

**Message from Mr Koïchiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO,
on the occasion of World Press Freedom Day**

3 May 2006

On World Press Freedom Day, we remind the world of the importance of protecting the fundamental human rights of freedom of expression and freedom of the press, enshrined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Freedom of expression and press freedom are central to building strong democracies, promoting civic participation and the rule of law, and encouraging human development and security.

This year, World Press Freedom Day is dedicated to the consideration of how protecting and furthering the fundamental human rights of freedom of expression and press freedom can assist in assuring another human right – the right to be free from poverty. Today, more than 1 billion people live on less than \$1 per day. Another 2.7 billion live on less than \$2 per day. To combat these tragic statistics, the United Nations Millennium Declaration of 2000 made poverty eradication the highest priority among the goals of the international development community. The first Millennium Development Goal (MDG) is that, by 2015, the number of people living in extreme poverty and suffering from hunger should be reduced by half.

It is in this context that the recommendations for action from the World Summit on the Information Society should be seen. UNESCO's elaboration of its concept of "knowledge societies", which is based upon four key principles - freedom of expression, universal access to information and knowledge, respect for cultural and linguistic diversity, and quality education for all – was an important contribution to the World Summit. This concept recognizes the crucial role of the media and information and communication technology (ICT) in creating activities that will expand access to information, contribute to achieving the MDGs, and enable us to eventually bridge the so-called "digital divide", which is understood to be far more than a technological issue.

In the five years that have elapsed since the MDGs were elaborated, governments, UN agencies, NGOs and other international actors have made tremendous efforts to mobilize resources and work together towards realizing these goals. However, despite these efforts, there is growing concern that without moving forward differently, we are not on track to attain the MDGs. Thus, we need to think creatively, even as we continue to think holistically, about how to achieve these essential goals.

One central component of efforts to achieve the MDGs is local ownership and participation. Observing the successes and failures of development efforts

has led development agencies, NGOs and state actors to structure development around local participation, recognizing that without the empowerment and understanding of local actors, even the best-supported development plans tend to produce negligible or unsustainable results.

Free and independent media should be recognized as a key dimension of efforts to eradicate poverty, for two main reasons. First, free and independent media serve as a vehicle for sharing information in order to facilitate good governance, generate opportunities to gain access to essential services, promote accountability and counteract corruption, and develop the relationship between an informed, critical and participatory citizenry and responsive elected officials. Second, free and independent media are associated with a range of ‘goods’ or benefits that are highly relevant to the challenge of poverty eradication - including the recognition and strengthening of basic human rights, a stronger civil society, institutional change, political transparency, support to education, public health awareness (such as education campaigns on HIV and AIDS) and sustainable livelihoods. There is also a strong positive correlation between freedom of expression and higher incomes, lower infant mortality and increased adult literacy. These ideas were reiterated most recently in the document adopted at the World Summit on the Information Society in Tunis, Tunisia, in November 2005, where 176 participating States reaffirmed that freedom of expression and the free flow of information, ideas and knowledge are essential for development.

Thus, World Press Freedom Day 2006 provides an occasion for considering the important questions of how a free press can help eradicate poverty and how freedom of expression and press freedom can assist in achieving the MDGs. In so doing, it becomes clear that the defence of one fundamental human right – the right to freedom of expression – may directly protect several others, thereby showing how rights protections are interwoven intellectually, morally, and in practice.

Of course, for the media to be effective in alleviating poverty, they must be allowed to operate freely and safely. This year, we celebrate World Press Freedom Day at a time when being a media professional has never been more dangerous. In 2005, according to the statistics of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), a record number of journalists and media staff – 150 people – were killed in the line of duty. This is the largest annual number of media professionals killed in recorded history, and represents a tragic continuation of a statistical trend that has been rising over the past several years; being a journalist is very dangerous and, sadly, is becoming more so. In addition to deaths in the field, journalists and other media professionals continue to face threats and harassment; last year, more than 500 media professionals were detained or imprisoned. Specific conflicts have also claimed record high numbers of

journalists who have been killed or injured, with the war in Iraq claiming 60 lives between March 2003 and December 2005.

UNESCO calls on governments and public authorities throughout the world to end, in particular, the culture of impunity regarding violence against journalists by investigating and punishing those responsible for attacks on media professionals, and by taking the necessary precautions that make it possible for journalists to continue to provide us with the essential knowledge and information that flow from a free and independent press.

Koïchiro Matsuura