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## **Journalism For Democracy in Southern Africa**

### *A sound investment in the future*

Democracy and media freedom in southern Africa – like the rest of the world - is in a state of constant flux, and mostly this fragility means the bad often outweighs the good. From a more positive environment in my country, Namibia, regarded by Reporters sans Frontières as one of the most free in Africa, to Malawi and Zimbabwe among others where oppressive conditions continue to place journalists under threat, this lifeblood of democracy is always at risk.

Things have come a long way since I started as a reporter in 1976 – when South Africa and then South West Africa were still firmly in the grip of the Pretoria apartheid government, at war with the liberation movements on the sub-continent. Further afield, authoritarian one-party states marred the face of Africa. While there has been progress since then, too often it's a one step forwards, two steps back scenario, and the dream of a truly democratic southern Africa remains at worst, a nightmare, and at best, a mythical vision.

Whether we can still secure these freedoms to the benefit of the marginalized people of our very unequal sub-continent or allow things deteriorate past the point of no return, is a question that plagues so many of us who hoped to see African success stories emerge from the ruins of colonialism.

In spite of a pervasively repressive environment in the 70s and 80s, independent media, mainly newspapers, often dubbed the 'guerrilla typewriters' in a sub-continent dominated by government controls over the fourth estate, emerged to play a key role and tackle the status quo in a climate that was not then conducive to press freedom. The Namibian newspaper which I founded in 1985 was one of these.

As the Nineties approached, bringing with it shifting geopolitical realities, the white minority government in South Africa finally agreed to self-determination and free

and fair elections for SWA. Coinciding with the end of the Cold War era and the fall of the Berlin Wall, change started to come about in South Africa itself as well as in what were then known as the Frontline States of southern Africa where autocrats began to lose their grip on power. It seemed then as if the world was headed towards a more progressive era.

A model rights-based Constitution adopted post Namibia's 1989 UN-sponsored elections – which embraced guarantees of press freedom and other rights - set the stage for others to emulate. Democratic transitions in southern Africa included South Africa, the home of apartheid, which saw the emergence in 1994 of what was dubbed the 'rainbow nation', with world icon, Nelson Mandela, at the helm of the new government.

On the media front, a significant gathering of mainly print African journalists met in Windhoek in May 1991 to craft the Windhoek Declaration on a free, independent and pluralistic African media, affirming the importance of the press for democracy and for economic development. I was privileged to chair the adoption of the Declaration which would have global resonance, leading to similar demands and recognition for free and independent media in other parts of the globe – from Sanaa in Yemen to Santiago in Chile, Sofia in Bulgaria to Alma Ata in Kazakhstan. The UN General Assembly marked the significance of the Windhoek Declaration by declaring May 3, the day of its adoption, as World Press Freedom Day. The Declaration also finally received the buy-in of African governments, albeit grudgingly.

But despite moves towards democratic advancement on the continent, there was to be no instant uhuru. The former liberation movements were and are often irritated by the probing eye of the media in holding power to account, and gains in freedom have been frequently offset by backsliding and the stamping out of dissent. A ban by first President Sam Nujoma in 2000 on government advertising in a newspaper often credited with helping bring the Swapo government to power, was a case in point. It took ten years before his successor lifted the embargo imposed because of the newspaper's perceived anti-government stance. Similarly, independent media in other parts of southern Africa came under fire from governments unused to democracy and journalism's essential role in its development.

But the stage had been set for African media to flex its muscles and demand change, and gradually this resulted in more pluralism in the print sector as well as the support of the broader public. At the same time many governments, including my own, continued to insist on state rather than public broadcasters and establish government newspapers at taxpayer expense. Slowly too, Africa's airwaves began to open up on a continent in which radio, even in this contemporary digital world,

still reigns supreme as the main source of news and information for the majority of its people and the African Charter on Broadcasting in 2001 helped this happen. In 2021 the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Windhoek Declaration and the global commemoration of WPF, again took place in Namibia, where the Windhoek +30 Declaration set a key focus for the digital future.

Yet the more open era failed to bring a halt to continued inequality and an ever-widening gap between rich and poor across the sub-continent. Instead entitlement and corruption gained impetus among the mostly ageing 'comrades' in the seats of power.

Arguably, the role of independent journalism and investigative reporting became even more critical in uncovering scandalous abuses of public resources in sub-Saharan Africa than it had been in waging the struggles for freedom. In Namibia, what became known as the Fishrot exposé has rocked the country, with allegations of corruption in the fishing industry reaching right to the top of the Swapo hierarchy, resulting in the jailing of two cabinet ministers, and a trial that is still ongoing. Whistleblowing, incisive reporting and cross-border investigations were exposing the excesses of power from Pretoria to Luanda, to Windhoek and beyond.

As a result of such revelations, combined with debilitating socio-economic circumstances, liberation movements had begun to lose their shine and in several elections post 2000, it seemed clear that they were slowly beginning to forfeit their mass appeal as the impact of a lack of service delivery and relief for poor and marginalised people began to turn the tide against the liberators. After the fishrot story broke on the eve of the 2019 elections, votes for Namibia's incumbent President Hage Geingob sank from 87% in the 2014 elections to slightly more than 56% in 2019, the lowest majority for any President since Independence. Likewise, the ruling party, Swapo, lost its parliamentary two-thirds majority. In South Africa too, the popularity of the ANC has also been dented in local government elections, perhaps a sign of things to come. Yet opposition parties remain fragmented, and with few exceptions, offer little hope of solid alternatives to the waning but still popular appeal of the former liberation movements in power.

In this deteriorating democratic environment, the importance of a vibrant civil society and the impact of independent and investigative media, professionalism cannot be overemphasized, and yet these are taxing times for both whose continued survival is at risk.

Not to be forgotten in the broader context, is the work of not only journalists in the SADC region, but also civil society and media support organisations as well as other critical voices speaking to the goals of democracy and providing important background, analysis and pleas for transparency. They include several regional

centres for investigative reporting which frequently come under pressure for their advocacy work.

In addition to government antipathy fuelling anti-media sentiments, the social media tsunami – which saw citizens flocking online and advertisers following suit – helped deliver a virtual death blow to traditional media, print in particular. The Covid pandemic, which followed, crippled this sector even further with severe economic pressures often undermining journalism's crucial role.

On the international front, the war in Ukraine was also set to impact media freedoms, and not only in that part of the world. The economic consequences of the Russian invasion would be felt far and wide, not least of all in the journalism sector fighting a rising tide of disinformation and wartime propaganda, putting the lives of those covering the crisis at serious risk.

The challenge that lies ahead for those of us concerned about the future of journalism and its pivotal role in democracy, is to find ways and means to sustain it in the public interest, so as to offset disinformation and continue to make a difference in empowering citizens with good information. The test is also to regain the trust of audiences: to help bring home awareness that in this fiercely divided and tumultuous world, good, independent and investigative journalism is now more necessary than ever before.

The recent Arusha Declaration adopted at a WPFDD meeting of the African Media Convention in Tanzania warned of the dangers of the digital siege, including increased surveillance and restrictive laws and the impact on privacy by governments in the online space, and the dampening effect these would have on both free expression as well as investigative reporting. Draconian laws on disinformation pose similar risks, and persistent persecution online, especially of women, exacerbates these threats.

Perhaps more troubling than new threats by governments, is the disturbing picture painted by the Afrobarometer perceptions index which reveals that people on our continent care far less about press freedom now than they did ten years ago. Much work needs to be done – also by journalists themselves – to reverse this negative trend.

There is no democracy without press freedom, and as Mandela once said: “only a free press can be the vigilant watchdog of the public interest against the temptation on the part of those who wield it to abuse that power”.

The world is not getting safer for democracy, to paraphrase Woodrow Wilson. Instead it is the opposite, and truth is under attack on many fronts. The global news

media industry is under threat at a time when access to trustworthy, independent journalism is, for many, a matter of life and death.

New research by Economist Impact, supported by UNESCO, finds that Covid-19 has intensified economic pressures facing the global news media industry. It is those in low- and middle-income countries which have been the most severely impacted, with a rate of decline almost two times faster than the global average. This has led to newsroom closures, layoffs and pay cuts for journalists at a time when access to trustworthy information is desperately needed. Without urgent action, the study concludes, the pandemic threatens the fundamental existence of free, fair, independent news media ecosystems all over the world.

As I speak, I'm aware that many who are deeply sceptical about the media. A range of accusations from bias and disinformation to sloppy, sensationalist and often thoughtless reporting, among others, are unfortunately true in many respects. Here in Germany, this is borne out by a Deutsche Welle report which reveals that complaints about insensitivity in Ukraine war reporting are piling up at the Press Council.

So while there is great need to raise standards of reporting worldwide, it is important we make the distinction between media as a term that is all-encompassing - including social media and a host of fakes that have begun to proliferate online, in print and in broadcast - and professional and ethical investigative journalism for the public good. It is the latter which needs support now more than ever, because, in the words of a colleague, good journalism is a sound investment for the benefit of all. In addition we should actively discriminate between media that is ethical and authentic and that which is anything but, and be far more selective about where we choose to get our news.

South Africa's Daily Maverick sums it up well, saying that through perpetually leaning into easy clickable dis and misinformation, there is a concerted effort to erode belief in that country, fuelling an apathy towards media in general that the country can ill-afford. Underpinning its self-professed mission to defend truth, something to which all South Africans are entitled, it adds that people have the right to know how their taxes are spent and misspent, who is putting them all at risk, and ensuring the wheels of justice turn to bring them to book.

On the same note, citizens need more than ever to be empowered by access to information. This is key for participation in the political process, helping them make informed choices in the voting booth, promoting media literacy, and allowing them to express knowledgeable views on matters of public importance while making sound life decisions in general. An audience-first approach – in an attempt to win back public trust and meet readers on the platforms they prefer – is

underway at reputable news media outlets from the Daily Maverick in South Africa to the Heidenheimer Zeitung in Germany. In the case of the former, the media house has a covenant with readers which promises to deliver high impact, independent public service journalism against the background of what they refer to as an internet-fuelled revolution which has brought onto the streets the 'blood of truth, trust and accuracy'. The Zeitung in turn has accelerated its digital transformation to fit the needs of its readers.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine, which is currently dominating the world headlines, has brought home most clearly the need for urgent action to save the independent press as was advocated in the Windhoek Declaration over 30 years ago and similar initiatives across the globe. But while the focus has inevitably shifted to Ukraine, we ignore at our peril other parts of the world in which the fragility of good journalism is equally under threat. Many national budgets are going into purchase of arms rather than development, and democratic countries need to find ways to maintain and increase support to media development. If not, there is a strong risk that the weaker independent journalism becomes in developing countries, the more susceptibility there is for deals to be cut that justify aggression and perpetuate war, and allow disinformation to further proliferate.

The goal of democracy is neither possible nor attainable without a vibrant, free and independent media sector which now needs all the help it can get. The creation of various international funds are underway in an attempt to help save good journalism worldwide but also in the global south. Neither should we forget the responsibility and role of big tech platforms, like Google, Facebook and Twitter to share profits with the journalism sector and not simply usurp the content of reputable media without compensation.

In Namibia too, the foundation of the Namibia Media Trust which is the publisher of The Namibian, is about to embark on a funding drive to support its efforts to ensure the future a viable future for good journalism on our continent.

In a recent presentation to the Cape Town Press Club, I spoke about dedicating much of my life to the cause of the kind of journalism which is intent on building a better world. I also noted that the current crisis has impelled journalists to introspect about their role and practice of journalism which needs to adapt or die with new realities. What are journalists supposed to be or do in these increasingly polarized and dangerous times, exacerbated by a global pandemic, is the question many of them are now asking themselves and so too the public. I argue now, as I did in the Seventies, for a journalism of commitment, one which is solutions based, and makes a positive difference to the tumultuous world we now find ourselves in.

Vigorous and consistent advocacy from the media sector in Namibia has helped ensure we live in one of the most free countries on the African continent. But even our freedoms and democracy remain fragile and vulnerable, and must be guarded and protected at all times to prevent their erosion.

The people, at the end of the day, are the ultimate beneficiaries when free expression and freedom of the press is allowed to flourish and information is valued as a public good. Our journalism back in the day, helped, among others, to at the very least rid the sub-continent of the scourge of apartheid, ensure a rights-based Constitution in several countries, and focus public attention on the evils like corruption and entitlement in our midst. So while it hasn't managed to forge a perfect world, good journalism can and does change things for the better.

There's no silver bullet to save the ailing media sector as yet, but what is absolutely clear is that any and all attempts to rescue the journalism sector will fail without public support and recognition of its indispensable role.

People with influence, policy makers and thought leaders like yourselves, can help make this happen, and find ways to keep and increase support to media development; can speak for the essential function of good journalism, can condemn the increased risks to the safety of those trying to fulfill this role in non-democratic and even democratic societies worldwide, can facilitate both moral and financial support for and training of ethical professionals in this sector, can reinforce the critical need for enhanced investigative reporting.

Inasmuch as your foreign ministry is intent on ensuring that the foreign policy agenda should be set by civil society and feminist activists, so too do women journalists have a prominent role to play in bringing this about to enhance democracy across the global spectrum.

With authoritarianism and illiberalism on the rise in the world, the International Press Institute (IPI) developed a set of 10 recommendations for democratic governments to lead by example, and among them is that the protection and promotion of press freedom be made a core element of foreign policy. These guidelines are well worth the scrutiny of governments, including my own, which, while proud of Namibia's high standing in global press freedom rankings, is silent when it comes to calling other rights-abusing countries to account.

Governments – whose role primarily, is to establish an enabling (and not disabling) environment in which freedoms can thrive - need to commit more than mere lip service to ensure the survival of good journalism. They must also defend press freedom even when politicians are on the receiving end of criticism by those who

should neither be lapdogs nor attack dogs, but true watchdogs over the public interest, and they need to be held accountable to this end.

And lest we forget, the media has its own internal challenges. That there is today fault in the world of journalism is not in doubt. We are still overcoming blind spots on issues of gender, race, class and language amongst other things, and are not always able to produce the most inclusive journalism – where audiences feel their stories and interests are part of the narrative. We have also seen proprietorial abuse of media properties and declining standards as competition with digital media gains momentum to capture the attention of audiences due to decreased revenues.

In the words of Richard Stengel, journalists should be non-partisan but cannot be neutral. They need to be biased in favour of truth and facts. Biased in favour of democracy itself. “We protect the press so the press can protect democracy”. And there can be no better investment in democracy – which cannot function without the communication of trustworthy information - than to secure the future of good journalism to forge a brighter future for people and our planet. I would appeal to you everyone to recognize that good journalism, right now, needs all the help it can get. It is in the common interest to do our utmost to ensure its survival, and in turn, that of democracy.