

Media as agents of Development

Address by

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Foreign Affairs Minister Louise Mushikiwabo

Information Minister Protais Musoni

Ministers, Captains of Industry

Media Scholars and Practitioners

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen

I am delighted to be back in the land of a thousand hills and to swap the grey skies of London with the sun on this, my third official visit in two years to this historic and beautiful city.

In collaboration with the Government of Rwanda, we convened this forum to discuss media in governance and development, which is of critical importance not just to Rwanda, but to the African continent, the Commonwealth and the wider international community.

It is important because a vibrant media reflects a functioning democracy and is a mirror of the level of development facilitation of sustained public dialogue. This is therefore a matter that must engage our active attention as we are doing today.

The Commonwealth, which I represent, has been in the fore front of promoting the values of democracy, equality, rule of law, representative government and human rights, including freedom of

expression, in its 54 member states, 19 of which ... including Rwanda ... are in Africa. It is a globally connected intergovernmental organisation of sovereign countries in Africa, Asia, the Pacific, the Caribbean, Europe and North America, who have shared values and goals, institutions, customs and networks and have similar challenges and aspirations. It works as a trusted partner for its member states and plays an overarching role in fostering good governance and development. Because it also acts as a catalyst for global consensus - building, the Commonwealth has entered into strategic partnerships with global and regional institutions such as the African Union Commission and the European Commission among others. This is who we are and why we have come to share our experiences with you.

In the Commonwealth, we have a network of professional organisations worldwide which play vital roles in the society. Two of them – the Commonwealth Broadcasting Association (CBA) and the Commonwealth Journalists Association (CJA) - are dedicated to media freedom and media capacity building. They will participate in some of the discussions here, and will also directly engage with some of the media houses here, identifying their needs and potential areas of co-operation and collaboration.

Since the early 1990s, the Commonwealth has made 'governance' one of its main political and development priorities. Considerable resources have been devoted to the promotion of political reform and for building capacities of state institutions involved in governance especially in promotion of democracy, electoral management and the rule of law; in strengthening the judiciary and in support of broader public sector governance and institutional development.

The media has been a critical partner and has contributed to the delivery of our governance programs. It has provided the platform for debates, highlighted some of the abuses of government control over the media, set standards, trained journalists – just as we are doing in the Commonwealth Secretariat under the Commonwealth Media Development Fund – where we have trained over 6000 journalists in 12 years. Rwanda has already been a beneficiary of this. Fifteen journalists from here received special-month training in development

journalism from our partner, the Indian Institute of Mass Communications, in October and November last year.

I believe the media in the Commonwealth has done much, but it needs to do much more in order to be effective guarantors of good governance and development.

The role of media in our societies is undisputed. It is expected to inform, investigate, educate and entertain. But we also know that the media sometimes distort and mislead. I therefore raise the question - how can the media achieve the goal of playing the role of an effective guarantor of good governance and development?

This responsibility is being undertaken progressively by the media in an increasing number of African countries, but not yet in all. Technological advances and the internet provide the media with unprecedented advantages to meet this challenge.

A basic prerequisite is for the media to submit to a robust self – regulation in order to be a credible arbiter and veritable conscience of the society. This, of course, should be supported by positive regulation by governments through enabling legislation that allows freedom of expression in a responsive and responsible manner. A deep democracy functions in no small part through an informed and engaged citizenry. The media can help shape this, through open and responsible journalism. The recent upsurge of pro-democratic movements has been very much supported by new and old media in country and internationally. Responses to the devastation seen in Japan have been fuelled by the immediacy of media reports on the horror and human dimensions of what happened. Our world is better for a free and functional media.

The media should also provide a realm for debate and a lubricant to the effective functioning of democratic processes. It should present itself as the voice of the people, accommodating all views and ensuring that the more dominant voices in our systems do not crowd out the less vocal ones, while at the same time ensuring that marginal voices and ideas are also heard.

Recent research has demonstrated that mass media influences economic, political and social outcomes. The research has linked high levels of media freedom and independence to stronger democratic systems and faster economic development.

Indeed, research from Commonwealth member countries has demonstrated that countries with free and independent media systems are better able to combat human calamities such as famine. In a recent Commonwealth Report, *Civil Paths to Peace*, written by a group of experts led by Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen, they stressed the importance of the media in drawing public attention to such issues long before they become fully blown problems.

It is therefore imperative that our member states treat information as a public good to which all citizens have inalienable rights. Unfettered information flows can only be guaranteed if our governments promote free and independent media institutions. For us in the Commonwealth, freedom and independence are best assured by embracing the democratic principle of openness and transparency in all aspects of government. Unfortunately this is far from the actual situation in too many of our countries where often government control and propaganda, have done a disservice to the role of the media in nation building.

Openness and transparency offer benefits to African countries. They offer our people the opportunity to scrutinise government policies and processes without fear of reprisals. Citizens ability to scrutinise government operations, generally demonstrate high political efficacy and a deeper commitment to participating in democratic processes.

The principal role of the media in promoting good governance is to act as a watchdog on the state and a purveyor of government policies in a way which enables them to be understood by the mass of the people. It should monitor the full range of government activities and should fearlessly expose excesses and abuses when they occur.

A well-functioning, free and independent media should extend the notion of openness and transparency to other significant areas of

daily life including the private sector and the major social institutions. Free media serves the people as a whole and cannot easily be manipulated. For this to happen it is strong and has ethical standards.

The greatest challenge in Africa to achieving the noble goal of open and transparent governance is the lack of enforcement mechanisms. Enforcement can best be provided by appropriate legislation the most common being laws promoting freedom of access to information. These laws empower citizens to access information relating to public and private institutions under the general rubric of the people's right of know.

The Commonwealth partners with other organisations to develop critical institutions to drive Africa to an era of openness and transparency. Our relationship with the Africa Union attests to this commitment.

To this end, the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association has established building blocks towards the attainment of a charter on the relationship between media and parliament. Among these was commitment to the freedom of expression enactment of access to information legislation mutual respect and dialogue. This represents a common point of agreement between the African Union and the Commonwealth and we stand ready to work more closely with our strategic partners on this.

We at the Commonwealth Secretariat offer expertise in capacity building in governance areas to African member countries, to African regional integration organisations and to the AU Commission. We have an agreement to help implement the Governance aspects of the Joint AU/EU Strategy for Africa as part of this mandate.

In conclusion, we in the Commonwealth firmly believe that Africa's democratic consolidation and the development agenda can be considerably enhanced by robust dialogue and engagement ushered in by a free and independent media.

Modern African media offer the continent and the world more than just tools for communication. They are powerful channels of

democratisation, governance, and change. This palpable mood of optimism must be driven ahead by forward-looking partnerships.

These must be characterised by the right mindsets ... the right ideas ... and these must be delivered at the right time.

Let us be a catalyst for this process at the Commonwealth Rwanda Media Forum.

Ministers, Excellencies

Ladies and Gentlemen

I thank you.

Ends.