

The Value of being an AOMA member

Dear colleagues across the African Continent and all over the world who are participating in this webinar, I am very pleased yet again to be among the speakers for this webinar organised by African Ombudsman Research Centre (AORC). My discussion today with you is on '***The value of being a member of the African Ombudsman Mediators Association (AOMA)***'.

Let me begin by appreciating the ombudsman institution in Africa as it has become a critical player in the governance agenda of Africa. Its role in advancing administrative justice, the rule of law, constitutional principles and human rights and widening access to justice and quality services has deepened governance on the continent by making it more meaningful to the people.

Considering the importance of the role of an Ombudsman, there was need for an institution which was to encourage the establishment, development and promotion of the concept of Ombudsman and African Ombudsman institutions. The Association was also to encourage the standards and principles of the Ombudsman in Africa and promote vigorous, fearless, effective, fair, impartial and efficient investigation of maladministration as enshrined in its constitution.

Colleagues, to discuss the value of being a member of AOMA, it is imperative for us to delve into the objectives of AOMA, trace the milestones which have been achieved by AOMA and derive from the aspirations of AOMA through its 2019 to 2023 Strategic Plan, themed "Re-positioning AOMA for 'The Africa we want'", which broadly sets out what AOMA aims to do and achieve over this period including re-building its own organisational framework, developing the capacity of its members for more effective delivery of their roles, and promoting the concept and practice of Ombudsmanship towards better governance of African countries.

As guided and underpinned by its constitution, AOMA has been instrumental in encouraging the establishment, development and promotion of African Ombudsman institutions as well as supporting and promoting the autonomy and independence of ombudsman offices. This has been done by advocating for development of Ombudsman offices in countries with no existence of such offices. For instance, in the recent past through the interventions of AOMA, there has been emergence of over 20 new national and specialty ombudsman offices across the continent.

AOMA has also continued advocating for legislative reforms which conforms to international standards and principles of ombudsman institutions. This is the case with Malawi, when AOMA advocated for the strengthening of the mandate of the Ombudsman in that country, the same can be said about Zambia when AOMA pushed for the relocation of the Ombudsman, moving from a building which was shared with other government institutions to an independent building and later to strengthening the mandate of the office from executive ombudsman to a parliamentary Ombudsman.

Colleagues, being an ombudsman mean being there to protect the rights of others and resolve their complaints of administrative injustice, but there is no one who is there to speak for the plight of an ombudsman when under attack. AOMA is a mechanism through which ombudspersons and their institutions find refuge in times of attack; this can be said about Mali when AOMA intervened when the ombudsman in that country was under attack.

However, under strategic pillar 5 in its 2019-2023 strategic plan, AOMA is working on creating a permanent framework for responding to crisis. This will enable AOMA to monitor and respond to crises that its members face, AOMA will be able to proactively provide support to its members when under attack by their government. This will also allow AOMA to vigorously hold its members accountable to the principles and ideals on which it stands for such that Ombudsmen can become more alert to upholding high standards in the conduct of their roles.

Deriving from its objectives, AOMA works to further mutual support, co-operation and joint activities through information sharing, training, and development of Ombudsman and staff. This is the reason behind the establishment of the African ombudsman Research Centre (AORC). Colleagues, you will agree with me that one of the key milestones of AOMA has been the establishment of AORC, a resolution from the first General Assembly of AOMA held in Johannesburg, South Africa in 2005.

Since its launch on 15 March 2011 at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in Durban, South Africa, the African Ombudsman Research Centre of AOMA has been a focal point for ombudsman offices in Africa. It represents an important platform for the exchange of knowledge and best practices and has certainly been of great value for the African ombudsman community.

The African Ombudsman Research Centre (AORC) has supported members of AOMA in the provision of information and training and by acting as a point of liaison with all participants involved in enhancing corporate governance in Africa while mainly focusing on Research that provides background information on issues and topics affecting Ombudsmen and Ombudsman trends and practices. The value and importance of AORC to AOMA members has been re-emphasized during the Covid-19 pandemic. You will agree with me that AORC has been at the center of bringing us all together through virtue means during these difficult times.

Since the declaration of COVID-19 outbreak as a global health emergency on March 11, 2020, AORC has been able to organise and coordinate various webinars and engagements. Starting from the training on report writing for African Ombudsman on the 14 August, 2020 to today's webinar, AORC has provided us an excellent opportunity to discuss various issues pertaining to the operations of ombudsman institutions across the continent through these facilitated discussions. AORC therefore, remains an instrumental part of AOMA and all members of AOMA will continue benefiting from its services as a documentation and training centre of the association.

AOMA has also held successful execution of a wide-ranging capacity development programmes for heads and officials of member ombudsman offices such as mediation training for Ombudsman operating in the African region, in March 2019 and other

trainings which AOMA has organised. AOMA has further continued to encourage mutual understanding and assistance by and between members, this has seen MOUs signed between ombudsman institutions and working together on several exchange programmes, this is in line with Goal five of AOMA's strategic plan, which aims at advance networking and professional engagement of offices and their functionaries.

AOMA is rebranding itself from just being a continental body of ombudsman institutions to a more robust and enhanced role of enabling its members become effective mediators in their own countries in situations of conflict. AOMA has so far signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the African Union Commission (AUC) as well as gained accreditation with observer status with permanent representation the African Union Commission. AOMA is lobbying within the regions to persuade regional organizations to support the enhanced role of the ombudsman as mediator in situations of tackling maladministration and armed conflict at the regional and continental level, the association is also working to advance to the status of an AU agency, these initiatives will enhance the profile of the association.

Through its objectives of promoting good governance including the observance of human and people's rights, transparency, administrative justice and the fight against corruption. AOMA has been able to adopt a framework of cooperation in promoting the strategic priorities of the African Union Commission in the realm of Democracy, Good Governance, Observation of Elections, and Peace and Security. AOMA has also received invitation to join various African Union peace making and preventive diplomacy initiatives and missions.

Further, in its effort to promote and enhance standards and principles which are generally accepted internationally as necessary for the proper and independent implementation of an Ombudsman's mandate, AOMA has adopted the 'OR Tambo Declaration for Minimum Standards for Ombudsman Institutions', aimed at promoting

common understanding, especially among governments and policy makers, the minimum standards for effective Ombudsman Institutions cooperation in Africa.

The interventions and milestones achieved by AOMA so far are a testimony that AOMA is the only organisation dedicated to advancing the development of ombudsman institutions in Africa. Therefore for any Ombudsperson or ombudsman institution in Africa, not being a member of AOMA is suicidal. As AOMA is doing everything possible to enable its members play a credible and more effective role towards the realization of Africa's collective aspirations, the Association needs the support of its members more than ever.