Communicating With Policymakers In Zambia About Development
A Guide For The International Development Community

**Analysis of In-Depth Interviews with Policy Actors**

**Daily information gathering routine**

Policy actors were asked to describe their typical daily information gathering routine. While specific habits varied, overall trends were remarkably similar. This composite profile highlights the most common daily routines.

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<thead>
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<th>AM</th>
<th>PM</th>
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<tr>
<td>6:30</td>
<td>12:30</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wake up and start organizing day’s agenda. Switch on the radio and follow morning news on Radio Phoenix and ZNBC radio.</td>
<td>Working lunch with a Sector Advisory Group.</td>
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<td>7:30</td>
<td>2:00</td>
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<td>Have breakfast and watch BBC to get up to date with international news.</td>
<td>Formal briefing by German aid implementation organization GTZ.</td>
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<td>8:00-8:30</td>
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<td>Leave the house and commute to work: listen to the repeat of top stories on the radio while driving. Stop on the way to buy <em>The Post, The Times of Zambia and Zambia Daily Mail</em>.</td>
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<td>9:00-12:00</td>
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<td>Browse through newspapers, reply to emails and read through reports from the Central Statistical Office. Conduct internal management meetings and meetings with other agencies, such as the planning director of the Zambia Development Agency to discuss issues relevant to the policy actor’s sector of activity.</td>
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### Gathering information for policy-making purposes

Policy actors in Zambia use a broad range of sources to keep up to date with news and current events and to gather information that shapes their decision-making. Despite some differences in individual sources, general daily information-gathering routines among all interviewees are largely similar and can be summarized as follows:

- Traditional media, particularly radio, are a core source of general news and information on current events, but are not considered crucial for policy-relevant information.
- Formal reports prepared by government departments and agencies, global development partners as well as civil society organizations emerged as the central—and the most trusted—source for policy-relevant information across a broad range of policy interests.
- Internet is used on a daily basis, particularly for sourcing background policy-relevant information. However, policy actors are cautious about the reliability of materials obtained via the internet and often cross-check them with official sources.
- Mobile phones have become an indispensable tool, making two-way policy communication between policy actors and their colleagues within and between policy organizations faster and more cost-efficient. Nevertheless, their use is largely limited to mobile voice-calls and SMS, while more advanced functions, such as internet or email access, for now remain an exception.

It’s not news that makes us decide what to do about our policy. The ‘news’ for decision making in my work I get from credible [government] sources or out of research which is done by the World Bank or the IMF or FAO. [Policy actor working on development issues]
The role of traditional media

While often seen as too event-driven, too focused on political issues and insufficiently interested in reporting on development policies, Zambian policy actors consider “traditional” media (that is, TV, radio and print) to be an indispensable source of general news and information on current events. Moreover, traditional media, particularly radio and newspapers, are also essential for monitoring public opinion and obtaining citizens’ feedback on the effectiveness of specific government policies and their shortcomings.

Most policy actors consume radio, newspapers and television on a daily basis; however, radio is considered their primary source and is mainly listened to early in the morning and while driving to work. Privately owned Radio Phoenix, state-run ZNBC radio and the BBC were some of the most frequently mentioned radio stations.

This is largely in line with the popular view, which also considers radio their key source:

![Daily Use of and Trust in Media Sources: The Popular View](https://example.com/diagram)

Newspapers also play an important role and all three Zambian dailies—state-owned Zambia Daily Mail and Times of Zambia and privately-run The Post—are standard mid-morning reading for most policy actors. They rarely mentioned international publications as sources of news and information on current events.

Television appears to be somewhat less important for policy actors’ daily news-gathering activities than radio and newspapers, possibly because TV news rarely fits into the policy actors’ busy daily agendas.

Nevertheless, those policy actors who do regularly follow TV coverage say they pay particular attention to international TV networks. Zambian national broadcaster ZNBC is still considered an essential TV information source, but interviewees also watch a variety of international TV channels, such as the BBC, CNN, Sky News, SABC and Al Jazeera.
International news providers are valued for their quality coverage and in-depth reporting on development issues, which are often covered only superficially by the domestic media. Nevertheless, one policy actor observed that Zambian outlets, especially community media, are able to convey and articulate certain issues that directly affect local citizens—for example, environmental challenges—better than national or international media.

Quality of Zambian media coverage

Policy actors generally perceive Zambian media as event driven, dominated by politics and frequently sensationalist. State-owned media in particular are often considered biased. For example, several interviewees said they can rely on the state-owned media to provide more favorable coverage of government activities than do the private media. One policy maker even suggested that private media are occasionally banned from attending certain events (such as launches of specific programs) to avoid negative publicity.

Furthermore, the lack of regular, detailed and analytical coverage on policy issues emerged as another frustration of interviewees with Zambian media.

However, some policy actors acknowledge that the quantity of policy-related media coverage has risen over the past few years. Some newspapers now also regularly publish sections dedicated to specific issues such as the environment and gender. Even so, most policy actors are troubled by the lack of quality in reporting on policy issues and often see Zambian journalists as unprofessional and lacking expert knowledge in the areas they cover.

This is especially the case when comparisons are made between Zambian media and the international networks, such as BBC and CNN, where policy issues are covered by experts who have undergone specialized training, rather than by general reporters. As one interviewee explained:

“If you get someone on BBC, they will pick someone who is a specialist and you are able to have a conversation with them; you are able to understand them, they are able to articulate. But if you sit with our journalists, I am not so sure how many you can sit with and have a conversation where you understand each other.” [Government official working on development issues]

According to the interviewees, insufficient training and expertise generates poorly researched reporting that may misinform the public and limit the impact of traditional media on policy making.

Furthermore, policy actors contend that the lack of specialist knowledge among journalists means the media tend to shy away from issues of a more technical or abstract nature, such as the impact of climate change or adoption of new technologies. As several policy actors observed, policy-related media coverage usually focuses on issues affecting the population more directly, while other more intangible but equally important issues are often neglected. For example, environmental topics such as sanitation, waste management and water quality, where media are able to illustrate reporting with local examples, receive
considerably more media space than broader issues such as climate change and chemicals management. Other neglected issues mentioned were domestic investment and the fight against corruption.

The role of new technologies

Internet and email

New technologies, particularly the internet, are rapidly transforming the way in which Zambian policy actors gather and use work-related information. Although traditional media remain the key channel for information on current events, the internet is becoming an invaluable daily source for background policy information, supplementing the input received through official channels.

One government official described the impact of new technologies on his information-gathering routine:

“I would say the most significant change would be the internet, because now I can cross reference any information I get from experts. For example, I can quickly look for best practices or benchmark what we are talking about, I can email a colleague with whom I have interacted and ask him, ‘Do you have information on this and this,’ and he can send me those documents on short notice. So I would say the internet has been the most significant influence on the way we obtain information.” [Government official working on trade issues]

Nevertheless, multiple interviewees voiced skepticism about the accuracy and reliability of information acquired via the internet, and for most it is a common practice to verify and cross-check collected material with other sources they deem reliable. These sources might include other government organizations, their colleagues within departments, as well as their officers on the ground.

Several policy actors also spoke of how email improved their communication with colleagues within and between organizations. Information exchange is now faster, easier and more cost efficient; feedback can now be acquired more quickly and the reliance on printed copies and postal services has been reduced.

However, despite their increasing use of email communication, email has not replaced written communication, and most policy actors insist that written submissions remain essential to policy process.

Mobile phones

Mobile phones have not yet been integrated into the information-gathering process to the same extent as the internet; mobile phones remain predominantly used for interpersonal communication via voice calls and SMS.

Moreover, several policy actors are cautious about policy-relevant information received via SMS from other people, and recipients are reluctant to use it for official purposes. Generally, information received via SMS is considered less serious, less reliable and less
retrievable than input received orally or via other means, if only by dint of its being delivered in the SMS format.

*I think for now if I get an SMS giving me official information, unless it’s a trusted source that I know, it would be difficult to use that as official information. SMS is by its very nature very personalized, so I think it is not handy for official communication.* [Government official working on gender issues]

*I wouldn’t receive information via SMS, for instance, and take it as serious information. I would rather get something documented.* [Policy actor dealing with environmental issues]

Nevertheless, interviewees appreciate how mobile telephony has increased the speed at which they obtain informal feedback; indeed, multiple policy actors spoke about the essential role mobile phones play in communication with their colleagues at project sites outside of urban centers.

**Limited use of mobile telephony in the information-gathering process is partially the result of technological constraints:** the majority of Zambian policy actors said they use basic mobile phone models that do not support email or internet access, thus limiting their information-sharing options to SMS and voice calls. Additional investments in this area are needed to further enhance the role that mobile telephony can play in policy actors’ daily routines of information gathering.

Interviewees agreed that the role of mobile phones will continue to grow and will further improve the accessibility of data, efficiency of information exchange and interactivity of communication with citizens and other stakeholders. They also acknowledge that policy actors need to start tapping into these new technologies as a means to communicate with the public, though as one interviewee pointed out, this must be done without “annoying” citizens. “It is a challenge,” one interviewee working on gender issues said, “but also an opportunity.”

**The role of personal and institutional sources**

Non-media sources play vital and diverse roles in providing relevant information to Zambian policy actors:

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Zambia’s mobile services market is dominated by Zain (a unit of India’s Bharti Airtel). According to the nationally representative 2010 AudienceScapes survey, Zain controls more than three-quarters of the market. Seventy-nine percent of all respondents who own a mobile phone* identified Zain as their mobile operator, followed by 38 percent for MTN and 7 percent for Cell-Z. The total surpasses 100 percent because many people use more than one operator.

Nokia is the most popular mobile phone brand (41 percent of all mobile phone owners said they have a Nokia phone), followed by Motorola (25 percent) and ZTE (15 percent).

*n =1,010 adults, 15+; total sample n=2,000*
- **Formal government sources**, such as individual ministries and the Central Statistical Office, are used most frequently and are perceived as the most trustworthy providers of policy-relevant material among all non-media sources. Policy actors also regularly use them to verify policy information obtained through other channels.

- **Zambian civil society** is seen as essential for helping policy actors raise awareness of individual policies in local communities, understand their impact and gather feedback on gaps that need to be addressed in the future.

- **Global development partners**, for example the UN agencies and the World Bank, are considered indispensable sources of regional and global policy-relevant data as well as technical and financial support.

### The importance of formal channels

Zambian policy actors prefer to obtain policy materials through organized and structured formal channels rather than informal networks, with clear accountability often mentioned as one of the main reasons for this. They largely rely on formal meetings and official reports prepared by different ministries and other government institutions, regulators, internal research departments, regional offices and field teams, as well as written submissions by a variety of civil society organizations, private sector players and global development partners. Written input is generally followed up with face-to-face discussions, workshops and roundtable meetings to provide further clarification of policy suggestions.

Although formal channels remain central to obtaining relevant policy materials, timeliness and irregularity of information received through these channels emerged as two shortcomings. For example, one policy actor dealing with governance issues described the challenges posted by the long and cumbersome procedures required to obtain relevant information from official bodies, which frequently slow down investigations of alleged violation of governance laws and regulations.

### The importance of civil society

Policy actors from a wide range of areas concur that close collaboration with local NGOs, businesses and professional associations—partly facilitated through Sector Advisory Groups—is imperative for successful policy implementation.
Cooperation with traditional leaders and faith-based organizations is less widespread but still considered vital, particularly by policy actors working on community empowerment, social welfare, and economic issues. As three such policy actors described:

They [traditional leaders] talk about their challenges; they are almost like policy drivers because they are in touch with the people so they see the gaps and know what is missing in their areas. [Interviewee working on community empowerment]

The local NGOs have also helped us in advocacy. I think they have really been taking the government to task and through that, I think they also keep us on our toes as a ministry to make sure that we live up to our mandate, to make sure that we are providing services to our citizens. [Policy actor working on social welfare]

It’s very rare that you find a ministry or a government department trying to provide a critical view. So in terms of really knowing how effective our policies are, I think that we depend much on the CSOs [civil society organizations] and the private sector out there. [Policy actor working on economic issues]

Efficient policy making is further hampered by the lack of up-to-date baseline data. Even though regional African and global data are often available through global development partners, reliable Zambia-specific data are either nonexistent or collected in an unusable format (e.g., the data are available in aggregate, but not broken down by gender, age or administrative units). The result is policy based on subjective interests, the interaction between different power players or intuition, rather than on research. One policy actor illustrated:

You can find a lot of information generally about water pollution in our library, on the internet, in books, in the journals, but if a student for instance from the University of Zambia or Evelyn Hone College comes to ask specifically what’s the status of water pollution in Zambia, Lusaka Province, in the Copperbelt Province ..., we need to do more studies and generate more information specifically for our location. Yes, you can have more information generally even about the region, but [people] are also more interested in knowing what’s happening on the local level. That is a major gap and this generally applies for all types of environmental topics. [Interviewee working on environmental issues]

Complaints about the lack of country-specific baseline data were heard from policy actors across all policy areas. Some highlighted specific areas where the data are lacking, such as climate change and basic demographic information.

Field or project site visits are a common practice and seen as central for obtaining real-time, first-hand feedback on the impact of development programs; the problem is that financial limitations make such visits less frequent than they should be.

Input received through structured formal channels is often complemented by less formal, ad-hoc verbal feedback from colleagues, experts, constituents and others, particularly on
the impact of individual policies on local communities. Policy actors also use these channels to verify information acquired through other informal channels and the media.

*If I’m in my constituency, I have a routine of getting up early. People wake me up; they start arriving at half past five with programs, with complaints, with projects, that they think must be brought to my attention for purposes of our own governance in our constituency.... They come to complain about a bridge, a school for everybody in that constituency, they’ll come to talk about projects which youth and women have put together.*

[Policy actor working on governance issues]

Overall, these networks appear to be a complementary source of information to formal structured channels, and are valued for enabling the policy actors to keep their finger on the pulse of society and keep up to date with its continuously evolving needs.

**The role of Global Development Partners**

Regular collaboration and exchange of information with global development partners is considered vital across a wide range of policy interests. Aside from assisting Zambian policy actors with financial and technical support, capacity strengthening and consultation on individual programs, international partners are viewed as essential resources for baseline data and analytical reports, which are frequently not available from domestic sources.

Collaboration appears to be closest with bilateral organizations, such as Germany’s GTZ, JICA of Japan and USAID, which provide strategic as well as tactical support to Zambian policy actors. One interviewee noted:

*JICA is currently sponsoring one of our programs, so we actually have two JICA staff working with us right now. They have been very supportive, have assisted us with capacity building and have helped us dealing with investment promotion.*

[Policy actor working on development issues]

Written documents, formal meetings, workshops and forums appear to be the most common and preferred modes of information exchange between Zambian policy actors and international development partners. Informal interactions, on the other hand, seem to be rare.

Input from global development partners (as well as domestic stakeholders) is sought, particularly in the initial, policy-formulation stage, although multiple policy actors indicated that there is a need to engage with global partners throughout the policy process. Regular interaction and sharing of policy-relevant information with interested parties is required to obtain constructive feedback on the impact of individual policies and to ensure they reflect the constantly changing demands of society:

*You have to continuously check your policy and see whether [it] is in tune with the demands of society. Are [constituents] finding this policy useful? Is there something new that needs to be put in? Is there something that is becoming...*
irrelevant because technology has changed, because the needs of the people have changed? [Government official working on agricultural issues]

Although interviewees are generally satisfied with their current collaboration with the global development community, they highlighted several areas which may be improved:

- Information exchange with international partners should be more regular, systematic and timely.
- Aside from providing policy input, international partners should play a greater role in assessing the impact of individual Zambian policies, identifying gaps and areas of possible further improvements.
- Interviewees called for greater support in building local capacity for gathering and analyzing country-specific data. This would reduce reliance on foreign sources and improve the evidence-based approach to policy-making.
- While policy actors appreciate the value of different types of data supplied by international partners, they point out that these data rarely include Zambia-specific information, and instead focuses more on regional or global perspectives, which limit their relevance and impact on policy making. One policy actor gave an example related to the use of the pesticide DDT for malaria control:

  DDT has been studied in so many places and found to be having a negative impact on the well-being of people, but with regard to how it is impacting the Zambian population... we still have room for studies to be undertaken. I think that if [the data] are specific to Zambia, it’s easier to convince decision makers that, OK, we are using DDT for malaria control but probably we should be phasing it out because it has negative effects and we should be moving towards using alternatives. [Interviewee working on environmental issues]

- Policy actors said local capacity-building should include investments in data-collection tools, the lack of which is partially blamed for the absence of sufficient baseline data across different policy areas. One interviewee elaborated:

  After the Ministry of Finance conducted a mid-term review of whether we are going to achieve the MDGs [Millennium Development Goals adopted by members of the United Nations], the key challenge faced was the lack of data. This is perhaps because some of the data that should be provided need to be collected through the use of technology and monitoring equipment, and for a long time we have lagged behind in that area. So, maybe because we did not have the infrastructure to collect the data, this is really showing as an inadequacy. ... We are not able to collect the information that we truly need. [Policy actor working on environmental issues]
• Some policy actors pointed out that the data alone are not sufficient and called for international partners’ additional guidance on how to translate collected data into actionable insight.

Many pointed out that, even when data are available, national implementers often lack the skills to identify information relevant to their policy making and struggle to understand how this information can be incorporated in their work. Some also thought that policy actors need additional training on how to present processed data to others in concise and comprehensible formats.

**Summary of key gaps and challenges**

Although specific gaps and challenges faced by individual policy actors in Zambia vary, they generally fall within one of the following areas:

• **The absence or lack of up-to-date, country-specific baseline data**
  
  This problem is endemic across a wide range of policy interests and is largely rooted in the lack of technology that supports data collection and insufficient data-collection skills. Inadequate knowledge of how to filter, package and present the data and information in the most concise and effective way as well as limited analytical capabilities further contribute to the gaps in this area.

• **Limited access to technologies that support personal information gathering**
  
  Only a few policy actors use 3G mobile phones that support data services outside of SMS, which limits phone users’ ability to exchange larger data files and provide prompt feedback while on the move or in areas with poor access to the internet.

• **Lack of regular and systematic communication with stakeholders**
  
  Communication with certain stakeholders, particularly international development partners, is often too sporadic. There is a need for more emphasis on establishing continuous information flows, providing feedback on proposed policies and assisting policy actors with impact assessment.

• **Low quantity and quality of policy-related media coverage**: Zambian media do not provide regular, credible and in-depth coverage on policy issues; as such the media are not an important source of policy-relevant information for domestic policy actors and thus do not appear to live up to their potential of being able to actively engage in and influence the policy process.

• **Inadequate funding**
  
  Budgetary constraints underlie the gaps highlighted in the previous three points, but they also limit other key information gathering activities, such as regular field visits.