

Dear Editor

A society can only flourish and grow in a climate of press freedom. In Nepal, Haïti and Russia journalists are tightened while doing their job. There's no freedom of press. Also our fellow agricultural journalists are suppressed by their government. Times are very difficult for them. What they need is support from international colleagues. But the IFAJ has the intention to abandon them.

Freedom of press is at the heart of journalism, admits the IFAJ. Because of this high importance, the IFAJ has established a committee that works on press freedom. This committee has had some serious assembles on this issue; now it's at the point of kicking our colleagues in Nepal and Haïti out of the club. Russian agricultural journalists (who) feel the threat from their government want to become a member but the chances don't look fortunate for them.

Even becoming half a member is difficult for the IFAJ. While we have contacts with our repressed colleagues governments would see themselves as a free country, they justify in their argument. This sounds quite arrogant to me. There is no reason to consider ourselves that important.

It's typical for despotic regimes to cut all ties of their citizens with foreign countries. And it sounds really strange to me when colleagues abandon each other in such difficult times. I'm afraid this reaction is only possible within an organization that has a strange relationship with press freedom.

When we take a closer look at the IFAJ we see indeed that the relationship with press freedom is rather awkward. Press can only be totally free, when it's independent. And on the point of independency the IFAJ is crippled.

IFAJ stands for International Federation of Agricultural Journalists. But the membership is not restricted to journalists. Also communicators or informers are welcome to become a member. This is not a bad thing. This choice makes us a capable, standing and financial prosperous organization. But this structure does not imply independency. An organization (such) as the IFAJ is not competent to take a moralistic position against other countries when it comes to issues like press freedom.

The IFAJ (does not distinguish) a difference between journalists and communicators. That's our choice. This choice (implies) that we are not independent. This is because a communicator has a totally different interest than a journalist. Off course, communicators deliver important, even essential information. But their goal is not only different, it's often even opposite to that of the journalist. The journalist strives for an independent story for his reader while the communicator's interest is a positive story for his employer.

Ergo: Before standing up against our colleagues in distress, we should struggle with our own independency. Because we have to handle it ourselves, this dilemma is even more difficult to handle. We have to look critically on our own organization. This can be difficult. But it does not mean we can keep on looking away from this.

Our committee that works on press freedom has not only an important, but also an enormously complex task. It has to deal with its own position as well as with our colleagues that suffer under a repressive regime.

We have to support our colleagues by taking action against their government. It's within our possibilities; if necessary, with help from organizations like Amnesty International or Free Voice. We have the skills, we have the finance. And it's our moral duty to never ever let our colleagues down.

Marc van der Sterren
Agricultural journalist
Koningslust, The Netherlands

Note from the IFAJ President, David Markey: The IFAJ has no intention of abandoning journalists in countries without a free press, as Mr van der Sterren claims. The 10-point plan proposed by the IFAJ will see the organization join the International Press Institute, recognized worldwide for its work in this area, with a view to working proactively with them to help journalists in those countries without endangering their lives. In this regard, the organization will become more active than it has ever been before in finding ways to work with colleagues struggling to do their job in extremely difficult and often dangerous situations.