

Malawi's journos accreditation in limbo

By Gregory Gondwe: @Kalipochi

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A high flying accreditation project for Malawian journalists, launched three years ago by the Media Council of Malawi (MCM), now hangs in limbo due to financial constraints.

Chairperson of the MCM, reverend Patrick Semphere told Bizcommunity that the accreditation process commenced in earnest with national sensitization of media practitioners and stakeholders on the procedures of the process.



Patrick Semphere, chairperson of the Media Council of Malawi

"The challenge that faced this activity including that of other MCM programmes was that core funding which had been received from the British High Commission to support the formative three-year strategic plan did not get renewed at the expiry of the agreed period," said Semphere.

He acknowledged that this adversely affected MCM program delivery in 2010-2011 financial year, including the accreditation process.

"The funding challenge has also adversely affected our staffing situation as we have lost some of our personnel. While a membership subscription from institutional members has gone a long way towards meeting some of the operational costs it has not been sufficient to keep the secretariat running," he said.

Several journalists expressed their disappointment, and two years or so after they filled forms for accreditation nothing has been communicated to them from MCM.

"I am very frustrated because some of my colleagues that we applied with, who also had similar attributes qualifying us for the accreditation, were long endorsed and promptly given their press cards," said Henry Mhango, correspondent for Capital Radio.

Some of the journalists who were accredited have complained that even after their press cards expired there were no signs of any renewal because nothing seems to be moving at MCM.

Mhango says this is in contrast to the MCM policy on accreditation, as it will not be in control any more when journalists will step out of line in their course of duty.

"The failure for MCM to move totally defeats the purpose of self-regulation," he says.

MCM accreditation policy

According to MCM accreditation policy, the promotion of the status of journalism can only be achieved through the institutionalisation of self-regulation concept. It says journalists are wary of self-regulators since they have much evidence that outside intervention inevitably leads to forms of censorship.

"However, it is legitimate to question whether media self-regulation is a sufficient answer to public concern over standard of journalism. As in all forms of self-regulation, effectiveness depends upon the professional confidence of journalists, their knowledge of the issues, and the conditions in which they work," reads the policy in part.

It says the accreditation of journalists is a huge leap towards effective self-regulation as it will provide confidence and assurance to both the public and the media about sustained high professional standards among media practitioners.

"[It will also] help individual journalists uphold their integrity and give credibility to the media profession. The introduction of press cards therefore will open a new era of sustained professionalism and high standards in the practicing of journalism in Malawi," says the policy.

Initially, the accreditation policy was put in place in order to provide principles and guidelines agreed upon by the media in Malawi to clarify the steps that must be taken by a local or foreign journalist to get accredited in Malawi as a professional media practitioner or journalist.

The policy consists of a set of procedures for accreditation and a press card scheme that is issued to an accredited journalist. This is because accreditation of journalists by MCM as a self-regulatory professional body is one way of sustaining self-regulation.

"Journalists and training institutions should therefore be accredited in order to maintain high standards of professionalism. This would further bring order, credibility and integrity in the profession," reads the policy.

Journalists and the policy

MCM is the overall supervisor of the Accreditation Policy and Procedures and the Press Card Scheme rests with MCM's accreditation and membership committee as well as government's Ministry of Information and Civic Education.

It was agreed that journalists be accredited so that they identify themselves to news sources, authorities, the public etc as genuine and professionally accredited representative of the media.

The policy also cautions that the press cards should not be treated as a licence of a passport to free information regardless of how they get it.

The other reason why journalists in Malawi should be accredited is to ensure that not any journalist cover an event but only those who have been accredited upon presentation of a press card.

In Malawi all journalists, foreign journalists and all media training institutions can be accredited after producing evidence that becomes part of the accreditation process. For example, journalists who are employed can be accredited upon providing a completed application form from endorsed by the employer as well as copies of certificates of academic and professional qualifications.

All freelance journalists are required to fill a form that would demand that they submit some of their work published in the past six months at the time of application as well as a letter from institutions they have worked for. The policy says freelance journalists shall be questioned if they fail to produce any articles.

For a foreign journalist to be accredited, they would also be required to fill a form that requires them to produce a letter of verification through their embassies in collaboration with Malawi's Ministry of Information and Civic Education as well as the immigration department.

Requirements

All these journalists are also required to produce valid identification like passports, driving licence and the like as part of other requirements.

A minimum academic qualification of the Malawi School Certificate of Education (MSCE) and a professional certificate in journalism, communication or media studies from a recognized institution is another requirement.

For a media institution to be accredited it will have to fulfill the standards set by the council.

According to the policy, journalists are required to pay an accreditation fee to cover production and administrative costs of

the press card. The fee is decided by MCM National Governing Council from time to time on recommendation from the Membership and Accreditation Committee.

While for foreign journalists, they will have to part ways with US\$200 to get accreditation where US\$100 will be directed towards processing arrangement and while Information and Civic Education Ministry gets the other US\$100.

Upon completion of all such requirements, journalists are given the press card which expires after two years; while for foreign journalists since it is applied for a specific period they would be pursuing their assignment in Malawi it expires afterwards. The policy however gives special consideration for emergency accreditation in case of breaking news.

It says, however that a journalist can also lose his or her accreditation upon dying, ceasing to be a journalist, being incapacitated, or being found guilty of gross misconduct contrary to MCM code of ethics.

All these requirements were set in motion upon resuscitation of the MCM in 2007 through the establishment of key constitutional committees which included the Membership and Accreditation Committee, Ethics and Complaints Committee and the Finance and Audit Committee.

MCM remains idle

Wanangwa Mtawali, a correspondent for 101 FM Radio, claims that MCM has not lived up to what is expected of them and that with absence of resources, it has remained idle.

"But all this is besides the point, I have been sent back when covering other events because the council is just sitting on my application, worse still they are not telling me whether I qualified for the accreditation or not," says Mtawali.

He says when MCM was resuscitated, they used to be invited to a number of workshops in line with media duty and this has stopped and he is not sure where the institution is taking the media fraternity to.

"I don't remember when I last attended any event organised by MCM," said Mtawali.

Sempere disagrees with this, saying despite the fact that core funding for the operation of the secretariat has been a challenge, it is gratifying that MCM has continued to attract support towards specific program delivery activities.

"UNICEF has supported us with a three year support towards child-rights reporting (up to last year) and we recently signed another agreement towards similar initiatives," he says.

He says the National Aids Commission (NAC) has just approved a one-year grant agreement on HIV and AIDS programming support for media houses.

"Last year, we partnered with the Danish organisation (International Media Support-IMS) for training journalists in conflict-sensitive reporting. We also engaged with PANOS in a maternal health capacity building project for media houses," he said.

In addition, he says MCM last year signed a memorandum of understanding with the Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB) for rolling out anti-corruption capacity building programming with media houses.

"This gives us confidence that MCM has a unique role to play in the development of the media profession in our country and that once issues of core funding are dealt with, MCM will soar to greater heights," he says.

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