

Honorary Award of the German Africa Foundation

Acceptance remarks by Gwen Lister

Berlin, 1 June 2022

Greetings to everyone, and firstly, a special word of thanks to the German Africa Foundation for honouring me with this award, and to its President, Uschi Eid, who I first met in Namibia in the 80s. Thank you, Uschi, for your personal commitment to the struggle for Namibian independence, and to the German Africa Foundation for its work in helping to broaden and better understanding about the African continent. Secondly, to the renowned journalist Robert von Lucius, my appreciation for your kind words about my work in journalism and press freedom advocacy over the decades. Another thank you to former German ambassador to Namibia, Christian Schlaga, for hosting me in Bonn this week. Last but not least, to Klaus Hess and Larissa Pflüger for your hard work and tireless efforts in trying over several months to get me here in Berlin to receive this award, but Covid intervened. Finally, I made it here, so thank you all.

Journalism and journalists over the world are in danger. Perhaps more so than ever before. So too is democracy in peril if we fail to ensure the sustainability and safety of both. Once I thought we'd made irreversible progress to this end in the 90s when the Cold War ended and African journalists led the way in helping to make significant gains in spreading the gospel of the importance of free and independent media and the importance of access to information on the continent and further afield. But now new dangers have emerged. These include life-threatening sustainability challenges, the rapid spread of disinformation exacerbated by the digital siege, the Covid pandemic, and not least of all the invasion of Ukraine where truth has already become a casualty of war, with the consequences felt far and wide. I accept this award in the hope that it will draw attention to the fact that the battle to save journalism must find resonance not only with citizens across the globe, but Governments too should commit more than mere lip service to ensure its survival. They must defend, promote and protect press freedom even when politicians themselves are on the receiving end of those who should neither be lapdogs nor attack dogs, but true watchdogs over the public interest. Ways and means must be found to increase support to media development, and condemn increased risks to the safety of those trying to fulfil this role in non-democratic and democratic societies worldwide. It is clear that where press freedom is at risk, other fundamental rights are in danger too. And while the media faces not only external but its own internal challenges - not least of all to win back the public trust by enhancing standards of ethics, accuracy and fairness - it is inevitable that democracies will die in darkness without good journalism which has, can and does change things for the better. As someone once said, "we need to protect the press so the press can protect democracy". Right now, it needs all the help that it can get.

So, thank you once again to the German Africa Foundation for recognizing journalism's essential role in building better societies.