

Strengthening Media Freedom Through an Accessible Complaint Mechanism

The Challenge

Media self-regulation plays a vital role in safeguarding media freedom, a key pillar of democratic societies. By enabling the media sector to address ethical concerns independently and transparently, it promotes accountability without undue state interference. Central to this is an effective complaint-handling mechanism that provides an accessible and professional avenue for addressing concerns about media coverage, strengthening ethical journalism and public trust in the media.

To fulfil this role, the Ethiopian Media Council (EMC) was registered in 2019 to promote ethical, professional, and responsible media practices in Ethiopia. The Council represents more than 100 media organizations, publishers, broadcasters, community media, internet media, and professional associations operating in the country.

In 2021, the Council set up an independent Press Complaint Commission responsible for reviewing complaints against member media outlets and adjudicating alleged violations of professional and ethical standards.

However, due to low public awareness, limited visibility, and constraints in financial and human resources, the complaint mechanism remained largely unknown and inaccessible to the public. As a result, despite being fully operational, the Council did not receive or adjudicate a single media-related complaint over the past five years.

The Approach

To address these challenges, the Support to Good Governance (S2GG) Programme supported the Ethiopian Media Council in strengthening the accessibility, visibility, and effectiveness of its complaint-handling mechanism.

The process began with a comprehensive assessment of the Council's communication and outreach efforts, complaint

arbitration procedures, and institutional capacity. The assessment identified several barriers that prevented citizens from using the complaint mechanism. These included low visibility of the Council, a complex and inaccessible complaint submission process, limited geographic reach, language barriers, low levels of media and information literacy, and insufficient staffing to engage with the public effectively.

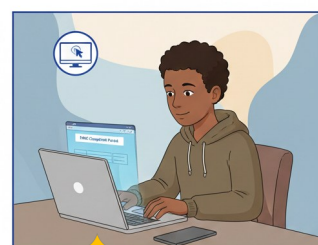
Based on these findings, a series of mutually reinforcing measures were implemented to improve public access to the Council's services, strengthen institutional capacity, and increase awareness of available complaint channels.

Making the Complaint Mechanism More Accessible

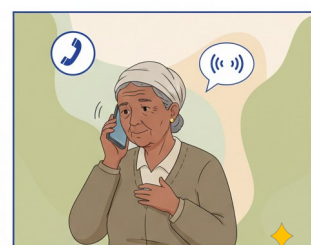
To improve access to the Council's services, the EMC's website was comprehensively redesigned and overhauled. It is now available in seven languages - making information accessible to a much broader segment of the population.

At the same time, the complaint submission process was simplified, digitalized, and fully integrated into the website. Citizens can now submit complaints through a user-friendly online form available in multiple languages. A dedicated complaints section provides clear information about the Council's mandate, explains what types of complaints can be submitted, and outlines the steps involved in the review process.

To further enhance accessibility for individuals with limited literacy skills or restricted access to online services, a toll-free hotline was established at the EMC. It provides a free and convenient channel for citizens to submit complaints, seek information, or clarify procedures.



ONLINE



TOLL-FREE HOTLINE



IN-PERSON



MAIL

About the Support to Good Governance in Ethiopia (S2GG) Programme

The S2GG programme is implemented by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) on behalf of the German Government. The programme aims to gear the Ethiopian governance system towards the transformation into a democratic and inclusive state based on the rule of law.



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Support to Good Governance
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Left: Registrar Officer documents complaints received via the hotline.

Right:
Examples of visibility materials produced to raise awareness of the public.

Strengthening Institutional Capacity

For many years, limited staffing had constrained the Council's ability to conduct outreach activities, register complaints, respond to inquiries, and communicate with the public. To address these gaps, support was provided for the recruitment of a Communication Specialist and an Office Registrar.

These new positions have strengthened the Council's operational capacity and enabled more systematic engagement with citizens and media stakeholders. The Communication Specialist has played a key role in expanding the Council's public outreach and digital presence, while the Registrar has improved administrative processes related to complaint registration and case management.

With the support of S2GG, the EMC is also providing additional trainings for Arbitration Panel members to strengthen their capacities to handle complaints professionally and effectively.

Raising Public Awareness

The S2GG Programme worked closely with the Council to develop a comprehensive set of communication and outreach materials designed to promote the institution and its complaint-handling mechanism. These included multilingual public service announcements for radio and television, brochures, social media templates, visual assets, and a brand guide that helped strengthen the Council's public identity and recognition.

The communication campaign achieved substantial outreach across the country. Multilingual public service announcements were broadcast on 32 community radio stations for four consecutive months. Following the initial campaign period, member stations continued airing messages free of charge for an additional three months, significantly extending their reach. Television broadcasts and ongoing digital communication activities have further amplified public awareness and engagement.



The Impacts and Results

Following the communication campaign and broader institutional strengthening measures, the Media Council received 26 media-related complaints - the first such complaints since its establishment - marking a significant milestone for an institution that had not received a single formal media complaint in more than five years. More importantly, the cases demonstrate that citizens are increasingly aware of the Council's services and are beginning to use the complaint mechanism as intended.

The significance of these results extends beyond the number of complaints received. The intervention has helped transform a largely unused mechanism into a functioning channel for media accountability and public engagement. Citizens now have clearer pathways for raising concerns, while media outlets face stronger incentives to adhere to professional and ethical standards.

In addition, the support by S2GG has generated a range of sustainable institutional assets that will continue to support the Council's work beyond the duration of the intervention. These include the multilingual website, the simplified complaint submission system, the toll-free hotline, communication materials, strengthened branding, and enhanced institutional capacity.

Together, these achievements have laid the foundation for a more accessible, responsive, and effective system of media self-regulation in Ethiopia. By enabling citizens to engage with media accountability mechanisms and strengthening the Council's ability to fulfil its mandate, it has promoted greater transparency, ethical journalism, and professional standards, and ultimately greater public trust in the media sector.

“The Ethiopian Media Council plays a vital role in fostering a media landscape that is fair, ethical, and accountable to the public. To truly serve citizens, the Council had to become more accessible, increasingly visible, and fully capable of effectively handling complaints.”

Mr. Amare Aregawi
Chair of the Executive Committee

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