PRESS RELEASE

UN supports journalists to counter disinformation, fake news and ensure their safety during COVID-19

Beirut, Lebanon

Friday, 1 May 2020 (United Nations) – While the COVID-19 outbreak is a global public health crisis, it has led to a parallel pandemic of disinformation that directly impacts lives and livelihoods around the world. Falsehoods and misinformation have proven deadly and sowed confusion about life-saving personal and policy choices.

In the current crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic, media workers are as vital as other essential professionals. Accurate information saves lives. In times of crises, news media, data journalism, fact checkers and investigative reporting shed light, whereas disinformation, spreads darkness, fear and a chain of bad decisions. In fulfilling their role, journalists around the world are to cope with unprecedented professional challenges ranging from switching to health-coverage for those who had no previous specialization, to ensuring their own health safety, while seeking to counter the spread of misinformation in what has been defined the first 'disinfodemic'.

Against this backdrop, and since the outbreak of the pandemic, the UN in Lebanon scaled up efforts to counter the growing surge of misinformation that is impeding access to trustworthy sources and reliable information. Coining the massive disinformation around COVID-19 as a "disinfodemic", the UN in Lebanon embarked on a series of initiatives aimed at working for truth and combating fake news.

 "To make sense of the COVID-19 disinfodemic, consider its opposite – information. The impact of disinformation in the context of COVID-19 is potentially deadlier, and responses are at once more urgent and potentially long-lasting in impact. Access to verifiable, reliable information makes the right to freedom of expression meaningful. A disinfodemic works diametrically against this right during a pandemic", said UNESCO's Regional Director Dr Hamed Al Hamami. He added: "More than ever we need facts. More than ever we need press freedom. This is why we are taking action to combat the disinfodemic and to disseminate campaigns and messages, as well as to mobilize and capacitate journalists and ensure their safety".

As COVID-19 is fueling other viruses of fake news, mistrust and disinformation, it is crucial that journalists be able to perform their job of providing reliable and credible information to the public. The UN in Lebanon has organized a series of national and regional webinars aimed to build the capacity of journalists on providing accurate information on COVID-19, delivering "positive" coverage of the crisis, and avoiding stigma and discrimination against infected people.

Through hackathons and mentorships, the UN in Lebanon is supporting innovators to develop and refine digital solutions to real life COVID-19 related problems. The CodeTheCurve global virtual hackathon aims to enable students, educators, teachers, and the research community to build tech skills, entrepreneurial spirit, and professional competencies while at the same time coming up with digital solutions to the global pandemic.

The UN in Lebanon is also supporting a Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC) for journalists titled "**Journalism in a pandemic: Covering COVID-19 now and in the future**" and developing it in Arabic language besides English, French, Spanish and Portuguese. This online course will notably cover the past history of pandemics and disasters in the 20th century and how governments responded to these outbreaks. It will also examine the unfolding of the 2020 pandemic and the fundamental importance of fostering freedom of expression, as well as detecting and combating disinformation and misinformation about the pandemic. The final module will look at story angles for moving coverage forward, and will discuss the importance of journalists' self-care in the process of covering the outbreak.

Several awareness raising information materials, including flyers and infographics have been prepared targeting the public. They offer tips on how to spot fake news and counter their spread, and how to avoid discrimination against victims of COVID-19.

A global media campaign will be launched on the occasion of World Press Freedom Day, under the theme "Journalism without fear or favour", focusing on the particular importance of independent journalism during the current COVID-19 pandemic. In the context of this campaign, the UN in Lebanon will launch a social media challenge, **#JournalistsSafetyIsYourSafety**, on 3rd of May in which leading journalists in Lebanon will take part. Follow @UNESCOBEIRUT and @UNICBeirut on Facebook and Twitter to know more about the challenge and to see the journalists and reporters who will be taking part in the challenge.

A free and independent press is always essential. In crises such as the current pandemic, reliable information saves lives. The UN in Lebanon is committed to supporting independent and professional journalism, especially at critical times like the COVID-19 context.

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