



TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE JOURNALISM IN SUB- SAHARAN AFRICA

Policy Brief

**Consortium to Promote Human Rights, Civic Freedoms
and Media Development (CHARM) Africa**

CONTENTS

About this policy brief	3
About CHARM	4
Acronyms and abbreviations	5

INTRODUCTION 6

THEORETICAL OVERVIEW – SUSTAINABLE JOURNALISM 7

Towards a practical application of sustainable journalism in media work	
a. Sustainable journalism as professional reflexivity	
b. Sustainable journalism as connected to the external world and its challenges	

A CASE FOR SUSTAINABLE JOURNALISM PRACTICE 12

THE MEDIA CONTEXT IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA 14

The environmental dimension
The social dimension
The economic dimension

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEWS, EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN PRACTITIONERS AND RESEARCHERS 17

HOW CAN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICAN JOURNALISM BE MADE SUSTAINABLE? 21

Meeting the challenges of social sustainability in sub-Saharan African journalism
Meeting the challenges of economic sustainability in sub-Saharan African journalism
Meeting the challenges of environmental sustainability in sub-Saharan African journalism
In summary

RECOMMENDATIONS 25

APPENDIX	26
ENDNOTES	29

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ABOUT THIS POLICY BRIEF

In sub-Saharan Africa, Fojo Media Institute and five other organisations are jointly promoting independent journalism and protecting the space for civil society organisations and human rights defenders. Bringing together academics and researchers in four universities in South Africa and Sweden, this project is part of the project: Consortium to Promote Human Rights, Civic Freedoms and Media Development (CHARM) project. The main objective is to introduce the concept of sustainable journalism, define what the concept could entail in a sub-Saharan context and investigate the implications for media development in sub-Saharan Africa. Stakeholder discussions were held with relevant media actors in four countries within sub-Saharan Africa on the subject matter. The findings, which provide clear policy directions, are shared in this report.

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ABOUT CHARM

The Consortium to Promote Human Rights, Civic Freedoms and Media Development (CHARM) in Sub-Saharan Africa aims to protect and expand the civic space for civil society organisations and human rights defenders, as well as nurture and enhance the effectiveness of independent media and journalism in the region.

To do so, it facilitates collective action both within and across countries, bolster existing coalitions and campaigns, and where necessary, supports the creation of new ones. CHARM is currently in its pilot phase set to run from October 2019 to June 2022, and the consortium intends on continuing the project after this period.

Due to increasing restrictions to the exercise of fundamental freedoms (association, assembly, and expression), the project works with a range of stakeholders across the spectrum of Sub-Saharan African civil society and media actors with a special emphasis on frontline actors working on issues related to gender, labour, LGBTQI+, and environmental and indigenous rights, as these groups are most likely to bear the brunt of closing civic space.

The project is designed and implemented by a consortium of six regional partners: CIVICUS, Civil Rights Defenders, Defend Defenders, Fojo Media Institute, Hub Afrique, and Wits Journalism who work closely with multiple broader networks, leveraging on regional and international human rights mechanisms to engage target stakeholders and collaboratively develop solutions to these complex challenges.



ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

FOI	Freedom of information
MFWA	Media Foundation for West Africa
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organisations
RTI	Right to Information
SABC	South African Broadcasting Corporation
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SJ	Sustainable Journalism
SSA	Sub-Saharan Africa
UN	United Nations

INTRODUCTION

Today, there is hardly any dispute about the need for the sustainable development of society. The rampant changes in the climate are resulting in social problems such as poverty and conflicts, and the urgency to address environmental and social risks and crises as sustainability issues is explicit in Agenda 2030 and its 17 sustainability goals.

The concept of sustainability is, however, contested and contextually dependent. As Kates, Parris and Leiserowitz^[i] argue, sustainable development involves a “creative tension between some core principles and an openness to reinterpretation and adaptation of different social, economic and ecological contexts.” Some scholars have claimed it to be an overused, watered down, and, not least, misunderstood phrase, and others say that there is hardly any consensus on sustainability beyond the very notion that there is no shared understanding. But the ambiguous character of the sustainability concept could also be viewed as an advantage. Its open nature allows for exploring perhaps unforeseen but still sustainability-relevant ideas and interests.

However, the role of the news media and professional journalism in sustainable development is not very prominent in these UN documents. Nonetheless, they do have a pivotal role to play in informing the public and spurring engagement in various issues of sustainability. Furthermore, journalism needs to look to its own sustainability, as the media globally is facing a viability crisis.

Thus, sustainable journalism^[ii] is a relevant concept that holds a useful potential in journalism practice in contemporary times. Though sustainability, and specifically sustainable journalism, is still in its conceptual infancy, there is a need to explore its various dimensions and applications further.

 In this policy brief we critically explore the following questions related to sustainability in journalism: What is sustainable journalism? How should it be defined in a specific context, such as in sub-Saharan Africa? Is it relevant? What happens when we apply sustainable journalism in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) based upon how media stakeholders in that region reason around the sustainable journalism concept? What kind of conclusions and recommendations can be drawn?

It is expected that these questions form a critical base on which sustainable journalism can be contextualised and practised in SSA.

THEORETICAL OVERVIEW – SUSTAINABLE JOURNALISM (SJ)

The attractiveness of the concept of sustainable development lies in the varied ways it can be interpreted, enabling diverse and possibly incompatible interests to “sign up” to sustainable development and its core principles: environmental, social, and economic sustainability, often called “the triple bottom line”. The following brief description of these three sustainability dimensions will pave the way for a general understanding of the concept and for the practice of sustainable journalism.

- ① **Environmental sustainability** is probably what comes first to mind when thinking about sustainable development, and the contributions from the environmental disciplines came early and are substantial. The environmental dimension forms the overall framework within which the other two dimensions are included and to which they are subordinate, and mainly refers to the resilience and robustness of biological and physical systems. It is the ecological carrying capacity of the Earth that determines what it is possible to achieve, economically and socially.
- ② **Economic sustainability** within the sustainability framework implies moving beyond a narrow focus on economic development. Sustainable economic strategies and technological development take into consideration not only economic growth but also the environmental damage, resource depletion, and social inequality it causes. It aims to “improve human well-being and social equity, while significantly reducing environmental risks and ecological scarcities”^[iii]. In this way, sustainability intersects with economics through the social and environmental consequences of economic activity and market behaviour.
- ③ **Social sustainability** is the most recent of the sustainability “pillars”. It was added to the environment-economy relationship when it successively was acknowledged that nature and culture cannot be viewed as separate entities – people and the environment do not exist in isolation from each other. Any significant changes introduced into the environment, changes in the climate, for instance, will likely affect people’s lives. Likewise, changes in society, such as increased urbanisation, have obvious impacts on the natural environment. So, an integral sustainability approach emphasises the need for a long-term balancing of not only the economic but also the social needs with the environmental carrying capacity. In this way, social sustainability addresses issues such as peace, security, social and environmental justice, poverty, human rights, political participation, democracy, and equality, and is central to the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of Agenda 2030.





The hierarchy between the three sustainability dimensions is important to keep in mind when approaching sustainable development in an integrated way. A robust and resilient economy is at the core of sustainability, but it is still subordinate to social sustainability which in turn is subordinate to environmental sustainability within which carrying capacity society and the economy can continue to grow. Thus, in an integrated sustainability approach, social and environmental stresses are not regarded as economic externalities. Instead, the economy's overarching aim is to function in the service of social and environmental sustainability.

The relevance and contribution of sustainable journalism as a concept and practice is twofold. First, the **integrated approach** to sustainable development described above is reflected in it. The concept refers to journalism that integrates the three sustainability dimensions and does not isolate, for instance, environmental issues from social and economic conditions. Examples of this kind of integrated approach could be journalism that:

- ⊙ reflects the economic aspects of an increasingly globalising society at the same time as it acknowledges the social and environmental consequences of these aspects,
- ⊙ generates value from new advertising formats that doesn't jeopardise the integrity and trust of citizens, and
- ⊙ interlinks local and national consequences of, for instance, climate change with their economic and social ramifications on a global scale.

Arguably, the complex reality of today requires such an integrated journalistic approach in order to uphold the democratic function and not least legitimacy of professional journalism.

 Sustainable journalism is thus located at the juncture of environmental journalism (reporting about climate change, loss of biodiversity, acidification of the world's oceans etc.), social journalism (reporting about peace, security, justice, poverty, human rights, political participation, democracy, equality etc.), and economic journalism (issues related to the economy and the financial sector, business, stock market etc.).

In addition, just as environmental sustainability has posed systemic questions about the way economics, markets, societies and politics are structured, sustainable journalism also poses systemic questions about how journalism as an industry within specific media ecosystems and contexts is structured.



Photo: Alex Radelich

The second main contribution of sustainable journalism is its inherently **double significance**, which means that it addresses two intertwined challenges of our time:

- ⊙ The sustainability crisis of society, e.g. environmental crises, democratic crises, poverty, financial crises, armed conflicts etc. Obviously, journalism has a crucial role to play here since it contributes greatly to the understanding, and hence the handling, of such challenges.
- ⊙ The sustainability crisis of journalism itself, which stems from lower advertising, falling consumption, lack of trust in traditional media among citizens, and fierce competition from online information brokers.

To respond seriously to the sustainability challenges – current as well as future – could be seen as a prerequisite for the future sustainability of journalism itself. Such responses range from high-quality, in-depth coverage to robust business models, but also extend (within the sub-Saharan African context) into considerations of media systems and relations with governments and business interests.

In this way, sustainable journalism attempts to counter the obvious risk that the efforts to maintain economic sustainability of the journalistic enterprise take place at the expense of professional journalism's social/democratic mission – to inform citizens and to spur public engagement about current and future economic, social, and environmental challenges.

Towards a practical application of sustainable journalism in media work

To apply sustainable journalism, professionally speaking, in everyday work, in terms of implementing sustainability-oriented news angles, perspectives, sources, etc. seems like a challenge in several respects. Journalism is not known for its ability to transform quickly, but rather for its professional integrity, which can express itself in the form of conservatism and a “business as usual” mode of thinking. But due to the crises and problems that the SDGs tend to emphasise, and the urgency to solve them, this places emphasis on the need for journalism also to become sustainable in its everyday practice. **Actually, does journalism have a choice?**

If the concept becomes too broadly interpreted, in terms of understanding that all news, in one way or another, could be linked to sustainable development as examples of sustainable journalism, it makes it difficult to apply sustainable journalism in a meaningful way. Nevertheless, a too-narrow perspective might become problematic as well if it would only include the environment and the climate crisis as topics for sustainable journalism, but not the other dimensions and thus the relational perspective. Furthermore, the concept might become too theoretical and therefore more difficult to apply in concrete fieldwork and in accordance with the professional conditions of everyday media work. Finally, the concept of sustainable journalism could also become too banal, in terms of simply representing “good” journalism, whatever that might be. Thus, one of the main purposes of this policy brief is to transform “sustainable journalism” into an applicable concept for practitioners.

To overcome these pitfalls, our suggestion is to make a start with a concrete, already-defined principle of sustainable development. One way to make the concept applicable in journalistic practice and fieldwork is to return to the Brundtland Report^[iv] and one of its seminal formulations, which very much embodies the entire idea of sustainable development:

 *Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.*

More precisely, the idea would be to pay attention to the temporal aspects of this definition:

- ◎ **The relationship between the past and the present:** What individuals, institutions and societies did in the past (their actions and decisions) have consequences for the present.
- ◎ **The relationship between the present and the future:** What individuals, institutions, and societies “do” (their actions and decisions) in the present time have future consequences.

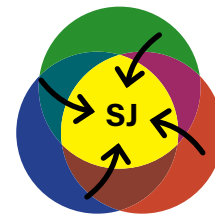
What is emphasised is the obvious idea that taking account of actions in the present is a way to develop a better future society – that there is a need of the present that must be balanced with future needs. It is quite easy to understand the meaning and ethical principle of the sentence, but *is there a communicative and thus journalistic version to be suggested?* As a journalistic style, maxim, routine, and so forth? Can we do exactly this in the context of news reporting or investigative journalism, including different kinds of editorial work? Below, we present two options, which do not exclude but rather presuppose each other.

a. Sustainable journalism as professional reflexivity

The first perspective would be to view the implementation of sustainable journalism as a media/news organisational challenge guided by the following ethical principle:

Sustainable journalism is journalism that meets the information needs of the present without compromising the ability of a future generation of media workers to meet their information needs.

This is connected to media organisations' but also individual journalists'/freelancers' capacity to reflect upon how their own actions, practices, and routines **here and now** shape tomorrow's journalism. Contemporary journalists to a great extent inherit their language, modes of thinking, ideals, topical frameworks, etc. from previous generations of media workers, and in the same way, future journalists' work will very much be influenced by contemporary acts. For example, if journalism strongly reproduces conflicts/antagonisms as a news value (the "us" vs. "them" rationale), rather than contributing to constructive peacebuilding, this antagonistic form of communication will probably prevail in future journalism and be in-built in its economic business models. If journalism predominantly skips the problem of climate change, this will make it more difficult for future media practitioners to practise climate reporting, and so forth. Consequently, it will limit or even hinder future journalists' ability to meet their own information needs about important topics or angles that the public deserves to be informed about.



b. Sustainable journalism as connected to the external world and its challenges

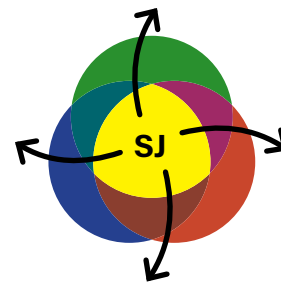
In this version, emphasis is rather on journalism's more active role concerning existing needs in society and thus their potential positive contribution to sustainable development:

Sustainable journalism is journalism that meets the information needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

This sentence is formulated in accordance with the assumption that contemporary journalism and its production of information has consequences for tomorrow's ecological, social, material, etc. conditions (involving the relation between the rich and the poor, energy transition processes, the climate, and so forth). If contemporary media workers and media owners look away from the kinds of urgent problems that are outlined in the SDGs, and instead stick to or even expand their production of "quick and dirty news"^[vi], **they will be running the risk of compromising** the ability of future generations to meet their needs.

Journalism then becomes sustainable by balancing or ideally exchanging the production of "quick and dirty news" with information that enables future generations to meet their own needs. In practice, this would mean that:

- ⊙ ever more, events become interpreted and covered within the framework of the SDGs;
- ⊙ that it becomes more natural and common to cover the very institution of the UN – including the relationship between the UN and other organisations and nation-states;
- ⊙ that the coverage of present events (which is fundamental for everyday news reporting) should routinely be connected to their historical origins/contexts and future consequences;
- ⊙ that it becomes standard practice to identify and include sources and voices that can comment and analyse events from a sustainability perspective.



A CASE FOR SUSTAINABLE JOURNALISM PRACTICE

When turning sustainable journalism into practice we are inspired by several journalistic concepts: slow journalism, solutions-oriented, constructive, peace, gender- and conflict-sensitive, global-local, entrepreneurial and ethical; as well as the concept “factfulness”, invented by the Swedish statistician Hans Rosling.

Another suggestive approach, global journalism, recognises the interdependence of countries and calls for the inclusion of global perspectives in news reportage. It acknowledges that issues that confront other nations have cross-border implications^[vii]. Engaged journalism turns attention to engaging and collaborating with audiences. It is seen as a moral obligation as well as an economic imperative in the face of dwindling revenues of media organisations.

At the core of the above, and many other concepts of journalism practice, is the need for journalism to remain relevant and responsive to the needs of society. However, none of the proposed concepts has been able to tie in the sustainable development goals together with enhanced journalistic approaches as a concept for journalism practice. The SDGs or global goals are a carefully designed collection of 17 interlinked goals^[viii] whose accomplishments are regarded as critical to the survival of humanity and to guarantee a more sustainable future for all. These goals are tied to our present needs, which when ignored will compromise our survival and sanity and that of future generations. On the other side is the responsibility of sustainable journalism to carefully scrutinise the SDGs and Agenda 2030 and to expose the sustainability challenges associated with them, in order for more sustainable solutions to be found to current global and local challenges.

Journalism practice and societal expectations of journalists have evolved over the years. It is expected that journalists not only inform, educate and entertain. They also need to ensure issues that adversely affect societal development are addressed. Often, media development organisations focus narrowly on goal 16, target 10 of the SDGs which advocates the guarantee of public access to information and the protection of fundamental freedoms. But there is the need to broaden the journalistic link to all 17 SDGs.



🎯 So, the idea of bringing together the three legs of global sustainability (environmental, social and economic), under which the 17 Sustainable Development Goals fall, is to ensure that issues that affect our day-to-day sustainability are incorporated into journalistic norms to be given the needed attention. The global goals recognise the developmental issues that need to be addressed and the fact that future sustainability depends on what is done now. By applying sustainable journalism, all aspects of issues that affect our sustainability are likely to be addressed for our current and future well-being.

Sustainable journalism is related to the two most important international treaties of our time: The Agenda 2030 and the Paris Agreement, both indebted to the 1987 UN report *Our Common Future*, known as the Brundtland Report¹. The treaties include both global and national commitments, and are followed up by initiatives by municipalities, private companies, civil society organisations and others, making them an ideal arena for journalistic coverage. While most media development organisations have focused on how journalism could be seen as part of the Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals, sustainable journalism can turn the tables and ask: “How can journalism make sure that our leaders keep their promises and deliver, not only in relation to the SDGs and the Paris Agreement, but on any commitment related to sustainability? How can journalism inform the public and hold power to account when it comes to the most important challenges and the biggest story of our time – the well-being and ultimately the survival of humanity?”

1. This report was published by the United Nations through the Oxford University Press. The Brundtland Report put environmental issues on the political agenda; it aimed to connect the environment to development; it also recognised that human resource development, in the form of gender equity, poverty reduction and wealth redistribution, was key to mapping out strategies for environmental conservation. The report also acknowledged environmental limits to economic growth in industrialised and industrialising societies.

THE MEDIA CONTEXT IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA (SSA)

Sustainable journalism may not be practised in the same way in all countries and by each publisher, as each country and publisher have unique challenges that confront their sustainability. In order to appreciate how sustainable journalism is to be practised in the sub-Saharan African (SSA) context, it is important to establish the setting within which media organisations and journalists carry out their informational mandate. It is equally important to explore the issues that confront the social, environmental and economic sustainability of media within sub-Saharan Africa. This section provides an overview of the ecosystem within which journalism is practised in sub-Saharan Africa and introduces the dimension of media as a larger system, rather than focus on just the level at which individual media organisations operate.

The environmental dimension

The African continent is home to an enormous share of the world's renewable and non-renewable resources. The continent is rich in minerals, forests, natural gas, arable land, oil and wildlife. With natural capital constituting between 30% and 50% of the total wealth of Africa, over 70% of people living in sub-Saharan Africa depend on forests, woodlands and agriculture for their livelihoods^[ix]. However, while a substantial portion of these resources is unsustainably utilised, others are depleted through unlawful activities.



According to the GEO-6 Regional Assessment for Africa, the environment is deteriorating more rapidly than previously projected^[x]. It is estimated that \$195 billion of Africa's natural capital is lost annually through the unlawful wildlife trade, illegal logging, illegal mining, unregulated fishing and environmental degradation^[xi]. This points to the need for governments to act swiftly to reverse the trend. The news media indisputably have a role to play in setting the agenda for environmental issues to be given the needed attention. They can do this by informing the public, raising awareness, educating and shedding light on environmental issues. Sadly, though, environmental issues are mostly not part of the news agenda or are poorly covered in most sub-Saharan African countries^[xii].

Coverage of environmental stories is largely limited to natural disasters. There is hardly any discussion of the context within which the event occurred, or its implications, or any broader analysis. Rather, in their efforts to shed light on the people affected by environmental phenomena, journalists often present these victims as helpless. No information is provided to empower them on the role they can play in contributing to addressing those environmental concerns, neither are they empowered with information on what they can do to preserve or sustain the environment for the benefit of future generations^[xiii]. While the media, more often than not, report weather events and their effects, there is little education and advocacy by the media in sub-Saharan Africa to promote environmental sustainability.

The social dimension



The news media is an institution mandated to ensure the promotion of democratic principles (transparency, accountability and freedom of speech and expression). For this reason, journalists should ideally work in an environment where they have unhindered access to information, characterised by freedom of expression, pluralism and diversity, with laws restricting media freedom narrowly defined and limited only to those necessary in a democracy, and with legal provisions that ensure a level economic playing field ².

Public and private influences on journalism can limit the accountability and scrutiny society expects of the media. Until the early 1990s, most African countries had state-funded media systems. No room was created for independent critical media. These state-funded media organisations were typically the public relations arm of governments and could not uphold probity and accountability. However, after the Windhoek Declaration in 1991, calling for free, independent and pluralistic media, most African countries made room for diverse outlets and opinions to boost accountability, good governance and independent media^[xiv].

At present, with a few exceptions, most constitutions in democratic nations in sub-Saharan Africa promise media freedom and unhindered access to information. However, despite these constitutional guarantees, media practitioners frequently contend with serious obstacles which negatively affect their role as the fourth estate, such as: attacks on journalists and media organisations^[xv], imprisonment, debilitating lawsuits, closure of media houses, selective enforcement of laws and internet shutdowns.

Ironically, most African nations have regulations to ensure unhindered access to information in the form of Right to Information (RTI) and Freedom of Information (FOI) laws. Nevertheless, there is either slow or non-implementation of such laws, or no clear roadmap for their implementation^[xviii]. Hostile and unsupportive workplaces also impact on the informational mandate; media organisations do not provide protection and insurance cover for their journalists even when they cover dangerous stories. So, although there is a putative free media environment in Africa, this is often more on paper than in reality.

There are also challenges to do with the capacity of journalists themselves. Many journalists do not have the required training or education to practise as journalists^[xix]. Media organisations themselves seldom offer training or refresher courses. New journalists are simply socialised into a profession which may already be deep into unprofessional practices. When journalists do not apply codes of conduct and professional ethics, they become easy prey to all manner of influences which rob them of their independence and credibility. This results in a loss of power to seek accountability from public officials and hold up their public advocacy mandate.

Journalism is not only a commercial endeavour but also a socio-technological phenomenon^[xx]. As channels evolve, resulting from new technologies entering into media use, journalists have to navigate the attendant challenges. Most recently, social media have paved the way for the dissemination of journalistic content by various non-journalistic information brokers. This has blurred the lines between consumers, creators and disseminators of information, as well as between journalism as a profession and other purveyors of news.

2. These are based on Media Development Indicators (MDIs) launched by the International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC) Intergovernmental Council, in 2006. The MDIs set out the framework within which the media can best contribute to, and benefit from, good governance and democratic development. The MDIs are structured around five categories: (1) A system of regulation conducive to freedom of expression, pluralism and diversity of the media; (2) Plurality and diversity of media, a level economic playing field and transparency of ownership; (3) Media as a platform for democratic discourse; (4) Professional capacity building and supporting institutions that underpins freedom of expression, pluralism and diversity; and (5) Infrastructural capacity is sufficient to support independent and pluralistic media.

As the how, the what and the who of journalism evolve, media organisations in Africa and elsewhere must also contend with fake news, disinformation and misinformation. As one example of the pervasiveness of disinformation in Africa, the European Union Election Observation Mission's preliminary report on Ghana's 2020 Presidential and Parliamentary Elections said that political campaigns in online media were characterised by misinformation, which confused rather than informed voters^[xxi].

The economic dimension

Media organisations in SSA suffer the global trend of losing advertising revenue to social media and other digital media platforms. Typically, commercial media organisations depend on sponsors and advertisers to fund their programmes and to pay their employees. Many public broadcasters also depend on commercial revenue^[xxii]. African publishers have had to find new income streams, but many jobs have still been lost. This trend has escalated under the Covid-19 crisis.

Media organisations need to have a firm financial footing to carry out their mandate. Economic constraints undoubtedly affect the social and political functions of the media^[xxiii]. Lack of resources narrows the news agenda as it costs money to produce high-quality content. Where the state is the biggest advertiser – as is the case in many African countries – public officials can too easily close the income tap if they are faced with coverage they do not like.

In order to deal with their financial challenges, some media organisations in Africa turn to funding from international donor agencies as alternative forms of revenue, including from development agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and religious organisations. In Tanzania, most radio stations rely on NGO support to keep their operations running^[xxiv]. Many investigative stories in Nigeria, Kenya and Ghana, as well as health reporting in South Africa, have been sponsored by foreign aid funds^[xxv]. Although donor funding or private investment in the media in Africa has led to reportage and investigative stories in areas such as health, social justice, education and the environment, which are often neglected because of lack of capacity within newsrooms, donor-funded journalism can sometimes compromise media independence. Sponsors of foreign development assistance coming into Africa for media development tend to set the agenda for the media coverage they want prioritised through funding criteria. This can pose a threat not only to media freedom, but also to local media determining their own priorities^[xxvi] ^[xxvii].

The economic weakness of much of Africa's media results in poor remuneration and poor conditions of service for journalists. Some journalists are driven to pay their own transport, communication and other costs. The generally poor conditions of service of journalists is a great disincentive and impacts the independence that is required of them in carrying out their duties^[xxviii]. In Guinea Bissau, as an example, journalists are compelled to join political parties to be able to continue to work as professional journalists^[xxix]. Poor remuneration also means media organisations lose good journalists who leave the profession to take up better-paid work in other sectors^[xxx]. Those who stay in the profession often become susceptible to influences that impact their independence.

In addition, even in contexts where the media environment is free, diverse and vibrant, there is also the trend of political actors dominating ownership of media organisations which often leads to a polarised media environment. Typically, journalists in such media organisations put aside best practices and professional standards as they work to push the agenda of their owners rather than serve the public interest. A polarised media environment provides a fertile ground for watering down independent critical media.



SUMMARY OF INTERVIEWS, EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN PRACTITIONERS AND RESEARCHERS

Three different sets of discussions were held over a two-week period with reporters, news editors and representatives of media development organisations in Nigeria, Ghana, Liberia, and Kenya. They were meant to ascertain what these key stakeholders made of sustainable journalism and its application in SSA. This section provides an overview of participants' thoughts on the concept and how they think that sustainable journalism could be applied in journalistic and media management practices.

The golden thread that ran through discussions was that sustainable journalism connects critical developmental issues in sub-Saharan Africa to the practice of journalism. Participants were of the view that there is a general trend of slow social and economic development within sub-Saharan Africa, coupled with a looming environmental crisis, due to poor environmental governance. They also agreed that what uniquely sets sustainable journalism apart from other new journalistic approaches is the provision of a model or framework for journalists to address contemporary issues that are tied to sustainable development. While SJ provides a framework, it also obliges journalists to concentrate on local contexts. This steers SJ away from the typical critique that often comes with journalism concepts emanating from the global north and intended to be applied in African countries.

 *To combine sustainability in reporting with sustainability in the business model sense, as is done in this very concept, is indeed very interesting; it provides a theory upon which journalism can report sustainably and be sustainable without government influence – Participant from Nigeria.*

With SJ as a framework for the practice of journalism, owners, content producers, media managers, news editors and reporters are set on a path that scrutinises and investigates critical local issues that have implications for development. Participants were also of the view that there are many social, economic and environmental challenges that need media attention but are not getting it.

 *Climate change is a key issue in Liberia that could be connected to sustainable journalism. Flooding is one specific problem, pollution is another. Security is another – Participant from Liberia.*

 *The climate crisis heavily impacts Nigeria, but this is not reported in the media. There is a clear opportunity to create an interest around these issues. Desertification is another example that is affecting the country. To introduce sustainable journalism as a central part of the journalistic curriculum could be one step toward more sustainable reporting – Participant from Nigeria.*

Moreover, SJ offers a framework to ensure that journalism contributes to fulfilling Agenda 2030. Participants agreed that this moves the SJ concept away from abstraction and towards workable practice. They concurred that connecting Agenda 2030 to the day-to-day practice of journalism is a viable way of guaranteeing that issues which have implications on commitments made by sub-Saharan African governments, who are members of the United Nations, are given the required attention. SJ weaves together pertinent developmental issues that are tied to the very survival of humanity. It also helps to answer the question of what journalism does in society. Thus, participants believed that it would compel sub-Saharan African governments to realise the global development agenda, beginning with local issues.

Intrinsic to SJ is the need to make relevant actors accountable and responsive to issues covered in the media, while at the same time ensuring that journalism empowers the general public with critical information for them to make informed choices about the environment as well as matters related to their economic and social well-being.

However, participants also expressed concerns over media independence in their countries. They were concerned about financial sustainability of media organisations, which has implications on quality of reportage. Participants agreed that the backbone of the practice of SJ is an independent media. Various forms of control of the media which do not allow journalists to effectively practise were discussed. Individuals (often politicians) and organisations who provide financial backing to media organisations often influence what is given attention and how stories are covered.

With ownership comes control, and news media are often owned by a combination of politicians and business people with political interests, which skews coverage to their political and economic advantage. This also leads to a polarised media system and results in weak journalism that is not in the public interest. Consequently, the accountability function of the media suffers. Tied to this, journalists who make efforts to work in accord with ethical journalistic practices get frustrated and leave the profession. Besides, related to media

independence, are attacks and revenue losses certain media organisations have to contend with because of the work they do. In order to avert closure by governments, crackdowns, attacks or withdrawal of advertising or funding, media organisations engage in self-censorship. This is averse to SJ practice.

Participants were also pleased with the business model that is integral to the SJ concept. SJ provides a theory upon which journalism can independently and accurately report sustainably, while also being conscious of their own sustainability as media outlets and contributing to global sustainability. A strong theme that emerged from the discussions was the need for media organisations to be financially autonomous to ensure editorial independence.

Participants were of the view that companies financing media organisations through advertisements often exert influence on how and what stories are covered in the media.

 *How do we keep newspapers in the newsstands and news radio in the soundwaves? To keep journalism economically sustainable and uncompromised is what comes to mind. In Liberia, journalism is threatened by media institutions not being financially sustainable. Without financial stability, journalism is easily compromised by people trying to bend truth or influence analysis – Participant from Liberia.*

 *“Government funding has traditionally been met with scepticism in sub-Saharan Africa – it is illogical that the government would fund journalism which is supposed to keep them accountable without trying to steer reporting. This can be clearly seen in francophone countries, where the government funds and controls the media. However, Cote d’Ivoire set up a public fund for media a couple of years back that provides loans (4% interest rate) to the media and so far, it has been working well without major government influence. A similar scheme has been set up in Nigeria during the pandemic – the central bank has introduced a loan scheme directed at the media (8% interest rate – contrasted with the general interest rate of over 20%) but let’s see, it might work” – Participant from Nigeria.*

There are also instances when journalists self-censor when “commercial interest” companies are involved in stories.

Participants, on the other hand, recognised the fact that independent media in certain SSA countries often struggle with minimal funding to carry out their duties. Covering SDG-related issues can be difficult when there is limited financial strength. Many media organisations are not able to cover human-interest and/or SDG-related stories, even when they have the resolve to do so. Many journalists in Ghana and other parts of sub-Saharan Africa are not paid salaries, but are paid

on a commission basis – by the number of stories produced. Given the almost non-existent financial capacity, minimal refresher training and generally poor remuneration, it is hard to get journalists to develop themselves and build the requisite skills to competently report on SDGs.

 *On journalist's capacity: capacity means skills, but also financial capacity. To fully do a quality story from start to end, journalists often need to fund transport and other expenses themselves. Many award-winning stories in Ghana were funded by the journalists themselves. Regular training and retraining is also important, but seldom funded by the media houses – Participant from Ghana.*

On occasions when refresher training is provided, key gatekeepers in media organisations are, more often than not, left out.

 *It is important to win the hearts and minds of the gatekeepers in news organisations (editors, managers) – journalists get training and are confronted by new types of issues, but editors and managers are usually stuck in the office. These are the gatekeepers, and they are very important to educate, because without them being plugged into issues like the SDGs, those stories will never be highlighted – Participant from Ghana*

In addition, there are also instances when certain governments attack businesses that fund independent media, forcing them into bankruptcy in a bid to compel funders to halt their independent critical media support. Furthermore, in contexts where the government is the biggest advertiser, critical media risk losing funding when they do not produce favourable reportage.

Even if a media organisation diversifies, in a bid to make them financially sustainable, sometimes the powers that be cripple these subsidiary businesses, depriving them of their ability to support the media houses to effectively carry out their mandate – Participant from Liberia.

There was consensus that SJ can build confidence among audiences if stories are not carried superficially but are followed through to hold people in power to account. Following through on stories is one of the biggest shortfalls in attempts by journalists to cover sustainable development-related stories in sub-Saharan Africa.

In light of the unique challenges journalism faces in SSA, as well as the opportunities that exist for SJ practice, participants were of the view that SJ in sub-Saharan Africa can be defined as: well-researched, independent, fearless professional journalism, which is grounded in sustainable business models, that focuses on the social, economic, and environmental issues that are unfolding in society, without compromising media independence. Sustainable journalism must also be entrenched in the following tenets: accuracy, public interest, fairness, balance, truth and facts.

HOW CAN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICAN JOURNALISM BE MADE SUSTAINABLE?

The challenge faced in sub-Saharan African countries, as elsewhere, is how to make journalism sustainable in all three dimensions, social, economic and environmental. It is not a new question, and variants have been asked by everyone interested in the health of journalism. But asking it in this way does a few useful things.

First, the notion of sustainability draws attention to the current generation's responsibility to the future. As we have argued above, journalism – like any social practice – must test itself against the future. It must always operate in a way that guarantees the rights of future generations.

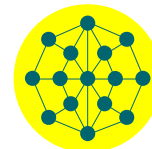
Secondly, the notion of sustainability provides a common ethical reference point for discussion in the three dimensions. When we ask about the impact of our current actions on the quality of the information ecosystems in times to come, we are pointing to an ethical duty to the future. We should consider the long-term impact of our business practices, not just because we would like to preserve our jobs, but also because our children will need reliable information.

Finally, the common reference point invites consideration of the ways in which the three different dimensions – environmental, social and economic – relate to each other. This, we believe, is the only way to “follow through”, as one respondent put it, and to capture the bigger picture. For instance, one might consider the impact of the loss of trust by audiences (a social issue) on financial sustainability. This is an area with much potential for future research as these interconnections are rarely explored.

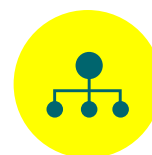
The lens of sustainability requires journalists and everyone who has some influence over the health of journalism, to become much more willing to reflect on their own practices, and how they will shape the future. Journalists are socialised into a public-minded practice that faces outwards towards society. The mantra “don’t become the story” is a good indication of how averse journalists are to involving themselves in the reportage they do. But the concept of sustainable journalism requires a particular kind of reflexivity involving the workings of journalism which goes beyond just an attention to the routines and norms of reportage. The self-reflection required by sustainable journalism needs to involve an inward-facing look within media industries about their own commitments to

the carrying-capacity of the Earth and the impacts they have environmentally. Socially, new movements like #Metoo, #BlackLivesMatter and the wave of student protests around #Rhodesmustfall have drawn attention to the impacts of media messages and sensitised media makers to vulnerable members of society and their rights to be treated in the media with respect, voice and attention.

Questions of sustainability need to be considered at three levels. At the highest level, there are **systemic** questions. It has become commonplace to point at the way the internet giants such as Facebook and Google have sucked the financial lifeblood from newspapers and other traditional news media. Australia has recently taken on the problem, and has legislated to force these companies to share advertising revenue with local publishers. Similar ideas are being floated in parts of Europe. This is clearly a systemic issue – it is far beyond the powers of any individual journalist or any publisher to address such issues. These issues are evidently crucial. Future sustainability can be guaranteed only if we change the systems that undermine it. The media systems of sub-Saharan Africa, interwoven as they are with governments' largesse and regulatory powers and elite business interests, also pose a significant challenge to the theorisation and practice of sustainable journalism for this context. It does not help that media systems analysis studies have based their work on the US and Western democracies and mostly treat the countries of Africa as deficient cases. These studies normalise media systems in hyper-capitalised, hyper-marketised media economies aimed at consumers and not necessarily citizens. There is a need to study the media systems of the SSA countries on their own terms.



Second, questions about sustainability need to be asked at the **organisational** level. Publishers must be held to account for the impact their practices have on the future. While working on this study, we were told about cases where employers employ journalists only on a casual, freelance basis. This causes clear harm in the long run, often encouraging journalists to adopt undesirable practices like accepting brown envelopes simply to stay alive. The primary responsibility here is clearly the organisation's. But it is not only employers who need to be held to account. Other organisations also have a powerful impact on the sustainability of journalism. Broadcast regulators are a good example, whose policies and approach to enforcement has a significant impact on media landscapes. We argue that media development groups are also organisations that need to be challenged to address questions of sustainability. In this context, the notion of sustainability becomes a useful test to ensure the worth of the countless plans and interventions to which African countries are subjected.



Third, questions need to be asked at the **individual** level. Individual reporters and editors are constrained by systemic and organisational issues, but still have capacity to take decisions that have a profound impact on the sustainability of journalism and on the reportage of sustainability. It is clear that the impact of the environmental crisis on sub-Saharan African countries gets too little attention in the media. Individual reporters and editors could do a lot to ensure that their audiences are properly informed.



So, what are some of the specific ways in which these issues confront journalism in sub-Saharan Africa? Many of the challenges faced in the region are the same as elsewhere, but as we have argued above, there are specific features that have to be taken into account. The following should not be seen as an exhaustive list, but as largely indicative of a way the idea of sustainability can be used to organise a number of concerns. Most of them are well-known, but we are suggesting a different way of thinking about them and understanding their relationship to each other.

Meeting the challenges of **social sustainability** in sub-Saharan African journalism



We argue that journalism is socially sustainable where it plays its proper social role of ensuring that audiences are sufficiently well informed to exercise their rights as citizens and enabling full participation in important conversations. It involves holding the powerful to account and requires independence and a relationship of trust with audiences.

In many parts of sub-Saharan Africa, several systemic issues stand in the way of this ideal, as outlined in section 3. Issues of media freedom, information inequality and misinformation must be tackled in order to guarantee socially sustainable journalism. This requires a wide set of measures, from campaigning to re-engineering a country's information system. Above all, it requires an integrated approach.

At an organisational level, questions must be asked about business and employment practices. Short-term profit cannot be allowed to jeopardise long-term sustainability. Publishers need to be held to professional standards that boost the trust of audiences, emphasising responsibility, ethics and accountability.

Individual journalists have a responsibility to behave ethically and conscientiously, as this guarantees the trust of audiences. They have a responsibility to seek out marginalised voices and draw them into the conversation. They should cover the full range of important social issues. The Sustainable Development Goals are a useful checklist of the important issues that need attention.

Meeting the challenges of **economic sustainability** in sub-Saharan African journalism



At a systemic level, the core issue revolves around the decline of the traditional business model that has sustained journalism for many decades, as described in section 3. However, several factors have an impact in sub-Saharan Africa. The weakness of many national economies has bedevilled the news media since long before the rise of the internet, while internet penetration remains lower than in other parts of the world. At the same time, governments have retained a much larger involvement in the media than elsewhere. And foreign donors play a significant role in media landscapes. These dynamics need to be better understood before one can be definitive about how global dynamics are playing out in African media. Nevertheless, it is clear that economic weakness plays a key role in undermining the sustainability of African media enterprises.

At an organisational level, media enterprises are often weakened by the fragility of their business models. This can lead to a loss of independence as interested parties seek to buy influence, which in turn damages their ability to serve audiences. They need to find new ways of ensuring their own viability. Interesting experiments are being undertaken in various countries, from membership models to paywalls and cross-subsidisation. These need to be supported, encouraged and studied, so that new models for financing journalism can be found.

Individual journalists are often forced into the gig economy in order to survive. Few are able to stay in a fixed job for extended periods. Instead, career paths are likely to include short-term contracts, freelancing and periods outside of journalism. This is not in itself unsustainable, though it does require new skill sets, such as flexibility and innovation. Journalists need to learn the necessary skills to operate in this difficult environment.

Meeting the challenges of **environmental sustainability** in sub-Saharan African journalism



The environmental challenge is the most fundamental of all, as it affects all of humankind. This is not an issue that journalists can report “from the outside” – we are all inhabitants of this fragile planet. Systemically, the media need to consider their own environmental impact as an industry. The decline of print has reduced the use of paper and carbon fuels to distribute newspapers, but it remains a factor. And other practices that have arisen need to be considered.

Individual reporters and editors need to focus strongly on reporting the important environmental stories as they affect their audiences. Sub-Saharan Africa is disproportionately affected by climate change and other aspects of the environmental crisis. Reporting of the details of this reality is important not only for African audiences, but also for the rest of the world. The African environmental story and how it connects to the global economy as well as its social implications needs to be heard.

In summary

In this section, we have tried to discuss the specific sustainability challenges faced by sub-Saharan African journalism. It is a first attempt to tease out the different aspects of the challenge in relation to the unifying idea of sustainability, in this particular geographic context. Undoubtedly, others will disagree with some aspects or approaches, and we welcome discussion that will further refine this line of thinking.

- 🌀 The approach should be of interest to everyone who has an interest in the health of journalism. That would include individual practitioners, publishers, regulators, governments and others. We feel that it should particularly be taken into account by the media development community. We believe that the development of intervention and support strategies and plans can profit from using the notion of sustainability as a unifying principle.

RECOMMENDATIONS



SYSTEMIC

1. Media viability is a great challenge in all the countries covered in this study. Media environments should be given support to ensure that operations can be financially viable, while at the same time increasing the professional level of the content, as this is a prerequisite for editorial independence.
2. Sustainable journalism should be developed in different ways, depending on the national context and the ability of the publisher. For example, it can depend on available financial resources, technological resources and size and capacity of the workforce. All media environments should be encouraged to tailor their own way of practising sustainable journalism.



ORGANISATIONAL

3. We suggest the establishment of a sustainable journalism partnership in sub-Saharan Africa where media, civil society and government can develop and implement the concept, thus furthering sustainability of both journalism and society. This partnership should ideally be connected to a global partnership. This would provide a forum for an ongoing discussion and exploration of the idea of sustainable journalism and how state institutions can support media organisations to do sustainable journalism, supported by the international community.
4. International and other media support organisations should apply the SJ approach to their work, ensuring that it serves the three dimensions of sustainability.
5. A university curriculum at Master's level in sustainable journalism, specially adapted to the sub-Saharan African context, should be developed and made available for journalism schools on the continent.
6. Universities and other research bodies should conduct ongoing research into SJ in the SSA context.
7. Media producers should be given support to produce and distribute news in an environmentally sustainable way.



INDIVIDUAL

8. Publishers and news editors and other key gatekeepers should be offered training and mentoring programmes to explore how sustainable journalism can be put into publishing practices.
9. Editors, reporters and other media practitioners should be given opportunities to develop skills to produce environmental, economic and social stories that have relevance to their audiences, connected to local and global sustainability.
10. Climate change sets more than anything else the limits within which all dimensions are included and are subordinate to. Training and mentoring programmes at all levels on how climate change influences our societies is hence instrumental to ensure sustainable development in sub-Saharan Africa.

APPENDIX

Excerpts from Stakeholder discussions on how sustainable journalism should work in SSA

- ⊙ Most stories covered in the media are generated from urban areas. This is sometimes due to short deadlines journalists must meet as well as limited resources that do not allow journalists to give attention to stories from less-developed rural communities.
- ⊙ Often, the voices of ordinary citizens, who are affected by stories, are not heard. The spotlight is, instead, put on the government/political actors who respond to issues in a way that only justifies their actions or attributes blame to one political party or another. There is minimal effort to go beyond those voices and to uncover how stories affect ordinary citizens, the chain of economic, environmental and social connections that can be made (even though there are glaring indications for such associations to be made), what workable solutions are available and what relevant actors are doing.
- ⊙ Many journalists (for example, in Ghana) do stories on events that they are invited to – over 50% of stories on TV are such features. There is the need to increase independent, development-focused journalistic work initiated by journalists themselves.
- ⊙ There are few women in decision-making positions in newsrooms in Liberia. This has implications on the reportage of issues related to women and children.
- ⊙ There are few specialised journalists, or those with relevant training, to effectively cover SDGs-related issues such as gender, environment and social justice.
- ⊙ On occasions when there are attempts to do independent sustainable journalism, stories end up being told the same way as event-related stories. For example, some journalists have attempted to tell social justice stories. However, while doing so, they have often focused on mere accounts of courtroom proceedings, with minimal analysis of immediate and long-term implications as well as what factors in the social and the economic system may have accounted for such incidents. In the same way, environmental stories are often presented as events-related and not critical research-based stories initiated by journalists. Also, healthcare stories are told from the narrow viewpoint of, say, poor quality of healthcare - without giving attention to the related economic, human resource and social justice aspects that apply. This may be due to lack of the mindfulness to make those associations, or simply the lack of the capacity to do so.
- ⊙ The media landscape in sub-Saharan Africa is replete with news stories that play out along political lines, leading to polarisation in the media. Given this, in Ghana, for example, the media is very polarised, as financiers and their political affiliates steer the news agenda of different media houses.
- ⊙ Imperative to the practice of sustainable journalism in sub-Saharan Africa is editorial independence of the media. Tied to this independence is the need for media organisations to be financially sustainable in a way that does not allow news coverage to be steered by funders or advertisers. Financial sustainability is also likely to lead to good remuneration for journalists so they do not succumb to monetary influence that neutralises their resolve or will to effectively do sustainable journalism. With adequate resources, journalists can be given the monetary support required to do stories related to sustainable

journalism. Without financial sustainability, there could be some influences that could affect editorial independence. When financial independence is achieved, journalists can carry out their constitutional mandate without fear of losing revenue and without favour.

- ⊙ Additionally, depending mainly on advertising revenue has its downsides. In a country like Liberia, many companies hardly advertise in newspapers. Thus, media organisations must begin to be innovative about revenue generation.
- ⊙ Funding from media consumers may be a better alternative in contexts where media organisations rely on government funding. This can be clearly seen in francophone countries, where governments fund and control the media.
- ⊙ Where media organisations require funding, building journalism on grants could be a more workable means of funding sustainable journalism enterprises if media organisations' or journalists' ambitions are aligned with grant conditions. There are sustainable journalism projects in Africa that have yielded good results with funding from grants. For example, the OpenSociety provided grants to some media institutions in Nigeria to do investigative stories on the Nigerian parliament and make them more accountable to the public. The OpenSociety had conditions that were aligned to the objectives of the media organisations. Connected to reporting on the SDGs, a media development organisation, the New Narratives, has also provided funding by way of fellowship (mentorship) and funding for journalists to report on land-related issues, mining and war crimes. This opportunity has allowed interested journalists to research, investigate and focus on particular issues over a period of time until lasting solutions are found. This endeavour could not have been possible without the grants and fellowships, as media organisations did not gain financially and could have thus abandoned such stories midway.
- ⊙ Media regulatory institutions should maintain professional independence, so governments and political actors do not use them as a channel to clamp down on critical media. They must, rather, work in the interest of media development so that sustainable journalism can thrive.
- ⊙ Creative storytelling is an important part of making journalism sustainable. This must be done by giving attention to the voices and faces behind stories as well as making relevant social, environmental and economic associations to them; looking out for the multi-level solutions attached to them and holding relevant stakeholders accountable.
- ⊙ Involvement of citizens in journalistic work is important when sustainable journalism is impeded by financial constraints. With the guidance of trained journalists, ordinary citizens will be able to identify and tell social-economic and environmental stories found in hard-to-reach areas in order to find workable solutions to them.
- ⊙ Collaborative data journalism is also one possible way forward regarding media innovation. Media organisations can collaborate with research institutions and individual researchers to understand trends based on research and delve into the practical implications of those trends. Example: some media institutions partner with the environmental protection agency in Liberia, which has helped them to understand the issue of climate change and how each citizen can be a part of the solution. Such examples are important – to partner journalists with experts helps the media to have a good understanding of issues and the public can then be educated.
- ⊙ Strong editorials are very valuable in tackling developmental issues. News media in sub-Saharan Africa must consider this as a viable way of doing sustainable journalism where resource constraints may exist. Such editorials must critically make economic, social and environmental associations in a single story.

- ⊙ Introducing sustainable journalism as a central part of the journalistic curriculum could be one step towards more sustainable reporting.
- ⊙ There should be a conscious effort to build journalists' capacity in sustainable journalism.
- ⊙ Inclusion of news editors (gatekeepers) in capacity building activities is important because they are key stakeholders who make decisions about news stories.
- ⊙ Tackling fake news and arming the public with credible information for decision-making must be part of sustainable journalism.
- ⊙ Journalists must follow through reporting to ensure stories which require action and solutions are not swept under the carpet. Sustainable journalism risks being a mere abstraction if accountability and solutions related to issues reported on are not achieved.
- ⊙ Sustainable journalism reaches its full capacity only when it brings about change or solutions.
- ⊙ There needs to be capacity building on how to intertwine the more classic political reporting with the SDGs - sustainable journalism consciously must find the inter-related social, economic and environmental connections of issues of stories that are covered. While combining the three pillars of sustainable journalism, it is important to be as detailed and comprehensive as possible. The capacity to do this needs to be built among journalists.
- ⊙ There are serious environmental issues that need to be given attention, such as flooding, desertification and pollution. Social issues that need attention are security, gender, equal opportunities and equitable distribution of resources.
- ⊙ Journalists need to be stimulated to appreciate the need to focus on the SDGs through workshops and other interactive arenas.

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