



## **Submission to the public consultation on the BBC, 'Your BBC, Your Say'**

**26 March 2004**

### **About BOND**

BOND (British Overseas NGOs for Development) is the United Kingdom's broadest network of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working in international development and development education. BOND was founded in June 1993, on the initiative of 61 NGOs, and now has over 280 members. It is officially recognised by the Department for International Development (DfID).

### **Introduction**

BOND is keenly aware that a globalised world is one in which processes and events in other parts of the globe intimately affect our own lives here in the UK. Our members are united in recognising the need to develop an informed and active constituency in support of development in the UK, as affirmed by DfID's two White Papers since 1997.

We wrote to the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport in March 2002 to argue that the new Communications Bill would benefit from a regulatory framework prioritising citizenship issues and promoting positive content regulation, particularly for factual programming on international development issues.

BOND welcomes the opportunity to respond to the opening consultation of the BBC Charter review. We are pleased that the government has pledged their support for a strong independent BBC.

We have structured our submission by following the broad themes set out in the government's public consultation document, though we have not addressed every one of them. The overall focus of our submission is on the international issues that are of concern to our members.

### **The BBC today**

The very existence of some 800 or 900 NGOs in the UK is a reflection of the longstanding concern of the UK public for international development issues. Around 14 per cent of charitable giving by individuals in the UK is to overseas aid agencies<sup>1</sup>. Surveys on public attitudes to development continue to show that there is a huge, informed constituency in the UK that takes these issues seriously and understands the importance of developing countries, where the majority of the world's population live.

The Office of National Statistics carries out an annual survey<sup>2</sup> of attitudes to development every year for DfID. Its 2003 survey showed that two-thirds (67 per cent) of respondents were 'concerned' about levels of poverty in developing countries. Two-thirds (66 per cent) of respondents said that they either 'agree strongly' (13 per cent) or 'agree' (54 per cent) with

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<sup>1</sup> CAF (2003) *Charity Trends*.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.dfid.gov.uk/Pubs/files/omnibus2003.pdf>

the statement 'poverty in developing countries could have effects which damage the interests of this country'.

Despite the rise of the internet and new communications services, 85 per cent of people in the UK still cite television as their primary source of information on developing countries<sup>3</sup>. Yet the main free-to-air television channels are failing them. Over the decade 1989 to 1999, programming on the five core channels on the subject of developing countries, outside of news, fell by 42 per cent<sup>4</sup>. In 2000-01, 'hard', in-depth programming on developing countries continued to fall, though new entertainment genres prompted an overall rise in factual international development programming<sup>5</sup>. The Communications Act 2003 gives Channels 3 and 5 lighter remits for programming on 'matters of international significance or interest' and also makes Channel 4's public service commitments much more difficult to sustain.

In this context BOND sees the BBC as the principle provider of independent, high quality, free information about the wider world. Publicly owned and funded, accountable to the public through Parliament, the BBC remains the best way of providing high quality, diverse information about developing countries that will promote the interests of informed UK citizens.

### **Publicly-funded services and functions**

The two mass audience TV channels, BBC1 and BBC2, have news bulletins that demonstrate a high level of commitment to international news. Their factual international programming outside news is less satisfying, but better than that of the commercial channels. On BBC1, it is concentrated on a small range of subject areas, travel, wildlife and 'light' human interest, and BBC2 has seen cuts in the number of hours of programming since 1998. BOND would like to see their public service requirements in this regard strengthened in the face of the competitive pressures in the UK broadcasting system.

It is evident that cuts in BBC2 international content have probably been mirrored by the rise of the digital channel BBC Four, which is now the main home of international documentary programming on BBC TV. However, programmes on the digital channels get very little publicity or promotion and can certainly be seen as niche channels rather than mass audience TV channels at present.

BBC World Service is well known to NGOs and many of their beneficiaries around the world as an objective provider of comprehensive information and education services. It is important to hundreds of millions of people and makes a powerful contribution to human rights and sustainable development.

BBC Online is unrivalled in the online world for the provision of multimedia news content at public service standards of objectivity, accuracy and balance. It can offer comprehensive coverage through the BBC's unrivalled spread of correspondents and benefits from a high level of public trust in an information market generally more prone than others to be untrustworthy.

BOND would like to see the BBC World Service and BBC Online maintained and strengthened, with BBC Online fully recognised within the renewed Charter.

### **Commercial services**

There has recently been a great deal of criticism of the scale and scope of the BBC's intervention in the online communications market, going hand in hand with concerns about the expansion of BBC service provision at the expense of commercial rivals. BOND follows 3WE and the Public Voice coalition in seeing the BBC as a conscious device for distorting the communications marketplace in favour of the citizen. There should be clarity and predictability with regards to the areas of provision that the BBC will or will not colonise.

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<sup>3</sup> DfID (2000) *Viewing the World*.

<sup>4</sup> 3WE (2000) *Losing Perspective*.

<sup>5</sup> 3WE (2002) *Losing Reality*.

In keeping with a view of the BBC as explicitly serving the information needs of citizens BOND would like to see channels and services that do not clearly fit a public service remit closed or reorganised as ancillary rather than core services.

### **Accountability**

The BBC should exist first and foremost to serve the communications rights and needs of informed, active citizens. Yet despite being publicly owned and funded by every citizen with a television set, the BBC is not fully accountable to the public. It exists by Royal Charter rather than by an Act of Parliament and the Charter does not specify the BBC's purpose and role in society. BOND believes that the statutory basis of the BBC should be a modernised Act of Parliament that enshrines the public service purposes of the organisation.

### **Conclusion**

BOND sees a strong, publicly accountable BBC delivering television, radio and online services as vital for the citizens of an international, globalised world. The BBC can meet needs that the market will not serve, relating to the public as citizens rather than consumers and operating according to civic, cultural and educational needs rather than by the bottom lines of the private sector. If the UK is to progress and prosper, it is important that its citizens are given the means to play a full part within the global information society. The BBC is ideally placed to help them do this.