

SOS PUBLIC SERVICE MEDIA SYMPOSIUM STATEMENT: STRENGTHENING PUBLIC SERVICE MEDIA ADVOCACY IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

Introduction

The SOS Support Public Broadcasting Coalition, in collaboration with Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS), held its 3rd Annual Public Service Media (PSM) Symposium on 8 and 9 September 2026, in Johannesburg, South Africa. The Symposium provided an opportunity for civil society organisations, media practitioners, researchers, academics and other stakeholders to study the challenges faced by public broadcasters in Southern Africa and consider how public service media can be strengthened regionally.

This Statement was adopted at the Symposium and constitutes a record of the two-day engagement and the advocacy proposals for public service media in Southern Africa. It does not represent an endorsement by every organisation that participated in the Symposium. The organisations and stakeholders who participated in the Symposium are reflected in Annexure 1.

Day one of the Symposium focused on the South African PSM landscape. Day two focused on the African Commission on Human and People's Rights (ACHPR) [2019 Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information in Africa](#), particularly Principles 11, 13, 17 and 18 of the Declaration. These principles provide an important litmus test for assessing the extent to which public broadcasters across the region are able to fulfil their public service mandates and operate independently of undue political and commercial influence.

Day two also brought together perspectives from Botswana, Malawi, Namibia, Zimbabwe and Zambia in studying the political, institutional, legislative and policy environments affecting public service media, as well as the opportunities and constraints for public service media advocacy and reform. The discussions also explored a way forward for strengthening public service media across the region, with a focus on developing practical approaches, fostering regional collaboration and identifying opportunities for sustained advocacy and reform.

Accordingly, this Symposium Statement seeks to capture common priorities that emerged from the discussions and translate them into a practical framework for sustained national and regional advocacy. This is a base document that seeks to provide a foundation for coordinated, sustained and action-oriented public service media advocacy and reform across Southern Africa. It sets out proposed actions and areas of collaboration that can be further developed by regional stakeholders to strengthen public service media and advance meaningful reform.

Background and context

Public service media has a distinct role and function in democratic societies. Unlike purely commercial broadcasters, public service media fundamentally exists to serve the public interest by providing citizens with reliable, accurate and diverse essential information to support democratic participation. Public service media exists to reflect cultural and linguistic diversity and foster social cohesion.

For their public mandates to be fulfilled, public broadcasters must be sufficiently independent from political and commercial interests. Their governance structures, funding mechanisms, editorial processes and regulatory environments must protect them from undue interference, while ensuring appropriate public accountability.

Public broadcasters in Southern Africa are currently facing common challenges, which include:

- Outdated regulatory frameworks;
- Lack of transparency and accountability and limited effective oversight;
- Sustainability challenges;
- Commercial and political influence; and
- Unprecedented digital transformation.

Against this backdrop, the 2019 ACHPR Declaration, under Principle 11, establishes the requirement that State and government-controlled broadcasters shall be transformed into public service broadcasters, accountable to the public through the legislature or other mechanisms for public accountability. This distinction between designation, the formal naming of an entity as a public broadcaster and transformation, the completion of the governance, funding and editorial reforms required by Principles 11 and 13 is a useful diagnostic across the region. Several country assessments set forth below describe institutions that have been designated without being transformed.

The symposium topics and outcomes are fundamentally aligned with the following extracts from the 2025 [M20 Johannesburg Declaration](#), endorsed by SOS as well as many other organisations present at the symposium:

- Safeguarding the editorial independence of public media institutions and preventing capture of regulatory bodies, funding mechanisms, and public advertising systems.
- The importance of public interest journalism and information integrity as essential public goods. Independent, economically viable media are indispensable to sustainable development and to safeguarding societies against misinformation and disinformation.

- The creation of public funding models for journalism, comparable to those that support other public goods, while ensuring strong guarantees of editorial independence and universal access to reliable information. Supporting media viability in this way is not optional — it is foundational to the health of our democracies and economies.

The 5-point Plan Proposed by Civil Society for Public Service Media in Southern Africa

1. Develop a national PSM reform agenda

Each participating country shall undertake a focused assessment of the key challenges facing its public service media institutions, be it legislative, policy, institutional, governance, funding, regulatory and editorial challenges. Subsequently, the countries shall develop a national PSM reform agenda setting out key challenges, priority reforms required, clear advocacy targets, potential allies and specific short- and medium-term action plans.

Below are key PSM reforms identified as necessary to address the challenges highlighted during the Symposium in each country. However, a key priority that applies to all public broadcasters in Southern Africa is the need to transform from being traditional broadcasters to being fully fledged PSM organisations with significant digital presence. This includes ensuring access across satellite (i.e. as must-carry channels) and sustained online presence through Over-The-Top (OTT) platforms, applications, streaming services, websites, and other digital platforms. This transformation shall be central to any advocacy that will be undertaken by the participating countries.

National reform agenda shall apply the designation and transformation distinction as a shared diagnostic: Botswana's Special Purpose Vehicle, Zimbabwe's 2011 Commercialization Act, Malawi's Communications Act and Namibia's 1991 Broadcasting Act each name their national broadcaster as a public institution without yet completing the governance, funding and editorial reforms Principle 13 requires.

Botswana

- Transform Botswana Television (BTV) and Radio Botswana into independent public service media institutions, with clear public-service mandates and governance structures that guarantee editorial independence.
- Ensure transparency in the establishment and appointment of the Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV) overseeing the transition of state media, including disclosure of its mandate, governance structure and appointment process.

- Review the Botswana Communications Regulatory Authority (BOCRA) Act to bring public service media within independent broadcasting regulation, removing the current exemption for state broadcasters.
- Establish an independent, multi-stakeholder appointment process for public media boards, with safeguards against political interference and arbitrary removal.

Malawi

- Review Communications Act (2016) which govern the conduct and operations of the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (MBC), to ensure editorial and institutional independence.
- Review of the Communications Act to include clauses that mandate parliament to act on MBC (through withholding to funding from national budget) where MACRA has failed to perform its regulatory role.
- Rope in more institutions to support the Media Institute of Southern Africa (Malawi Chapter) and the Media Council of Malawi in the campaign for the proposed PSB reform.

Zimbabwe

- Replace the 2011 Commercialization Act with a standalone PSM statute defining Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC)’s mandate, mirroring Principle 13.
- Restore parliamentary consultation over the Broadcasting Authority appointment, removed by the 2025 Amendment Act.
- Establish an independent multi-stakeholder appointment process for the ZBC board itself
- Ringfence ZBC funding through a transparent, Parliament-reviewed formula, not levies or discretionary grants.
- Align the Cyber and Data Protection Act and AI strategy governance with independent non-presidential oversight.

Zambia

- Ensure public broadcasting laws are fully actualised:
 - The 2025 Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation (ZNBC) Act alongside its broadcast charter should be fully implemented.
- Produce and publicise the Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) score card on ZNBC.
- Conduct public discussion and debate on Zambia’s expectations’ on PSB.
- Create awareness about what Zambia’s seek from ZNBC as a PSB.

- Engage the SOS Coalition in high level meetings regarding PSB full actualisation in Zambia

Namibia

- Amend the 1991 Broadcasting Act to:
 - replace ministerial discretion over board appointments with an independent, transparent public nomination mechanism;
 - entrench editorial independence in statute; and
 - move NBC funding from an annual discretionary subsidy to a protected multi-year formula.
- Strategically, make use of the full commencement of the Access to Information Act to obtain information relating to NBC governance, funding data, etc.
- Bring the NBC within CRAN's broadcasting licensing and supervisory jurisdiction. Section 93 of the Communications Act, 2009 suspends the entire broadcasting services chapter as it applies to NBC, including the licensing requirement, the Broadcasting Code, and CRAN's supervisory power, pending a Ministerial determination that has never been made. NBC remains subject to CRAN only for matters such as spectrum licensing, leaving it outside the same content-accountability framework that governs commercial and community broadcasters, and without the independent regulatory check Principle 17 requires.
- Expand the scope and mandate of the ACTION Namibia Coalition to include PSM advocacy.

2. Establish PSM advocacy models

There is consensus that public service media advocacy is essential for holding public service media institutions, governments and other relevant stakeholders to account. Such advocacy shall be a coordinated and sustained effort. As such, countries shall develop their PSM advocacy models tailored to national contexts.

In some countries, existing media civil society organisations may expand their mandates and advocacy programmes to include public service media, while in others, dedicated PSM advocacy coalitions or networks may need to be established. These coalitions shall bring together diverse organisations and individuals with complementary expertise, including media and journalists' organisations, civil society and democracy organisations, human rights organisations, lawyers and strategic litigation organisations, academics and researchers, public-interest technology and digital rights organisations, professional and industry bodies, freedom of expression organisations, community-based organisations, unions, federations, and other interested parties with a common goal.

Namibia's ACTION Namibia Coalition, an operational umbrella structure in place since 2012 with the NMT Media Foundation serving as secretariat, offers one working example of how an existing civil society coalition can absorb a PSM advocacy mandate rather than requiring a new structure to be built from the ground up.

3. Strengthen strategic litigation and legal advocacy

Where ordinary advocacy tactics fail to provide meaningful avenues for reform, PSM advocacy organisations shall explore strategic litigation and other legal interventions as tools for advancing public service media reforms and accountability. Each country shall develop or strengthen its own capacity and networks for strategic litigation.

Regionally, existing legal networks and public-interest law organisations that can provide pro bono or affordable legal expertise and support shall be roped in. This is particularly useful for policy, regulatory and legislative reform and development and may include drafting alternative policy statements, regulations and legislative provisions. And we agree to work together, as part of a cross-border collaboration, to share skills, expertise and experience in this regard.

Where possible, these regional networks shall support country -based strategic litigation as well. Such regional mechanisms are useful for sharing legal research and comparative jurisprudence, developing common legal arguments and principles, and the exchange of litigation strategies and lessons.

The objective should not be to litigate every issue, but to use litigation strategically where it can establish important legal principles, compel institutional accountability, protect public service media rights and create opportunities for broader policy and institutional reform.

4. Establish a Southern African PSM Advocacy Coalition

Consider establishing a standing Southern African task team tentatively titled the Southern African Public Service Media Advocacy Coalition, initially comprising the countries participating in the Symposium, with scope to expand to other Southern African countries. The Coalition would provide a permanent structure for cross-country collaboration, lessons and expertise sharing, accountability, coordinated regional advocacy and PSM research. It shall hold regular meetings to review developments and reforms in participating countries, eventually establish its own constitution and appropriate governance structures, and pursue formal registration as a regional organisation, thereby strengthening its institutional legitimacy and eligibility for funding. The task team would develop an MOU to guide its activities and working relationships. The task team could also work collaboratively with other regional bodies that are working for press freedom.

The Coalition shall develop a sustainable funding mechanism that supports both its regional work and, where possible, national PSM advocacy initiatives. Its functions would include monitoring legislative and policy developments affecting public service media, coordinating regional advocacy campaigns, facilitating access to regional legal networks and strategic litigation support. The functions shall also extend to developing submissions and policy positions for PSM, coordinating engagement with relevant regional and continental institutions, and providing a rapid solidarity and response when public service media is threatened in any participating country. Most importantly, the Coalition shall lead the development of a Southern African Public Service Media Framework and a regional PSM advocacy blueprint. The Coalition's functions shall also include coordinating a joint civil society submission ahead of each participating State's periodic report to the African Commission: Principle 43.4 of the 2019 Declaration requires States to detail their Declaration compliance measures within the periodic reports already required of them under Article 62 of the African Charter. A shared submission of this kind would allow several coalitions to speak with one evidentiary voice into a reporting process States currently complete largely unopposed.

5. Develop a Southern African PSM Framework

Drawing on the 2019 Declaration and other relevant instruments, the Coalition will lead the development of a Southern African Public Service Media Framework, in line with global and regional human rights frameworks and guidelines, incorporating regional benchmarks and a PSM scorecard to assess progress towards effective PSM. Alongside, develop a regional PSM advocacy blueprint setting out shared priorities, strategies and coordinated actions for advancing public service media reform across Southern Africa.

The scorecard shall be built around the specific compliance indicators in Principle 11.2 and the six sub-elements of Principle 13, rather than generic benchmarks, following the precedent set by the Media Integrity Monitoring Framework proposed in the 2025 M20 Johannesburg Declaration. The Framework's development shall be coordinated with the Special Rapporteur's ongoing guideline process under Resolution 631, for which SOS is the implementing organisation, so that the regional and continental instruments reinforce rather than duplicate one another.

Implementation plan

Following the Symposium, the participating countries shall agree to the following immediate actions:

Within 30 days (Note with SOS Coalition playing an initial coordinating role):

- Finalise the Symposium Statement;
- Confirm one focal organisation/person from each participating country; and
- Establish a small interim regional coordination group which shall ensure each country has, within this period, identified organisations or individuals that are interested in joining PSM advocacy coalitions.

Within 2- 4 months

- Complete national PSM reform agendas for all participating countries;
- Identify priority advocacy targets in each country;
- Develop a Southern African PSM Framework;
- Identify key research areas;
- Identify potential sources of funding for the advocacy activities; and
- Draft the MOU for the task team.

Within 5 - 6 months

- Convene an online multi-stakeholder regional advocacy meeting;
- Adopt the task team MOU;
- Finalise the Southern African PSM Framework; and
- Develop a preliminary regional funding strategy.

Within 7-12 months

- Host a webinar to launch the Southern African PSM Framework; and
- Convene a Southern African PSM Conference.

Conclusion

This Symposium Statement serves as a starting point for collective action, translating the discussions and commitments of the Symposium into a practical foundation for sustained national and regional PSM advocacy. It calls for stronger, independent, sustainable and genuinely public service-oriented media institutions across Southern Africa, guided by the 2019 ACHPR Declaration. The Statement recognises that strategic, sustained and coordinated public service media advocacy can move the needle towards more effective, independent, sustainable and accountable public service media institutions across the region, and provides a basis for stakeholders to work together towards this shared objective.

Annexure 1: Speakers

1. Faiza Abrahams-Smith (Director, The Institute for the Advancement of Journalism)
2. William Bird (Director, Moxii Africa)
3. Dr Sanele Gamede (University of Johannesburg)
4. Dr Ivy Gikonyo (Manager: Expression, Information and Digital Rights Unit, Centre for Human Rights, University of Pretoria)
5. Nomhle Odette Kangootui (Secretary General, Southern Africa Broadcasting Association (SABA))
6. Dr Joel Konopo (Managing Partner at INK Center for Investigative Journalism – Botswana)
7. Prof Franz Kruger (NLA University College, Norway)
8. Justine Limpitlaw (Independent Electronic Communications Lawyer and Associate, LINK Centre, Wits University)
9. Dr Phathiswa Magopeni (Executive Director, The Press Council of South Africa)
10. Kgothatso Mampa (Lawyer and Legal Consultant)
11. Wade Maning (Executive Director, Defend our Democracy)
12. Prof Ellard Manjawira (Malawi University of Business and Applied Sciences – Malawi)
13. Prof Winston Mano (University of Westminster, UK)
14. Michael Markovitz (Media Leadership Think Tank, Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS))
15. Prof Viola Milton (University of South Africa)
16. Izak Minnaar (Media Expert, Trainer and Consultant)
17. Nonku Mkhize (Executive for General Management, Broadcast Media Africa)
18. Samkelo Mokhine (Executive Director, Freedom of Expression Institute (FXI))
19. Jeanette Morwane (Deputy Director General (DDG): Media and Content, DCDT)

20. Dr Tabani Moyo (Regional Secretariat Director, Media Institute of Southern Africa MISA – Zimbabwe)
21. Khadija Patel (Director, Alamina Strategy)
22. Ayabulela Poro (Senior Manager: Communications and Stakeholder Engagements, MDDA)
23. Shoeshoe Qhu (Chief Executive Officer (CEO), MDDA)
24. Luke Rous (Head of Broadcasting Subcommittee, Independent Producers Organisation (IPO))
25. Carol Seatlanyane (Communications and Administration Officer, SOS Coalition)
26. Thabo Shole-Mashao (Entrepreneur, Journalist and Radio & TV Host)
27. Hendrik Sittig (Director of the Media Programme for Sub-Saharan Africa, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS))
28. Uyanda Siyotula (National Coordinator, SOS Coalition)
29. Thandi Smith (Head of Programmes, Moxii Africa)
30. Charles Stuart (Entertainment and Media Leader, PwC South Africa)
31. Prof Ruth Teer-Tomaselli (University of KwaZulu Natal)
32. Karen Thorne (Station Manager, Cape Town TV)
33. Zoe Titus (Executive Director at NMT Foundation – Namibia)
34. Adv Pansy Tlakula (Chairperson of the Information Regulator and former Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information in Africa)
35. Gudani Tshikota (Project and Campaigns Coordinator, SOS Coalition)
36. Xolile Vundla (Chairperson of the SOS Coalition / Chairperson of Animation South Africa (ASA))
37. Prof Laeed Zaghlami (University of Algiers – Algeria)