



# Freedom of expression fundamental to democracy

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Democracy is dependent on people having the right to freely express their views and to access and circulate information. On the basis of these freedoms media, independent of state control, are established. For many years the media environment in Zimbabwe has been

characterised by strict control, partisanship, intimidation and repression. If democratic reforms under the transitional government are to succeed, the independence of the media sector is paramount.

In spite of state control over Zimbabwe's only daily newspapers and a monopoly of the airwaves, in 2008 the people voted for political change. The political strategy aimed at silencing opponents and entrenching power failed. Nevertheless, via its control of media the former government was able to seriously limit access to information, advancing a partisan view of developments in Zimbabwe and the outside world.

Through repressive legislation (AIPPA and POSA) media freedom was restricted. Although these laws were amended in 2007 and although the Unity Agreement of September 2008 calls for the licensing of media players, such licensing is still in partisan hands and media freedom and access to information is still severely restricted.

One of the conditions jointly agreed upon by donor countries is that media freedom in Zimbabwe needs to be enhanced before any substantial donor re-engagement can come about.

Sweden's main policy document on media issues is founded on the rights of individuals, the right to freedom of expression and the right to knowledge. On this basis Sweden has, for a considerable period of time, included culture and media in its development cooperation.

## Promoting a free flow of information

Sweden supported the establishment of the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) in 11 SADC countries in 1992. MISA focuses on the need to promote free, independent and diverse media that will lead to an informed society which has the capacity to influence how it is governed.

The Zimbabwe chapter of MISA has been supported by Sweden since 1995, with a brief interruption. In 2008 Sweden approved the funding of a new 3-year programme. The programme is premised on the belief that media freedom is a key component in Zimbabwe's political transition.

The MISA programme encompasses:

- A freedom of expression and access to information campaign, involving the creation of alternative media platforms to publicise information;
- A national campaign on the right to information and lobbying of parliament and local authorities on key issues.
- A campaign for broadcasting diversity to facilitate the establishment of community radio stations and to convert the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation into an independent public service broadcaster.
- Support to journalists and media workers through training.



Photo: Per-Ulf Nilsson

Independent media have had a difficult time in Zimbabwe.

## Promoting professionalism

The state media in Zimbabwe has been manipulated and controlled by political interests, fuelling unethical, divisive and incorrect reporting. Professional ethics have been set aside and journalism standards have deteriorated, as professionals have left the scene.

In June 2007 a group of professional media workers established the Voluntary Media Council of Zimbabwe (VMCZ). Its aim is to establish an effective system for self-regulation of the media, in order to promote



John Gambanga, Executive Director of the Voluntary Media Council.

Photo: Per-Ulf Nilsson

ards of journalism”, he says. But in order for these standards to prevail in the media, they need to be free from political interference and laws that curtail their freedom.

“Today we have pro and anti-government media. What we need is independent media that supports nobody”.

In the programme supported by Sweden, VMCZ will:

- Establish an office and hire qualified staff
- Handle adjudication of complaints, where complaints are brought to VMCZ and resolution is sought between complainants and the media in question
- Promote editorial independence and press freedom and initiate peer evaluation within media organisations
- Train journalists.

The training of journalists is a major feature of the programme and will be carried out in cooperation with the Swedish journalism training institute FOJO. VMCZ will also partner with the regional Southern Africa Media Training Trust. The project will help improve the quality of journalism so that it reflects internationally recognised standards of skills, knowledge and attitudes.

high standards and ethical behaviour.

John Gambanga, the Executive Director of VMCZ, is an experienced journalist and editor, having worked both at ZBC and at independent media such as the Daily News, before it was silenced.

Gambanga is a staunch believer in professional self-regulation. He believes that if journalists are allowed to, they can set and adhere to a high level of professional ethics.

“All we want is professional stand-

## Facts and figures

Swedish policy is to support the right to freedom of expression and the right to knowledge. Independent media, regardless of ownership, governed by professional journalism ethics, are crucial for the healthy democratic development of a country. On the basis of this conviction, Sweden supports two media organizations in Zimbabwe.

### The Media Institute of Southern Africa

A programme involving a freedom of expression and access to information campaign, a campaign for broadcasting diversity and media support. Swedish contribution 2008 – 2010: SEK 3.6 million

### The Voluntary Media Council of Zimbabwe

A programme aimed at  
– establishing an effective system for professional self-regulation of the media  
– training of journalists in cooperation with FOJO Sweden. Swedish contribution 2008 – 2011: SEK 4.5 million.

[Fluctuating exchange rate:  
USD 1 = appr. SEK 8]

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