Freedom of opinion and expression is a fundamental human right underpinning all civil liberties and an important prerequisite for the functioning of democracy. Freedom of the press, free flow of information, and pluralism of the media are crucial to keep power in check. Being the public’s watchdogs of these freedoms and providing the element of public scrutiny, journalists and media workers ensure governments’ accountability and adherence to the rule of law.

The role of free, pluralistic and independent journalism is crucial also for the effective implementation of the 2030 Agenda, of which Sustainable Development Goal 16 focuses on promoting just, peaceful and inclusive societies. Peace, justice and strong institutions allow good governance to thrive. An independent and enabling media environment is essential for this.

Yet, across the globe, recent political, technological and economic transformations have placed new strains on press freedom. Ranging from restrictive legislation and censorship, to new limitations linked to national security and anti-terrorism measures, erosions have also been observed in national legal frameworks that govern source protection. Intimidation, political and economic pressure, harassment, kidnaping, physical attacks, arbitrary arrest and even killing constitute the risks faced by journalists carrying out their job. Women journalists face double vulnerability, targeted both as woman and as media workers. According to the latest UNESCO World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development, 530 journalists were killed between 2012 and 2016, an average of two deaths per week. The vast majority of those killed were local journalists (92%), while 8% were foreign correspondents, and this trend holds across all regions of the world.

Journalists working internationally frequently rely on fixers, interpreters and others acting as intermediaries between the foreign journalist and their sources at the national or local levels, including other freelance journalists and media workers, contacts in government, armed groups, non-state actors and others. News media companies, especially those reporting on conflict situation, corruption or organized crimes, rely heavily on the work of freelance journalists and photographers and others engaged in the practice of journalism. They also face unique protection concerns and challenges.

Media workers, in particular those engaged at the local and national levels, are exposed to the risks of working on dangerous assignments and can also be targeted for the part they play in delivering the news to the public. Furthermore, after assignment, these locally employed civilians remain in the area and face additional risks. They may be declared traitors and face difficulties in finding other work. They may even be detained and face criminal charges for their involvement in the journalistic activities undertaken. In addition, they usually do not have the same level of security as staff journalists or foreign correspondents and too often are a living example of the price one pays for freedom of expression.
The UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity notes that “the protection of journalists should not be limited to those formally recognised as journalists, but should cover others, including community media workers and citizen journalists and those who may be using new media as a means of reaching their audiences.” Journalists’ employers and associations should be aware of their responsibilities and must take steps to aid team members in difficulty, including freelancers, fixers, photojournalists, drivers, interpreters and others. It should be recognized globally that laws ensuring safety of journalists should also extend to media workers, especially locally employed personnel who generate a significant amount of public interest journalism.

Encouragingly, the number of countries adopting right to information laws is increasing and the international normative framework on the safety of journalists has been significantly bolstered. Moreover, there is greater recognition of the right to privacy.

The theme of World Press Freedom Day 2018 thus highlights the importance of ensuring that societies possess legal guarantees for press freedom and an independent judiciary that duly prosecutes crimes against journalists. The interactive discussion will examine how guaranteeing freedom of the press means guaranteeing the safety of journalists and all those who work in the field of media. Together, they are often paying a high price for their essential duty, a service that ultimately is keeping power in check.

Points of discussion:

- Participation of media workers in the struggle to uphold rule of law and human rights and how this affects their safety
- Risks vis-à-vis incidents of threats and attacks against media workers
- Determining awareness, knowledge, and attitudes toward media workers’ roles, relevance, and safety
- Steps needed to ensure better safety for locally employed media workers
- Role of the media outlets
- Role the UN have to play in ensuring compliance with the obligation to protect journalists and media workers