

MEDIA STATEMENT

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

MEDIA STATEMENT: MDDA COMMEMORATES WORLD PRESS FREEDOM DAY 2019

Johannesburg, South Africa, 3 May 2019. In celebration of World Press Freedom Day 2019 (3 May), the Media Development & Diversity Agency (MDDA) reaffirms its commitment to the growth and protection of a diverse and pluralistic media environment.

South Africa has several press freedom advocacy organizations that regularly challenge encroachments on media freedom. The courts and regulatory bodies have consistently reaffirmed freedom of the press and the right to information, handing down judgments and rulings in support of open and accountable government and media independence. However, there is increased concern about press freedom amid recent intimidation of journalists.

Those who had experienced intimidation of recent include Talk Radio 702 host and eNCA analyst Karima Brown, Daily Maverick investigative reporter Pauli van Wyk, Tiso Blackstar's associate editor Ranjeni Munusamy and News24's Editor-in-Chief Adriaan Basson. Such acts must be condemned as they do not only undermine the safety of journalists and their right to report to ensure that we have an engaged and informed citizenry but also undermine constitutionally guaranteed right to freedom of expression and of the press.

As we commemorate World Press Freedom Day, it is important that we also reflect on the important role community media plays, particularly community print media. Community media are crucial to ensuring media pluralism and freedom of expression and are an indicator of a healthy democratic society. As an alternative medium to public and commercial media, as well as social media, they are characterized by their accountability to, and participation of, the communities they serve. They have a greater focus on local issues of concern and facilitate public platforms for debate and discussion.

The MDDA has in its approximately 15 years of existence supported over 80 community and small commercial print projects to the value of approximately R70 million. With the contribution of MDDA support, grassroots publications have managed to attain circulation figures of 8 million copies per month; over 20 million readers per month and seen Black ownership of non-commercial publications sit at over 70 percent, with 21 percent of the publications being owned by women.

Despite these great strides, the sustainability of community print media remains a serious concern and a threat to media pluralism. The print media sector remains largely untransformed with undue concentration of media ownership in the hands of a few industry players, having a significant impact on media and transformation. Transformation however needs to be tackled from various fronts. Whilst policy planned at addressing transformation is a good start, it is not enough. How transformation is financed should also be a priority of the Government to ensure that transformation becomes a sustainable programme. As it stands the MDDA is tasked with the support of Community Print and Small Commercial Print projects, but financial constraints compromise the sustainability of community print projects and transformation. To aggravate the challenge, community media is still not receiving its share of advertising from Government despite commitments to spend 30% of the advertising budget on community media.

All these challenges pose a threat to ensuring that community print media remains an alternative voice for those who did not previously have access to information in a language of their choice.

It is important that there is renewed commitment to support community print media to ensure that community media journalists fill the shoes of many great journalist like Zwelakhe Sisulu, Aggrey Klaaste, Henry Nxumalo and Allister Sparks who continuously strived for quality journalism. This becomes more critical in an era of disinformation and misinformation which go against the basic tenets of ethical and quality reporting.

The MDDA is a statutory development agency, deriving its mandate, from Section 16 and 32 of the Constitution Act No. 108 of 1996, thereby providing for freedom of expression and access to information. As a partnership between the South African Government and major print and broadcasting companies, it promotes and assists in the development of community media and small commercial media in South Africa and the transformation of the media, by providing support (financial, capacity building, etc.) in terms of the MDDA Act No 14 of 2002. It also aims to raise public awareness with regard to media development and diversity issues, and to encourage media literacy and a culture of reading. For further information: www.mdda.org.za

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*Enquiries: Cheryl Langbridge 011 643 1100/082 493 6184
cheryl@mdda.org.za
Margaret Ndawonde 011 643 1100/082 785 6071
margaret@mdda.org.za*
