Joint Initiative: Launch of a Forum of Legal Actors on Freedom of Expression

Today at WPFC 2020, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, UNESCO, Free Press Unlimited and the T.M.C. Asser Instituut jointly launched the Forum of Legal Actors. The initiative should help to create a network of legal actors to support and defend the right to freedom of expression and the safety of journalists.

In the coming years, the Forum will bring together judges, public prosecutors, lawyers and representatives from judicial institutes from all over the globe to strengthen the role of legal actors in the defence of the universal right of freedom of expression. The Forum will be a platform to exchange views on best practices and the interpretation of legal provisions, and it will disseminate international norms and standards in comparative law.

Background

Although the universal human right to freedom of expression and the relevance of the Rule of Law are formal UN Sustainable Development Goals, the past decade saw a steep growth in attacks on freedom of expression in general, and on the safety of journalists in particular. The Forum of Legal Actors, which falls within the framework of the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists’ and the Issue of Impunity, aims to strengthen the defence of the crucial right of freedom of expression by engaging legal experts from across the world. By exchanging views it will set forth how legal actors, such as judges, prosecutors, lawyers and legal institutes, can help in defending freedom of expression and in prosecuting perpetrators of crimes against journalists. For when there is impunity for attacks on journalists, both the Rule of Law and respect for fundamental rights are threatened.

Increasing knowledge

In today’s world, it is both a necessity and a challenge to interpret laws in the dynamic and increasingly pervasive digital dimensions of the right to freedom of expression. In the coming WPFC editions, the Forum will therefore focus on capacity building, with expert exchange meetings in 2021 and 2022. These two Fora events, hosted by the Asser Institute in The Hague, will pay particular attention to French and Spanish speaking communities.

Expert participants

The inaugural edition of the Forum at the WPFC 2020 assembled over forty expert participants in the legal field, joining in from South-America, Africa, Asia and Europe. First, the expert participants focused on the role of regional and national courts in protecting freedom of expression. The second session focused on capacity building at the national and regional level.

Findings & conclusions
As the Forum discussed sensitive topics and cases, it operated under the Chatham House Rule to help facilitate a free exchange. Findings and conclusions of both sessions, however, will be summarised and reported upon in the publicly accessible online session on ‘Strengthening investigations and prosecutions to end impunity for crimes against journalists’, organised by UNESCO on December 10, 12:15 PM (CET).

For more information on the Forum of Legal Actors, please contact Pascal Messer, head of communications, Asser Institute at p.messer@asser.nl | 06 24235243.

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