

New index to improve media standards

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The Rwandan government last week unveiled its Media Development Barometer that will help measure and improve standards of local media.

The index is a home grown approach to assess local media performance against internationally accepted quality and professional standards. While it was launched by the government, Cabinet Affairs Minister Protais Musoni said that this initiative should in the end be spearheaded by the civil society.

"As has been our practice over time, when we notice an area worth investing in and no one seems to be doing so, the government takes the lead but with the intention of 'disinvesting' when private players finally come in," Musoni explained.

The barometer was funded by the United Nations Development Program through the Media High Council. "We are committed to helping in media development in Rwanda because of the immense role they play in the democratization process and ensuring transparency and good governance values which we respect as UNDP," said Auke Lootsma, the UNDP country director.

According to Transparency International Rwanda, which was contracted to do the pilot survey to come up with tools and test them for effectiveness, the barometer will help to know where Rwandan media currently stand, find the weak points and help improve them in partnership with stake holders. "The media barometer will ensure that press freedom is not only provided for in law but also practiced and respected," explained consultant researcher Caesar Handa.

Rwandan media have a chequered history especially following their negative role during the genocide against the Tutsis, in which they openly broadcast and printed messages that spurred the violence.

However, liberalization, advanced technologies and new laws have gradually seen growth in the industry in form of more media outlets and training institutions. There are currently 40 newspapers and magazines, 32 radio stations and one television station which is state-owned. There are also three journalism training schools.

The media barometer is expected to increase professionalism in the sector, which is still lacking. "Within five months, the results from a survey that will be conducted based on this barometer are expected and these will tell us how bad or good the situation currently is and guide us on appropriate measures to take and within two to three years, a positive change will be seen," remarked the executive secretary of the Media High Council, Emmanuel Mugisha.

Among the indicators will be the conduciveness of the regulation system to freedom of expression and media freedom, plurality

and diversity of the media with emphasis on a level economic playing field and transparency of media houses' ownership.

Others indicators will be aimed at finding out whether media in Rwanda are a platform for democratic discourse, the level of media development with emphasis on professional capacity building, the level of infrastructural capacity and media availability and access to information for citizens.

According to Transparency International's Caesar Handa, measuring the media by these international standards will ensure they compete not in a rats' race but in a lions' race as far as media development and freedom are concerned. "Because the problem with competing in the rat's race is that even when you win, you remain a rat," he said. "But when you race with the lions, even when you lose, you remain a lion."

Source: allAfrica.com

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