Maimouna Saleck had been fascinated by journalists since her childhood because they give a voice to people to explain their problems in hope that someone may listen and help. But due to lack of opportunities and journalism schools in her native Mauritania, Maimouna’s passion for knowledge led her only to becoming a librarian, until she got a chance to be trained as a journalist by Dune Voices in 2015. Such was her commitment to her new career, that within a year she had won the prestigious Anna Lindh Mediterranean Journalist Award 2016, for her story on the infiltration of Islamic extremists in traditional religious schools ‘mahadhras’ in Mauritania.

“To me, the Anna Lindh Award is an equivalent of a degree in journalism. Here in Mauritania only a selected few benefited from higher education at journalism schools outside of the country. My real journalistic training started with the Dune Voices team. Dune Voices editors helped me investigate and find evidence for a sensitive and taboo topic such as the one I wrote about and was awarded for. Dune Voices and MDI moulded me into a journalist,” Maimouna explained after collecting her award at a ceremony in Amman, Jordan, on 18 February 2016.
Dune Voices Journalist Wins a Prestigious Anna Lindh Award

hosted by HRH Princess Rym Ali.

The princess defined the Anna Lindh Foundation’s Journalist Award as “a central initiative in recognising and supporting the courage of those journalists who are working to present an alternative narrative to the Mediterranean region today”. Other award winners included Al Jazeera journalist India Stoughton.

Maimouna joined Dune Voices when this feature agency and multimedia platform was set up by the Media Diversity Institute (MDI) to gather, train, and mentor local journalists committed to report on people and marginalised communities in the Sahara. MDI’s Executive Director, Milica Pesic, stated, “I am particularly pleased when awards such as the Anna Lindh Foundation Award go to women journalists. Reporting on marginalised groups in the region can be demanding and it takes great courage and commitment to do what Maimouna and the other 60 Dune Voices reporters do almost every day.”

Dune Voices specialises in providing reliable, in depth, well investigated feature stories covering topics such as conflict, security, women, youth, ethnic and religious minorities, as well many other issues, giving a voice to marginalised groups and ordinary people inhabiting the Sahara region, and often forgotten by the mainstream media. The stories are regularly republished and rebroadcast by media outlets throughout the region, as well as by international outlets such as Africa 24, Radio France Internationale (RFI) and World Weekly, who like most media organisations do not have the resources to gather information from the heart of the Sahara.
A classic example of this work was demonstrated a few days after the attack on the luxury hotel in Bamako in November 2015, when a member of Dune Voices' Malian team, taking great personal risk, travelled to an area 400 kilometres north of Timbuktu to investigate the source of Islamic fundamentalism in the north of the country. He did what he was trained to do – to report on people of the Sahara's lives, fears, wishes and challenges.

"There is no military force or regular patrols in our village. When jihadists arrived, they threatened residents and ordered them not to deal with those who they call 'heretics',' said Mohamed to the Dune Voices' journalist, describing an isolated life in the Saharan village of Zouiret. This investigative story was republished on the front page of Al Fajr, an Algerian daily newspaper.

Set up by the Media Diversity Institute (MDI) Dune Voices reports in Arabic and French, while the best articles are translated into English. Diverse in its content and structure, this multimedia platform brings important stories from the heart of the Sahara via its own network of reporters in Libya, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco and Algeria. Only in the last few months, the Dune Voices team has trained more than 40 local journalists and citizen journalists.

One of them, Abderrahmane Ahmed Boulla, has learnt "how to put ordinary people's lives and problems into focus, but also how to stay committed to professional standards of objectivity and impartiality." Another trainee, Khalil Sow states "I especially enjoy the editorial line of Dune Voices that insists on giving voice to the weak and marginalized." Their colleague Salma Cheikh Ouali, who has been with Dune Voices from the start, says that the "Dune Voices trainers taught me how to stay detached from my own emotions while reporting on usually very emotional topics." Such topics have been covered in stories on child marriage and slavery in Mauritania, difficulties of divorced women and poverty in Morocco and the lives of people escaping the Libyan city Benghazi. On the Dune Voices website there are testimonies of rural women without clean drinking water, landmine victims in Mali, and refugees and their children.

"Every war has its losses and victims. They are always children and vulnerable people that pay the highest price in any conflict. This bitter truth is illustrated by the refugee status of children; these children have lost the joy of education, playing and entertainment with the loss of their parents, and had to work hard to cover their needs," said Mohamed Agh El Maghdi, a teacher in Mbera refugee camp set up in Mauritania, some 50 km from the Malian border.
Dune Voices Journalist Wins a Prestigious Anna Lindh Award

This Dune Voices' piece of reporting on refugees even caught an eye of UNHCR people themselves. Amongst the heroes of Dune Voices stories are also illiterate women, Bedouins, habitants of remote villages, the homeless, and hungry. Dune Voices is a platform to publicize the testimonies of the people who live in the Sahara and its countries, as well as the people who move from one region to another to escape violence.

"We are interested in people and their stories, what they have to say to the world. Our stories have a human angle and our journalists get direct quotes and stories from people who were never interviewed by most of the media, who were never asked for an opinion," says Afef Ben Aicha, Dune Voices Managing Editor.

Dune Voices articles have been republished more than 250 times last year in national and regional mainstream media, and the editorial team is working to build further partnerships with media outlets across and outside the Sahara region.

"It is interesting to have a partnership with alternative agencies like Dune Voices since they are present in remote, hidden areas and communities, and their journalists bring original stories," says Hadda Hazem, the Director of Al Fajr, an Algerian daily newspaper.

Director of the prominent Algerian daily El Watan, Omar Belhouchet, thinks "the level of journalists in the Sahara is very low". "The idea of training citizen journalists is very interesting, and avoids regional media needing to waste lots of money when there's an event, like the Radisson Blue Hotel attack in Bamako, for example. We have shared stories from dune-voices. It's good to establish such a partnership."  El Watan for instance, published a Dune Voices' story on Sub-Saharan migrants who get raped in Algeria, while Impact24 ran a story on Syrian refugees in Northern Mali. Dune Voices' stories are republished and promoted not only in newspapers and online in the countries of the Saharan region, but they are also discussed and analysed on local radio stations, as well as on Radio France Internationale (RFI).

"We are happy to be partners with Dune Voices because they have contacts and reporters in dangerous and inaccessible places such as Sirte and Derna in Libya, Timbuktu and Kidal in Mali. It is interesting and important to hear voices coming directly from those cities," says Annick Barret, Editor in Chief of Allo Presse Programme at RFI.

Dune Voices is amongst the few media outlets that have reporters inside Libya. Stories about those who still live in cities such as Sirte, Benghazi and Derna are regularly published on the Dune Voices website.

"Unfortunately, most Libyan media have stopped working now. There are only a few online media, like us, that are still working and have journalists inside Libya. That is why it is good to establish a partnership with platforms like Dune Voices to cross-check information, which is very important in conflict situations," says Omar El Kedaii, editor-in-chief of Bawebet Al Wassat.

Covering conflict and security issues is one of the focuses of Dune Voices. One of the most successful articles on Dune Voices, that was republished in the media in several countries, was the testimony of a former jihadist, who is now leading an NGO for sport and culture in Mauritania.

"I joined jihadists after I heard a religious speech directed against the West, especially against the USA coinciding with the images of oppression against Muslims in Palestine, Somalia, Afghanistan and Iraq. Joining the organization was also due to the political reality in Mauritania in 2003 since there were many coups and there were many nationalists and ethnic armed groups inside and outside the country, in addition to the armed Islamists," says Abdelwadoud Weld Mohamed Salem.

Ultimately, Dune Voices is about raising awareness of issues from the heart of the Sahara, often forgotten and ignored, by sharing stories with national and regional mainstream media, in order to foster accountability from local government officials.

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