

# Measuring Public Access to Information and Protection of Fundamental Freedoms in Sustainable Development Target 16.10 with V-Dem Data



## KEY FINDINGS

- Currently decided indicators for monitoring target 16.10 capture only limited aspects of public access to information and related fundamental freedoms.
- As an independent research institute, V-Dem provides additional information on democracy-related Sustainable Development Goal 16 and its sub-targets to supplement the proposed official indicators.
- V-Dem data with world-wide coverage can reliably capture restrictions of access to information and several distinct aspects of fundamental freedoms.
- The indicators include measures of the range of political perspectives represented in the media and the freedom of academic and cultural expression.

**At the UN Sustainable Development Summit in September 2015, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development has been adopted. Its seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) define the development priorities for the coming 15 years. The effectiveness of the SDGs and their 169 targets will largely depend on their implementation and monitoring. So far, 230 indicators have been proposed by the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators (IAEG – SDGs) and agreed upon by the UN Statistical Commission in March 2016.<sup>1</sup>**

For the first time, global targets related to democratic governance are included in the Post 2015 Development Agenda. SDG 16 aims at the promotion of “peaceful and inclusive societies” with “access to justice for all” and “effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels”.<sup>2</sup> Since improved governance is at the core of sustainable development, SDG 16 is therefore both, an end in itself as well as a key to the achievement of the other SDGs.<sup>3</sup>

The Varieties of Democracy Institute (V-Dem) has been involved in the process of identifying suitable indicators to measure SDG 16 as part of the virtual network of stakeholders and experts convened by the United Nations Statistics Division and the SDG16 Data Initiative. The UNDP

Virtual Network Sourcebook contains 60 V-Dem indicators and indices.<sup>4</sup> V-Dem provides complementary data for the measurement of SDG 16. Consistent, impartial and transparent data from independent research institutes increase the reliability of the measurement of the targets and enhance the legitimacy of the SDG monitoring process. Such tools enable scholars, civil society organizations and other actors to monitor the implementation and encourage local ownership and dissemination of the SDGs. Inconsistencies in definitions of concepts, methods and sources between countries can be avoided by using data from independent institutes based on standardized definitions and methods for all countries. Our reliable expert-based indicators are aggregated transparently and easily accessible online without charge.

In this brief we discuss the main challenges with the current proposed official indicator to measure Goal 16.10, and present V-Dem’s complementary indicators.

## Spotlight on Target 16.10: Public access to information and protection of fundamental freedoms

Target 16.10 aims to “ensure public access to information and protect

<sup>1</sup> UNSTATS (2016) <sup>2</sup> UNSTATS (2016) <sup>3</sup> UNDP (2014) <sup>4</sup> UNDP/BMZ (2016)

fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements.”

The proposed official indicators for this target are:

- 16.10.1: Number of verified cases of killing, kidnapping, enforced disappearance, arbitrary detention and torture of journalists, associated media personnel, trade unionists and human rights advocates in the previous 12 months.
- 16.10.2: Number of countries that adopt and implement constitutional, statutory and/or policy guarantees for public access to information.<sup>5</sup>

The suggested indicators in their current form focus on public access to information and neglect the aspect of fundamental freedoms, which is an important component of target 16.10. With regards to violations of access to information, it is necessary to capture also less violent and extreme ways for governments to restrict their citizens’ access to information than physical harm of journalists.

Furthermore, the number of journalists or associated personnel advocates killed or abducted is likely to be low in countries with high levels of media freedom, but also in extremely repressive regimes, because journalistic activity in such countries is very limited. This undermines the validity of the indicator. Lastly, public access to information is not only linked to the freedom of the press and journalists. Other sources of information like academia and culture need to be taken into account. Thus, additional measures are required in order to capture this aspect.

<sup>5</sup> UNSTATS (2016)

## V-Dem Indicators for Target 16.10

To measure public access to information and related fundamental freedoms, we suggest the following V-Dem indicators:

- **Freedom of Discussion** – specifies to what extent citizens are able to openly discuss political issues in private homes and in public spaces. V-Dem measures the freedom of expression separately for women and for men. Additionally, an aggregated version combines the gender-specific versions of this indicator. Figure 1 illustrates the increasing freedom of discussion for women and men on the global level from 1980 to 2012.
- **Freedom of Academic and Cultural Expression** – measures the freedom of academia and cultural expression related to political issues. Figure 1 shows the improvement during recent years.
- **Government Censorship Effort Media** - captures direct and indirect attempts by the government to censor the print or broadcast media. Figure 1 shows that the global average of media censorship by governments has decreased during the last decades.
- **Print/Broadcast Media Perspectives** – reflects if the major print and broadcast media represent a wide range of political perspectives. As figure 2 on the next page illustrates, all regions but Western Europe & Northern America have experienced major improvements during the last three decades. At the same time, considerable differences among regions exist. While a wide range of political perspectives is represented by media in Western Europe and Northern America, they remain limited in other regions in the world, and especially in Asia and in MENA.

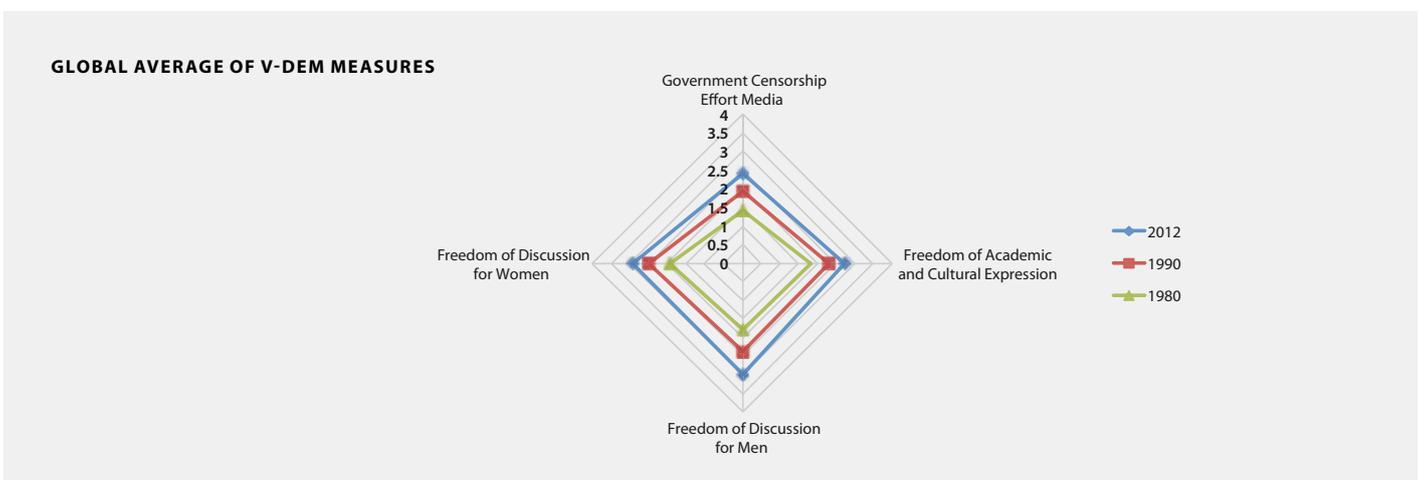


Figure 1: Global average of V-Dem measures of public access to information & fundamental freedoms. Note: Scores increase with higher democratic quality

## PRINT/BROADCAST MEDIA PERSPECTIVES

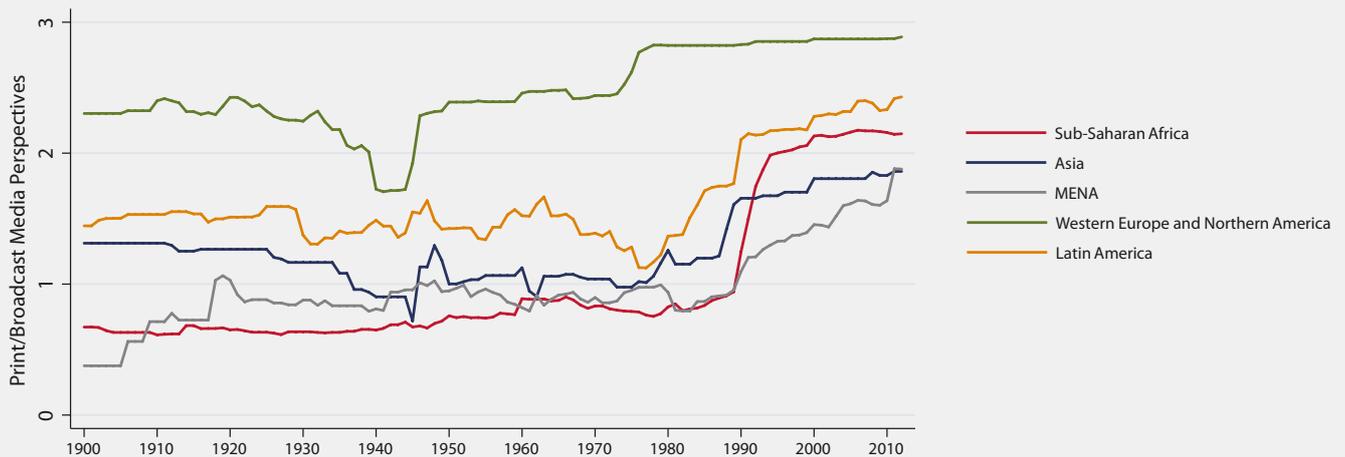


Figure 2: Print/Broadcast Media Perspectives in selected regions

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## ABOUT V-DEM INSTITUTE

V-Dem is a new approach to conceptualizing and measuring democracy. The project's multidimensional, nuanced and disaggregated approach acknowledges the complexity of the concept of democracy. With four Principal Investigators, two Project Coordinators, fifteen Project Managers, more than thirty Regional Managers, almost 200 Country Coordinators, several Assistant Researchers, and approximately 2,600 Country Experts, the V-Dem project is one of the largest-ever social science data collection projects with a database of over 15 million data points.



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