

Convening
South Asia Media Defenders
Network (SAMDEN)

22-24 June, 2019

International Centre Goa

SOUTH ASIA MEDIA DEFENDERS NETWORK (SAMDEN)

Mission Statement

Cognisant of the need to address growing pressure on freedom of speech and expression in South Asia, increasing attacks on media workers and professionals and recognising that such freedoms are indivisible and know no political boundaries, journalists from across this geography have come together to form the South Asia Media Defender's Network (SAMDEN). Its aim is to extend support and solidarity to media counterparts in the region who are under attack in various ways. It will also mobilize media colleagues through collaboration with other like-minded media groups and associations.

The Network will be anchored in the Commonwealth human Rights Initiative (CHRI) (www.humanrightsinitiative.org), led by four co-convenors -- CHRI's Director Sanjoy Hazarika, Kanak Dixit, writer and Founding Editor, Himal Southasian, Mahfuz Anam, editor and publisher of The Daily Star, and Beena Sarwar, journalist and filmmaker.

The aim of such a Network would be to extend support to media professionals at risk in general, but specifically in semi-urban, small metros and rural areas whose vulnerability is rarely recognised. SAMDEN seeks to develop briefing tools on risk analysis, directories as well as other relevant resources for journalists including handbooks on media and IT laws to enable media workers to be better equipped to deal with the challenges and risks entailed in carrying out their professional duties in hostile conditions. SAMDEN also plans to develop an interactive website platform that will carry details of assaults on media freedom as well as short online reports on experiences of pressure on the media in South Asia.

SAMDEN held its first Convening between 22nd- 24th June 2018, at the International Centre, Goa.

Participants:

- Sanjoy Hazarika, International Director, CHRI and Convenor, SAMDEN **(Co-Convenor)**
- Kanak Dixit - Writer and Founding Editor, Himal Southasian, Kathmandu, Nepal **(Co-Convenor)**
- Mahfuz Anam - Editor and Publisher of The Daily Star, Bangladesh **(Co-Convenor)**
- Beena Sarwar- journalist and filmmaker, Pakistan/ USA **(Co-Convenor)** (Skype)
- Sujay Gupta – Former Editor, Herald and media entrepreneur
- Pradip Phanjoubam - Editor, Imphal Free Press
- Kalpana Sharma- Consulting Editor, EPW
- M K Venu, Executive Editor, The Wire
- Patricia Mukhim- Editor, Shillong Times
- Aunohita Mojumdar- Himal Southasian
- Sangeeta Barooah Pisharoty- Deputy Editor, The Wire
- Rana Ayyub- investigative journalist and writer
- Dileep Chandan- Editor, Asam Bani
- Shailesh Gandhi - Former Central Information Commissioner, RTI activist
- Sofia Hultqvist – Project leader Bangladesh, FOJO, Sweden

- Salil Tripathi- columnist, author, Chair of the Writers in Prison Committee of PEN International (Skype)
- Lucy Freeman - Chief Executive Officer, Media Legal Defence Initiative (MLDI) (Skype)
- Valentine Gavard, Programme Officer, Assistance Programme, Rory Peck Trust (Skype)

- Venkatesh Nayak – Programme Coordinator, Access to Information Programme, CHRI
- Niyati Singh- Research Officer, Director’s Office, CHRI
- Kakoli Roy- Senior administrative assistant, Access to Justice (Prison Reforms Programme), CHRI

The final day of the SAMDEN Convening began with brief opening remarks by Sanjoy Hazarika, where he sought a discussion with members over the following key questions:

- Making SAMDEN sustainable (including funding)
- Target audience- find networks across borders
- Activities to help build capacity of target audiences
- How do we expand from South Asia (2018) to South-east Asia, Africa and the Pacific
- How do we make sure this happens- resources and people?

- Sanjoy Hazarika, Mahfuz Anam, Kanak Dixit and Beena Sarwar could be co-convenors of the Network
- On the issue of publishing statements, there was up consensus that statements only needed to be issued when important. A fine balance had to be maintained: don't protest too much, but don't miss out either. Statements could be the responsibility of Kalpana Sharma, M.K. Venu and Aunohita Mojumdar, formulated by the SAMDEN researcher and sent to others for comments within a strict timeframe. There was consensus that all members needed to trust the core group in the statement they agree to issue.
- Learning from the past: which media platforms/forums worked or didn't and why.
- Keep the mandate simple and ensure objectives are achievable
- Membership should be individual, not organisational, informal and organic but with clear goals and functioning
- Priority should be on attacks or threats to the life and reputation of journalists
- Network should be of sufficient credibility and strength—with 100 + eminent members, and a second tier of additional membership of persons from civil society organisations, lawyers, etc.
- Each member could the equivalent of contribute Rs. 1000 annually in their country to the activities of the Network. The effort should be to expand the Network organically by reaching out to others within their countries
- Network functioning could be both above the radar (issuing statements) and below it ('behind the scenes advocacy'), but effectiveness would increase with less visibility.
- The Network could also think of reaching out to the families of slain or attacked journalists in the future—who may not have another source of income. Such solidarity at times of crises would help build credibility and trust
- The Network would be soon connected on Whatsapp.
- SAMDEN's projected future activities, include the following: a compilation of laws pertaining to media and media freedom across South Asia, a guide for journalist safety in dangerous situations: FOJO is to share a draft risk manual), a database of local journalists and stringers, and a directory of legal cases filed against media workers. It was also suggested that the Network add to this a 'Roll Call of Shame' annual report which highlighted bad media practices.
- It was to be kept in mind that social and local contexts vary, and what may help one situation may not help another in a different territory. Risk mitigation manuals could be helpful not only in terms of dangerous assignments but also online harassment.

- A Secretariat need to be created, housed in New Delhi. This needed to have 2-3 persons employed, including a researcher working full-time (unlikely that this would be a full time assignment -- this could be through a CHRI Communications officer), working on the Network's objectives, drafting statements, and any other research work required by the members.
- In a discussion on the notion of 'South Asia', it was asked if this would include Myanmar: this point was not resolved but it was pointed out that 'independent' media in that country did not take a non-partisan approach to the Rohingya issue
- It was also important to look at the worst case scenarios and work backwards— thus, would Pakistani journalists be willing to make statements on Balochistan or the Pakhtuns? Similar crises have been seen in other South Asian countries and other Networks and organisations have at times not critiqued countries for fear of antagonising them. This leads to a loss of credibility and the Network needed to be on its guard
- In future, the Network could think of developing a legal helpline to provide journalists in need with access to lawyers.
- It was suggested that SAMDEN link up with common networks and groups such as the SAWM, SAHR, SAHFR, SAFMA, CWIJ, Safenewsrooms—and help in creating a stronger regional platform to take common stands on these issues.
- It was suggested that the Network could publish a monograph/book with member journalists providing first person accounts of the threats, intimidation and attacks they have faced or continue to do so.
- There was concern about how to best reach out to the target audience—journalists in rural areas; members of the Network needed to reflect more on this in the next weeks.
- Members present were print specialists—the Network needs to be expanded to include television and radio journalists, and bloggers.
- It was suggested that each member create a listing of those of whom they knew faced threats to add to the proposed directory.
- It was proposed that SAMDEN could look at early warning signs—at those countries or states which are displaying worrying trends of media violations or shrinking media freedom
- SAMDEN's was to be mission statement to be re-drafted and disseminated
- The original idea behind Media Fellowships was the creation of two SAMDEN Fellowships -- one print, and the other, visual. These Fellows could travel to different countries and present their work not only to their mentors, but to journalists present at conferences and workshops. It was suggested that while the Fellowships could be geared to focus on existing media and IT laws of four South Asian countries (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka) and consider their strengths and deficiencies and scope for abuse. It was also suggested that local resource persons were also necessary for deciphering laws in national/ vernacular languages.
- It was decided that Sujay Gupta, Venkatesh Nayak and Shailesh Gandhi could create a roadmap of what this legal manual could look like, to begin with.

- The Network should deliberate in greater detail the role of the proposed Fellowships—there should be a discussion on what the Fellowships sought to achieve and the way they needed to be framed.
- In addition, a small convening of lawyers should be held to look at issues of libel, internet abuse and trolling could be held to look at the impact of such abuse especially psychological scarring and harm (harming the victim's health) – intentional, aggressive social media abuse leading to assessed adverse psychological impacts, especially on women journalists, and to better define the blurred lines between hate speech, threat to harm and actual harm
- There was agreement that the proposed South Asian Fact Finding Missions would not work should they involve journalists from other countries; it was felt these should be limited to media leaders from within a country wherever SAMDEN felt there were instances of egregious harm or pressure on a journalist or media worker of that country
- The web-based map proposed along the lines of the RTI's Hall of Shame which mapped attacks on RTI users in India could be up and running over the next few months—a compiled spreadsheet of raw data on recent attacks was available. CHRI's RTI team could assist the setting up of this. The period to be reviewed could start commence from the year 2000- till the present.
- In terms of funding, funds are available in the original budget for Fellowships, outreach, fact-finding missions and the creation of a map, publications and database. This allocation could be tweaked slightly to allow for another Convening, perhaps in October. The venue was to be finalized.