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

Report Summary

InterMedia conducted in-depth interviews with 17 senior policy actors and policy implementers in Zambia to better understand how they gather, assess, share and disseminate policy-relevant information. In particular, this study focused on how the global development community can best support the policy process from an informational point of view.

The interviewees, referred to in this report as ‘policy actors,’ came from a wide variety of practice areas, but their information-gathering and sharing habits proved to be very similar. The interviewees also highlighted challenges they face in accessing and using policy-related information, and they made concrete suggestions of ways in which the development community can help them overcome these challenges.

Information gathering habits

Traditional media, particularly domestic radio stations, are a key daily source of news and information on current events for Zambian policy actors. However, such media is not considered an important source of policy-relevant information.

Most policy actors listen to news on the radio early in the morning and while commuting to work. This is complemented by browsing through the three main Zambian dailies when arriving at the office and by watching TV news in the evening. Even though the interviewees largely rely on domestic media to keep them up-to-date with the latest news, they generally feel frustrated by the lack of professionalism and expertise among Zambian journalists, particularly compared to international media.

For policy-relevant information, the interviewees rely heavily on organized, formal channels of communication. Official reports produced by internal research departments, field teams, different ministries and other government entities are viewed as the most trustworthy sources.
Input provided by other stakeholders, such as local NGOs, traditional leaders, business associations, faith-based organizations and global development partners, is also highly valued and many policy actors actively and regularly seek their contribution through mechanisms such as Sector Advisory Groups, written submissions or regular face-to-face meetings.

Informal networks play a supporting role and are used mainly to cross-check information obtained through other channels or to obtain feedback on the effectiveness of individual policies or programs.

New media and communications technologies are rapidly transforming the way Zambian policy actors gather information; the internet has already become an essential source for collecting background data necessary for policy work. However, for now, policy actors remain cautious about the trustworthiness and accuracy of the material gathered on the web, and most of them cross-check this input with sources they see as more reliable—for example, official government sources and colleagues within departments.

Although policy actors recognize the transformative power of mobile technology, they see mobile phones as more of a “collaborating tool” than a primary source of information. Mobile phones are mainly used for interpersonal communication via voice-calls and only a few interviewees use them for gathering policy-related materials. Furthermore, they consider news and information received via SMS—similar to information collected on the internet—as significantly less reliable than information received through other channels.

Limited use of mobile telephony in the information-gathering process is also attributed in part to technological constraints: the majority of policy actors use only basic mobile phones that do not support email or web access and thus limit users’ ability to receive information to SMS and voice calls.

Dissemination of policy-relevant information and obtaining feedback

Policy actors say traditional media are an effective channel for information dissemination as well as for obtaining constituents’ feedback on the effectiveness of policies and programs. Respondents said they frequently participate in radio call-in shows, grant interviews, issue press releases or engage with journalists at different events or field trips. Some policy actors also spoke about co-producing TV and radio programs focused on specific themes. These direct media interventions are considered highly effective but are done infrequently because of insufficient funding.

External stakeholders—particularly local NGOs, traditional leaders and faith-based organizations—are another indispensable source of feedback from the grassroots, but are used less often for information dissemination.

Policy information is also frequently shared through personal interaction with constituents at various types of public gatherings and officials’ visits. These are viewed as particularly
important for reaching the illiterate (who, according to the 2010 AudienceScapes survey\(^1\), include 15 percent of the adult population), specific target groups, and constituents who are not a part of the core audience of traditional media.

The use of new technologies, e.g., the internet and mobile phones, for information dissemination or collecting feedback is rather limited. Other forms of obtaining feedback from constituents include citizens’ letters, phone calls or walk-in visits, and, more rarely, market research methods such as surveys and focus groups.

**Key recommendations for the development community**

The interviews with Zambian policy actors pointed to several opportunities for development partners to contribute more effectively to policy debates and help improve the policy information flow. Here are a few key recommendations:

- **Use structured formal channels**: Development partners who want to make their views known to Zambian policy actors should place emphasis on providing information through organized formal communication channels. Informal networks should be considered complementary channels.

- **Timing is crucial**: Provide information to policy actors as early in the policy formulation in process as possible, but also strive to establish mechanisms that enable regular exchange of information in the implementation and evaluation stages of the process.

- **Choose preferred formats**: Provide policy input in writing (concise, written reports) and follow up with face-to-face meetings, workshops and round-table sessions.

- **Raise awareness**: Use traditional media, particularly radio, to raise awareness on selected issues among the general population and consider partnerships with individual media outlets to co-produce radio and TV stations. Help policy actors in Zambia develop innovative mobile phone-based strategies to reach out to the constituents.

- **Fill the data gap**: Lack of up-to-date, country specific baseline data was the most common grievance expressed by the policy actors from across a wide range of policy areas. Global development partners can help address this gap by providing Zambian policy actors with sufficient training on data collection and data analysis as well as by promoting investment in data collection technologies and tools.

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\(^1\) Nationally representative survey, n = 2000, 15+, April-May 2010
• **Support media training:** Targeted media training will help journalists strengthen their understanding of key policy issues and their ability to provide quality coverage. This will lead to a greater willingness on the part of policy actors to engage with and incorporate the media into the policy information flow.

• **Support investments in communications infrastructures and new technologies.** Better national communication infrastructures and wider access to new technologies, particularly the internet, will improve the efficiency of information gathering and dissemination and increase the inclusion of currently marginalized groups in the policy process.