

Zambia speaks



Polling station sign with voters

“ Through Zambia Speaks!, people have brought leaders to account. It was like a public forum where promises made by candidates were subjected to checks and balances. Where they felt leaders were not listening, they voted for others. Radio is powerful in that respect. ”

N'gandwe, Station Manager, Radio Icengelo

Zambia Speaks! was developed in the run-up to the 2016 elections to give the electorate a platform to engage their leaders as a way of promoting accountability and good governance. The programme was developed by BBC Media Action with support from the Zambia Accountability Programme (ZAP). This was in partnership with community radio stations and two TV stations, Muvi TV and the state-run Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation (ZNBC).

As Fr. N'gandwe observed, the programme brought the candidates and their constituents together and gave the electorate, including those in rural areas, a voice in governance. It also gave candidates a platform to share their messages.

“In an election dominated by personal attacks and mudslinging, the debate featuring key contenders, presented a rare opportunity for the candidates to stake their claim to the presidency by discussing key development issues,” Changwe Kabwe, journalist mentor BBC Media Action.

Raising the bar: the role of radio

Community media in Zambia occupies a unique space, reaching areas underserved by the national broadcaster and commercial stations. The stations have the potential to play a significant watchdog role in holding decision makers to account, while providing audiences with the information they need to make informed decisions.

Radio Chikuni, a community station in the southern province, was part of Zambia Speaks! and used its platform to enhance the visibility of female candidates within its catchment area. The station also broadcast live election debates from Lusaka.

“We put aside some free radio airtime for female candidates. Two of the local candidates we featured were elected as Members of Parliament: Mutinta Mazoka in Pemba and Attractor Chisangano in Gwembe constituency,” explained Jyde Hamoonga, Chikuni Radio station manager.

Radio Icengelo, in the Copperbelt province, also ran electoral programmes such as ‘Meet Your Candidate’, which was a platform for aspiring members of parliament, executive mayors and ward councillors to broadcast their messages. Presidential candidates Hakainde Hichilema (United Party for National Development) and Edith Nawakwi (Forum for Democracy and Development) were also among the guests featured.

“Politicians felt they needed to be on Radio Icengelo because we have been around for twenty years and are credible,” said Fr. N’gandwe.

An important part of the project was audience feedback and as Mr Hamoonga shared, the audience was responsive.

“People were writing in immediately via SMS to thank us for giving them the opportunity to hear the voices of the candidates. We live in a rural set up so people would also walk in and tell us how they felt about the programmes.”

The BBC Media Action provided technical, editorial and production support to ZNBC and Muvi TV to ensure the debates were editorially sound, credible and of a high technical quality. Reporters and producers at ZNBC and Muvi TV also received capacity development training and support. The debates series on radio, on the other hand, received support in terms of equipment and production costs from ZAP and capacity development from SIDA. Radio stations sent representatives to Lusaka to receive training.

“The plan for the producers who received the training to continue trying to be balanced and objective in their electoral process programmes and to give their audience the best kind of platform for information so they could make informed decisions when it came to the actual voting day,” said Mr. Hamoonga.

The radio stations, through BBC Media Action, have so far aired 244 governance radio programmes. The programmes led to immediate outcomes. There were particularly those that involve elected leaders interacting with citizens. These include documented cases of government officials making political commitments and a change in perceptions about the roles and responsibilities of leaders was observed.

Laying the ground for future elections

Euphrasia Lewella of Radio Icengelo said the station has already started working towards the 2021 elections. **“We have an election planning team and are already brainstorming how to approach coverage challenges of elections.”** In the next elections, Radio Icengelo would like to have reporters across the whole country at totalling centres because what happens in a community affects the whole country.