African media councils form a pan-African network for self-regulatory bodies

In an African first, the Network of Independent Media Councils in Africa (NIMCA) was formed on Thursday 16 May 2024 after the inaugural meeting of African media councils convened by the South African Press Council in Cape Town, South Africa.

The 13 councils from East, West and Southern Africa resolved to establish the new body to bring together independent media content regulators from around the continent and to convene regularly to discuss the strengthening of media freedom, ethics and public accountability on the continent.

NIMCA calls on independent media regulators in other African countries to join the new organisation to promote self-regulation as the cornerstone of a free, professional and credible media in an evolving communications landscape where social media is implicated in the circulation of unethical and low-quality content.

NIMCA's objective is for the professional media to report freely and without fear of reprisals while at the same time being accountable for living up to journalistic ethical standards and codes of practice.

NIMCA's ethos and operations will be guided by the Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information in Africa, issued by the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights in 2019.

The Cape Town meeting agreed that the media, irrespective of whether it is privately or government funded, needs to operate in a free environment with no threats of censorship, intimidation, harassment or threats against journalists. This is because independent and professional journalism is a critical pillar of society that holds governments and other powerful actors accountable, informs the citizenry and help them understand their societies and events as they unfold.

The African media councils met during Africa Month and shortly after World Press Freedom Day and deliberated on a range of issues, from the governance of digital platforms and companies, through to developing a pan-African media ethics framework and ethos, along with UNESCO's principles for a communications regulatory system that works to foster ethical and credible journalism.

The regulators emphasised that in jurisdictions where co-regulation is constitutionally stipulated, media councils and similar bodies must be allowed to self-regulate and act independently from government. They agreed that trust in and credibility of the media is vital for its survival, and that self-regulatory mechanisms are key to uphold professional standards and consider complaints where media fall short of meeting these.

Delegates also highlighted the issue of gender equity and sensitivity in the composition of regulatory bodies. The NIMCA executive body will in future be formed with equal representation of men and women.

Delegates from the media councils shared their best practices and challenges about press freedom, as well as how to foster ethical journalism in an environment where the media and its regulatory bodies face a crisis of funding and sustainability.

In a fast-changing digital environment, the media regulatory bodies noted that they need to provide guidance on how media should deal with ethical issues related to the emergence of artificial intelligence (AI), convergence, and the need for new journalism curricula and training models.

Delegates highlighted the risks of social media being treated as a news source by the public, although this environment lacks effective quality standards and ethics, and where trustworthy content and journalism are increasingly hard to find.

The media councils recognised the importance of exploring new financial support models for the media, in order to promote, support and sustain journalism and the related independent self-regulation mechanisms in the industry.

The councils urged journalists, photographers and other media practitioners to uphold the basic tenets of journalism in order to fend off state regulation and punitive measures by those in positions of power.

They also commented on developments in Zambia and welcomed the commitment by the Zambian government to encourage media self-regulation as opposed to state regulation. They urged other countries to repeal repressive laws and policies gagging the media and ensure and promote media freedom.

In the case of Eswatini, where the government has warned that it may consider statutory regulation, delegates urged stakeholders to vigorously pursue a path towards self-regulation.

Delegates from UNESCO also participated in the meeting and reaffirmed the organisation's commitment to support and collaborate with African media councils in advocating for freedom of expression, universal access to verified information and safety of journalists and media professionals in line with regional and internationally agreed goals and frameworks.

NIMCA will initially be led by the Media Council of Tanzania (MCT), which also chairs the East Africa Press Council, represented by MCT executive secretary Ernest Sungura; together with representatives from the host of the inaugural meeting, Latiefa Mobara, executive director of the Press Council of South Africa; from West Africa George Sarpong, executive secretary/CEO of the National Media Commission in Ghana; and from Southern Africa Kennedy Mambwe, chairperson of the Media Self-Regulatory Council of Zambia. They will form the inaugural executive board of NIMCA to set up the organisation.

The MCT will host the 2025 NIMCA meeting, with support from UNESCO and the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, and will also act as the initial secretariat for NIMCA.

Sungura, the first NIMCA chair, said, "This is an important day for our media sector and eco-system. For too long our media councils have operated in silos with little engagement or information sharing. In a world that is increasingly connected, but also fracturing into echo chambers, NIMCA heralds a new era for building common approaches, deepening media freedom, foster stronger accountability systems and support credible, sustainable journalism across our continent."

Participants from the following independent media regulatory bodies, some statutory and others non-statutory, participated in the inaugural meeting:

East Africa

Media Council of Tanzania

Media Council of Kenya

Media Council of Uganda

Rwanda Media Commission

Ethiopia Media Council

<u>West Africa</u>

National Media Commission, Ghana

Nigerian Press Council

<u>Southern Africa</u>

Namibia Media Ombudsman

Media Council of Malawi

Voluntary Media Council of Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe Media Commission

Media Self-Regulation Council of Zambia

Press Council of South Africa

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<u>Note to editors:</u>

Issued by the newly formed Network of Independent Media Councils in Africa (NIMCA) after its inaugural meeting in Cape Town, South Africa.

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