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INTERNATIONAL ANTI-CORRUPTION CONFERENCE 2024

Vilnius, Lithuania

18-21 June 2024

SESSION REPORT

*Please know you may design the structure of this report to better suit the session.
It's important to capture the key outcomes and solutions proposed for the future.*

Session Title: Watching the Watchtower: Harnessing The Power of Collective Action

Date: 25 June 2024

Time: 08:30 AM - 10:00 AM (GMT +3)

Report prepared by:

Carmela Fonbuena
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Moderated by:

Megumi Hara
Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice Officer
UNODC

Panellists:

- Carmela Fonbuena
Executive Director
Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism
- Georgina Kekea
President
Media Association of Solomon Islands
- Marie Cauchois
Regional Anti-Corruption Advisor (OIC)
UNODC Pacific
- Mech Dara
Independent Journalism
Cambodia

Share the thematic focus of the session, its purpose and corruption risks?

The session “Watching the Watchtower: Harnessing The Power of Collective Action” discussed the challenges confronting investigative journalists in the Pacific and Southeast Asia when they investigate corruption in their respective countries, and highlighted the important role of existing journalist networks in the two regions to address these challenges.

The Pacific Anti-Corruption Journalists Network (PACJN) was formed in 2019 while the Journalists Against Corruption (JAC) was formed in March 2024. Both the PACJN and JAC receives support from the UNDOC, the guardian of the United Nations Convention Against Corruption.

Summary of panellists’ contributions & discussion points (please be as detailed as possible)

Georgina Kekea, president of the Media Association of Solomon Islands

Georgina Kekea, president of the Media Association of Solomon Islands, introduced the Pacific Anti-Corruption Journalists Network (PACJN). Established in 2019, PACJN has organized journalists in the Pacific Islands to undergo various trainings to report on corruption under the Teieniwa Vision, a framework to combat corruption signed by Pacific Island countries that are members of the Pacific Islands Forum.

Kekea said journalists are also battling misinformation, which has been a huge challenge because of low literacy in the region. Integrity agencies such as the Solomon Islands Independent Commission Against Corruption (SIICAC) and the Ombudsman have implementation problems.

Kekea, coordinator of PACJN, said the network is also envisioned to help address common challenges confronting journalists in the region such as lack of resources and human capital especially in countries where the populations are small, and the lack of infrastructure where radio remains the major medium for most people.

She said PACJN was also created to promote investigations and anti-corruption reporting, and collaborations among Pacific journalists. PACJN can also step in cover important issues in Pacific countries where there are no independent journalists. Ultimately, Kekea said journalists in the Pacific should be able to collaborate on investigations to expose corruption in the region.

Marie Cauchois, UNODC Regional Anti-Corruption Adviser and Officer-in-Charge for the Pacific

Marie Cauchois, UNODC Regional Anti-Corruption Adviser and Officer-in-Charge for the Pacific, also highlighted the importance of the collective vision of the Pacific Island countries under the Teieniwa Vision, making leaders accountable to anti-corruption commitments. Unique challenges in the region such as the lack of human capital has underscored the importance of journalists developing healthy relationships with the government to fight corruption and without compromising their independence.

Cauchois also highlighted the toolkit for journalists covering anti-corruption in the Pacific context. It was created by PACJN and the UNODC, which supports the network. Cauchois an article scan of Pacific published stories shows a growth from 100 stories in 2021 to 500 this

year. She said it didn't mean there's a growth in corruption incidents in the region. It showed that journalists are better at writing about anti-corruption stories, a direct result of the efforts of the PACJN.

Carmela Fonbuena, executive director of the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ)

Carmela Fonbuena, executive director of the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ), also introduced a new network of investigative journalists in Southeast Asia whose members committed to do more reporting to expose corruption in the region. PCIJ serves as coordinator of the Journalists Against Corruption or JAC. She underscored how the network can help newsrooms and investigative journalists in the region respond to threats from state and non-state actors — powerful people who do not want investigative journalists sniffing around to expose their corrupt practices.

Fonbuena also highlighted challenges in terms of access to data and information in the region because many countries in Southeast Asia do not enjoy the freedom of information enjoyed by the rest of the world. The Philippines, for example, still has no FOI law. Data privacy laws have also been used as excuse to deny access to contracts and other documents. The restrictive information environment in Southeast Asia has necessitated journalists to be more creative in finding data to support investigations. Fonbuena said new tools and technologies are helpful but not all tools and technologies are accessible. They require resources and expertise that newsrooms may not necessarily have. This is also a challenge that JAC may be able to help address.

Following its public launch in March 2024, JAC will hold its first training session in July on investigative corruption, on OSINT investigative skills, and on online scams.

Mech Dara, an independent journalist from Cambodia

Mech Dara, an independent journalist from Cambodia, shared his experience when he investigated online scams in his country, exposing how it involves money laundering, corruption, and human trafficking. He said he can't prove that the state authorized these activities, but he said there is clearly no state intervention into these illegal activities. It is also clear that police and immigration officials have been involved in the harassment of works who are seeking to escape the scam compounds.

Dara showed the heavy cost of standing up to corruption. Independent newsrooms in Cambodia have been shut down under pressure from repressive regimes. He is now doing freelance and research work to get by.

Dara welcomed the creation of the JAC network and said he looked forward to accessing resources that would allow him to continue his investigative work. He also wants to collaborate with journalists from neighboring countries follow how the corruption trail moves from one country to another. He said JAC could also facilitate engagements with civil society organizations, serve as examples of professional media to disabuse misconceptions that the media are only out to exploit victims to produce reports.

Main outcomes of the session (include quotes/highlights and interesting questions from the floor)

Annika Wythes, UNODC regional anti-corruption adviser, asked an important question. “How do you build trust among the Network members?” A related follow up question also asked how the journalists work with government and integrity agencies’ communication officers.

In the Pacific, where journalists work closely with public relations officers of governments, Cauchois said PR officers have been very supportive — informally — of journalists’ work. Keke said the PR practitioners respect their work as journalists.

For JAC, Fonbuena said PCIJ recognized that trust-building is crucial in the formation and growth of JAC. This means PCIJ made sure that the process is consultative, and it is the JAC members who collectively decide how the network should be supporting the work of anti-corruption investigative journalists.

An audience member also asked: “Are there plans to engage young and student journalists?”

“We need to make journalism sexy for the young ones who could consider media as a career,” said Keke, who recognized dwindling interest among the youth in investigative journalism.

Fonbuena said it is important to mentor young journalists so they stay in the industry.

“We should mentor young journalists on the rigors of traditional journalism, but we also need to learn from young journalists on how we can innovate investigative journalism so we can engage wider audiences. Because we don’t want to produce powerful investigative reports that nobody reads,” Fonbuena said.

Key recommendations for the future and concrete follow-up actions

All the journalists in the panel agreed on the importance of collaborations. *“We are stronger together,”* said Fonbuena. Networks can help address the challenges confronting investigative journalists.

Fonbuena called for investigative journalists who want to focus on investigating corruption in southeast Asia to join JAC. She also called on like-minded allies to work with the network and provide support.

Keke also highlighted the importance for everyone to understand the cultures of the people in the Pacific countries.

“It’s not ‘one size fits all.’ We want collective action but we need to do it on our own terms. Our integrity work should also address sanitation issues and poverty, for example.”

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What can be done to create opportunities for scaling up the solutions discussed in the session? And by whom?

The panel sought the support of like-minded allies to work with the network and support the work of the network.

Is there a specific call to action to key stakeholders, such as governments, businesses, funders, civil society, young people, journalists or any other stakeholder that should be noted? Please specify if relevant.

The panel invited journalists join the networks in the Pacific and southeast Asia and join training workshops on anti-corruption investigations and pursue collaborations with fellow investigative journalists.

The panel invited civil society organizations to work with the networks and funding organizations to support the work and activities of the networks.

The panel also called on governments to address challenges to journalists' access to data and information, and not see journalists as enemies but as allies in the anti-corruption work.

Rapporteur's name

Carmela Fonbuena
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Date submitted

25 June 2024

Action! This report needs to be emailed to iacc-av@transparency.org within 24 hours of the session. If you wish to update the report, please do so by 21 July. Thank you.