

“The Role of the Media in the Development of Africa”

**Presentation by Paddy Coulter, Director, Reuters Foundation Programme*
at Green College, University of Oxford**

There are two distinct foci of debate and concern over the impact of the media on Africa’s development. One – the role of northern hemisphere media – has been well aired already in today’s roundtable. There is little need for me to add to the panel consensus on the problems of unbalanced coverage geared overwhelmingly to crisis and conflict. As a recent Oxford lecture by Reuters Chairman Niall FitzGerald warned, the western media is in danger of missing the big story on Africa, a continent whose average economic growth figure of 5% is roughly double that of Europe.

But the other focus – the critical role of media **within** Africa - is largely neglected outside the continent. Yet it is precisely local African media that have some of the most crucial development functions to perform, namely

- providing African people with reliable information on, for example, the prevention of HIV/AIDS and other vital matters
- holding government and other powerful institutions to account, as a World Bank study into the positive impact of local media on school development in Uganda attests
- acting as a key driver for a free and prosperous society, and here it is important that proper attention is given to media enterprise and the media business sector, particularly as governments on the one hand and ngos on the other can dominate whatever debate takes place.

The publication earlier this year of the Report of the Commission for Africa, *“Our Common Interest”*, went a long way towards rectifying this neglect. I confess that I was (pleasantly!) surprised at the prominence given to the media’s role in the final report which had been approved by a commission whose members included the British and Ethiopian Prime Ministers, each with their own complicated position towards media in their respective countries. But perhaps the enlightened stance of the report can be explained by the fact that commissioners were meant to be acting in a personal capacity rather than representing their states.

For a continent where government control and indeed outright government ownership of media still predominates, the Commission Report presses the concept of **plural media**. It instances Mali where there are some 150 independent radio stations and 30 private newspapers alongside the predictable government television and radio stations. And it urges donors “to substantially increase funding to African independent media institutions and those governments promoting free media”.

I would personally single out four priority areas which in my experience need to be tackled:

1. transforming government television and radio stations into proper public service broadcasters
2. improving standards of journalism, largely though not exclusively by upgrading journalist training
3. developing genuinely independent national news agencies in order that local African media have access to reliable and objective frontline reporting
4. establishing sensitive media regulation which would encourage stronger self-regulation and professional codes of ethics on the one hand and more transparent regulatory frameworks in collaboration with civil society and business on the other.

But my overarching recommendation would be for all concerned to make sure that the Africa Commission’s findings on the media and their development role get taken up at all relevant forums - and then acted upon!

Ends

*** The Reuters Foundation was set up in 1982 primarily to promote standards of journalistic excellence in the developing world, through training courses around the world and through its prestigious Foundation Fellowship Programme at Oxford University. This allows outstanding mid-career journalists fully-funded study breaks to pursue specific research topics in depth. For further information see the Foundation’s website www.foundation.reuters.com**