How the Parliament of Zimbabwe Library and Research Services provide access to citizens to knowledge about parliament

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Abstract:

In Zimbabwe the major source of Parliamentary Information prior to 2000 was through Library and Public Relations departments. Parliament of Zimbabwe established constituency information centres across the country. These were called Parliament Constituency Information Centres (PCICs). PCICs were established as a result of reform initiators and supporters. Funding was obtained from Development Partners such as UNDP, KAF, Stiff Stung and SIDA among others. Main problem identified was the lack of access of parliamentary information, which hinders informed participation in the democratic processes of the nation. The project was initiated to provide access to parliamentary information to members of the public in different constituencies in order to involve them in the democratic processes. Main short-term objective was to improving consultation between legislators and their constituency residents. The long-term objective was to empower all citizens in different constituencies with regards to parliamentary issues in the country and in their particular constituency and hence be able participate in the democratic processes for the national development. The PCICs provide a database of Parliament generated information where documents like the Hansard, Orders Papers, Government Gazettes and Acts, and Bills can be accessed by the public within the constituencies. Information departments, namely the Library, Research, ICT and Public relations participate in the maintaining the operation of the informatics database at each PCIC. The idea behind the creation of such a database was enable the public to be involved in the legislative process from a more informed standpoint, in addition to being a base for parliament-generated information. To date 120 PCICs have been established out of 210 Parliamentary Constituencies. There are, however, challenges faced in maintaining the PCICs operational.

Keywords :
Zimbabwe / Parliament /Constituencies / Information / Information Centres

1. Brief Information about Parliament

The Parliament of Zimbabwe is currently housed in a building situated between Nelson Mandela and Kwame Nkrumah Avenues along Third Street in Harare. Construction of the building began in 1895. The building had been planned as a hotel, but proved to be non-viable. In early 1898, the British South Africa Company (BSAC) bought the partially finished building and made several renovations. The Parliament of Zimbabwe, as in most former British colonies, is based on the Westminster model. The history of the Parliament of Zimbabwe may be discussed according to the Constitutional developments of 1924, 1965, 1969,1979 and 1980.

1.1 Composition of Parliament

Section 32 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe provides for a Parliament states that the legislative authority of Zimbabwe shall vest in the Legislature, which consists of the President and Parliament. Section 38 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe further provides for the composition of Parliament, which is made up of two Houses, the Senate and House of Assembly. The Senate consists of 93 Members. The House of Assembly consists of 210 members who are directly elected by voters registered in 210 constituencies delimited in accordance with section 61A of the Constitution.
The Attorney General is an ex-officio member of both the Senate and The House of Assembly but does not have voting rights.

2. Libraries and Research Services

The Library and research departments are two of the three departments that form the Directorate of Information Services. The other department is ICT. These departments are charged with responsibilities of information delivery to parliament. Directors who report to the Principal Director Information Services head both departments. The library department has a staff establishment of eight, while the research department has 14**.**

The Parliament of Zimbabwe Library was founded in 1923, upon granting the country self-governing status. The library received its first catalogue in 1928. Membership is open and free to Senators, Members of The House of Assembly, Officers of Parliament and approved external users.

The Research Department was established in 1982 to provide research and analysis services to Members,

The library and research departments provide a number of services but this discussion will concentrate on those services that were introduced as a result of Parliamentary Reforms.

3. Parliamentary Reforms

The Parliament of Zimbabwe has been implementing wide ranging parliamentary reforms since the year 1997. Some of the reforms, although not part of this discussion include: the practice and procedure of the House in relation to public business; the committee system; conditions of work and support for the members and staff of Parliament; and dress code and decorum.

The major source of Parliamentary Information prior to 2000 was through Library and Public Relations departments. Parliament of Zimbabwe established Constituency Information Centres across the country. These were called Parliamentary Constituency Information Centres (PCICs).

The centres were established as a result of parliamentary Reforms Committee appointed in 1997 and subsequently adopted in May 1999. The reforms were both a self-realisation by members of parliament (MPs), and a response to, concerns by stakeholders that Parliament was a remote institution that was not responsive to public needs. Citizens generally perceived it as just a 'building" that was distant from them, were politicians met to discuss issues that were not relevant to them. MPs themselves were invisible in their constituencies; only to resurface during election time.

Funding was obtained from Development Partners such as United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Konrad Adenauer Foundation (KAF), Stiff Stung and Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) among others. Main problem identified was the lack of access of parliamentary information, which hinders informed participation in the democratic processes of the nation. The project was initiated to provide access to parliamentary information to members of the public in different constituencies in order to involve them in the democratic processes. Main short-term objective was to improving consultation between legislators and their constituency residents. The long-term objective was to empower all citizens in different constituencies with regards to parliamentary issues in the country and in their particular constituency and hence be able participate in the democratic processes for the national development. The PCICs provide a database of Parliament generated information where the public within the constituencies can access documents such as the Hansard, Orders Papers, Government Gazettes and Acts, and Bills. Information departments, namely the Library, Research, ICT and Public relations participate in the maintaining the operation of the informatics database at each PCIC. The idea behind the creation of such a database was enable the public to be involved in the legislative process from a more informed standpoint, in addition to being a base for parliament-generated information.

The Speaker, Hon. Emmerson Mnangagwa, set out the significance of the of the new PCIC plans at a Constituency Relations Workshop organised by Parliament and UNDP in October 2002:

"The representative function of parliamentary democracy is the primary objective of any popular assembly. It is identified with the expression of the popular will and representation of all the people through universal suffrage and more importantly with the fundamental duty of MPs to look after the interests of their constituencies and assisting them with solving their problems, which derive from their practical needs. (…) As legislators your will realize that you need to create a machinery for consulting with your constituencies and involving them in decision-making in the constituency's activities. Capacity building of the electorate should therefore be an ongoing process of reciprocity"

Echoing the need for these PCICs to the implementation team, the Hon. Minister of Science and Technology, Olivia Muchena, stated:

"I would like to see a computer in every MP's constituency office so that people can come and punch buttons and get whatever they want in Shona and Ndebele."

The PCICs have so far been established in 104 of the original 120 constituencies (currently there are 210 constituencies). PCICs are wholly owned by Parliament, although MPs have been asked to help securing office space in their respective constituencies, either at local authority offices, government offices or from private individuals. In order to provide unbiased information to citizens, it is important to note that PCICs are not political party offices and, as such, political party regalia, literature or objectives are not part of the collection of their information resources. They are therefore an extension of Parliament, a principal source of information about the constituency's state of affairs.

Conclusion

Parliament Constituency Information Centres (PCICs) in Zimbabwe are a new development that has closed the gap between MPs and members of constituencies through empowering them with information. This positive development has strengthened the constitutional mandate of serving the people of Zimbabwe. There are, however challenges that are being faced in maintaining the PCICs operational.

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