CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

**Statement by Irene Khan**

**Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of freedom of opinion and expression**

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Mr. President,

Excellencies,

Distinguished delegates,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great honour and pleasure to be back before the Council. I would like to thank Member States for their constructive engagement with my mandate during the past year.

In my third report to the Council in the 30th year of the mandate, I focus on the role of freedom of expression in promoting sustainable development. Development is sustainable, not only because it incorporates economic, social and environmental dimensions, but because respect for human rights makes it just, inclusive and transformational.

As Member States prepare for the High-Level Political Forum in New York next month and the Summit on Sustainable Development in September, it is vital to reinforce the right to freedom of opinion and expression as a catalyst and ingredient of sustainable development.

Let me highlight the five key messages of the report:

Firstly, freedom of expression is an essential enabler of sustainable development, facilitating a range of economic, social and cultural rights and generating significant social and economic dividends. The free flow of information and public debate empower individuals, communities and civil society, promote accountability, allow Governments to be better informed and more responsive to the needs of their people, and make institutions and markets more efficient and effective.

Secondly, there has some notable achievements in advancing information and participation as key ingredients of development. Over 90% of the world’s population now live in countries that have adopted laws on access to information. Environmental impact assessments have become a standard tool to engage affected communities in large development projects. Many civil society organizations and social movement networks, activists and human rights defenders have proactively forged spaces in sustainable development processes at the global, regional, national and local levels.

Thirdly, despite this progress, there remain major gaps, challenges and failures that make the reality grim.

Despite a legal right to access information, requests for information are often denied because of a culture of official secrecy, serious gaps in the scope and implementation of laws, lack of capacity, resources and independent oversight, and inadequate or non-existent appeals.

Despite legal requirements on corporate disclosure, accessing information from companies on their human rights record is problematic.

States spectacularly failed to reach the target “to provide universal and affordable access to the Internet in least developed countries by 2020.” An estimated 2.7 billion people worldwide are not online. A majority among those who have access do not have meaningful connectivity. Internet access among women is significantly lower than men and at the country level the gender digital divide cuts across other axes of discrimination.

Fourthly, the link between sustainable development and freedom of expression is not only about information. It is also about voice – the right to articulate views, debate, discuss, criticize, challenge, protest, participate and demand.

Those whom the 2030 Agenda pledged not to leave behind remain the least heard in decision-making, the most excluded from access to information, and the most exposed to harassment, discrimination and violence.

Gendered censorship is pervasive, with women’s voices being suppressed by State, communities, religious and private actors. Online gender-based violence is a serious barrier to women’s ability to speak, engage and organize online.

Many States fail to respect the participatory rights of Indigenous people set out in international and regional instruments. Free prior informed consent is often an empty promise, **e**nvironmental impact assessments an ineffective tool for engagement.

Those who dare to speak truth to power or shine the light on human rights violations, corruption and illegal exploitation of natural resources - journalists, environmental activists, trade unionists and human rights defenders - are censored, threatened, intimidated, prosecuted, attacked or killed with impunity. Impunity thrives because of the powerful vested interests behind the crimes.

Fifth, there is hope for change. Good practices and good results are emerging where multi-stakeholder partnerships have built transparency and trust, the media have been able to operate with freedom and independence to expose corruption and wrongdoing, and civil society has enjoyed the space to participate in development processes and contribute with ideas, opinions and information.

Building on these good practices, the report provides some concrete recommendations to States, companies, development finance institutions, companies.

A number of the recommendations focus on enhancing the participation of those of those being left behind, on the safety of journalists and activists, and on strengthening access to information and proactive disclosure by States.

If development is to be meaningful, then the voices of the most disadvantaged in society must be heard and heeded, and civil society and media must be free to hold the powerful account.

I urge States to follow the good practice of multistakeholder partnerships to build transparency and trust, uphold media freedom to report corruption and wrongdoing, and protect civic space and ensure meaningful engagement with communities in development processes.

I call on companies, including the digital technology sector, to undertake human rights due diligence across their value chain and disclose the impact of their activities on human rights and sustainability.

New technologies are creating new inequalities, disproportionately affecting women, girls, Indigenous communities, poor and marginalized communities. States, the private sector and the international organizations must redouble their efforts to ensure universal and meaningful access to open, free, interoperable and secure Internet, and pay particular attention to the gender digital divide. Attention should be given also to community-based networks and Internet infrastructure.

I have recommended information, media and digital literacy become part of all national school curricula and adult learning programmes and an indicator of the Sustainable Development Goals on education and gender equality.

Finally, with less than seven years left to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, the gap between the promise to leave no one behind and its realization on the ground creates a new imperative to invest in sustainable development. One of the most impactful “investments” that States can make is in freedom of expression.

I call on States which most vocally profess their support for the Sustainable Development Goals to come forward and invest in the rights to expression, information and participation which the 2030 Agenda so clearly endorses.

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