

THE TANZANIA MEDIA FUND LAUNCHED

The Tanzania Media Fund (TMF) was formally launched by the Speaker of the National Assembly, Samwel Sitta, in the afternoon of December 3, 2008 at the Karimjee Hall and was attended by a sizeable group comprising various media stakeholders, members of the diplomatic corps and Government officials.

Also officiating were the chairperson of the steering committee of TMF, Elieshi Lema and the Swiss Ambassador, Adrian Schlaepfer, both of whom delivered important speeches stressing the crucial role that media has to play in ensuring good governance and socio-economic development.

Elieshi noted the rapid growth of the media sector in the country over the past two decades or so, radically changing the way Tanzanians communicate among themselves, from a situation some twenty years ago when talking of media meant a Government owned newspaper, a single radio station, also owned by Government, and another newspaper owned by the ruling Party, to the current scene in which Tanzania boasts over 70 newspapers, over 45 radio stations and 27 television stations almost all of them in private hands.

Notwithstanding the dramatic increase in the number of media outlets serving the Tanzanian public, she said, it was imperative for media practitioners to apply high quality standards in their work if they are to be credible and effective. For this to happen, training in news collection, processing and research was of paramount importance.

To this end, TMF would finance, on a competitive basis, journalists, news organisations and non governmental organisations engaged in media work. Support would also include mentoring programmes under ‘Jifunze kwa Vitendo’ (Learning by Doing) with a view to providing practical tutoring which would improve news processing and research.

The Swiss Ambassador, for his part, saluted the important role played by Tanzanian media in the political processes of the country, and hailed the “vibrancy and openness” debates within the media. While recognising the “vital role” played by Government by heeding the principle of freedom of expression, the ambassador was critical of laws and practices that impinge

on that very freedom, citing the Newspaper Act of 1976 as being “not necessarily supportive” of the principles of freedom of expression and called for a speedy review of the legal and regulatory regime in place and the tabling in Parliament of a Right to Information Act and Media Services Bill “without further delay.”

Said the ambassador:

“Access to quality information empowers people to exercise their civic rights and duties, it serves local communities, helps combat corruption, and acts as a catalyst for debate and protest – all elements that are vital for development in a democratic society. But media themselves can also act as agents of change. Indeed, strong and independent media are forceful vectors in the fight against poverty and ignorance in any country... On the other hand the sometimes very low quality of journalism is a concern, as is the lack of trained journalists.”

The Swiss Ambassador was representing five donor countries supporting the Fund: the UK, Ireland, Denmark, the Netherlands and Switzerland.

The formal launching statement by the Speaker of the National Assembly, Samwel Sitta, was very much in the same vein. He noted the important work done by media organs in informing and educating the society, exposing actions that hinder development such as corruption, graft, abuse of office, inadequate delivery of services and misuse of public property.

He congratulated the Tanzanian media on their courage and steadfastness in exposing numerous scandals in the public domain. He however pointed out that media freedom and freedom of expression were seriously curtailed in most African countries by draconian laws such as the (Tanzania) Newspapers Act of 1976.

Sitta reminded the audience of the principles on which the “Tanzania of Nyerere” was founded: egalitarianism, brotherhood, ethical behaviour, care for the weak and non-discrimination on the basis of race, religious creed, ethnicity, place of origin or gender, tenets that have helped identify Tanzania as a nation of civilised people with a culture of cooperation and generosity.

Nevertheless, he noted, in recent times there had been acts and pronouncements which indicated that certain individual and groups were at work to demolish those principles, and the main vehicle in this endeavour was a certain identifiable section of the media.

Sitta castigated the unnamed section of the media as agents of corrupt elements within the society seeking immunity from retribution for the acts economic sabotage they were involved in, which had seriously undermined the welfare of the majority of Tanzanians.

He called for action to thwart these dangerous trends, which if unchecked could lead to serious trouble in the country, even civil war. It was imperative, therefore to strengthen well meaning media organs to counter the negative elements in irresponsible media, which he said was the main objective of TMF.

The Speaker highlighted the importance of the collaboration between media and the Parliament and revealed that his office had adopted a five-year plan (2008-2012) to improve the quality of Parliamentary journalism by organising training programmes in-country and overseas.

He noted the strained relations between media and the Government, a result of media's quest to expose evil doings within Government and the latter's resistance against such exposure. He called for greater transparency in Government work and insisted on the need for all economic contracts entered into by Government to be made available to *Bunge*, as the representative organ of the Tanzanian people.

“What is the logic for a minister who says he is going abroad to sign a commercial agreement in our interest and who comes back to tell us that the agreement he signed on our behalf is a secret to be kept away from even the representatives of the people – the Parliament?” he queried.

He took the opportunity to remind all ministries that they are required to deposit all such agreements with the Clerk to the National Assembly, adding that the Speaker's office had opened a special registry where all the agreement will be kept open for the perusal of MPs desiring to see them.

The launch was followed by a brief panel discussion of issues pertaining to media in Tanzania, the central question being: Quality Journalism in Tanzania: Is the core challenge Government restriction? Media itself? Or a passive public?

The discussion was exciting, if brief for want of time. What came out of the short presentations by the principal panellists and other participants was that there were shortcomings in all the three areas: Government's desire to restrict media freedom by withholding information, criminalising tort issues and denying advertisement to 'uncooperative' media; an incompetent, ill trained and sometimes corrupt media and a largely nonchalant public that often does not know its rights and/or is hesitant to come forward with information that could help media report on misdeeds.

Nevertheless it was pointed out that whereas the Tanzanian public may believe in, and respect its leaders, it was necessarily made up of dupes, and once given the right information it was apt to express its displeasure in no uncertain way, as evidenced by recent events. This placed on the media to be more proactive and to unearth as much information as it can to mobilise the public's engagement.

The point was made to the effect that the media is generally the reflection of the society in which it evolves and that in a situation characterised by a lack of a clear direction, such as the Tanzania of today, it was not surprising that media seemed to lack a sense of direction as well. Yet this did not preclude the importance of the role of agency played by certain elements in the media, who have courageously taken on powerful interests and helped the country to know more about corruption and other cases of wrongdoing.

The problem of financial independence was raised, it being made clear that the nascent media in the country was too financially weak to undertake serious training of journalists or to engage in serious investigative work.

Since the Government was averse to investigative journalism, which it regards as an irritant, it would not fund such training, the upshot being that media operators requiring training were forced to rely on donor funding, this in itself perpetuating a well known dependency situation.

It was recognised that whereas generally the Government was wedded to opacity and secrecy, a few elements were emerging who were ready to blow the whistle on what transpired in their departments, which has been an important source of material on which the media has worked to great success in some cases. This was a positive trend that needed to be encouraged.

A slight controversy arose over the decision by the Editors' Forum to blackout news about the minister responsible for information after he recently banned a newspaper, a section asserting that the decision impinged on the public's right to know what the minister is doing, and another arguing that it was a proper way to voice displeasure at the minister's arbitrariness.