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SOS COALITION LAUNCHES MULTI-PRONGED CAMPAIGN TO SAVE THE SABC

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Following the dissolution and appointment of an Interim SABC Board, the SOS Coalition held an emergency meeting early last week to look at the multiple crises unfolding at the SABC and how civil society can contribute to addressing these.

The Coalition agreed that the crises have escalated to a new high and would remain unresolved given Parliament's refusal to investigate their root causes. Coalition members were, frankly, dismayed at Parliament's "enquiry" held last Tuesday into the governance and management failures at the SABC.

The feeble nature of the limited process that took place, as well as the refusal to hear any civil society and expert analysis, cannot remotely be described as a proper or "due inquiry". This was a significant missed opportunity to deal head-on with the problems at the SABC. Parliament needs to be held to account for its ongoing dereliction of duty in exercising proper oversight of one of the most important public institutions in South African society

Parliament made little or no attempt to analyse and debate the reasons behind the second collapse of the SABC Board in less than five years. The enquiry existed merely in name – Parliament's primary concern seemed to be the urgent appointment of an interim Board. Although Parliament and the Minister both made reference to the need for a forensic investigation into the SABC, there was no clear indication of the depth, scope and timing of this investigation and if the investigation sought to identify whether anything needed to be done differently so as to stop the continuous turnover of SABC Boards and SABC Board members.

In light of these very serious developments, Coalition members agreed that more radical action was needed. SOS believes that we must now mobilise communities and stakeholders to reclaim our right to a high-calibre, editorially independent and excellently managed public broadcaster.

The Coalition is looking at a number of possible actions to ensure, and with finality, the resolution of the following issues:

- Parliament's complicity in the crises at the SABC through ineffective and absent oversight;
- Parliament's failure to conduct a "due enquiry" in removing the SABC Board;
- Problems arising from inappropriate Ministerial powers in relation to the governance and management of the SABC, as well as allegations of improper Ministerial interference;

- The perpetual instability of SABC Boards and the reasons for the tide of Board member resignations since 2010;
- Allegations regarding Board members in the Auditor General's and Special Investigating Unit's reports;
- Crises at management level including the protracted absence of permanent executive management;
- Gaps in the Broadcasting Act that allow for a lack of clarity as regards the appointment of SABC executives, opening the way for undue state and political interference;
- The legality of the SABC's Articles of Association that allow for Ministerial interference in the appointment of executives;
- Turning the SABC into a Chapter 9 body such as the Public Protector and Human Rights Commission. (The independence of Chapter 9 institutions is protected by the Constitution); and
- The possibilities of placing the SABC under administration to stem mismanagement and to put sound operational and administrative systems in place.

The Coalition reiterated its belief that the SABC is still the most important communications institution in the country. It still has the widest reach and still remains the only source of information for the vast majority of the poor and people who reside in rural areas. The Coalition believes that as South Africans we simply cannot give up on our vision of an empowering, citizen-orientated public broadcaster that produces creative, investigative and critical programming. South Africa needs an effective public broadcaster. We need an SABC that works.

The SOS Coalition represents a broad spectrum of civil society stakeholders committed to the broadcasting of quality, diverse, citizen-orientated public-interest programming aligned to the goals of the SA Constitution. The Coalition includes a number of trade union federations including COSATU and FEDUSA, a number of independent unions including BEMAWU and MWASA; independent film and TV production sector organisations including the South African Screen Federation (SASFED); a host of NGOs and CBOs including the Freedom of Expression Institute (FXI) and Media Monitoring Africa (MMA), and a number of academics and freedom of expression activists.

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