



# **The Windhoek Declaration**

at the

**Fifth Gender and Media Summit  
“Empowering Women in and through the Media - Providing a  
Voice for Gender Equality”  
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All too often, declarations remain simply pieces of paper filed away and forgotten. But the Windhoek Declaration is different, and its impact is still being felt today.

In 1991, the winds of change were blowing for a second time after the liberation from colonial rule as many countries in Africa embarked on a path toward more democracy. Until then, efforts at independent, professional journalism had been a rarity and come at a huge price.

But the situation has been changing fast, not least thanks to the Windhoek Declaration, which has contributed to changing the media landscape in Africa.

The gathering in Windhoek marked the beginning of a solidarity movement of journalists, editors and media owners and the emergence of media development organisations across the continent.

## **Catalyst for new organisations**

The Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA), with chapters in eleven countries of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and which promotes independent and pluralistic media, was formed in 1992.

One of its first projects was an email alert system to make Africa and the rest of the world aware of violations of media freedom as soon as they occurred. Regular conferences were held to share experiences about setting up and maintaining newspapers against all odds.

Similar organisations were initiated in Eastern and West Africa with mixed levels of success. The Media Foundation for West Africa has emerged as a strong sub-regional actor on media freedom advocacy. Discussions on forming a global coalition started at the Windhoek conference and the International Freedom of Expression Exchange (IFEX) was established a year later. IFEX is now a worldwide actor on freedom of expression.

The UNESCO conference in 1991 described the Declaration as “a catalyst in the process of encouraging press freedom, independence and pluralism in Africa” and resolved to extend such declarations to other regions of the world.

It also recommended to the United Nations General Assembly that 3 May be declared “International Press Freedom Day”. The UN did so in 1993.

### **Global impact**

The Declaration has left its mark around the world in other ways as well.

In 1992, a UNESCO media conference in Kazakhstan adopted the Declaration of Alma Alta, declaring full support for the Windhoek Declaration and acknowledging its importance as a milestone in the struggle for free, independent media around the world.

The Declaration of Santiago (Chile followed in 1994, the Declaration of Sana’a (Yemen) in 1996 and finally, in 1997, the Declaration of Sofia (Bulgaria) urged “all parties concerned that the principles enshrined in this (Windhoek) Declaration be applied in practice”.

The most celebrated aspect, I think, of the Windhoek Declaration is that it has established a baseline from which other interventions came.

The celebrations on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the Declaration – also held in Windhoek – were used by activists to propose and adopt a new document that would address issues specific to broadcasting, the African Charter on Broadcasting.

The demand for truly public broadcasters has become a common call around the continent – although with mixed success so far. Community radio stations are flourishing in many countries – even though many struggle financially.

The Declaration of Principles of Freedom of Expression was adopted in 2002 by the African Union, was influenced by the spirit of Windhoek. The AU

Declaration demanded that “all state and government-controlled broadcasters should be transformed into public-service broadcasters”.

The Windhoek Declaration also informed the Midrand Declaration on Press Freedom in Africa, adopted by the Pan-African Parliament in 2013, as well as the Midrand Call to Action on Media Freedom in Africa, also adopted by the PAP in the same year.

### **Still wrestling for control**

Twenty-five years after Windhoek, there has been some progress regarding media freedom in Africa countries, but an “independent, pluralistic and free press”, as the Declaration demanded, is still far from being a matter of course.

Politicians still want to control media coverage; are complacent when cronies intimidate and attack journalists, continue forced closure of media houses and, the latest trend I may say, is purely to shut down the internet or access to social media platforms.

It must also be acknowledged that there has been little movement around gender and media. Gender equality is intertwined with freedom of expression and the equal participation of men and women in public life. Your presence here today is evident that a movement has been created that seeks to make our media relevant and responsive to the needs of all citizens. Hopefully and collectively we can also make citizens aware of their responsibility to support and protect the media, to allow it to attain the principles set out in the Windhoek Declaration, which ultimately benefits us all.

Is the Windhoek Declaration now just another piece of paper, merely of historical interest? It is not. Given its impact over the last 25 years, its legacy lives on.

I have said it before and I will say it again ... the Windhoek Declaration is one of Africa’s greatest gifts to the world. Thank you.

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