

## Report of the General Secretary

WACC's principle of communication for all, which enables people and communities to be seen and heard, is the foundation for any attempt to bring about genuine social progress. That principle has always been challenged, and no more so than today when many governments are conspiring to restrict and, in some cases, to criminalise freedom of speech and press freedom for reasons of "national security" or simply to repress dissent.

Fortunately, many international entities – including the International Freedom of Expression Exchange (IFEX) and the World Council of Churches – are speaking out against such human rights violations and censorship. And it is in some sense fortuitous that what is happening coincides with the World Summit on the Information Society+20, which is focused on the genuine democratization of communication, and on taking a multistakeholder approach to our shared digital future. WSIS+20 also aims to identify and implement outcomes that better embed human rights standards in technological development, its governance, and the norms and structures that underpin them. WACC and its partners in the Global South have been at the forefront of these discussions and manoeuvres.

Since the original WSIS 20 years ago, the communication context has been transformed into one in which digital technologies have expanded exponentially to a point where around 70% of the global population is now online. However, accessibility and affordability are still biased in favour of privileged developed countries. Elsewhere, barriers such as high data costs and digital illiteracy impact primarily the poor and women, particularly in rural areas.

In parallel, and in many parts of the world, the rise of populist or right-wing politics has drastically reduced the public space for counter speech or dissent; governments have weaponized digital communication technologies; Internet shutdowns and attacks on independent journalism and journalists have multiplied; and Big Tech has gained unprecedented political influence and power.

In this context, communication rights remain an aspiration. It is still a world in which civil society participation in governance spaces is restricted, and the voices of civil society actors are marginalized. In addition, digital technologies are being used for state surveillance, and social media are being used to disseminate misinformation, disinformation, fake news, and hate speech. Counter measures are needed.

### **Looking back over the past year**

In brief, and as articulated in WACC's Annual Report 2024, WACC partnered with 55 communication projects (8 in the Middle East, 13 in Africa, 8 in Asia, 2 in Europe, 22 in Latin America, and 2 in the Caribbean). Of these, 10 were under Gender and Communication, 11 under Indigenous Rights, 14 under Climate Justice and Communication, 7 under Communication Rights and Migration, and 13 under Digital Communication Justice. WACC provided additional support to promote the active engagement of its partners in networks advancing communication rights for sustainable development and climate justice.

With the aid of Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, WACC worked with the Asia-Pacific Mission for Migrants to launch a 3-year project to address the communication and information needs of migrants in the Asia-Pacific region. The focus countries were

Philippines, Indonesia, Nepal, Cambodia, South Korea, Hong Kong, Thailand, and Malaysia. Migrant organizations, faith-based organizations, and advocates in migrant-sending and migrant-receiving countries created an online community of care and protection for migrants and migrant workers. They developed digital tools and platforms providing rights awareness, vital and accurate information on migration and trafficking, and highlighting experiences and best practices.

With the aid of the Canadian Primate's World Relief and Development Fund (PWRDF) – now called Alongside Hope – and in partnership with the Latin American Association for Community and People's Education (ALER), WACC continued implementation of a major project in Brazil, Colombia, and Ecuador to strengthen the community radio sector to be better positioned to advance climate and environmental justice across the Amazon region. The core beneficiaries are a group of 36 (50% women) citizen environmental journalists, who will train an additional 5 people in their communities, bringing the total number of expected direct beneficiaries to at least 180 (50% women). A significant percentage of participants are from Indigenous, peasant, and Afro-descendant communities.

With the support of PWRDF/Alongside Hope and in partnership with Grupo Comunicarte (Colombia), WACC continued implementation of a project to strengthen the community radio sector serving people in the Andean Moorland (Paramo) ecosystem, which plays a vital role in the water cycle and the storage of carbon dioxide. The core beneficiaries were a group of 12 (50% women) citizen environmental journalists from community radio partners.

Internationally, WACC was active in advocacy to create more balanced public narratives related to migration during the 2024 Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD). WACC organized a side-event as part of its work with the GFMD working group on public perceptions and invited project partners from the Philippines and Jordan to speak. WACC followed up with an online "conversation circle" involving 4 speakers and 65 participants.

With the support of the World Council of Churches and Evangelische Mission Weltweit, WACC developed educational and advocacy resources on digital justice, including a webinar series on AI, You and Your Organization and an online self-directed course, Just Digital. The courses have directly attracted over 200 communicators and multipliers with Spanish and French Just Digital sessions recently in April and additional sessions in development for release later in 2025.

Last year, WACC held a consultation of project partners in Nepal organized in alliance with AMARC Asia-Pacific and focused on digital justice. Participants from 17 countries gave valuable input to the WSIS+20 process, agreeing that digital resources need to be democratized and that governance decisions about digital technologies must prioritize the public interest over private profits.

While preparing for the 7th iteration of the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) in 2025, WACC, in collaboration with WCC, launched an initiative to tackle tech-facilitated gender-based violence which includes an adaptation of the media monitoring methodology for social media. And in preparation for the Summit of the Future and WSIS+20, WACC participated in several meetings of civil society actors led by the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) and IT4Change to coordinate strategies and plans of action. WACC also participated in NetMundial+20 and the G20 Preparatory Meeting on Information Integrity, as well as in the WSIS+20 High Level event in Switzerland where it organized a side-event on gender justice together with the Global Alliance on Media and Gender (GAMAG).

Through the projects detailed above, WACC has made a demonstrated difference at the community level, in which evaluation after evaluation has highlighted the sustainability of the approaches WACC supports because they equip people with the communication skills to claim their rights. The project work alone, however, would not be significant without WACC's convening power and our ability to rally people around the greater cause of communication justice, with our particular focuses on gender, migrants, indigenous peoples, digital and climate. This is evidenced by participation and recognition in larger fora and networks where people's voices are now being heard. In addition, partners who are necessarily focused on urgent local or national issues have been able to relate them to global trends and challenges. To give just one example, in response to well documented concerns about the impact of misogyny and violence online, WACC created a unique social media monitoring tool that enables people to gather evidence, raise awareness, and carry out education and advocacy.

The difference WACC makes is cumulative. It is a potent mix of working with project partners at the grassroots, shared advocacy with regional civil society organisations, interventions at the regional and global levels, underscored by persistence, determination, and a willingness to collaborate. To give just one global and national example, the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) has impacted policymaking at the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) and among media outlets registered with the Ministry of Communication in Senegal.

### **Looking ahead**

The world continues to face multiple political and economic crises, some in countries like Sudan and Myanmar where WACC has no presence. Development aid has been cut and everywhere there is a riot of misinformation and fake news destabilizing political and societal structures. WACC still believes that the struggle against poverty, hunger, climate change, civil conflict, gender-based discrimination and violence, and for a just digital future depends on people having the right affordably to access media, digital platforms, and AI, to receive and produce communication content, to express themselves freely, and to receive the training needed to use effectively all tools of human communication.

A crucial area of communication rights has always been that of public interest journalism, i.e. the sources that people turn to in order to form opinions about matters of democratic governance. Digital media provide new platforms and formats for disseminating information and allow for the creation of alternative online communities. However, with social-networking platforms now a major source of news, information, and disinformation, WACC will still advocate for strengthening the role of independent public interest media.

In 2025-26, and in pursuit of the outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS+20) taking place in July 2025, WACC will continue to work towards achieving greater social justice via four main strategies:

- Strengthening the capacity of grassroots communities to identify and implement action lines emerging from the UN Global Digital Compact and WSIS+20 that enable them to claim rights and entitlements and to advance digital justice.
- Countering the pushback on gender equality in and through the world's media with advocacy based on the results of the 2025 Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) and creating a global gender-focused observatory of social media.
- Advancing rights-based and social justice-oriented digital communication and information ecosystems that promote trust, democratic civic participation, and meaningful inclusion of marginalized groups.
- Assessing media and communication trends from the perspectives and realities of communities both South and North to inform collaborative advocacy.

At the same time, we are conscious that financing such activities has never been more difficult. Cuts in financial support for humanitarian aid and development have led to a global crisis that has only just begun, and which will have long-term and unforeseeable consequences. This crisis can only be exacerbated by a climate emergency that some governments are wilfully ignoring or denying, which is resulting in food and water shortages that will ultimately increase migration – even in countries of the north. In addition, war and conflict continues to take its grievous toll in Ukraine, Gaza, Sudan, Yemen, and Myanmar, while China continues to threaten annexation of Taiwan.

Part of the reasoning behind the paper “Proposed Management Action on Going Concern and the Changing Political and Economic Climate” is to tackle the question “Where do we want WACC to be in five years’ time?” Do we want it to be a smaller INGO that just does project work – for however long that gets funded by big donors – or a more nimble, effective global leader known for critically assessing the state of our information society, living out its mission to support and amplify local voices and realities, and advocating solutions based on the full application of communication rights to the critical issues of the day. Because we hope it is the latter, we are calling for a deep dive into WACC’s identity, outreach, and structure to position ourselves strategically in a world with greater challenges for an organization like us, and a much greater need for the perspectives we offer.

Taking action is not something staff can do alone, nor is it solved by tweaks to roles or in half-hearted new initiatives. What it does require is dynamic input and communication globally and regionally, and a commitment not just to brainstorm but to take an active role in bringing the best ideas to fruition. WACC’s directors, regional executive committee members, staff and allies are crucial to success as together we work towards greater relevance and visibility. WACC must continue to amplify the voices of people living at the margins, but it must also relinquish whatever holds it back and devise a new presence in an uncertain and volatile world.

One of the world’s great communicators, the Brazilian photographer Sebastião Salgado, died in May 2025. Salgado was famous for using black and white photography to depict the world and human suffering in an astonishing range of greys and half-tones, making us all see differently. Accused of sanitising misery, he asked, “Why should the poor world be uglier than the rich world? The light here is the same as there. The dignity here is the same as there.”

WACC shares that same sense of moral purpose: to communicate the universality of human dignity and, in doing so, to make people see the world differently and help bring about positive change.