



The role of the media since the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals

Harare, Zimbabwe

December 11, 2017

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The role of the media since the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals. This is the topic that I was requested to speak to today but, with your permission, I'd like to amend the title of this presentation very slightly to the following: **'The role of African media in promoting and entrenching the ethos of the Sustainable Development Goals'**. This is a conversation I think would be worth having.

The SDGs, when adopted in 2015, reflected the essence of the development changes that we want to see and embrace around the globe. When consensus was reached on the 17 goals and 169 targets it was done so on the principles of multi-stakeholder engagement and collective implementation. A consensus, therefore, that everyone had a role to play and no one would be left behind.

WHAT we know or do **NOT know** determines our response to it, **WHAT IS REPORTED reported** and **HOW it is reported** goes some way in shaping the policy and State action agenda, and has implications for the millions of people whose lives are affected. In this statement, we have reinforced and acknowledged the importance of the mass media as key drivers for the spread of information.

There is not much information available or any assessment that I am aware of that gives insight into how the media has fared in reporting on the SDGs since its adoption in 2015. What I can confirm through the online searches that I've done, is that African media appear to be leading in reporting on the SDGs. Is this because of a genuine interest by the media in the global development agenda? Possibly because of our 'developing country' status and funds allocated for media awareness campaigns on the SDGs? I cannot say. I also cannot confirm that we are making the desired impact.

What I **CAN** confirm is that we are living in strange times where the world we know seems to have, quite literally, flipped on its axis; where we are watching international news channels with a measure of disbelief and – dare I say it – a combination of dread and amusement. All the while we've become increasingly **DESENSITISED** by an information overload of corruption-focused news and lacklustre political analyses ... the same faces, mostly male, telling the same stories that somehow seem very distant from our lived realities.

Globally we have witnessed the release of the Panama and Paradise Papers who are without a doubt a feat in terms of cross-border investigative journalism of an incredibly high standard, meticulously reported. These reports of illicit financial flows captured our imaginations for a while, but largely affected the elite and certainly, within our own countries, have not led to a single prosecution or even policy change. The response, rather, has been an even greater crack-down on independent journalism targeting the safety of journalists, the financial sustainability of news media and therefore the financial security and working conditions of journalists.

Earlier this year I had an opportunity to meet with a number of colleagues to deliberate on the most pressing challenges to media freedom and free expression on the continent and to debate potential responses.

We reached consensus that the financial sustainability and independence of media was the single-greatest challenge to democracy, with global trends related to the collapse of traditional journalistic business models being aggravated in the region by weak advertising markets and the undue influence of media outlets captured by political elites. The result of these commercial pressures is to leave media organisations, especially smaller community media, exposed to undue political and economic influences and limits their capacity to work independently in the public interest.

High-quality public service and public service journalism in particular should be supported as public goods. Public interest journalism involves media content that provides citizens with access to information on key aspects of public life significantly affecting their well-being and involvement.

I would like to leave here knowing that I have made a practical contribution to the outcome of this consultation. So herewith some recommendations:

(1) Provide road signs or context:

Development plans abound – the SDGs, AU Agenda 2063, SADC’s RISDP, and at a local level there are the national development plans – Vision 2030 and in the case of Namibia, our President’s personalised Harambee Prosperity Plan. These development plans are devised by government agencies and technical development experts far removed from the media that must champion them and even further removed from the publics that must absorb and act on them. What are we to do?

The Silence Breakers – related to the Weinstein scandal – are Times Magazine’s ‘Person of the Year’. How are we linking that story to the SDG5 on Gender Equality.

(2) Offer ‘wisdom journalism’:

Despite plummeting subscription to newspapers, thanks to the Internet the actual consumption of news is apparently higher than it’s ever been. But expanded access has also made news a cheaper commodity and undermined journalism’s traditional economic model. A new – perhaps not so new – argument is that journalists need to do more than simply transmit information; they have to have a value added. *In Beyond News: The Future of Journalism*, New York University professor Mitchell Stephens advocates for what he calls “wisdom journalism.” He argues that we need journalists who are experts, who are specialists, who are really capable of adding insight and wisdom to the news. So, rather than simply inform, journalism’s goal should be to transform how we think, to lead “wiser citizens and therefore wiser politics.”

Our challenge in this respect is clear. Capacity. We continue to suffer from the juniorisation of news rooms. Academic institutions are not providing bridging courses for Economists, Geologists on journalistic writing and, equally important, the news media for professional development is not an attractive option. This is perhaps a consideration for the Unesco Centres of Excellence?

(3) Personalize and Give Voice

Poverty is under-reported in the media and, when it is reported, those facing poverty are often not given the space to explain what it really means. How people living in

poverty situations can engage with the media to get seen and valued? Make the alternative story the mainstream.

In addition to a more personal tone, younger readers expect personalised content. That is, content that has been selected specifically for them. Readers/consumers tend to develop a loyalty toward news outlets.

I am reminded of the MISA Windhoek@25 publication which was released in 2016 to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the seminal Windhoek Declaration on an independent, pluralistic African press. The physical newspaper was replicated online, including content rewritten for online media as well as multi-media productions (video and audio) for online media and radio. Presented young people to speak on issues related press freedom, how they understand it and what they expect from the media.

(4) Expand “civic journalism” and community coverage

Studies show that audiences, young audiences too, are drawn to civic and political coverage. Therefore, community coverage **IS** a valuable investment in future audiences. News that is local and relevant and personalised resonates with local audiences.

(5) Put young people in the news

If you're going to write an article about gender differences at colleges hire a college student, or at least have one co-write the piece. If you are going to write about child rights, involve children.

(6) Develop a sharing, learning culture (regional networks)

One of the most successful regional networks that I am aware of is the African Platform on Access to Information. This network of organisations is the reason for us celebrating September 28 as International Day for Universal Access to Information.

- Developed the APAI Declaration which articulates the right to access to information in all its dimensions, nationally, regionally, and internationally;
- Has focused narrowly on promoting legal frameworks for access to information in Africa; since 2010 increase in number of countries with laws - from 5 to 21 today
- Networks require coordination, resources; for people working to support a value proposition is also required.

In conclusion, African media has several challenges to perform the role that we expect of it, but there are also immense opportunities. The ethos of the the SDGs is that of inclusivity, of promise for a better future. African media has the potential, if supported, to change the flow of this conversation from the South to the North. That is its role, ultimately.

Thank you.