

COMMUNICATING PARLIAMENT – LET’S VISUALISE!

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**AT THE THIRTEENTH WORKSHOP OF PARLIAMENTARY
SCHOLARS AND PARLIAMENTARIANS, 29TH-30TH JULY, 2017
WROXTON COLLEGE, WROXTON, OXFORDSHIRE**

Abstract

Communicating about Parliament has been a key feature of the parliamentary reforms in the National Assembly of Zambia. Communicating about Parliament by means of Parliament Radio, various publications on the Zambia Parliament and Parliament website has served to inform people about what Parliament is all about under the auspices of transparency. Communicating about Parliament is important because the more people know about Parliament and what happens there the more opportunities they will explore as to how they can participate in what takes place at Parliament. Their ability to hold their representatives accountable will also be enhanced. However, despite these different channels of communicating about the Zambian Parliament, evidence has revealed that majority of the citizens do not know much about Parliament, its functions, operations and activities.

PLEASE LISTEN TO THESE WORDS

“Who should visit the constituency offices?”

“It’s the local leadership such as area councillors, village headmen or chairperson so that they talk to the MP on our behalf.”

“Have you ever visited Parliament?”

“I don’t feel comfortable visiting Parliament. It is very intimidating. There is too much security.”

“You mean Parliament is open for visitation by anyone, I thought its only politicians who are allowed to go there.”

“What is the name of the Speaker of Parliament?”

“The name of the speaker, you mean there is only one?” But I hear so many of them speaking.”

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Introduction

Parliament is the natural focus for the electorate to express its views (Connecting Parliament to the Citizens, 2011, p. 79). The more people know about Parliament and what happens there, the more they will explore opportunities as to how they can participate in the legislative arm of government. Their ability to hold their representatives accountable will also be enhanced. However, despite the different channels of communicating about the Zambian Parliament which have been used, evidence has revealed that majority of the citizens do not know much about Parliament and its functions. The opening words on page one of this paper has outlined some of the expressions which show that some people have a misunderstanding with regards to the operations, functions and activities of Parliament and the role of a Member of Parliament (MP).

The dulux visualizer lends the principle that people will not learn about Parliament by imagining what it's like when they are told about it but using the principle to 'visualise,' the visual aids will enable them to 'see' Parliament and get a well rounded understanding as to what happens there, thereby removing the mystery and misconceptions. It is therefore, time to move beyond the 'talk' and distribution of literature on Parliament to letting people 'see' Parliament by putting more emphasis on visualising Parliament.

This paper reveals that talking and hearing about Parliament has not resulted in increased knowledge about Parliament in the Zambian context. It therefore proposes different ways to visualise parliament as far as the Zambian situation is concerned. It is hoped that the insight provided into the Zambian situation will ignite the interest of other Parliaments as to how they could best interest their citizens to want to know more about Parliament with the hope of increasing their participation in the activities of the legislature.

The paper is divided into two main parts. The objective of the first part is to establish that talking and hearing about Parliament has not resulted in increased knowledge about Parliament in the Zambian context. As a build up to meeting this objective, the first part begins by outlining a brief profile of the National Assembly of Zambia and then proceeds to talk about how parliamentary reforms have provided an opportunity to communicate Parliament and the efforts that have been undertaken to communicate Parliament. The first part reaches its climax by revealing the results of the efforts to communicate Parliament. The objective of the second part which is to present recommendations is ably covered under the subheadings "visualising Parliament"; with one of the subheadings directly presenting recommendations. The paper closes with a brief conclusion.

Communicate and Visualise – understanding the concepts

Communicate – to express thoughts, feelings or information to someone else, for example by speaking or writing (Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners, 2002, p. 277). Therefore, communicating Parliament entails expressing thoughts or feelings to someone about Parliament, either by speaking or writing so that effective communication or interaction between the people's representatives (MPs) and the represented (constituents) can take place.

Visualise – to form a picture of someone or something in your mind (Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners, 2002, p. 1600). It entails use of visual aids to show people or to let them see what is being said. Visuals relieve monotony. Visual aids with titles are effective as they combine written text with visuals. They clarify and emphasise material ...increase its impact, helping to aid retention.... (Tynan et al, 2013). Visuals reward the communicator with increased visibility of his message. Examples of visual aids include charts, graphs,

photographs, computer graphics and physical objects (Wood J T, 2003, p. 392). They also include videos.

The National Assembly of Zambia – a brief Profile

Article 82 of the Constitution of the Republic of Zambia (Amendment) Act no.1 of 2016 provides for the structure and membership of the National Assembly of Zambia. The National Assembly of Zambia comprises one hundred and fifty six (156) members directly elected on the basis of a simple majority vote under the first-past the-post system plus eight (08) nominated members. In addition, there is the Vice President who is the Leader of Government Business in the House, the Speaker and his two deputies. The two deputies are referred to as First Deputy Speaker and Second Deputy Speaker, respectively, in no order of importance; the only difference being in how they each assume their position. The First Deputy Speaker like the Speaker is elected from among persons who are qualified to be elected as Members of Parliament, but are not Members of Parliament. The Second Deputy Speaker is elected by Members of Parliament from among their number.

The 156 elected members represent the 156 constituencies in the country, 128 of which are classified as rural and 28 as urban. As of 2015, rural constituencies comprised a population of 8,789, 529 and urban ones, 6,235,786, bringing the total population of Zambia to 15,023,315 (Central Statistical Office, 2014, p.3 & p.4)

Parliamentary Reforms – An Opportunity to Communicate

Strong and sustained commitment on the part of the National Assembly and its cooperating partners catapulted the implementation of parliamentary reforms in early 2002 to greater heights. Results of the reforms programme began to be

visible thereafter and some of the limitations of the institution in ensuring effective oversight of the Executive were addressed in five (05) areas:

- i. The Committee System;
- ii. The legislative process;
- iii. The Administration of the National Assembly;
- iv. Support services to Parliament and its Members; and
- v. The Member-Constituency Relations.

(National Assembly of Zambia, 2000, p.3)

Some of the themes which have resonated in the implementation of the parliamentary reforms include, "taking Parliament closer to the people," "bringing Parliament closer to you" and "opening up Parliament." The underlying principle has been that it does Parliament no good to make changes and improve things in its work of oversight and holding the government accountable if people are not part of this process. Therefore, the parliamentary reforms have provided a platform on which Parliament can communicate its activities and educate people on how they can get involved in the work and operations of Parliament. This has been done mostly under the Member Constituency Relations component of the reforms programme which covers the aspect of parliamentary communications and outreach. The rationale is that communications and outreach efforts are effective and important ways of both disseminating and receiving information (National Assembly of Zambia, 2000, p. 4). Therefore, parliamentary reforms have provided the National Assembly of Zambia a context within which to explore different avenues of reaching out to the public so that they can communicate Parliament effectively.

Efforts at Communicating Parliament

Educating citizens is an enabler, building confidence and empowering them with knowledge of how and when they can communicate their views to Parliament (Hansard Society, 2011, p. 43). The National Assembly of Zambia has to this effect, published a number of publications on the structure and work of Parliament. However, it has been observed that most of this material is text-heavy and might not be user friendly to majority of ordinary citizens especially those with limited school education as indicated by the fact that only 36 percent of the population has at least completed secondary (upper) school education (ZICTA, 2015, p.2). It should be noted that despite most people in Zambia not completing upper secondary school, the literacy level in the country stands at 63 per cent as of 2015 slightly lower than sub-Saharan African average adult literacy rate of 64 per cent (Zambia Education Policy Review, 2016, p. 79). In this case, simplified text combined with visuals might be more effective.

The text heavy literature is usually taken from the National Assembly and constituency offices by school going pupils or those in college who are usually motivated by their school curriculum or projects to read and research information on Parliament. Bearing in mind the poor reading culture in Zambia, it is difficult to determine how much of this literature is actually read by those who collect it. It has been observed that education authorities have a lot of work to do to reverse the poor reading culture in the schools (Zambia Daily Mail newspaper, May 2017). The same newspaper article states that the Minister of General Education acknowledged this problem and has called upon school authorities to revamp libraries and to inculcate the reading culture in pupils starting from pre and primary school all the way up to upper secondary school (Zambia Daily Mail, 2017).

The examples below highlight some of the effort on the part of the National Assembly of Zambia to communicate its work and activities.

Communication Strategy – the institution has had two communication strategies; the first one from 2011 to 2015 and the second one, currently active, 2017 to 2021. The communication strategies were spurred on by the parliamentary reforms which as alluded to earlier put emphasis on opening up Parliament and taking it closer to the people. An observation was made that people did not know much about Parliament or as much as they should to enable them participate in its activities not because Parliament was not fulfilling its mandate but because it was not actively making regular and deliberate efforts to tell people about what it was doing. Therefore, it was viewed as a 'closed' institution unconcerned about engaging with citizens. It was envisaged that the communication strategies would work to rectify this anomaly by championing Parliament's mandate through informing people about its operations, activities and functions. Parliament would continue to work but it would at the same time tell people about its work in a well thought out manner.

The 2011-2015 Communication Strategy attempted to reach out to all stakeholders but it was to a large extent constrained by limited financial resources and was crowded with too many activities. The 2017-2021 Communication Strategy has been carefully crafted taking into consideration the shortcomings of its predecessor.

Publications - publications on the National Assembly of Zambia have been written either by staff within the institution or in liaison with external people. These have included brochures, abstracts, books and leaflets. The publications describe the legislative process, the committee system, motions, parliamentary questions, petitions, among many others. These publications are usually taken to the constituencies by the area MPs when they travel to their constituencies.

Members of the public access them when they tour Parliament, attend road shows or at National Assembly stands whenever the National Assembly participates in such events. Parliamentary publications ran out very quickly due to demand from people who tour parliament, mostly school pupils.

Parliament Radio & Community Radio stations – Parliament Radio reaches all the ten (10) provincial centres in the country. It has proved to be a convenient tool to communicate Parliament to the people. Parliamentary debates are broadcast live and there are other programmes to help people get a better understanding of what happens in the chamber and the work that parliamentarians do. Committee meetings are also aired on Parliament Radio, with the popular one being the Public Accounts Committee meetings which are usually aired live. Indeed, Parliament Radio is doing its best in ‘‘taking Parliament closer to people.’’ Sometimes Parliament Radio staff accompanies parliamentary committees on site visits and tours so that they can produce radio programmes on the committee tours.

Owing to the fact that Parliament Radio does not reach all areas of the country, agreements have been entered into with eighteen (18) community radio stations in all the ten (10) provinces in order to increase the coverage area. The community radio stations are helping to expand Parliament's reach in disseminating information to the public on the operations, functions and activities of the National Assembly (Report on the Mapping Exercise of Community Radio Stations, 2017, p.1). There are plans to add eight (08) more community radio stations to further expand the coverage. Community radio stations serve the advantage of communicating Parliament in local languages unique to the area being covered.

Road Shows – these events have proved popular because they contain an element of entertainment in form of music and dance. Presentations and talks

on the operations and activities of Parliament by staff from the National Assembly and the area Member of Parliament are interspersed with music and dance. The entertainment is usually provided by a local musician with his dancers. This makes learning about Parliament fun and exciting. To maintain the momentum and the interest of people, free items such as caps, pens, t-shirts and others are given during interactive sessions. So far, three (03) road shows have been held in some of the far-flung corners of the country since the beginning of the year. Previously, road shows were confined mostly to urban areas or were held when there was an event such as the commemoration of the International Day of Democracy (IDD). It is a small start, but the goal is to ensure that these small steps culminate into gigantic ones and eventually all the constituencies get to have the ‘‘road show experience’’.

Parliament Television – when the parliamentary reforms commenced in 2002, effort was made to pilot Parliament TV in 2004 by broadcasting parliamentary debates live on the national television channel for an hour. This initiative was discontinued due to the astronomical costs associated with carrying out the broadcasting. However, televising of live parliamentary debates resumed in 2016 on the public national television channel on a pilot basis in Lusaka. The goal is to establish a Parliament Television station able to broadcast to most parts of the country whilst at the same time maintaining both Parliament Radio and TV.

Communicating Parliament – Tracing the Results

It is evident that the National Assembly of Zambia has been making great strides in communicating Parliament. The publications are available, some road shows have been taking place and Parliament Radio is working at reaching out to the citizens and dispensing information on the operations, activities and functions of the National Assembly. What has been the result of all this effort? The results are

revealing and gives reason on the need to put emphasise on visualisation when communicating Parliament. The impact of previous efforts on communicating Parliament can be gleaned from responses given by people when asked questions to determine their understanding of the functions and operations of Parliament.

During a 2013 survey of 2,965 households in 30 constituencies out of the 150 constituencies (before the amendment of the Republican Constitution in 2016, the previous Constitution provided for 150 constituencies) conducted, to among other things, determine the public's knowledge about Parliament, it was discovered that 78.0 percent of the households claimed that they understood the role of the MP. However, further interrogation revealed that the households did not properly understand the constitutionally-defined roles or work of MPs, nor did the majority (55.2 per cent) understand the role of the National Assembly (Chigunta, F et al, 2014, p. 7). Since that time, people's limited knowledge of the functions of Parliament still remains a challenge as evidenced in other surveys. Those who tend to have some knowledge of Parliament and what it does normally cite law making as the function of Parliament. It has been shown that the other functions of Parliament are not that well known.

In 2016, the function of Parliament mentioned by the majority (53 percent) of the 500 visitors to the National Assembly of Zambia stand at a six (06) day national exhibition in Lusaka was law making. Only 18.5 percent of the people interviewed at the stand mentioned more than one function of Parliament. It should be noted that majority of visitors to the stand were from within Lusaka and nearby towns.

The level of knowledge about the functions of the National Assembly is very encouraging. However, what needs to be done is to help majority of people appreciate that Parliament has more than law making as its function. It would

be impressive if the 53 % of respondents who exclusively mentioned law making as the function of Parliament could add the other functions of Parliament to their knowledge. It should be noted that despite more than half of the respondents knowing at least one function of Parliament, this did not motivate them to visit the constituency offices or Parliament. It can be deduced that despite having knowledge of the functions of Parliament, the respondents did not know or understand how they fitted into the legislative process resulting in them not visiting the constituency offices and Parliament. This perspective is supported by the fact that 23% of respondents indicated that they don't visit Parliament because they *'didn't know that it was open to the public'*.

The other reasons given for not visiting Parliament included: *'Lack of information about the National Assembly of Zambia'* (11%); *'Lack of time'* (15%); *'It's a restricted area with high security and intimidation at the gate'* (17%). These reasons highlight a common thread which shows that people feel detached to what is happening at Parliament and that they are intimidated by the set up of Parliament, both its physical structure and its procedures. This could also explain why despite 72 percent of the visitors to the stand knowing the physical location of Parliament, only 36 percent had actually been there.

It was also revealing that the highest number of visitors to the stand who knew one function and at least two functions of the National Assembly had a university degree and above (35 and 38 percent, respectively). This supports the evidence from the constituency offices that most people who go to get literature on Parliament are those who are in school or colleges meaning that the higher the level of education, the more interest a person is likely to have in reading on Parliament making the written text more appealing to the educated or those in school. It's also noteworthy that when conducting a road show in one of the rural constituencies in June, 2017, it was discovered that majority (55.4 percent) of those who attended the road show had primary school level of

education followed by 37.5 percent of those with secondary school education. This is interesting considering that during the pre road show survey; majority (51.4 percent) of respondents had secondary school education whilst 31.9 percent had primary school education.

It could be concluded therefore, that road shows which have elements of entertainment when educating about Parliament could appeal more to those with lower levels of education whilst communicating about Parliament using the written text could appeal more to those with secondary school and higher levels of education. This also explains why 95.7 percent of those who visited the exhibition stand had an education level of secondary school and higher and eagerly took literature from the stand.

The 2013 survey (Chigunta, F et al) revealed that people's awareness of the constituency office was low. When asked to name the key role of the constituency office, only 12 percent gave the correct answer; a meeting place for constituents and the area MP. Likewise, the number of people who had visited their constituency office was also low; only 11.4 percent had visited the office despite 49.9 percent being aware of the existence of the constituency office. In a similar vein, the 2016 survey conducted at the National Assembly exhibition stand at the six (06) days national exhibition in Lusaka revealed that only about fifteen (15%) percent of the respondents had been to a constituency office. This is a startling revelation bearing in mind that these offices have been in existence for an average of nine (09) years. This low visitation of the constituency offices, ties very well with the revelation that few people (41%) know about the locations of the offices.

The survey done prior to the June 2017 road show in the rural constituency alluded to earlier revealed that 52.8 percent of the respondents indicated that they knew of the existence of the constituency office but only 6.9 percent had

been there. Regarding those interviewed after the road show, only 20.4 percent had made effort to visit the office out of the 66.1 percent who knew the location of the constituency office.

Regarding Parliament Radio and Television, responses which emerged from the 2016 survey at the National Assembly exhibition stand showed that the listenership (Parliament Radio, 75.1%) and viewership (Parliament Television, 41%) of parliamentary proceedings is an indication that people do want to know about Parliament and to get involved in its activities. This also shows that people in Lusaka, the physical location of Parliament are taking time to listen to Parliament Radio and watch Parliament TV.

The survey also revealed that younger people (132 of those aged 30 years and below) are less likely to listen to Parliament Radio than older people (248 of those aged between 31 and above). The findings revealed that the older the age of a person, the more likely they are to listen to Parliament Radio and watch parliamentary debates. This is not surprising given the poor reading culture of young people in Zambia who prefer social media and watching movies (Zambia Daily Mail, May 2017).

Those who are accessing information on Parliament either through reading, listening to Parliament Radio, watching Parliament Television and have some knowledge on the functions and activities of Parliament as well as those who are not reading and therefore have little information on Parliament need to be reached in a such way that they can be motivated to engage with Parliament and to visit the constituency offices. Visualising Parliament can assist both groups to have the National Assembly embedded on their minds, to be informed with the aim of understanding and remembering the operations and activities of Parliament. To those who already know, it reinforces and expands their knowledge and understanding. To those who know little or nothing, it opens up

a whole new world into the institution of Parliament, its structure, activities and operations with the aim of helping them appreciate their role in the legislative arm of government.

Visualising Parliament – ‘Speaking’ to the mind through the Eyes

What people see with their eyes will leave a lasting impression on their minds. Especially is this applicable in the Zambian situation where if given a choice, people are more likely to watch something than to read about it. This is also given the fact that news about Parliament is not perceived to be as entertaining or interesting as other types of news. Therefore, there is need to visualise Parliament in innovative ways such as through dramatisation of parliamentary activities. By visualising Parliament, even citizens who might not have an opportunity to physically visit Parliament will be able to identify with Parliament with the possibility of interacting meaningfully with their representatives on parliamentary matters. Seeing Parliament in pictures either still or motion will help to demystify this legislative arm of government.

Visualising Parliament – Recommendations

The recommendations for visualising Parliament include ideas which can enable citizens ‘see’ themselves at Parliament, taking part in the activities of the National Assembly, being inside the Parliament chamber, in the committee rooms or participating in a parliamentary committee public hearing in the constituency. They also include suggestions which could facilitate actual physical visits to Parliament buildings to give citizens the opportunity to visualise themselves in the legislative process. Some of the recommendations pinpoint directly to the National Assembly of Zambia as a way of sharing what could be applicable within the Zambian context, others are general. However, regardless

of the context, the recommendations could be reflected upon and if found suitable could be modified to suit a local situation.

1. A simple video cartoon and comic strip depicting the activities, functions and operations of Parliament could visualise Parliament for the many young ones who visit Parliament as part of school delegations as well as those who accompany their parents to the National Assembly of Zambia stands at national and district exhibitions.

2. An increase in the number of publications with fewer text combined with pictures either photographs or drawings. Currently, a publication entitled, *“Parliament and the People – A Simplified Guide to the Work of Parliament,”* which features drawings with fewer written text is the most popular publication among visitors to the National Assembly and constituency offices. This is because most readers find it easy to understand due to its simplicity and fewer written text with plenty of pictures depicting the functions of Parliament. This could be extended to posters which could feature drawings or photograph type pictures which can communicate Parliament in a captivating visual way.

3. LCD television screens and satellite television decoders could be purchased for constituency offices so that constituents could watch big events such as the official opening of Parliament, the Budget Address by the Minister of Finance as well as the debates which are televised on Parliament Television. This will attract more people to the constituency offices and help them get a visual understanding of Parliament and what happens there. Constituents will be able to appreciate the link between Parliament and their constituency offices as well as the role their MPs perform in Parliament. A clear visual understanding of Parliament and its functions will give greater meaning to the constituency offices.

4. Programmes for young people on Parliament Radio and Television which appeal to them should be devised. This could include commemorating the International Children's Day of Broadcasting (ICDB). The ICDB was launched by UNICEF in 1991 in order to encourage broadcasters worldwide to create awareness for children issues. It is celebrated every second Sunday of every December. It is a day when broadcasters "Tune in to Kids" to air quality programmes for and about children.

5. There is need for further engagement of young people which could eventually lead them to be interested in different aspects of parliamentary activities, including listening to Parliament Radio and watching Parliament Television. The National Assembly could come up with interesting awards for young people who visit their stand at national exhibitions. These awards/prizes could include:

- a. a visit to Parliament as Speaker's Guest to watch debates from the Speaker's Gallery;
- b. a slot on the Youth Parliament as MP; and
- c. a luncheon with the Presiding Officers for three young people.

The rationale is to help young people learn about Parliament in a non-traditional way, a 'visualised' way; away from the classroom, through interaction with the Presiding Officers, participation in Youth Parliament and watching debates in the Chamber.

6. Regular exhibitions at district and national exhibitions. Citizens need to see Parliament out there like they at times see government departments and ministries. During the national exhibition that the National Assembly of Zambia participated in last year, 2016, people were surprised and kept asking why the institution had never exhibited before as it was the first time the institution was

doing so. They expressed hope that the National Assembly would keep exhibiting at the national exhibition for agriculture and commercial entities every year. The Republican President when touring stands at the national exhibition took time to visit the National Assembly stand and encouraged the members of staff that were at the stand to continue exhibiting every year.

7. Use of social media such as twitter, whatsapp or facebook can afford parliamentarians a platform to personalise interaction with their constituents and help them keep track of how they are representing them whilst at Parliament even when they are not in the constituency. Carefully planned, messages posted on these digital tools can enable constituents visualise how their representatives are working at Parliament. Digital tools will especially appeal to young people. With careful planning and by means of well thought out messages, Parliaments can also use social media to communicate their activities and functions. Parliaments can post clips of videos on YouTube and upload photos and information on their facebook pages. Websites have proved to be more popular among Parliaments than social media platforms, this could be because the social media operate in their own space and according to their own set of rules, beyond the influence or control of Parliaments (World e-parliament report, 2016).

8. Television documentaries on activities of Parliament and parliamentarians. A number of people know law making as one of the functions of Parliament. Documentaries on how the legislative process takes place and the impact of some of the laws passed in Parliament could go a long way in assisting people understand how the laws that are passed affect them and how they can get involved in ensuring that the laws to be passed address their needs. Documentaries can show that parliamentary business goes beyond the 'talk' or the debates to doing actual work on the ground where people are through site

visits or parliamentary committee tours in ensuring that the Executive arm of government is fulfilling its mandate to the people.

9. Dramatising parliamentary activities through feature films which can build appreciation for parliamentary work.

CONCLUSION

There are a number of opportunities for communicating Parliament. However, these should be coupled with visualising Parliament. It's important to move beyond just talking about Parliament to 'showing' people Parliament. This is because despite the many books and other pieces of literature which has been written on the National Assembly of Zambia, the fact still remains that majority of people do not know much about Parliament, its activities, operations and functions. This could be the case in other jurisdictions as well. However, the surveys and research conducted has shown that there is interest from the population to want to learn more about Parliament. It is hoped that providing citizens with opportunities to visualise Parliament might satisfy this interest to the extent that it will motivate them to actively engage with their representatives both in their constituencies and at the National Assembly.

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