Peace means understanding

Peace reigns between people and between societes as long as opinions and interests can be exchanged and discussed and democratic decisions can be made. When this exchange is impossible, peaceful coexistence between states and people breaks down. The work of professional media is a basic precondition for freedom – and for peace. Whenever the freedom of the media is restricted, whenever it is not possible to report openly and critically about the government and about members of the government, whenever opinions are suppressed or manipulated, freedom is threatened – and hence free competition between opinions and peaceful coexistence between people is also threatened. This is why the media play a central role in peace promotion and in human rights policy.

Switzerland advocates and works for the promotion of peace and security, respect for human rights and the fight against poverty. In doing so, Switzerland relies on dialogue with governments, but also on the strengthening of society and of its structures. Democracy can only thrive if society has ways and means of expressing its interests and of realising them. Only a lively democracy can secure peaceful coexistence between people. Without democracy there is no freedom and without freedom there is no peace and human security.

Media are the textbooks of democracy. In the media we learn about new events every day, we are confronted with new opinions and we in turn re-assess our own opinions. We follow the peaceful but often difficult path of understanding. This is why the media have to fulfil their role as the fourth power, independently of the power structures of the state and of business. The media provide a platform that reveals interests, questions opinions and criticises positions, and by increasing our understanding of diverse and even of opposing opinions and interests they create a common understanding of our society and of our world.

medienhilfe was quick to understand the importance of the media and to act accordingly. Against the background of wars in former Jugoslavia and the social challenges posed by the transition processes in East Europe, it consistently supported media that took on responsibility for democracy and peace, that defended the interests of the weak and criticised the powerful. It supported media that tried to remain independent thanks to their professionalism. Our cooperation with and support for medienhilfe has strengthened Switzerland's peace promotion. In many cases, media workers and partners of medienhilfe operated as early warning systems, identifying and reporting on social crises at any early stage. Opposition TV and radio station B92, for example, was supported by medienhilfe and played a central role in the overthrow of Milosevic. Open and critical media in general are important partners when the task is to report on peace processes, to reflect on recent wars, to protect minorities and to help them to assert their rights.

The 15 years of experience that medienhilfe has acquired have given it a competence that represents a major contribution to peace promotion and to development cooperation. In recent years, medienhilfe has succeeded in applying the lessons learnt in former Jugoslavia to other countries in East Europe. This underlines the value of its competence. Now media from the Near East and from Africa are seeking to form partnerships with medienhilfe and are developing new programmes as a result of its advice, which proves that medienhilfe will be needed in the next 15 years too.

I congratulate medienhilfe on its 15th anniversary and I hope that it will continue to make a constructive and productive contribution to peace, human rights and democracy in this world.

Micheline Calmy-Rey, President of the Swiss Confederation