

Report of the General Secretary

1. Introduction

In 2001, WACC's former director of studies and publications, Pradip Thomas, and I conceived a series of booklets on the theme "In search of common values". Among those invited to write was Albert van den Heuvel, President of WACC from 1996 to 2002. In his contribution, Albert wrote:

"Today, more than at any other time, we are aware of the collective destinies of the human race. There is a lot that can be gained from forging understandings across the many divides of tradition, beliefs, memory, history and culture. We must understand that there is room for universals as well as for diversity; that there are different ways of reaching and achieving universals; and that tolerance, respect, and understanding are common to all cultures."¹

Nearly two decades later, the climate crisis – or climate emergency – has brought into sharp focus the fact that the human race shares a collective destiny. Ongoing conflicts in countries such as Venezuela, South Sudan, Yemen, and the Philippines continually remind us of that fact. In some ways, the need for greater tolerance, respect, and understanding has never been greater and that's where WACC has a key role to play.

Albert van den Heuvel was a great fan of constructive criticism and positive provocation. He would applaud taking WACC's slogan "Communication for All" to a new level by adding a sustainable development goal to the 17 devised by the United Nations. The goal of SDG 18 is "Expand and strengthen public civic spaces through equitable and affordable access to communication technologies and platforms, media pluralism, and media diversity."

Its targets are:

- * By 2030, ensure the existence of spaces and resources for men and women, in particular the poor and vulnerable, to engage in transparent, informed, and democratic public dialogue and debate.
- * By 2030, ensure the existence of regimes where creative ideas and knowledge are encouraged, and can be communicated widely and freely to advance social justice and sustainable development.
- * By 2030, ensure protection for the dignity and security of people in relation to communication processes, especially concerning data privacy and freedom from surveillance.
- * By 2030, ensure communication spaces for diverse cultures, cultural forms and identities at the individual and social levels.

This is a secular elaboration, of course, of WACC's own Principles (dating from 1984 but revised, as you may remember, in 2012) which affirm, "The centrality of communication – including mass, community and social media – in strengthening

human dignity and in promoting democratic values and social justice.”

I have quoted Albert van den Heuvel and the new SDG 18 as a benchmark for what I see as WACC’s main purpose: being prophetic, speaking up, and helping others to be heard and to be visible.

2. From Hamburg 2018 to London 2019

2018 was a year of celebrations. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the World Health Organization, and the World Council of Churches all turned 70. WACC marked its own 50th anniversary with a symposium exploring new challenges in the field of communication for social change. The symposium took place in Hamburg, Germany, at the end of a three-day meeting of WACC’s Board of Directors. Some 40 participants explored the legacy of the 1980s MacBride Report and its continuing relevance today – a theme we returned to in the most recent issue of WACC’s journal *Media Development*. Keynote speaker Dr Ellen Ueberschär, President of the Heinrich-Böll Foundation, challenged WACC to apply the right to communicate to the digital world:

“We must succeed in establishing ground rules for communication in the digital public sphere that enable minorities and vulnerable groups to exchange views and make themselves heard. The same goes for mechanisms to counter fake news and prioritize true empathy over quick emotions and a culture of indignation that quickly descends into violence. The forces of democracy and public welfare must stand together in the fight to build credibility and trust in the digital media world.”²

In pursuing WACC’s strategic plan, general secretariat staff continually seek opportunities to make the organizations’ policies and activities more widely known – constrained only by time and budget. A listing of public engagement interventions can be found as an appendix to the Programme Report, but some examples include:

In 2018, programme manager Lorenzo Vargas represented WACC at the celebration of ACT Alliance’s 3rd General Assembly in Uppsala, Sweden. Hosted by the Church of Sweden, this gathering provided an opportunity for representatives of the 140 ACT Alliance members around the world to engage in dialogue about joint priorities in the areas of sustainable development, humanitarian assistance, and human rights advocacy.

That same year, I participated in a UNICEF Latin America regional workshop on the theme “From words to action: Improving communication, community engagement and accountability” in Panama City. UNICEF focused on several humanitarian aid concerns in the region, especially responses to migrants and refugees. WACC and its partner Comunicarte highlighted work with youth in Colombia on strengthening peace and stability after the end of the country’s long-running conflict.

In 2019, for the first time, WACC took part in the Deutsche Welle Global Media Forum, May 27-28 in Bonn, Germany, where we organized a panel discussion on the theme “Can Migrants Make Themselves Heard in the Age of National Populism?” Some 40 participants heard speakers from Colombia, India, Africa and Europe share insights about WACC-supported projects that are using media-based strategies to advance the rights of migrants and refugees. WACC’s Treasurer, Dr Stephen Brown, was one of the presenters.

Themes to be pursued in the period 2019-2020:

It almost goes without saying that WACC will continue its magnificent and essential work on the representation of women in the world's news media. Yet, funding that enterprise is by no means assured and one of the questions facing this Board is what to do if, after nearly 25 years, funding fatigue and the multiple demands of other social justice initiatives dictate an end to the project.

Continuing with the theme of migrants, refugees and displaced persons, WACC is applying its media monitoring methodology to how they are represented in the news. As you will hear from the programme report, a number of WACC's partners have undertaken research on this topic. At the global level, we are beginning to consolidate this regional evidence in order to advocate for more balanced and accurate portrayals of migrants and refugees and to encourage appropriate policy and community responses based on facts and real needs rather than stereotypes and misinformation.

In response to Ellen Ueberschär's challenge at the Hamburg symposium, WACC will be exploring and reflecting on communication rights, duties, and responsibilities in the world of digital media. Digital platforms offer powerful tools for justice, education, mission and understanding in a world where communication is key to social justice and sustainable development. However, we have also seen the same platforms used to spread deliberate disinformation and hate. Politically motivated digital campaigns of "fake news" are undermining democratic processes and attacking responsible journalism.

WACC and its partners will be exploring the balance between communication rights and communication responsibilities in the digital sphere, and developing tools and knowledge for community organizations and networks across the spectrum to use digital media effectively and strategically, particularly in the face of disinformation and hate speech. To this end, we are already in conversation with partners about the possibility of a public event to take place in September 2020 on this theme.

WACC has also witnessed disturbing attempts by governments and private interests to curb the organization and activities of civil society. The ability of civil society to access information, freely participate in decisions that affect it, and demand accountability from government and public services is essential. Yet civil society organizations and networks face increasing obstacles in all regions. "Shrinking public space" is an urgent theme for communication rights, now and in future. WACC is focusing its attention on strengthening alternative voices and enabling people and communities to be heard where it matters most.

Last but by no means least, we are working on "Traditional Knowledge and Climate Change: Towards Resilience and Survival", a proposal to gather, systematize, and create a repository of traditional knowledge in contexts where local communities need to be better prepared for the long-term impacts of climate change.

Traditional knowledge is often embedded in local languages and transmitted by word of mouth and/or through local practices. It is also most often to be found in older generations and, therefore, is at risk of vanishing with time. In the face of the urgency of climate change action, gathering traditional knowledge in a systematic way that can be made available in a variety of formats – including digital platforms – would

provide the basis for long-term adaptation, mitigation, and survival. It would also be a resource that could be shared with other communities facing similar dilemmas in a form of knowledge exchange that can only improve and strengthen resilience.

3. General Secretariat

It is customary for general secretaries to thank staff for their dedication and service and sometimes this may appear to be an afterthought. In my case, however, I wish to acknowledge the hard work and commitment of all the staff who, since I took office, have devoted their time and energy to making WACC succeed and to advancing the cause of communication rights. In any office, there are always ups and downs, the rough with the smooth. But as directors, you can be assured that the current staff work as a team with the best interests of WACC at heart.

From a full-time staff of 24 persons in London before the move to Toronto in 2006, today the General Secretariat counts on the services of nine people (seven full-time and two part-time). In addition, a research coordination consultant is fulfilling a one-year contract and independent consultants are employed on an hourly basis to cover IT and web maintenance. The General Secretariat also benefits from the presence of ACT Alliance's Director of Communications and its Climate Change Communications Coordinator. It also hosts the administrative coordinator for Thyroid Canada.

The General Secretariat is housed in a building adjoining Hope United Church and converted for the purpose at the time WACC to Toronto. WACC pays annual rent to Hope United and that is a significant burden on the budget. The lease comes up for renewal on August 31, 2020. WACC has the option of terminating the Lease by giving notice on or before January 31, 2019. WACC is also able to negotiate the terms of a new Lease.

In that light, staff have been reviewing options including (i) sub-letting half the available space; (ii) moving operations to a smaller leased space; (iii) decentralizing operations completely. A fourth option would be to accept an invitation to be hosted by a like-minded organization in Toronto or elsewhere. Unfortunately, no such offers have been made and evidence suggests that most church-related and other not-for-profits are cutting back on their own staff and office space.

The Agenda for this meeting includes an item covering these matters.

4. Fund-raising

When I took over as General Secretary, I told the staff that fund-raising was no longer – if it ever had been – a task for one person alone. It was no longer possible to come up with program ideas and simply to hand them over to someone whose job it would be to find the funds. Moreover, core budget funding would have to be tackled by recouping core budget costs in the form of coordination costs (salaries) and administrative overheads. To that end, cost accounting now informs the budgets presented to potential program and institutional funders.

For fund-raising the principle we are following is to leave no stone unturned. This means that staff always have in mind the need to identify and to follow up funding possibilities: whenever they see a lead or opportunity in announcements, public calls, and discussions with people they meet. More specifically, 2018 and 2019 have focused on fund-raising for the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) 2020, including for the first time crowd-sourcing funds. Considerable energy has gone into rolling out a funding strategy using WACC, GMMP, and GAMAG email contacts, as

well as directing funding proposals to entities interested in promoting gender justice.

In addition, full proposals for both major program areas – Communication for Social Change and Gender and Communication – include staff salaries and overheads as significant components for getting the job done. Grant-writing and smaller proposals follow the same pattern.

Two records are kept to facilitate oversight of this process: “Actions” lists approaches made to potential funders and their follow up; and an ExCel chart shows funds pledged. These documents are regularly monitored by myself and the Deputy General Secretary.

We have yet to explore other fund-raising possibilities such as monthly pledges, legacies, consultancy services, and social enterprise initiatives that might increase income. The membership base for the first two is dwindling and we have to assess the time and cost implications of the latter two.

In the meantime, the role of directors, regional executive committees, members and partners should be strengthened in realistic ways that do not create a conflict of interest and that can genuinely help strengthen the communications rights movement worldwide.

5. Strategic Plan 2022-26

A strategic plan is a management tool that serves the purpose of helping an organization do a better job, because a plan focuses the energy, resources, and time of everyone in the organization. A strategic plan:

- * Communicates strategy to staff, members and partners
- * Prioritizes financial needs
- * Provides focus and direction to move from plan to action

The WACC Canada Board of Directors met 6-9 September 2016 when they received a Review and Evaluation of the Strategic Plan 2012-2016 and considered a Revised Strategic Plan 2017-2021 prepared by Dr Jim McDonnell and Mr Alvito de Souza.

Two issues now face the current Board: (1) An evaluation of what has been achieved under the Strategic Plan 2017-2021; (2) The design and implementation of the Strategic Plan 2022-2026.

By the end of 2021, WACC will need to have in place a plan that will guide the work of WACC towards some key goals. What are those goals? How will WACC achieve them? In order for strategic planning to be successful, the process is as important as the outcome.

A new strategic plan will need to take into account the success and failures of the Strategic Plan 2017-2021 together with WACC’s changed circumstances in the light of an ever changing communications ecosystem.

The Agenda for this meeting includes an item covering this matter.

6. Challenges

Since 1968, WACC has raised and strengthened the voices of marginalised and

vulnerable people worldwide. It struggled against apartheid in South Africa in the 1970s; it supported liberation from colonialism in Zimbabwe in the 1980s; it fought for a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) in the 1990s; it picked up and ran with the idea that greater gender equality could be achieved by studying how women are represented in the world's news media; it trained communication professionals; it published a professional series of books and its own quarterly journal, *Media Development*; it helped promote films in which shared human values are explored in depth; and it helped bring communication rights onto the world's stage.

From the point of view of its vision of "Communication for All", WACC's purpose, therefore, has been to disturb the conscience of the world by being critical, provoking dialogue and creating greater understanding. But beyond disturbing the world's conscience lies action: speaking out, advocating change, and enabling others to act for themselves.

Today's challenge is to exercise moral leadership by discovering new directions for the values WACC embraces and by exploring what Albert van den Heuvel referred to as "forging understandings across the many divides of tradition, beliefs, memory, history and culture." In particular, how can communication rights help achieve the sustainable development goals? How can communication rights help advance gender equality? How can communication rights help alleviate the climate crisis? And how can digital ethics help create a fairer and more just world?

Notes

1. Albert van den Heuvel (2001). *Values for a Global Society*. WACC Publications.
2. Ellen Ueberschär (2018). "Challenges for communication rights in the 21st century." *Media Development* 3/2018.