STRENGTHENING LINKS BETWEEN PARLIAMENTS AND CITIZENS

Input from the Parliament of Zimbabwe
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QUESTION 1

What have been the priority actions in your parliament to strengthen links with citizens? What were the lessons learned?

Parliament of Zimbabwe has since 1995 been implementing Parliamentary reforms to strengthen the institution's capacity to execute its constitutional mandate. The reforms are partly in response to criticisms form the public that Parliament was ineffective in holding the Executive to account in the manner in which it formulates and implements public policy and programmes. There was also a perception that Parliament was an institution that was inaccessible was and, therefore, closed to, and removed from, the public. To strengthen links with citizens, Parliament of Zimbabwe has been pursuing the following;

1.   Public hearings

Democratic governance entails that citizens must be consulted on the development of legislation and policies that have a bearing on their livelihoods. To this effect, Parliament conducts public hearings on legislation before Parliament and topical issues that may be of interest to both Members of Parliament and the public. Parliament has been holding public hearings on legislation since 2001 to get the views of the public on legislation. Public hearings Guidelines have since been developed to guide the conduct of public hearings and ensure that they are conducted in an objective, non-partisan and professional manner which safeguards the integrity of Parliament. This year, 8 public hearings which were provincially based were conducted on the Public Orders and Security Amendment Bill, (a Private Member's Bill, and the Indeginisation regulations.

2.   Opening up Committee meetings to the public

All committee meetings, save for deliberative meetings which are closed sessions, are open to members of the public, including the press. The schedule of committee meetings is circulated on the Internet well in advance to notify all interested parties of the committee meetings, the subject matter to be discussed and the persons to appear as witnesses. Civic society organizations and commerce and industry also have access to committees to discuss issues important to them. Members of civic society and the

general public are frequently given an opportunity to engage Committees on issues affecting them.

3.   Relaxing the dress code for the public attending sessions of parliament
The reform process culminated in the relaxing of the dress code to enable citizens to observe parliamentary sessions and proceedings.

4.   Parliament Constituency Information Centres (PCICs)
Parliament opened constituency based PCICs to enhance interaction between MPs and citizens. The PCICs provide an avenue in the constituencies for MPs and the electorate to meet and discuss constituency issues. PCICs also act as sources of information on Parliament as various Parliamentary publications like the hansard and Votes and Proceedings can accessed from there. Up to 120 PCICs were active during the Sixth Parliament.

5.   Showcasing Parliament at fairs and shows
Parliament of Zimbabwe takes part at International and national fairs, the objective being to take 'Parliament to the people'. This year, Parliament exhibited at the Zimbabwe International Trade Fair and is also taking part other provincial based fairs or shows.

6.   Press Programs
Parliament frequently convenes meetings and workshops with reporters, the principal objective being to enhance and promote objective parliamentary reporting. A multi-stakeholder workshop was held in Bulawayo where reporters from the major news organizations were represented.

7.   Outreach to Tertiary Institutions, schools and communities

Every year Parliament conducts outreach programmes to tertiary institutions, schools and communities as part of its public education programme. These programmes are meant to educate the public on the mandate and functions of Parliament and how the public can be involved in the work of Parliament and its Committees.

LESSONS LEARNT
- There is need to use both English and vernacular languages in communicating parliamentary messages as some citizens do not understand English

- There is need to convene a workshop for News Editors as these determine content of newspapers and ultimately what stories are covered. This would enhance coverage of Parliamentary issues.
- There is need to frequently update literature in the PCICs as most of it is outdated.
- There is need to frequently update Parliament Website

QUESTIONS 2

Has parliament faced situations that have had a negative impact on public opinion? How did they respond to them?

In executing its constitutional mandate of *'...making laws for peace, orders and good government'*, Parliament has indeed faced challenges that have had a negative impact on public opinion. These can be summarized as follows; -

1. The fast tracking of some bills has created a perception, among some members of the public, that Parliament was simply rubberstamping executive policies and programs without affording members time to consult and effectively debate. As much as possible Parliament tries to follow the established procedure relating to stages of bills in order to give members enough time to consult and debate legislation before Parliament.

2. Failure by some Ministers to respond to Committee reports and to respond timeously members' questions creates the impression, within the public, that Ministers do not take Parliament seriously. The Presiding Officers and the Liaison and Coordination Committee have held meetings with members of Cabinet to highlight to them their obligations to Parliament.

3. Recently there was an element of failure by some members of Cabinet to cooperate with Committee enquiries. This has the tendency of eroding the public's view of Parliament and Executive attitude to Parliament. Parliament has to its credit stood its ground reminding the Executive on the need to respect the principle of separation of powers and let Parliament execute its mandate without hindrance.