

Making the media work with the civil society

 By [Gregory Gondwe](#)

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A meeting of senior media gurus from five African countries, took place on Saturday 17 September 2011 at the [Highway Africa Conference](#) in Cape Town, South Africa, agreed to disagree on whether the media needs to be bed fellows with civil society to achieve either parts' objectives or not.

The Southern Africa Trust, the *Mail & Guardian* and Highway Africa partnered to co-host the one day meeting of targeted media organisations from Uganda, Kenya, Malawi, South Africa and Ghana.

Although no Tanzanian representative turned up, gurus from other countries who are involved in the Southern Africa Trust project turned up to dissect the suggestions of creating synergies between media and civil society.

Telling the development story

The trust's executive director, Neville Gabriel, was of the view that there was a need for the media to join hands with the bodies like the trust in order to tell the development story. He said, according to a study called '(Dis) Enabling the Public Sphere: Civil Society Regulation in Africa', civil society has the weakest of relationships with the media and there was a need to change this posture.

Charles Onyango-Obbo, Nation Group's executive editor for the Africa and Digital Media, based in Kenya, was of the opinion that the two should not mix, but should continue to look at each other the way 'water and oil does'.

"The media still need to treat the civil society with certain scrutiny and the two should therefore not become one," said Onyango-Obbo.

Peter Mwesige, executive director of the African Centre for Media Excellence, agreed with Onyango-Obbo by citing a Ugandan scenario where the media found itself in a dilemma over the Gay Rights issue in that country.

He said while other civil society institutions were in support, between 80% and 90% of the population was of the view that homosexuality needed to be criminalised and as a media it was challenged with a moral and ethical question on how best to deal with this.

Media should not play 'holier than thou'

After following the discussions, managing editor for Malawi's Nation Publications Limited, Edward Chitsulo, weighed in by

pointing out that in all aspects, the media should not play a 'holier than thou' attitude when discussing the matter.

Chitsulo said that the corruption cancer has not spared the media, where government and civil society has accused it on corruption and that there was need to draw parameters within which civil society needs to be allowed to collaborate with the media.

"In doing so, we need to remember the Western African proverb that says 'when greetings proceed past handshake to an elbow then it is no longer greetings but wrestling', and in this relationship, there is need to keep a close check on where to strike a convergence," Chitsulo said.

Nicholas Dawes, associate editor at *Mail & Guardian*, shared experience on the media firm's existing collaboration and partnership with the Southern African Trust in telling a development story without compromising on the 'sexy' approach that compels readers to read on.

He said over a few years that they have been in partnership with the trust, they have successfully reported on poverty and social development issues and that even at the end of the partnership they will still continue with the initiative.

"It is a very journalistic way of telling a story, and the way we have been approaching it, we are able to meet the challenge as our audience grows and South Africa is changing," he said.

Dawes said this has even induced them to establish a *Mail & Guardian* for investigative journalism, in view of doing more through publishing investigative stories, training journalists in investigative journalism and advocacy.

Building relationships with civil society

After tossing the idea of establishing partnership back and forth, the media gurus agreed to establish relationships with civil society, like the trust, by putting in place operating guidelines.

Gabriel added that all the trust needed was to explore interest in potential strategic grant partnership opportunities with media houses in the countries present in order to increase visibility of poverty policy issues and the work of policy advocacy actors. He said their approach as a trust is not that of interference but assisting existing media institutions to tell a story in a way that will help achieve the objective of letting people uplift their social status.

"Editorial control rests with the media as is the case in the partnership that we have with the *Mail & Guardian*. We don't and we can't even come in for scrutiny or criticism even when we are funding the project," he said.

With *Mail & Guardian*, the trust buys space where stories on the subject matter are published.

"Our aim is to invest in order to increase quality and quantity of covering development issues, particularly on pro-poor growth and food security which is the Millennium Goal number one," said Gabriel.

The question on how to treat such pages bought through this partnership were raised and another debate ensued; others felt branding such pages by putting logos or mentioning the involvement of the trust, for example, could steal the thunder of a story as people build attitudes towards something like that in the media.

"In Nation Media Group, even if we collaborated with God we will still indicate that," argued Onyango-Obbo.

Media body limits damage

He said in an environment that exists in East Africa, there is a need to indicate how the story has found its way into the newspaper like the Trust/*Mail & Guardian* partnership because the media body limits damage besides saving face in the event that things have gone haywire.

Onyango-Obbo said there is need to establish an elaboration of set of agreement, depending on polity to polity depending on differences of national and regional nuances.

The media experts that gathered finally agreed to separately enter partnerships with the Southern Africa Trust in order to reshape their approach to reporting development news in their respective countries. Different media representatives in the meeting have pledged to put in place deliberate policy to give room for the flourishing on the partnership on the card.

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