of Journalists, convened by UNESCO and OHCHR. Together with our UN sister agencies, we are concerned about the issue of attacks on media workers and journalists. That's a snapshot of some of the issues and potential entry points, but I look forward to hearing much more as the webinar continues.

Moema Freire: Thanks a lot, Sarah, for sharing this important overview of the challenges and key entry points on how we can advance on this agenda. Now, I would like to invite Lena Slachmuis. She is the Executive Director of Digital Peacebuilding from Search for Common Ground. Before giving the floor to Lena, I would like to remind you to please share your comments and questions in the chat. Lena, today, will contribute to this discussion by answering two questions: How do you see the role of media in building peace in highly polarized societies, and which innovative strategies can we apply to reduce polarization in partnerships with media actors? Lena, the floor is yours.

Lena Slachmuis: Thank you so much, Moema, and thanks for inviting Search for Common Ground to this important conversation. I spent about a decade as a journalist before I joined Search for Common Ground and then spent the next 15 years trying to find a way for media to not be a tool of promoting hatred and division, but rather a tool for promoting trust and collaboration. I'm excited to share a few things that we've learned along the way.

Lena Slachmuis: I want to share a little bit about how we understand media's interaction with polarization, why it's sometimes hard to change course, and what we've learned over the last 20 years. Three things that were interesting to me about the HDR report were that when they looked at 81 papers over the last 20 years, as our colleague from UNDP said earlier, people are widely misperceiving what others think, what they do, and who they are. This prevents them from feeling as though they have a shared purpose and can actually lean in and collaborate. Among the two recommendations that the HDR report says is that we need to pierce through that fog of false differences to move us

towards cooperation and remind people that there actually is common ground between them.

Lena Slachmuisjlder: In our view, two things really shape polarization: one is our lived experiences, and the second is how we experience the world through media. It's important to remind ourselves that when we think of media, we think of facts and information, but really our perception of the other is shaped by our emotions and how much trust we have in different relationships. The media plays on that and builds this important world called the narrative. The narrative is how we make sense of the world around us, define who are our friends, who are our enemies, whether we're the victim or the victor, and who are our heroes. It's a determinant factor in understanding if we're trying to build a more trusting and collaborative society.

Lena Slachmuisjlder: This is really hard to do in polarized contexts. On the right here, I could have had five slides of all the training materials that Search for Common Ground has produced over the years, working with journalists, talk show hosts, investigative journalists, and youth programs to get journalists to see the potential of their role, to reframe the conflict, seek solutions, and rehumanize people, particularly after protracted violent conflict. But I will admit that this is hard because the media is never impartial or neutral, and the ownership is in partisan hands. This means the very people we're training, even if they understand and have the aspiration to do better, often have their hands tied.

Lena Slachmuisjlder: The change we've tried to make over the years is to not stop working with journalists but to look at different formats, including entertainment formats, drama formats, fiction, and nonfiction, that seek to remind people that in times of war, conflict is reduced to a binary "us versus them." Media has the potential to remind us of the multitude of identities we each possess, reframe the conflict, look back at grievances and causes of conflict, highlight examples of solutions, and rehumanize people, illustrating that there is common ground across divides.

Lena Slachmuisjlder: A couple of examples: One was a TV drama and radio drama in many countries called "The Team." The name and metaphor were the same: if you don't collaborate, you won't score goals. In each country, the production team determined the storyline and team members based on key divides and areas of stigma and stereotypes. From Nepal, where we had a female coach, to Indonesia, where we had a football team in a prison, to Kenya, where we had team members from across ethnic and tribal lines, these stories and the way we used them through media and mobile cinema and discussion groups opened up new conversations and made people feel comfortable with diversity and difference, checking their misperceptions of the other.

Lena Slachmuis: Another example using nonfiction: Burundian heroes who risked their lives during mass violence in the seventies and nineties in Burundi. For five years, Search for Common Ground produced weekly stories of one person who risked their life to save someone of the other ethnicity. This shifted the ingrained trauma narrative about the other and turned it around so that people felt proud of their heroes and a sense of shared humanity.

Lena Slachmuis: We've also consistently leaned into having young people under the age of 18 produce shows themselves, seeking diversity in the composition of these teams. This enables them to tackle issues that adult journalists sometimes find taboo or difficult. You'll hear later from Yakang from the South Sudan version of this program about what that has meant for the South Sudanese community.

Lena Slachmuis: Lastly, an example from the Great Lakes: a partnership with journalists from radio stations in Rwanda, Burundi, and the DRC. Together with eight partner radio stations, we created a live, interactive broadcast across the three countries, rotating weekly from one country to the next, with co-hosts from at least two different countries. This allowed people to phone in their language and began to shift their identities from only seeing themselves as Burundians, Rwandans, or Congolese to being part of a new generation wanting similar things and equipped to talk about difficult subjects.

Moema Freire: Thanks a lot, Lena, for your presentation. It's nice to see how youth and communities can play an important role in this process. Thank you very much for sharing with us. To continue our discussion, I would like to introduce Ayman Mhanna. He is the Steering Committee Member of the Global Forum for Media Development and also the Executive Director of the Sky Center for Media and Cultural Freedom. Before introducing Ayman and giving the floor to him, I would like to remind you again to please share your comments and questions in the chat. After Ayman's presentation, we will have a moment of interaction with our invited speakers. So, Ayman, I would like to ask you how far partnerships with media can be strengthened to enhance citizens' trust in public institutions, reduce polarization, and strengthen democracy. Based on the experience of the Global Forum for Media Development, what are the key recommendations for strengthening media's role in highly polarized societies? The floor is yours, Ayman.

Ayman Mhanna: Thank you very much. Good morning, good afternoon, and thanks for the opportunity to discuss how we can strengthen partnerships with media and enhance trust in institutions. Which institutions are we talking about? Micro-local institutions. Most polling shows relatively high support and high trust in micro-local institutions. Trust in national institutions is where we saw in the HDR report that there are fundamental problems, and the situation is even more critical when it comes to trust in cross-national,

transnational, and international institutions, especially in times of conflict when people feel victimized or not properly defended and protected.

Ayman Mhanna: I draw on some of the experiences from the work of the Global Forum for Media Development (GFMD) and from my organization, the Samir Kassir Foundation, based in Beirut, the Sky Center, to vault between important principles and recommendations and practical examples that illustrate my point. These principles mostly stem from a series of six principles recently adopted

Ayman Mhanna: I draw on some of the experiences from the work of the Global Forum for Media Development (GFMD) and from my organization, the Samir Kassir Foundation, based in Beirut, the Sky Center, to vault between important principles and recommendations and practical examples that illustrate my point. These principles mostly stem from a series of six principles recently adopted, thanks to GFMD's advocacy, by the OECD in their development cooperation principles on relevant and effective support to media and the information environment.

Ayman Mhanna: In societies where skepticism towards public institutions is very high, theoretically, partnerships with media can be a bridge to rebuild trust. I'm saying theoretically on purpose because, in order for that theory to turn into practice, partnerships must be meaningful. Therefore, a holistic approach, a whole-of-system approach, is needed.

Ayman Mhanna: Meaningful partnerships involve producing high-quality, inclusive content about all segments of society, ensuring that no segment feels excluded, and containing the "us versus them" discourse. This happens through training, support for quality content production, and ensuring that independent media, not tied to political ownership, can control the market and the narrative. Support should give space to independent voices that can see beyond political divides.

Ayman Mhanna: However, if we ask the media alone to fix problems that are multifaceted in nature, we will fail. Support for the media sector must go hand-in-hand with meaningful investment in development aid, economic recovery, security sector reform, judiciary transparency, electoral transparency, gender equality, women's political participation, youth involvement, and education quality. These sectors influence people's perception and trust much more than a beautiful show on TV or a great campaign on social media.

Ayman Mhanna: Support for independent media should be increased creatively, not only through funding but also by ensuring a local ecosystem that supports them. In each society, even in the most polarized ones, there are independent journalists and media outlets. It's crucial to direct aid to them in a way that does not harm them, ensuring they

are not perceived as strategic communication conveyors but strengthened in their role as journalists, informing the public, speaking truth to power, and holding those in power accountable.

Ayman Mhanna: Additionally, there is a need for a serious conversation with social media companies about balancing the open space they provide with the pervasiveness of divisive and polarizing messages. The lowest quality, divisive content can spread much faster and cheaper on platforms like WhatsApp and Telegram, while high-quality content requires significant investment to achieve visibility.

Ayman Mhanna: Lastly, trust local leadership. True partnership between international players and local players, understanding local realities and perceptions, is essential. Avoid double standards and ensure that the same principles apply universally. For example, the way refugees are portrayed in media should be consistent, regardless of their origin. Double standards can undermine years of partnership and efforts to promote equality and destroy the "us versus them" narrative.

Moema Freire: Thanks a lot, Ayman, for sharing these important insights on how to reduce polarization and how media can support increasing trust in public institutions. Now, we have a quick moment to interact with our panelists. I invite you again to post your comments and questions. To warm up, I would like to ask our participants today, our panelists, to share one recommendation on how we can build and sustain successful partnerships between public actors, international organizations, and media. From all the important insights you have presented, what would be the one you would highlight to our audience? I would like to invite Sarah, Lena, and Ayman to quickly share some thoughts with us.

Sarah Lister: Happy to. Excellent conversation, and thank you for poking us, Ayman. We always look to you to poke us, and that's very much appreciated. For me, what stood out again was this focus on trust—trust local systems and local actors, and make sure that you, as an international organization, are engaging with local people and local leadership, providing what they need and say they want you to provide. UNDP colleagues on the call will know that this is difficult for a variety of funding and program management reasons, but we need to keep that imperative very close to us. Thank you.

Moema Freire: Thanks a lot, Sarah. Before I also invite Lena and Ayman, I would like to pose a question from David. His question is: Are there efforts to strengthen mainstream journalism in line with the points Ayman has raised in the conversation by helping journalists to apply or adapt the approaches to storytelling outlined by Lena? Lena and Ayman, I would like you to add this point to your answers.

Lena Slachmuis: Thank you so much. When you read the UNDP report, it reminds you how hard it is to govern today with the information space so fragmented. It's really difficult. When we ask ourselves how we are trying to tackle polarization, it's both to help societies not disintegrate into mass violence and to help societies become healthy, advance, take decisions, and have transparency and accountability. In that context, the media has a role we hope they can play. I agree with the concerns and the need for further investment to hold on to what's left of some independent media. I would never say no to that.

Lena Slachmuis: Because our mindsets are not only shaped by more accurate facts, it is important to find ways to shift the narrative, working with different kinds of media actors, not only news journalists who can shape how we perceive the other. To do so, it's not always a training program. Sometimes it's an experience, helping people immerse in another reality. It's about thinking differently about the support we give to media as this important pillar. I don't believe that only more training about the role journalists should play is the way forward. There needs to be an activation of many other voices in society that, for different reasons, are not stepping in to say, "Hold on! I don't believe this problem is intractable." Encouraging young people to shape the narrative is crucial. I would encourage UNDP colleagues to think of media and the information ecosystem as influenced by more than just top-tier fact-based journalists but others in the space. Thanks.

Moema Freire: Thanks, Lena. Ayman?

Ayman Mhanna: Definitely agreeing with Lena on this point. Yes, there are efforts to train news journalists and produce entertainment content. Many great actors are in this field. I can't name them all, but when I think of the work that Media Diversity Institute does or the French development agency's recent project related to migrations in six countries across Africa and the Middle East, these calls strengthen the importance of a wider media ecosystem, including entertainment.

Ayman Mhanna: The real question is, who is watching? Who's reading the best content we produce? If there is no significant effort to change or increase meaningful reach, not just quantitative reach, we face challenges. It's not the lack of efforts but understanding communication channels, how people consume information, and what makes them more or less attractive to certain formats. This needs to be evidence-based. More content is needed, but also continuous audience research to understand if what we produce matches societal expectations. Simple examples, like advertisements related to Syrian refugees in Lebanon placed in an English-language newspaper, show the need for effective channels. Convenience programs sometimes lead to investments not in the most effective channels but those that allow quick reporting. Revising procedures within institutions can unlock potential.

Moema Freire: Thanks, Ayman. Thanks again, Sarah, Lena, and Ayman, for your important participation in this discussion. Wrapping up our first segment, we have seen how polarization poses a significant gridlock to human development in different regions of the world and how the Human Development Report has brought important recommendations. We have also learned the important role of partnerships with media in this context and the challenges media faces in advancing this agenda. We have heard different approaches, such as involving youth and local communities, and reflected on how media can support increasing trust in public institutions. Thanks again to all our panelists.

Moema Freire: We will start the second segment of our webinar. In this segment, we will hear from different experiences from the field. To start this reflection, I would like to welcome again Lena, who will moderate the presentation of two experiences from the field selected for us from Search for Common Ground. Lena, you have the floor, and we have eight minutes for the presentations. Thanks a lot.

Lena Slachmuislder: Wonderful. Thank you again, Moema. I'd like to have on the screen Yakang, joining us from Juba, where she's part of the Lugara Shabab Youth Program. Yakang, you are a member of this production team with other young people who are different from you, who are not Nuer as you are, and who have had different experiences. Tell us a little about what being a diverse team has enabled you to do.

Nyakang Madier: Thank you, Lena. Hello, everyone. My name is Nyakang, a youth participant from Juba, South Sudan. In South Sudan, we suffered a conflict that divided our communities along ethnic lines and other social statuses. These divisions created stereotypes affecting how young people and adults see and relate to each other. My experience participating in the Youth Talk project has empowered me and my colleagues to bridge the gap that our society has created because of social stereotypes. The 2013 conflict widened the gap between the Nuer community, where I come from, and the Dinka community. In the beginning, I was afraid of participating and interacting with them due to the stories created by them and the fear of being with them. However, being part of the Youth Talk project put me under the protection of other young people living within us. I found myself with people of disabilities, young child soldiers, orphans, street kids, and others from different backgrounds. Together, we are opening conversations about resilience, tolerance, and unity, which South Sudan needs the most.

Lena Slachmuislder: It's interesting that you said you feel protected by the diversity of the group. That's a real signal to remind us that diversity can also build our resilience faced with polarization. My question to you, Nyakang, is how does the show, when it's aired, affect the listeners and their understanding of their own divides and polarization?

Nyakang Madier: In some communities, people feel free talking to their relatives and friends because of broken trust, lack of cooperation, and historical grievances that continue to affect households and communities. However, our team has great diversity, and this year we have produced 98 programs amplifying 1,200 voices from each ethnic group and social status. We have interviewed community members, government officials, IDP leaders, and others. I have interviewed people from different ethnic groups, which gave me courage. We interviewed the Speaker of the National Parliament, Honorable Nunu Kumba, about girl child protection laws, and we coordinated an interview with a military spokesperson about recruiting young children as soldiers. We also interviewed UNICEF experts, chiefs, parents, teachers, heads of national institutions, and others.

Lena Slachmijlder: Thank you so much, Nyakang. We don't have more time right now, but thank you for sharing your experience. Can we bring Cynthia up now? Cynthia, you were part of the Great Lakes Generation radio show while you were a journalist at the Independent Radio Isanganiro. Share a little about how that impacted you personally to be part of a team producing this first-ever live show across three countries. Are you with us, Cynthia?

Cynthia Ngendakuriyo: Hi, Lena. Can you hear me?

Lena Slachmijlder: Yes.

Cynthia Ngendakuriyo: Thank you so much for the question. This program first opened my eyes to the world beyond borders. Every Saturday, we traveled to meet young people from Burundi, Rwanda, and DRC. Growing up in Burundi, a country between Rwanda and DRC, I had never set foot in either of these countries before GJL made it possible. My first trip took me to Kigali, six hours by road from Bujumbura. It was the beginning of a great adventure I never imagined possible. Growing up, many of us young people were surrounded by mistrust and stereotypes toward other nationalities, often rooted in historical tensions and internal conflicts like the 1993 political ethnic crisis or the Rwanda genocide. The Great Lakes region witnessed displacement and pain, and many Congolese hesitated to visit Rwanda and vice versa due to deep-rooted stereotypes and mistrust.

Cynthia Ngendakuriyo: The GJL program offered us the opportunity to confront these challenges. I particularly remember a trip in February 2012, heading to produce the show in Kinshasa at RTJR, one of our partner stations. It was my first flight, taking me thousands of kilometers away from home, raising concerns among my family and friends. Before reaching Kinshasa, I spent several days in Goma, in the eastern part of the country, as humanitarian missions took priority. My parents and friends frequently called to check if I had arrived safely, especially since I was alone and tensions were high with armed groups

active in the area. After days of waiting, I finally managed to catch a flight to Kinshasa. In the studio, my introduction to radio in the city began with a few words in Lingala, the most widely spoken language in DRC. This allowed me to connect with the audience. My family, who rarely listened to our broadcast, tuned in this time. At the same time, we allowed listeners who followed us from home to intervene in Kirundi, my local language, making the program magical. As I traveled and returned alive once, twice, despite the challenges, it created curiosity among my friends, who decided to visit DRC and start their journeys.

Cynthia Ngendakuriyo: This journey allowed me to see the world from a different perspective and witness empathy. We discovered people facing the same problems, sharing the same hopes and challenges, no matter the kilometers that separated them. We began to refer to each other as "we," like a unified generation. At the end of the show, many young people began to talk with "we" instead of "them," encouraging me to challenge stereotypes in my reporting by sharing stories of mixed marriages or students studying in neighboring countries. Online, we saw positive comments on social media where young people engaged and reflected, helping us rewrite the story of collaboration.

Lena Slachmuisder: Yes, this has been so amazing to hear how transformational it was for you and your friends. I imagine all the radio listeners who were listening to you at Radio Isanganiro. We don't have more time at this point, but I encourage you to reach out to Search for Common Ground Burundi for more information. Thank you so much, Cynthia, for sharing your experience.

Moema Freire: Thanks a lot, Lena, Cynthia, and Nyakang. It's very inspiring to see your experiences and takeaways from South Sudan, Burundi, Rwanda, and DRC. To continue our discussion, I invite Jacqueline Dalton, Head of Editorial Content, and Alexei Soldatenko, Director of Operations from the Institute for Regional Media and Information. They will share lessons learned from their experiences. Jacqueline and Alexei, you have the floor.

Jacqueline Dalton - Fondation Hirondelle: Thank you very much. Can you see my slides?

Moema Freire: Yes, perfectly.

Jacqueline Dalton - Fondation Hirondelle: Perfect. Hello, everyone. The bulk of this segment will be with Alexei, our Ukraine partner, but first, I want to briefly outline the approach that underpins Fondation Hirondelle's work on media and social cohesion. Fondation Hirondelle was created in 1995 in response to the Rwanda genocide, where media, particularly radio, was used to incite violence and propagate hate speech. This led to horrific violence. The idea was to counter this by creating media that does good, leading to the birth of Radio Agatasha, serving audiences in the Great Lakes region. Since then,

we've created and supported media in dozens of contexts, focusing on countries in crisis or fragile states.

Jacqueline Dalton - Fondation Hirondelle: People need accurate news and information to make well-informed decisions. We aim to ensure they have high-quality information focused on facts, balance, and solutions. We use multiple channels to reach different communities, including digital platforms, messaging apps, TV, and radio, especially in African countries where radio is still very big. We produce content in multiple languages to reach more people and create a unifying effect within a country. For example, Radio Ndeke Luka in the Central African Republic has achieved high trust, with 95% of people choosing it for trusted information.

Jacqueline Dalton - Fondation Hirondelle: We believe in providing information and using media as a platform for dialogue, allowing difficult conversations to happen publicly in a respectful and balanced environment. We emphasize giving ordinary people a voice to ask questions of their leaders and include marginalized groups in discussions. For example, a study by the University of Zurich on Studio Tamani in Mali found that people who followed it were more likely to favor dialogue as a solution to conflict.

Jacqueline Dalton - Fondation Hirondelle: Proximity to populations is crucial, being on the ground and listening to them. Alexei will now talk about concrete examples of this work in Ukraine. Over to you, Alexei.

Oleksiy Soldatenko: Thank you, Jackie. Hi, everyone, from Ukraine. Since the full-scale invasion, about 230 media outlets have disappeared, and communities have changed dramatically. Local media is crucial for providing information needed to survive, such as evacuation and transport information. We support local media in Ukraine with funds, grants, training, mentoring, and technical support. We involve local media in designing our programs and conduct comprehensive media landscape assessments to understand and address media needs.

Oleksiy Soldatenko: We conducted a sociological study in 23 communities to see the role of local media in promoting social cohesion. The study included 49 focus groups and over 2,300 respondents, involving media in designing the methodology. Understanding audiences is critical for effective social cohesion media programming. Local media needs to know their communities, not just their audiences, to play a positive role in social cohesion.

Oleksiy Soldatenko: For example, a newspaper from Bakhmut, a city now completely destroyed, sees its mission as a dialogue platform uniting the community wherever they are. They engage people in discussions about the vision of the city they want to rebuild and

relevant content. Our findings show a strong demand for public dialogue and a request for watchdog functions, positive stories, and trust in local media.

Jacqueline Dalton - Fondation Hirondelle: A final message is the need for a long-term, holistic approach to supporting media. It's not just about swooping in during a crisis but building good institutions and trusted relationships with audiences over time. If you want to see the full research findings from Ukraine, you can scan the QR code for the full document. Thank you.

Moema Freire: Thanks a lot, Jacqueline and Alexei, for these important findings and recommendations on how media can contribute to peace and social cohesion. To continue our discussion and finalize our webinar, I invite Rawhi Afghani, Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding Program Advisor at UNDP Regional Hub of Amman. Rawhi, you have the floor for an eight-minute presentation.

Rawhi Afaghani: Thank you very much for having me. I will talk about three distinct examples from our region: Libya, Lebanon, and Iraq. In Libya, we launched a platform called Ibras to strengthen the media landscape in the southern part of Libya, increasing civic engagement and peacebuilding. The platform

Rawhi Afaghani: Thank you very much for having me. I will talk about three distinct examples from our region: Libya, Lebanon, and Iraq. In Libya, we launched a platform called Ibras to strengthen the media landscape in the southern part of Libya, increasing civic engagement and peacebuilding. The platform was launched in September and aims to create a new space for civil society, media, and communities to connect and foster dialogue and development. It promotes resilience and sustainable peace by fostering active civic participation.

Rawhi Afaghani: In the run-up to this platform, we conducted a comprehensive media landscape assessment to understand and address media needs in southern Libya. We also provided capacity building for more than 80 media practitioners, civil society organization members, and government media officers on sensitive reporting and communication for development. The key benefits of this initiative include community collaboration, improving communication challenges, and local ownership. The platform is owned by local organizations that maintain, sustain, and engage with the community. However, challenges include initial content creation and competition from established social media platforms.

Rawhi Afaghani: In Lebanon, the media landscape is characterized by outlets affiliated with specific political or religious groups, affecting objectivity. However, this has allowed the growth of alternative media, providing platforms for democratic expression. The main challenges include disinformation on social media, fueling tension between refugees and

host communities. UNDP Lebanon has a long history of promoting balanced and conflict-sensitive media coverage. This includes the Journalist Pact for Strengthening Civil Peace in Lebanon, signed by 37 media entities, and training for media professionals and students in fact-checking, peace journalism, and media effects. Awareness campaigns on anti-fake news and peacebuilding journalism have also been conducted. The Sawa platform engages well-known journalists and provides a hate-free space, encouraging objective approaches free of stereotypes.

Rawhi Afaghani: In Iraq, since 2021, UNDP Iraq has collaborated with media actors to enhance social cohesion, not only by countering negative narratives but also by creating positive ones that resonate with societal needs. The focus is on empowering media to engage on sensitive issues and shaping discourse to strengthen vertical relationships between the government and society and horizontal relationships between communities. Initiatives include training journalists on conflict-sensitive reporting and peace journalism, creating a citizen journalist network, and launching a platform with over 1,037 media pieces published. A new initiative focuses on equipping journalists to handle issues of return, reintegration, and minority rights, particularly for returnees from ISIS fighters or their families. This involves training journalists and aspiring journalists on conflict-sensitive reporting and pairing them with experienced journalists for mentorship.

Moema Freire: Thank you very much, Rawhi. I wish we had more time to get into detail, but I would like to share with our audience that we will be sharing more resources and links to each of these experiences. This will allow us to learn more in detail about each of the experiences presented today in our webinar.

Moema Freire: Wrapping up our second segment, we have learned more about the experiences of South Sudan, Burundi, Rwanda, and DRC, and seen how youth and community members can play an important role in activating partnerships with media to build social cohesion and reduce polarization. We have also learned how media can contribute to peace and support difficult dialogues through building platforms of interaction and dialogue on challenging topics. We have discussed the role of local media in promoting social cohesion and debated important research questions that remain for those interested in deepening their work on this topic. Finally, we have heard about the experiences of Libya, Lebanon, and Iraq, and key takeaways and recommendations from those experiences.

Moema Freire: Thank you all again for your participation in this webinar. I take this opportunity to announce that we still have two other webinars planned for the series in the upcoming weeks. We will have one on measuring polarization and another on public communication. We invite you to join us. I also want to express special thanks to

Emmanuel Sapienza and Edzerk, who have jointly prepared this webinar and worked a lot behind the scenes to help build this session today. After we close our webinar, we invite you to participate in the one-minute evaluation poll that will appear after the webinar finishes. Thank you a lot for your participation, and we look forward to continuing this discussion with you in the following sessions. Have a nice day.