

A Communication strategy for enhancing visibility, responsiveness, and accountability of the Malawi National Assembly

Levi Zeleza Manda, Pro-Vice Chancellor (Research), Unicaf University, Malawi. Email: l.manda@unicaf.malawi.org

Abstract

This study used focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with purposively selected members of parliament to explore the causes of the representation gap, lack of responsiveness and aloofness of which Malawian members of parliament are often accused by the constituents, facts which have been established by several studies. The study also used focus group discussions to gather information from parliamentary and political reporters for these to explain and recommend ways in which parliamentary reporting could be improved. It found that, except when they made “donations” to assist during funeral and illnesses, MPs rarely directly contacted their constituents from their election to the expiry of their terms to share experiences and ideas. Their engagement with journalists was equally dismal. Further, the discussions indicated that MPs misunderstood their own roles and mandates as Members of Parliament. To mitigate these problems, a robust communication strategy is proposed to create public awareness about the legal and developmental role of the Malawian parliament and parliamentarian and bring this national law making institution closer to the people by enhancing its image and presence in the public mind.

Key terms: *parliament, democracy, communication strategies, mass media, national assembly*



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Introducton

Since 1994 surveys have consistently indicated that Malawians are disillusioned and disenchanted with the conduct and performance of the Malawi parliament as an institution, members of parliament (MPs) as representatives of the voters, politicians and government officials. Erdmann, Patel and Schweitzer (2004) reported that their 1998 and 2000 surveys of popular perceptions of parliament and parliamentarians indicated “many people [interviewed] were very dissatisfied with the performance and the lack of responsiveness of many members of parliament” (Erdmann *et al.*, 2004, p. 21) and further noted that:

[It] was a common complaint [in Malawi] that once [candidates were] voted into parliament they were never seen in their constituencies again—something which has been confirmed by other studies (2004, p.27).

Precisely, Erdmann *et al.* (2004) pointed out that 60% of the people interviewed in 1998 were either unsatisfied or very unsatisfied with their parliamentarians, a rating which slightly improved to 50% by 2000. The Afrobarometer surveys (Khaila and Chibwana, 2005; Tsoka and Chinsinga, 2008; Tsoka and Dulani, 2012), too, found a similar pattern of social-distance between parliamentarians and the general populace and made similar observations and conclusions about the relationship between MPs, the public and constituents. Among other conclusions, the surveys revealed that people expected their MPs to be responsive, accountable and transparent; to visit their constituencies frequently and deliver (bring) development benefits.

The 2005 Afrobarometer survey (Khaila and Chibwana, 2005) found that only 37% of the respondents actually trusted the national assembly, 26% were categorical in their distrust of the national assembly while 31% were non-committal. The same survey found that only 41% of the respondents approved of their parliamentarians' performance while 55% disapproved. Khaila and Chibwana (2005) explained that the low rating emanated from the fact that most members of parliament, especially those representing rural area constituencies, rarely lived in their constituencies and, thus, had very little contact with their constituents. Thus, such members of parliament were considered to be aloof. Indeed, the 2008 Afrobarometer survey (Tsoka and Chinsinga, 2008) indicated that 84% of the respondents reported that they had never had any contact with their parliamentarians in the previous year and that 40% thought that their parliamentarians were so aloof that they never listened and hearkened to their constituents' voices, wishes, needs and demands. While the disapproval rating for parliamentarians stood at 55% in the 2005 Afrobarometer survey (Khaila and Chibwana, 2005), it dropped to 62% in the 2008 study (Tsoka and Chinsinga, 2008) but improved to 55% in the 2012 survey (Tsoka and Dulani, 2012).

Low ratings of parliamentarians are not unique to Malawi. Citing a 2000 worldwide survey, Causley (2005) points out that in many democratic countries the public was generally disenchanted with the conduct of parliamentarians and regarded parliamentarians lowly. Anderson and McLeod (2004) and the Hansard Society (2005) severally observed that this public disillusionment, cynicism and disengagement with parliament was mostly a result of failure by parliaments to reform, update themselves and effectively communicate to ensure people understood what parliament was all about.

As Malewezi (2003) observed during one of the Building Bridges workshops organized by the Institute for Policy Interaction (IPI) in Malawi, the low approval ratings of the national assembly were an effect of a serious communication and listening gap between MPs, civil society, and constituents. Indeed, a study commissioned by the Malawi Parliament (Malawi National Assembly, 2006) concluded that some 83% of Malawians interviewed wanted their parliamentarians to represent their views in parliament and do what they (the constituents) wanted or expected from their parliamentarians. The study also observed that there existed a serious representation gap; thus echoing Malewezi's (2003) observations.

Communicating parliament: international experiences

It is clear from above analysis that the Malawi National Assembly and individual MPs fail to effectively communicate, whence the wide gap between parliament and the public. In some countries, this gap has already been, or is being, addressed. For instance, the National Assembly of

Zambia (NAZ), with funding from the Germany government, has established offices in all its 150 constituencies, from where members of parliament operate and serve the public irrespective of their party affiliation, and seek the opinion of constituents before going to parliament. From 1995, the Malawi National Assembly, too, planned to have pilot constituency offices, funded by the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (IDASA), whose recurrent expenditure would later be integrated into the national budget, as part of national assembly infrastructure expenditure (NDI, 1996).

Like the parliaments of New Zealand, Australia, Britain, and South Africa, the NAZ has a Parliament Radio to broadcast parliamentary proceedings and other matters to do with the national assembly (see NAZ, 2013). Thus, dependence on the services of the public broadcaster is curtailed.

In Namibia, that country's citizens participate in the legislative processes through public hearings funded by the national assembly itself. To encourage unfettered and robust popular debate on bills and critical social issues during the public hearings, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) contracted a local legal organization to summarize bills and put them in a common person's language. Further, the Namibia National Assembly operates bus-housed Mobile Training Units (MTUs) replete with computers and a satellite uplink (see Africa4All, n.d). The MTUs travel the length and breadth of Namibia exposing people to the country's parliamentary website and encouraging MPs and civil society organizations to use it. Through the MTUs, common people's comments on bills and any concerns are channeled to the right parliamentary committees and individual MPs who provide responses almost in real-time. This innovative two-way participatory communication approach narrows the gap between the public and the parliament by taking the institution to their homes and communal places. Full citizen participation in political life, including the need to be consulted in the affairs of their parliaments, is one of the pillars of democracy (Kindra and Staphenurst, 2010). As if that were not enough, the Namibia National Assembly runs the Constituency Channel (CC), a parliamentary radio and television broadcasting service funded by the NDI as part of the Namibian Parliament Constituency Outreach Program, also funded by the NDI.

In Moldova and India, the parliaments set aside outreach and open-days. Once in a year parliamentarians are encouraged to bring to their offices their children and family for these to appreciate parliamentary work (Pralong, 2006; Sapra, 2006). The Australian parliament (something replicated that country's regional governments such as the New South Wales) provides political and parliamentary education to schools through parliamentary outreach programmes such as taking visitors on tours of the parliament, coordination of community events and displays, and provision of political education to students (Causley, 2005; Grove, n.d). Such outreach activities rarely, if ever, happen in Malawi.

Research objectives

The above literature review points to a serious lack of consistent communication between Malawi's parliament and the public. This study, therefore, sought

- a) to understand through interviews and a literature review the causes of the representation and communication gaps and to
- b) to propose a robust communication strategy that would facilitate communication between the Malawi National Assembly, individual members of parliament, and their publics to salvage their image, increase their visibility, responsiveness and accountability to the Malawian population.

Method

This study used in-depth qualitative interviews with 10 members of parliament and five senior national assembly staff members to understand what had led to the communication and listening gap between the public, the Malawi National Assembly and the members of parliament and how this could be rectified. The 10 members were purposively selected. Six of these were heads of parliamentary committees while four represented the heads of the committees. The five senior national assembly staff were from the department of communications (3) and Clerk of Parliament's Office or administration (2). A separate focus group discussion was held with 15 journalists who specialize in parliamentary and political reporting. These were recommended by their media houses. Five other invited journalists did not attend the discussions. The members of parliament mainly discussed the causes the lack of visibility of parliament and the apparent antagonism between parliamentarians and their constituents while the journalists concentrated on how they thought they could better report parliament and make it more visible and acceptable to the public. The members of parliament and journalists were gathered and interviewed at Ryalls Hotel in Blantyre, Malawi, on consecutive days in January, 2009. The meetings were paid for by the Malawi National Assembly, which had commissioned the study in preparation for its five-year (2009-2014) communication strategy. A literature review and policy analysis were conducted to learn how other countries' parliaments enhanced their accountability, responsiveness and visibility.

The data were analyzed using thematisation (Kvale, 1996), a process which permits the researcher to comb through the discussions, pick out statements that belong to emerging themes, which are later analysed and interpreted to gain a clear understanding and possible trends.

In keeping with the ethics of social research, names of interviewees are not used in this study and where necessary, codes, such as **MPIa**, to represent the first statement made by the first Member of Parliament during the in-depth interviews or focus group discussion and **JN3d** for the third journalist's third statement are instead employed.

Findings and Discussion

Role of Members of Parliament misunderstood

The discussion with members of parliament revealed that some members of parliament did not fully understand their constitutional mandate and that they confused their social role with their legal responsibility. These observed that it was difficult to fulfill all the expectations from the public. One discussant sums up this position thus:

The public expects too much from us, as parliamentarians... people expect us to build school blocks, bridges, pay school fees, give free transport to all the sick and even foot funeral bills...yet our resources are limited (MP3b).

Even those who were fully aware that Section 66 of the Malawi Constitution (see Malawi Government, 1994) restricted the role of the members of parliament to lawmaking processes agreed that it would be suicidal for members of parliament to stop spending their own resources on constituents' problems that are typically personal in nature. One such knowledgeable discussant said:

"A member of parliament who does not spend his or her personal resources on his or her constituents stands no chance of re-election. This explains why some members of parliament stay away from their constituencies until such time that they are ready to "provide" something... Our people, our constituents, need to understand our resource limitations... Maybe we should blame ourselves for promising our people too much during our elections campaigns" (MP8g).

The above observations are in tandem with conclusions made by the IPI Building Bridges Workshops of 2003 (Hajat, 2003), which identified such problems as the legislators' inadequate knowledge about their role, job and responsibilities; the public's ignorance about the duties of the member of parliament, and the lack of transparency on the part of the legislature, notably, the inaccessibility to the public of plenary sessions and committee of parliament meetings and limited circulation of parliamentary records. Consequently, the legislature, which voted to restrict its discussions to English, is seen as elitist, and aloof. It should be noted that in their personal capacities as social beings, parliaments can do philanthropic work. However, this would not sound like an obligation if the public were fully informed.

Engagement with journalists

During the focus group discussion with the journalists, it became clear that the Malawi National Assembly did not put in place sufficient means of engaging journalists as partners in taking the parliament to the people. For instance, the journalists observed that the Press Gallery, which is supposed to be exclusively accessed by journalists covering parliamentary proceedings, was nonfunctional and, as a result, journalists were mixed with security personnel and other people. The journalists also noted that most times, recordings of parliamentary deliberations were late or never availed to journalists; the *Hansard*, which published the verbatim parliamentary discussions, was sold instead of being freely distributed to journalists; the national assembly website featured mostly stale information, and that members of parliament and national assembly staff were at times unwilling or slow in providing information and according journalists interviews. One journalist discussant queried:

“Ours is probably the only parliament in the world that hides information or makes it very difficult for journalists to obtain even basic information or publications. Why, for instance, do journalists have to beg for Standing Orders? Why not make these available online for everybody, including constituents and journalists, to access? The August House needs to put its house in order,” (JN5c).

The journalists' focus group discussions indicated that the relationship amongst national assembly staff, members of parliament and journalists was somewhat acrimonious.

Communication deficiencies

Interviews with some national assembly members of staff and an analysis of official documents pointed to the fact that the Malawi National Assembly was already aware of its communication and operational deficiencies. As such, it had embarked on drafting a strategic plan to outline its vision, and mission. Also, a three-year program of activities was in place; a website had been created; a quarterly newsletter was being published, a library and archives section was stocked; and the national assembly had started engaging journalists through training workshops to sensitize them on parliamentary procedures, etiquette, and guidelines, ethics of parliamentary reporting, and to help them learn and internalize parliamentary terminology.

Conclusion and recommendations

It is clear from the above discussions that Members of Parliament and elsewhere often fail to symbiotically stay in touch with their constituents after their election. This is mainly a result of their failure to properly use the services of journalists and available social, new and traditional media and communication platforms. For the parliamentarians to coherently and comprehensively improve

their image among constituents, there is need for parliaments and individual journalists to have communications as detailed below.

Elements of the proposed communication strategy

The interviews with parliamentarians and journalists and the literature review provided enough insights into the elements of an effective communication strategy for the Malawi National Assembly. Experience from parliamentary communications elsewhere demonstrate that an effective communication strategy ought to address internal and external communication needs. This study recommends a communication strategy that comprises that elements recommended below.

Internal communication

The Malawi national assembly needs to establish effective internal communication channels before it presents itself to the world. Apart from establishing or improving on the intranet system, the Malawi National Assembly should install in its purpose built precincts, and internal toll-free telephone and email system, and establish or modernise its parliamentary Resource Centre/Members lounge. This requires resources, which the Malawi National Assembly can easily procure from the national budget and cooperating partners. Development of an internal policy on communicating with the public and other external stakeholders is as urgent as the need to review Part 33 of the Standing Orders, which empowers the Speaker to order out of chamber and Press Gallery any unelected person (Malawi National Assembly, 2003). The National Assembly should ask itself why citizens of Malawi should be called strangers if indeed the parliament belongs to the people.

External communications

To effectively communicate with the public and project its image to the outside world, the Malawi national assembly needs to increase public awareness and understanding of the functions of parliament and members of parliament through the establishment of constituency offices, which will host constituency information centres. While waiting for the establishment of constituency offices, the Malawi National Assembly could take advantage of the multipurpose community telecentres the Malawi Communication Regulatory Authority (MACRA) and private entrepreneurs have established in schools, post office centres throughout Malawi, and business centres in rural as well as urban areas (see Mbvundula, 2004). The Malawi National Assembly could even share the cost of establishing the telecenters with the Malawi Communication Regulatory Authority. The Malawi National Assembly can also create awareness of parliament through public debates, open-days, Mobile Training Units and by establishing a dedicated parliamentary TV and Radio broadcasting service, linked to the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation. Decentralising the holding of the children's parliament from the parliament buildings in Lilongwe to district centres would also help the public, mainly the children in rural areas to understand what parliament is all about. Additionally, the Malawi National Assembly could consider creating school, and college based parliament clubs, which would be encouraged to debate issues about their own institutions. To cater for online audiences, the Malawi National Assembly needs to update its Wikipedia page, which details the history, progress, vision and mission of the Malawi National Assembly. The Wikipedia page has proved worthwhile because it provides quick information to students, policy makers and other online visitors interested in Malawian politics. The Malawi parliament website needs to be frequently updated. To it should be added response forms, personal blogs, facebook pages, and contacts for members of parliament and key parliamentary members of staff. This use of interactive multimedia communication platforms would increase interactivity between members of parliament and some of their constituents. Although less than 20% of Malawians do regularly access news through the

internet (Tsoka and Dulani, 2012), these internet-savvy are likely to pass on the messages to others through word of mouth, a communication medium that has been found to be very effective in marketing and endorsing goods and services (Fakharyan *et al.* 2012).

Regular of training parliamentary reporters

Finally, the Malawi National Assembly needs to increase the accuracy of parliamentary and political reporting by organising regular training workshops for journalists; developing an online parliamentary reporters mailing list or chat group through which the parliamentary communication office will be communicating important information with journalists in a timely manner; holding quarterly press luncheons or dinners with senior editors to establish a working rapport between the Malawi National Assembly and media houses, and taking journalists on a tour of constituencies for them to appreciate the situation on the ground.

The above list of communication platforms, strategies and activities is not exhaustive. However, if implemented they would go a long way to improve public understanding and appreciation of parliament and the role of members of parliament. Obviously, the audience or public of a parliamentary communication strategy is multi-tiered. The above activities and strategies mostly target the general. However, the communication strategy would be incomplete unless it also included formal communication channels, such as memos, letters, and telephone calls for communication between the National Assembly and the executive, international NGOs, government departments, UN organizations, Civil Society organizations, and cooperating partners.

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