



The African Media Barometer (AMB)

A new instrument in media development cooperation

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“Reaffirming the fundamental importance of freedom of expression as an individual human right, as a cornerstone of democracy and as a means of ensuring respect for all human rights and freedoms”

Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression in Africa
(2002)

1. Yet another index?

Indices seem to be very much the fashion not just in the area of international cooperation for development: They seek to describe developments in nation states through the collection of reliable data, measure these against internationally accepted norms and thus create a basis for meaningful comparisons. The more enterprising among the organisers of such indices collate the results of their surveys into rankings which allow the respective countries to check where they stand in relation to others (or, at least, where they have been placed).

One prominent example is the global “corruption index” drawn up annually on behalf of *Transparency International (TI)*. Public perception of this index concentrates mainly on which countries have been moving up or down the scale. And the sometimes furious reactions of national governments in countries with low rankings show that this index is indeed taken note of. It exerts pressure on governments and societies to act in order to improve their ranking – not least because the TI index is increasingly taken as one important measure of a country’s suitability as a potential recipient of foreign investment.

Another internationally well-known example of a global overview is the *Freedom House Index*, the democracy report, including media, of the New York based *Freedom House* organisation. With the help of its catalogue of indicators the report measures and compares the development of democratic structures and institutions in the countries under review.

The African Media Barometer is a more modest attempt and the way it collects its data (see 2.) is fundamentally different. This new instrument takes its cue from the *African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM)*, part of the *New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD)* which provides for African states to voluntarily submit to a process of self-assessment of their social, political and economic development on the basis of universally accepted democratic values. This self-assessment is meant to be undertaken with the cooperation of and strong inputs from civil society.

The NEPAD Secretariat, based in Pretoria/South Africa, has developed a comprehensive catalogue of criteria to form the basis of APRM processes in the individual countries. When this catalogue was made public, it was met with immediate protest from leading global and African media organisations like the *International Press Institute (IPI)* and the *Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA)* who, in a joint letter to UN General Secretary Kofi Annan, pointed out that “*the APRM’s good governance criteria have a serious defect in that they omit a key requirement for good governance: the fostering of free and independent news media*”.

Indeed, the APRM catalogue is almost completely silent on matters concerning freedom of information and expression which are of vital importance for the development of democracy. In the meantime MISA and the APRM Secretariat have agreed to work together on correcting this crucial deficit. This is an important step forward. However, the APRM process has a few other structural flaws.

One of them is the principle of voluntary participation. No country can be forced to undergo this process of critical self-reflexion. And a number of African governments have already made it clear that they regard the APRM process as a form of interference in their internal affairs and therefore refuse to take part in it.

A second problem is the enormous complexity of this very ambitious endeavour, given the wide scope and high standards laid down in the catalogue of criteria. The difficulties of actually applying these on the ground have already become apparent in the countries that pioneered the process (among them Ghana, Kenya and Mauritius).

There is also little clarity on how civil society is to be involved. And the two questions of who is to be ultimately responsible for drafting the final reports to the *African Union* (AU) and what conclusions are to be drawn from them are left unanswered.

Nevertheless, the idea at the heart of NEPAD: that of self-assessment, of critical self-reflexion undertaken with the cooperation of all players within the respective national context on the basis of jointly developed values and principles, has great advantages over the more familiar method of evaluation by international organisations and outside institutions. As long as the process of self-assessment is open and transparent there is real hope that the reforms identified as necessary by all concerned at a national level will have a much better chance of being tackled and succeeding than those prompted by international criticism, all too easily dismissed as unwarranted outside interference.

It is on the basis of all these considerations and following extensive discussions between African media organisations (MISA in particular), as well as a probing debate with media practitioners and academics from all over sub-Saharan Africa during the *Highway Africa Conference at Rhodes University* (in Grahamstown/South Africa) and the Media Project for Southern Africa of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung that the African Media Barometer was born. In a first phase over the course of 2005 the new instrument was put to the test in Zambia, Namibia and Botswana together with MISA, and in Kenya in partnership with the Kenya Media Council. Since then MISA has undertaken the same, somewhat fine-tuned process in Angola, Mozambique and Swaziland. The individual country reports are available immediately after completion on the website of the FES Media Project (www.fesmedia.org.na).

2. How does the African Media Barometer work?

The first step was the **development of indicators** as a common basis for debate and assessment.

The task was made easier by the fact that the African continent has, over the past decade, achieved a fair amount of consensus on principles and basic tenets in the area of freedom of information and expression, laid down in multilateral agreements and declarations by the AU as well as regional organisations like the *Southern African Development Community* (SADC). The translation of these multilateral standards into national policies, however, still leaves much to be desired.

This continental consensus developed largely as a result of two groundbreaking Windhoek Conferences, the one on the independence of print media in 1991 and on broadcasting 10 years later¹. The basic principles agreed upon in Windhoek were codified for the AU as a whole by the *African Commission for Human and Peoples' Rights* (ACHPR)² in its *Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression in Africa* of 2002. The Declaration complies fully with all international standards; indeed, it could well serve as an example for other continents as well.

This Declaration, then, provided an ideal framework and point of departure from which a total of 42 indicators, grouped into 4 sectors, were developed for the discussion and assessment of media systems and media practice in the countries of the continent. The indicators are formulated as ideal goals, with the four sectors covering the following areas³:

- Freedom of expression, including freedom of the media, are effectively protected and promoted.
- The media landscape is characterized by diversity, independence and sustainability.
- Broadcasting regulation is transparent and independent; the state broadcaster is transformed into a truly public broadcaster.
- The media practice high levels of professional standards.

¹ Windhoek Conference on the Independence of the Media 1991; Windhoek Plus 10 conference 2001

² The ACHPR is the official AU organ mandated to interpret the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights which is binding on all AU member states.

³ The complete catalogue of indicators can be found at www.fesmedia.org.na under African Media Barometer.

The next step was answering the question **who should do the self-assessment and what process should be followed?**

The decision was made in favour of a *national panel* consisting of up to 10 people, with one half being directly involved in the media (practitioners, academics and owners) and the other half coming from other areas of civil society (human rights, gender, church groups, trade unions etc.). Representatives of governments and office bearers of political parties are expressly excluded from taking part in the process. This follows from the requirement expressed in the AU Declaration that the media must operate independently from state and political (as well as economic) influence.

The panelists are selected (by the partner organisation in the country concerned) on the basis of their extensive knowledge and standing in their individual fields of work. However, they join the panel in their individual capacities, not as representatives of their respective groups. Care is also taken to have the interests of people in rural areas adequately represented.

Sitting over two days these panels, under the guidance of an external moderator, work their way through the indicators point by point. This moderator should be well and broadly versed in media matters, be familiar with the purpose and methodology of the barometer and make sure that the “rules of the game” are adhered to while not in any way influencing the content of the debate. The discussion usually starts off with an exchange of information concerning the indicator under review (what is the legal or political framework, what are the specific problems or concerns in our country?) in order to create a common level of understanding, followed by an evaluation of the facts and trends observed. The qualitative discussion culminates in a quantitative assessment or scoring (in a secret ballot) using the following scale of points:

- 1 Country does not meet the indicator.
- 2 Country minimally meets aspects of the indicator.
- 3 Country meets many aspects of the indicator but progress may be too recent to judge.
- 4 Country meets most aspects of the indicator.
- 5 Country meets all aspects of the indicator and has been doing so over time.

Why this quantitative assessment? The aim is not to rank countries by awarding (good or bad) marks. Without doubt the most important and fruitful parts of the exercise are the qualitative debate and the conclusions drawn from it. Nevertheless the additional scoring does make sense. It forces panelists to reach clarity for themselves on the points under discussion and does not allow for any fudging or ducking the issues. And the analysis of the total of individual marks sometimes provides interesting insights regarding areas of controversy (with sharply differing assessments) even if these were not clearly evident in the actual discussion.

A rapporteur takes detailed notes of the debate and then writes the country report. Statements made are not attributed to individual panelists but recorded anonymously. Like all the other participants (with the exception of the moderator) the rapporteur will be a citizen of the country under review and a suitably qualified and experienced person. The draft report is first submitted to the panelists for them to make any necessary corrections. It then goes to a coordinator (usually the moderator of the discussion) tasked by the organisers to format it in a manner that makes it easily comparable with other country reports. The coordinator is not allowed to make any changes or corrections regarding content.

3. Gimmick or action-oriented development tool?

What is the intention behind this instrument? The initiating organisations agree that the African Media Barometer is not a new scientific method of data collection. It is rather meant to serve as a **lobbying instrument to promote debate on political and social reforms.**

In other words: the aim is not to draw up a compendium of objective facts. This is not done by other international indices either – they, too, are based on assessments by experts, real or presumed. The fundamental difference between the Media Barometer and other similar international approaches lies in the fact that in this case the outcome is exclusively determined by national experts, right up to the writing of the country report. This is likely to result in a higher degree of authenticity and, even more importantly, of acceptance in the political and social context of the country concerned. Those who feel stung by the criticism expressed can not just dismiss it easily as a product of New York or Berlin.

The Barometer is meant to be an **instrument to measure developments in the area of media systems and actual practice on the ground.** Of course this can not be done on the basis of a snapshot alone (which is all that the existing country reports can claim to be). The intention, therefore, is to repeat the process in the participating countries at regular intervals. Whether this should be every 2 years as envisaged presently or whether significant changes are better measured over longer periods, time and experience will tell.

By the way: One welcome side effect for the FES Media Project is the fact that the country reports constitute a new tool for measuring the success (or otherwise) of its own work. And such an assessment by the partner countries themselves will probably be a more honest and relevant undertaking than any other traditional form of internal or external evaluation.

4. First experiences gained from applying the barometer

The story of the barometer so far and the reasoning behind it shows clearly that it started out as a mere theoretical idea. How would it fare in real life? Would experienced and self-confident partners allow themselves to be bound by a discussion framework predetermined by set indicators? Would they still accept the result as their own? And what about the inherent contradiction in a barometer that claims to be a self-assessment by Africans themselves, but which was conceptualised and implemented with major inputs from a European organisation like FES?

All these questions are not just rhetorical. They have been (and presumably will continue to be) asked by participants ("What do you want us to do here?" being one of the clearest indications of initial scepticism). Such very real reservations can not just be reasoned away. They are usually voiced at the beginning of the retreat. And they are the first hurdle to clear for the moderator who has a vital role to play in making the exercise work. He or she must be able to communicate the background, the philosophy behind the undertaking and enjoy a certain level of trust and respect among the panelists. What has been working very well so far is for the moderator to reassure participants in the introductory phase that all their concerns will be carefully noted and revisited in the final evaluation session (which, of course, must indeed happen!). Apart from that they are asked to give the rules of the game the benefit of the doubt. Experience up to now shows that by the time the process is concluded many of these questions and reservations have fallen away.

These regular evaluations with their frank and thorough discussions have yielded valuable information also on methodology, for example on the fact that certain indicators lacked clarity (which was, of course, corrected as a result). Perhaps even more important was the realisation, expressed again and again, that this form of intensive working session, which demands full participation from all involved from the very start, made the pivotal question of ownership almost obsolete. For most panelists this kind of outcomes-based retreat is a completely new experience. They are used to being invited for seminars with a set agenda, where they are mostly the passive recipients of information. Barometer retreats are completely different: here it is the participants themselves who determine the contents and the results of discussions. In all workshops held so far, panelists could hardly be stopped from debating well beyond the envisaged hours once the initial scepticism had been overcome.

The evaluation sessions at the end of retreats had two other results frequently remarked upon by participants: they felt they had gone through a learning process both as individuals and as a group. And more than once the group discussions resulted in a collective consensus that jointly identified deficits should now be addressed by joint action. In Namibia, for example, panelists decided to make a renewed attempt to revive a self-regulatory mechanism which so far exists largely on paper only and which is meant to ensure that the media live up to professional and ethical standards. In Zambia, joint action is to be taken against media hostile legislation still on the statute books from colonial times. And panelists in Botswana,

so often held up as a shining example of democracy in Africa, spoke about a "democracy without democrats".

Media organisations themselves, then, as well as their national and international partners (including FES) have already learnt a lot from the process. And the country reports available so far are a veritable treasure trove of information on the situation of the media in the countries reviewed. It would have taken considerable effort (and presumably much more time and money) to compile this amount of information in such condensed form in any other way.

5. Where to from here?

In its test phase (with the exception of Kenya) the African Media Barometer has confined itself to Southern Africa. This was the logical choice to make, given our close cooperation with MISA and the fact that the FES Media Project covers the southern part of the continent only. MISA has decided to take the Barometer to another 6 countries of the sub-continent in 2006, those where the organisation is represented by national chapters. By the end of 2006, then, an almost complete overview of the situation in all SADC countries will have been achieved. In 2007 the plan is for the countries first assessed in 2005 to be revisited.

In the FES and together with our partners in the media field we are currently debating whether and how the exercise could be extended to include West and East Africa. One problem seems to be that there are no functional regional media organisations in these areas firmly anchored in the various member states as is the case with MISA in Southern Africa. For West Africa first exploratory talks point towards a possible partnership with the *Media Foundation for West Africa*, which is not based on the support of member organisations in the individual countries (like MISA), but which does have a functioning network of national correspondents.

In East Africa the debate is only in its infant stage, but at least a start has been made with Kenya in 2005. Tanzania will follow in 2006 - because the country is a member of SADC and has a national MISA chapter.

For now, though, any plans for extending the Barometer process to other sub-Saharan countries are directed only at those where the FES runs national projects. The reason is simple: without the help and organisational support of these national offices the workshops held so far would not have been possible. This does not mean to say that the FES alone will necessarily bear all the costs involved. Even in Southern Africa financial support for the retreats in Angola, Mozambique and Swaziland has already been provided by *The Netherlands Institute for Southern Africa* (NIZA).

In any case the FES remains responsible for selecting and training the moderators. At present there is one each for anglophone and lusophone countries respectively.

Overall the FES will see to it that the name and methodology of this new instrument are not being used without its consent and cooperation. The need to reserve this right results from the amount of interest that the barometer has already elicited in other parts of Africa and beyond. In a few cases similar processes have been started without the FES' knowledge and involvement, applying less stringent quality standards and different methodologies. This is why measures had to be put in place to prevent the barometer from being discredited by inferior imitations.

This reservation notwithstanding, the FES naturally wishes to see this new instrument applied as broadly as possible and yielding useful results.

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