INTERVIEWS

Coalitions for Change

Interviews with key informants

Experiences and practice

Following the Coalitions for Change workshop, Michael Randall spoke with five of the workshop's key informants about their experiences of coalition building and the lessons they have learned. Three of the interviews are available as video recordings, while the other two are available as edited transcripts.

Video recordings

Tabani Moyo, former Chair of the Media Alliance of Zimbabwe.

Adnan Rehmat, IMS consultant, Pakistan.

Maha Taki, Media Development Advisor, PRIMED programme.

Transcripts

Jane Chirwa, Project Manager, MISA-Zambia.

Dr Haron Mwangi, media academic and co-author of Mapping Coalitions.

Interview with Dr. Haron Mwangi

Dr. Haron Mwangi is the former Chief Executive Officer of the Media Council of Kenya, a self-regulatory body for the Kenyan media industry. He consults widely on issues related to freedom of expression, media policy and regulation, access to information and open governance in both the private and public sector. He has also conducted extensive research on media economics, including viability and sustainability and civil society coalitions in Sub-Saharan Africa. As well as consulting for FOJO/IMS and GFMD in Sub-Saharan Africa, Dr. Mwangi is currently a visiting scholar of media and communication at the University of Rwanda, in Kigali. He holds a PhD and an MA in Media and Communications from the University of Nairobi.

Dr Haron Mwangi

What lessons does the Kenyan experience of coalition-building and media advocacy have for other African nations?

One thing I have learned is that it's not possible for the media sector alone to drive media reforms, freedom of expression and democracy in a country. That's because most of the private media – as much as they are interested in media freedom and freedom of expression – are also profit-driven and, therefore, that gap needs to be filled by civil society. Though it is possible to form a media-only coalition or a civil society-only coalition, a combination of human rights defenders and media organisations gives a better impetus to the struggle for media freedom and freedom of expression.

You need to have a very clear vision, a very clear focus. You cannot just agitate and lobby for change and reform without substantively demonstrating that there is a cause that you believe in and that you are advocating for. There must be facts; there must be figures. There must be information that you can put forward to other forces that are opposed to your course.

It is very important that you have a clear plan, a clear path. If you can't demonstrate to the members of a coalition that there is movement from point A to point B and that things are changing, then they are likely to surrender midway. So you need to monitor what you have achieved and what you have not been able to achieve. You should have clear consensus about the way the reforms should be pursued and how consultations should be conducted.

There is also a need to anchor your pursuit for change in the cultural, constitutional and legal framework of the country. Of course, some cultures are opposed to reforms and change, so you need to see how you can work within the political and legal context but, at the same time, see how you can tackle some of the issues that you think are standing in the way of change.

The challenges of building and maintaining a coalition can represent a steep learning curve for all concerned. What skills do coalition members need to acquire in order to optimise their potential and deliver real impact?

Each coalition must have people that are knowledgeable, competent and committed to change: people who have legal minds for drafting laws; people who are specialised in media development and reform; people who have an understanding of global happenings. So a coalition must be a cosmopolitan of ideas and knowledge, a convergence of knowledge of the issues but, at the same time, the skills that are required for reforms.

Once coalitions have achieved their primary goals, there is a tendency for some to get sluggish and to get contented with modest achievements. Governments in Africa tend to open up the civic space in fits and starts, giving you a sense of optimism and a feeling of success just to introduce another offensive legislation or policy that could be inimical to media freedom and freedom of expression. Re-grouping to agitate for change including mobilisation of members of the coalition takes time. Journalists are not on the lookout most of the time. Maintaining the momentum for change by coalition is no easy task. It's sometimes characterised by lethargy and complacency. You need to be creative. So, for example, if you've been successful in securing new media laws, the next thing you want to see is how those laws are applied. Getting the laws is one thing, but the effect of those laws on media freedom and freedom of expression must be monitored so as to manage those forces that are opposed to the laws or have a tendency to misinterpret them. So maintaining the momentum of discussion within a coalition is important because, if you drop the ball, reassembling the forces again becomes a problem. Continuous learning and engagement as well as networking with like-minded coalitions can be effective in identifying best practices that could be applied to your context.

Sustainability remains a challenge for media coalitions worldwide. What measures can be taken, in your view, to maximise the chances of a coalition surviving in the long term and continuing to foster the development of the local media environment?

The Kenya Media Sector Working Group (KMSWG) that has now been operating for close to 10 years brought together various media organisations, professional associations and media development partners that have been able to raise funds for development as a coalition. They adopted a common basket-funding approach. So, if we are applying for grants from SIDA or USAID, they do not receive 10 proposals at the same time addressing the same thing but, instead, they receive only one proposal from the whole industry formed by over 26 media actors. However this does not negate the fact that individual coalition members raise funds for their other programmes. Often, common media development interventions attract funds under the coalition umbrella.

The coalition defines exactly what they want to do with the funds and then those funds are distributed to the different organisations that form the coalition depending on their strengths. For example, if we are looking at issues relating to the safety and security of journalists, then we work with the Kenya Union of Journalists (KUJ). If we want to work on media self-regulation, then we work with the Media Council of Kenya. If they are working on ethics of journalism and editorial independence they work with the Kenya Editors' Guild .(KEG). Basket funding for the coalition is also instrumental in creating ownership and support for media reforms programmes as well as cultivating solidarity for the course .

This coalition is very active and meets once a month or, if there is a need, in between at the convenience of members. Through organised meetings and intervention activities, they avoid duplication and replication of resources and efforts. Also, the organisations that form the coalition are able to contribute individual resources towards planned media reform activities. Thus the coalition has maintained its focus and solidarity through the support of members even when the common basket of resources dries up.

In some cases, we have seen coalitions driven by international agencies and donors. What do you see to be the most important contribution of media development agencies to advocacy initiatives?

The first and most important role of international media development actors is to motivate the formation of coalitions and provide financial support. The second thing that they bring is expertise and facilitate local coalitions to link up and build networks with other like-minded coalitions regionally and internationally. Sometimes they even fly in experts who help to fortify the coalition and build capacity to push for change. Building a network with people outside our countries gives the nascent coalitions motivation to move on with change even in adverse circumstances.
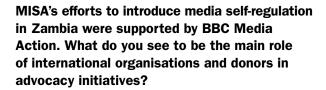
International organisations also serve to help keep up the momentum for reform, if we are slacking. Also, we have to be accountable for the resources provided and these requirements ensure that we maintain standards within the coalitions. However, some funds are problematic in their nature and they may not be able to respond to emergencies. So, for example, if I'm not happy about the way the government is treating some journalists and I want to organise a protest in the streets of Nairobi, I may not be able to do that because, although I have money from the donor, it is not budgeted to respond to an emergency situation. Fortunately, some organisations are very flexible and are able to adjust their budgets quickly.

In your paper on "Mapping Coalitions", you say that governments may co-opt media and civil society leaders in order to silence outspoken voices. Can you explain how this co-option works and how it can be avoided?

Civil society organisations and media form a rich pool of human resources and experts in diverse fields. They have produced some of the best researchers, some of the best managers, policy-makers and politicians. In Kenya, between 2001 and 2005, when we were moving towards full participatory democracy, [representatives from] some of the leading civil society organisations were appointed to various positions in the government. This was done firstly to reward them for being part of the force that agitated for multiparty democracy, secondly, to tap into the exert pool of human resources needed for reviving the economy and, thirdly, to silence civil society and allow the new government to reform the economy. In Kenya, it was deliberate and, between 2002 and 2011, there was no active civil society in the country. The government were very strategic in the way it did that.

Interview with Jane Chirwa

Jane Chirwa is the Programmes Manager at MISA Zambia. Her role is to coordinate teams working on a wide portfolio of projects. Jane is responsible for resource mobilisation, planning and governance and for overseeing the successful delivery of all projects undertaken by the organisation. She has been closely involved in MISA's efforts to advocate for media self-regulation in Zambia.

Jane Chirwa

MISA's efforts to introduce media self-regulation in Zambia were supported by BBC Media Action. What do you see to be the main role of international organisations and donors in advocacy initiatives?

They add the international perspective. They come with knowledge and experience that they can share with us and help us to do things better. Local knowledge has to be mixed with other democracy-focused goals. In Zambia, democracy is something that marks a departure from the kingdom-orientated mentality where everyone listens to the chief. It's a fairly new phenomenon and we are learning more about it, so it's important that other people who have done it better give us the benefit of their knowledge and experience.

The initiative has been driven by a Technical Working Group. How was the group organised and convened?

The Technical Working Group is a group of people who have been chosen to assist with the development of documentation for the self-regulatory body and to run with this idea. Based on a needs assessment, MISA Zambia has budgeted for the resources that the TWG needs to carry out its activities. We assist them with the costs of bringing the members together and with accessing the expertise that can help develop the laws. Usually they meet every fortnight but, if there is no need for them to meet and the resources are limited, the meetings are scaled down.

Does MISA chair these meetings?

No, we have totally removed ourselves from the picture. We chaired the initial meetings of the Media Liaison Committee but we understand that ownership comes when people fully participate and they feel part of something. At the inception, they said that what we want is media self-regulation. We know our principles and guidelines for media self-regulation because we have documentation that directs our policy and the standards by which we should abide. But we shouldn't be the lone voice speaking about this because then the government can divide us. Instead, we wanted to be able to speak with one voice while providing the technical expertise and guiding the rest of the group. So we deliberately took the back seat for that reason.

How have differences of opinion or conflicts within the TWG been resolved or mitigated? What action did you take to bring the process back on track?

There are always differences of opinion but the differences have to be managed and, being an organisation that has done a lot of advocacy for a long time, we realise that we don't have to fight someone when they come up with a viewpoint that might be inimical to media freedom. What you have to do is to get them to understand the repercussions of what they are making a decision on.

For instance, when MISA Zambia read the documentation for the ZAMEC bill, we said that, if we have a regulation framework that means

only media with registration can practise in Zambia, it is going to be very difficult for anyone to operate as a journalist. So we got rid of the mandatory requirement for a practising licence.

Also they had proposed that someone practising without a licence would be jailed for two years and that anyone who had been jailed for two years could never be registered with ZAMEC or would be automatically excluded. So you can see the irony of that: it was going to become a very good tool to get rid of journalists who were giving [the government] trouble.

They also singled out the journalist as the one who bears the sole responsibility for published stories. For instance, if it is alleged that the story a journalist wrote defames someone, they would pay money – not apologise, retract or explain – and the fines they were paying were huge. And so we were saying, "Look a journalist is going to pay money for publishing a story through a media house that has edited the story and added the headline. But, when a story is published, the first defendant should be the media house. It's the media house that should bear the consequence of the legal suit. They should pay for a lawyer and make sure that they go to court."

But our colleagues don't necessarily see these things until it's too late. They make the submission and that's when they backtrack. So our work has more of an educational aspect. Now we're very happy because, when [our colleagues] go out to the public, they say, "We objected to this particular bill being enacted by the previous regime because they wanted journalists to pay at an individual level." We are happy that they are speaking that language because we know they have picked up the ideas that we shared with them.

The confrontational process is not something that we want to use. We want to take more of an awareness-raising approach to advocacy. Because, here in Zambia, when you bombard someone with big words and embarrass them, they call that advocacy. But they don't know that advocacy can involve taking an educational approach and providing alternatives. That way you can get a lot of things moving.

How would you characterise negotiations with government officials in Zambia. Are they open to dialogue? Have you found it easy to build relationships at government level?

Threatening to go to the Constitutional Court or the Public Protector is always a last resort. Most of the time, we just want to engage with them and reason with them. That way, you don't create an enmity and you don't have a situation whereby they create a wall and won't listen to you. So usually, what we use is less confrontation and you can see sometimes we take a back row, leading from the back and letting others meet. So we get a lot of people to understand that this is important not just for us at MISA but for them as well. Beyond this, we have our standards and we conduct research on a lot of different sectors of the media that can help to guide us.

Along the way, the government and political factions made repeated attempts to derail the process. How did you establish red lines and maintain them?

When they were going down the road of ensuring that there was mandatory registration for all journalists, we had a meeting with BBC Media Action and came to an agreement that neither the constitution nor the bill nor the ZAMEC Code of Conduct should mention that it is mandatory for journalists to register. We then explained the dangers to the Media Liaison Committee and the Technical Working Group and, of course, they agreed to that. So we reached a stalemate [on this issue] with the previous government but now we are opening the process with the new government.

What are the next steps for your work in Zambia? Are there other areas of media reform or regulation that you intend to address? Do you intend to widen the scope of your coalition?

In Zambia, the media is experiencing major challenges with sustainability. Journalists' pay is very low, so a lot of people who have the right experience have jumped ship and are in public relations or in the diplomatic service. Also, the government tends to clamp down on media houses that are doing well using a variety of different means.

For example, we have a very strong TV station called Movie TV which was one of the best private stations. Normally, in a TV station, a journalist collects the news and gives it to a video editor to make the cuts. But the journalists [at Movie TV] were like machines: they could collect and edit the news single-handedly. So when the PF [Patriotic Front] came into power, they got all these journalists and put them in ZNBC [the national broadcaster] and Movie TV has been limping ever since. It's doing very badly.

These are the means that are utilised by the state to try and cripple the media. So we are always on the lookout for situations like this and we try to narrow them down to advocacy on a single level and encourage people to backtrack on some of the bad decisions that they want to make.

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Public interest media are vital to open, just societies – they provide trusted news and information, hold the powerful to account and create a platform for debate. Yet truly public interest media are in crisis.

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To learn more about PRIMED please see **bbcmediaaction.org** or email **media.action@bbc.co.uk**.

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