

Forum on Minority Issues

Geneva, 24th and 25th November 2015

Speech by Francis Kpatindé (Wednesday 25 November 2015)

Thank you for inviting me to this Forum on discriminated minorities.

Probably because of my own professional background, I have chosen to talk about the relations between the media and minorities, and to sketch out possible solutions for how the media can contribute to a more equitable access to justice for minorities. Not infrequently do we hear about a “cordial discord” between minorities and the media.

In my opinion this disagreement is the result of a misunderstanding. Indeed, the media and minorities need each other.

On the one hand, the situation of various minorities remains largely underexplored and is an endless source for investigation and media broadcasts. On the other hand, ethnic, racial, and linguistic minorities need their cause to be known by as many people as possible. In this respect, the media are an extraordinary tool.

When talking about whole and full access to justice for minorities it is difficult to avoid the media, the vehicle for mass culture. The image of minorities is also conveyed through the media. It is hence in the common interest of media and minorities to get along as their destinies are tied to each other.

As a matter of fact, journalists reporting on minorities are not always malicious. Very often, the media do not know these minorities. They don't know their history, their ambitions, the

context they live in, and even less do they know their cultures and languages, since official history silences minorities.

It therefore comes as no surprise that minorities are represented through a distorted lens, from a strange angle, with all the prejudice it implies. But, in my opinion, this is not always due to bad intentions.

Hiring journalists with a minority background is a good thing *per se*. It is normal, fair and well-advised to have a public administration, companies, and media that reflect the make up of society. Hiring minorities in the media may contribute to a better understanding of each other and possibly allows for correcting mistakes and prejudice. But hiring women and men with a minority background in the media is not enough as such, for editorial offices are not necessarily flexible and democratic. They work according to a different, complex kind of logic.. Recruiting more people belonging to minorities in the media might not lead to substantial progress because the media function like an autonomous republic, with a self-assurance which is often unjustified.

Within editorial offices minority journalists may be seen as suspicious, especially if they intend to report on issues related to their own community. Even the most professional journalists would be suspected of being inevitably biased.

I recall the case of a journalist coming from the Harratin community of Mauritania, when I was working in a Paris-based magazine a few years ago. When he would write about this community forced into slavery in Mauritania, his articles would be examined from every aspect, literally dissected by chief editors. Once someone even said that he should stop writing about Mauritanian affairs.

Yet most of the time this journalist would not express his opinion in his articles. He even made praiseworthy efforts to stick to the facts, but he was suspected simply because of his origins.

Having said all this, by way of conclusion, I would like to make a few suggestions.

1 – We must act in the very first link of the chain, namely in journalism schools, and provide expertise and pedagogical tools to young journalists looking at minorities, so as to enable them to address these issues with professionalism and the required knowledge and sensitivity.

2 – We must provide these pedagogical tools to media as well, of course without undermining their independence.

3 – And, because we are our own best advocates, we have to encourage minorities to set up their own media, even if it may give the impression of strengthening segregation – it is actually about desegregating. We should be aware though that this measure alone will not be enough to solve the problem.