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## Tanzania: “Better media. A better Africa.”

*Richard Gerster\**

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*Freedom of expression and a diversity of printed newspapers are some of Tanzania's cherished achievements.*

On 3 December 2008, the Swiss Ambassador to Tanzania Adrian Schlöpfer advocated for “strong and independent media” as “powerful tools in the fight against poverty and ignorance”. The reason for his presentation was the launch of a new media fund in Tanzania which aims at promoting high quality journalism by financing investigation, tailor-made on the job training cum mentoring and legal aid in the case of conflict. Switzerland was also speaking in the name of Great Britain, Ireland, Denmark and the Netherlands which jointly ensure the fund's finances until 2011. Samuel Sitta, Speaker of Tanzania's parliament, was also present at the event. In his welcome address he quoted a journalist: “Only an African press genuinely committed to the freedom of the media, respect for human rights, respect for people's welfare and development can bridge the gap and

sail Africa to the much desired promised land. Better Media. A better Africa.”

### ***Litmus test***

However, media work in a rapidly changing context such as Tanzania is not without risks. An observer even compares it to a “playground peppered with land mines.” The event was preceded by a controversy: On 8 October 2008 the Swahili weekly magazine “MwanaHalisi” published an article which claimed that leading figures in the governing revolution party (in Swahili: Chama Cha Mapinduzi, CCM) tried to prevent the acting president's second term after 2010. Two days later the ministry of information withdrew the newspaper's publishing right for three months. It viewed it as an attempt to sow distrust on the basis of



*Elishi Lema, Chairperson of the Tanzania Media Fund and publisher.*

rumours and so an abuse of the freedom of press. The publishers' association reacted to this interference by announcing a publishing ban on all statements issued by the ministry of information. In the meantime, *MwanaHalisi* is being published again. In spite of these incidents there is broad agreement among the observers that Tanzania's political will for independent media has never before been as strong as it is now. "Even at the beginning of the 1990ies the media simply were the government's mouthpiece", says the journalist Hamis Mzee looking back. "Thanks to competition, there is now a diversity, particularly of print but also electronic media." Samuel Sitta says that Tanzania's media mosaic is made up of 60 newspapers, 45 radios and 27 TV channels.

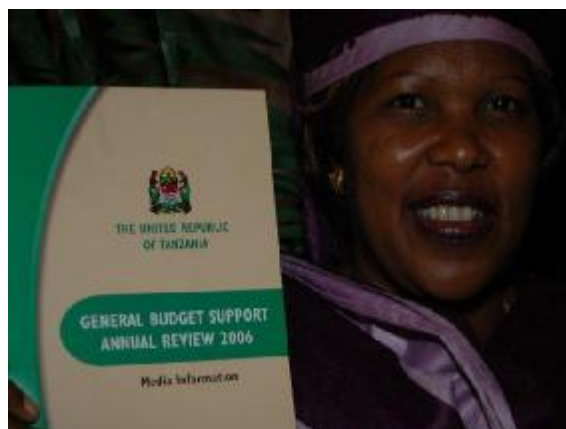
When it comes to its social influence the media has passed its litmus test as a fourth estate – besides government, justice and parliament – in the course of several highly political cases of corruption. First of all there was a buzz of information about corruption in the Bank of Tanzania which was then taken up by the media (see separate text and interview). Finally the central bank's Governor was sent packing. Another high level corruption scandal followed it, which led to resignation of the Prime Minister as well as other ministers implicated in it. The media were largely responsible for the fact that the scandal did not end in talk. They kept at it and public scorn did not diminish until the responsible people stepped down. Social change has sped up since President Jakaya Kikwete's election in 2005. Again Hamis Mzee: "Today

people publicly discuss politics and their leaders' behaviour in the bus." The people are aware of their rights and forcefully demand accountability from the political elite. "The media have played a decisive role in the social dynamic and that the responsible people did not run off", summarises NGO activist Semkae Kilonzo, coordinator of the private network Policy Forum his assessment.

### ***Budget support: The media's key role***

For some years Switzerland – together with a group of 14 countries and multilateral organisations – has directly been cofinancing Tanzania's state budget on the basis of "Mkukuta", the country's poverty reduction strategy. In the 2008/09 financial year the donor group completed Tanzania's own revenues with some 717 million US dollars, thereof some 5,7 million dollars (6,5 mio CHF) from Switzerland. In return for the financial injection into the budget the government has committed to reach concrete goals in all areas vital for the population, such as education or health services. Furthermore the government is in a constant dialogue with the donors and is continuously giving them account. The right to information has been an important topic on the occasion of the 2008 annual conference. What is more, the government and donors on this occasion actively inform the media about budget support.

The decisive factor, however, is whether people and parliament hold the government accountable for the public services. The media are an important interface and play a



*Since 2006 the government annually prepares a media information package about budget support.*



key role in this process. A precondition is open access to information about the government's activities and an understanding of media as watchdogs of good governance and exposures of abuse. "What we have seen since 2005 is encouraging. Bringing cases of corruption to the light and to trial is an indicator of the government taking on its responsibility", says Elieshi Lema, Chairperson of the Tanzania Media Fund and a publisher herself. However, access to information is still far from being taken for granted. Semkae Kilonzo: "We very often receive information only because of our personal relations."

### **Switzerland's strategic contributions**

It was no coincidence that Switzerland also spoke in the names of other countries at the previously mentioned launch. Switzerland plays an important role among the international donors when it comes to shaping the media landscape in Tanzania. An independent and diverse media landscape should give a voice to all groups of the population – including the poor. It should be a forum for public concerns and serve as a sounding board against abuse. In this

sense Switzerland has placed its modest financial contributions in a strategic manner aiming to develop a broad impact.

On one hand Switzerland provides bridge financing for Tanzania's media council in order to enable its work for a contemporary media legislation. An engagement for a better media law is one of the tasks the media council – founded in 1997 – set itself. The currently valid Newspaper Act is outdated and is neither in agreement with the basics of free access to information and freedom of expression, as they are anchored in Tanzania's constitution, nor with human rights, which Tanzania has also signed. A first draft of a new legislation caused a storm of protest. Free access to information would have been an exception rather than the rule. The media council lead a broad coalition of civil society and the media in order to present to the government propositions in line with international standards. After broad consultation detailed proposals were presented to the government. A submission building on this work should soon be presented in parliament.

On the other hand Switzerland has successfully been engaged in establishing the



*Youth needs reliable information in order to find their way in society.*

media fund mentioned at the beginning. In a survey, 98 percent of all consulted journalists have indicated a need for further education. Professional investigative journalism meets the changing conditions of a free society, because it is not content with the government's announcements but wants to reach the bottom of the truth and collects various opinions. Access to information used to be considered a voluntary courtesy by the leading powers – today it is

recognised as a human right in official documents. "Truth alone is not enough to fight the abuse of power. We also need the power of the people", goes the saying in the media scene. The new diversity among media causes hunger for transparency. Independent media demanding accountability from politics, completes Switzerland's considerably larger contributions to Tanzania's state budget. This serves both Tanzanian and Swiss tax payers.



*Radio is a popular medium, also in rural areas.*

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