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COMMUNICATION

by

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on

“Universal Citizens Participation in the Work of the Parliament of Zimbabwe”

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Esteemed Colleagues;

May I begin my brief remarks by extending my deepest commendations to the Inter-Parliamentary Union for the successful hosting of this critical meeting of the Secretary General's from various national Parliaments. I will preface therefore, my remarks by quoting Ben-Zeev and Waterhouse (2012), who observed, and I believe, rightly so that ***“A ‘People’s Parliament’ requires an institution that prioritises and seeks active engagement with the public, and that is receptive and responsive to the needs of the people.”*** This laudable statement forms the import of my communication, which quintessentially speaks to how the Parliament of Zimbabwe has moved towards enhancing the participation of citizens in the work of Parliament.

Reflective of the infectious aspiration espoused by Ben-Zeev and Waterhouse (2012), the Constitution of Zimbabwe gives credence to the participation of citizens in Parliament. Section 141 of the Constitution read together with Standing Order 191 is emphatic in its declaration that ***“Parliament must facilitate public involvement in its legislative and other processes and in the processes of its Committees.”*** Dove-tailing Section 141, Section 149 of the Constitution read together with Standing Order 195 accords every citizen and permanent resident of Zimbabwe, the right to petition Parliament to consider any matter within its authority, including the enactment, amendment or repeal of any legislation. Additionally, these cardinal provisions are reinforced in our Parliament's Institutional Strategic Plan (2018-2023), which unequivocally articulates the modus operandi towards the attainment of the Constitutional mandate of ***“protecting the Constitution and promoting democratic governance in Zimbabwe.”***

It is therefore axiomatic that the robust Constitutional and other provisions are only as effective only when they are implemented. To that end, the Parliament of Zimbabwe adopted a three pronged model, which acts a conduit through which public participation in Parliament can be enhanced. The model is anchored on three key pillars of Information and Education, Consultation and Involvement as well as Feedback.

Under the **Information and Education** pillar, our Parliament cast its gaze towards enhancing access to information, which we believe is the cornerstone for effective citizen participation in Parliament. Through the Speaker's Outreach Program, which has largely targeted higher and tertiary education institutions in Zimbabwe, Parliament of Zimbabwe has managed to establish linkages between the legislature and the academia which laid the foundation for evidence-

informed policy making. Further, over the past few years, our Parliament has taken steps to adequately capacitate the Public Relations Department, the hub of information dissemination in Parliament. Moreover, observing that the modern environment is inundated with misinformation and disinformation including misconceptions about the operations of Parliament, our Parliament embarked on the development of a robust Communication Strategy and Language Policy. The Communication strategy establishes an efficient and effective communication infrastructure with both internal and external stakeholders, including citizens, which is critical to meeting our constitutional obligations. The Language Policy, on the other hand, envisages that all the sixteen (16) recognised languages in Zimbabwe are utilised in the dissemination of information. It is hoped that this strategy will be of importance in countering fake news and disinformation while simultaneously enhancing the effective and efficient participation of the citizens in Parliament. The Parliament of Zimbabwe has taken it upon itself to inform the general public on the petition's procedure in response to the common realisation that petitions submitted before Parliament were generally inadmissible mostly due to technicalities. In this regard, a petition procedure has been developed, and the legal services has set up a booth at every exhibition to inform the public about the petition processes.

Additionally, the vibrant Research Department has been critical in the production of content and research products such as policy briefs, analysis of budget statements, bills, protocols and agreements – all of which work to educate the citizens and assist them to effectively participate in the activities of Parliament and its Committees. To add on, Parliament of Zimbabwe has increasingly participated in various exhibition shows such as the Zimbabwe Agricultural Show (ZAS), the Zimbabwe International Trade Fair (ZITF) and other provincial exhibition shows. These platforms have been used to spread information about Parliament, which, in the grand scheme will enhance citizen participation. Parliament of Zimbabwe, through the Public Relations Department has hosted various schools and organisations and has given them a tour of the Parliament Building as a way of opening Parliament to the citizens.

A robust interactive website has been critical in disseminating information to the public. Significant investments have been made over the years to ensure that Members and the general public have access to sufficient and timely content. Participation and regular content updates on various social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram have proven to be very effective in increasing our reach and providing citizens with relevant and accurate information. The COVID requirements taught us to think outside the box, which led to investments in these platforms. Turning to the **Consultation and Involvement** pillar, which is

primarily anchored on Section 141 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe and Standing Order 191, Parliament of Zimbabwe has formulated and implemented a raft of interventions. Among these includes the use of public hearings for bills, petitions and other issues national interest. More so, bearing in mind that the world has gone digital and necessitated by the exigencies of the COVID-19 pandemic, our Parliament has also adopted virtual public hearings which are carried out through the Zoom platform. The hearings have also been taken to the radio stations as a way of widening the reach especially for people in the hard-to-reach areas. Additionally, Members of Parliament, as the elected representatives of the people have increasingly utilised the question time platform during the Wednesday Parliament plenary sessions to highlight issues of importance in their respective constituencies. Through motions, Members of Parliament have been vociferous in playing their representative role by speaking to issues of national interest – issues which are reflective of the collective voices of the people of Zimbabwe. Our Parliament has also sought to promote health lifestyle through the establishment of the Zimbabwe Parliamentary Sports Club – a club in which Members of Parliament use sports to spread awareness while also promoting health lifestyles in their constituencies.

The **Feedback** pillar essentially completes the cycle of effective participation in the work of the Parliament of Zimbabwe. Through the various social media platforms, Parliament of Zimbabwe has managed to effectively disseminate information and get real-time feedback from the Citizens. The Citizens' Budget, an abridged version of the National Budget is developed and distributed to constituencies annually as an avenue to simplify the budget as well as provide feedback on the outcomes from the pre-budget consultations. The next addition of the citizen's budget will include sections written in each of the 16 recognised languages in addition to infographics. As a consequence of national budget consultations, the Committee on Budget and Finance has plans to hold feedback meetings with each of the 10 provinces of the nation to inform them of the recommendations incorporated in the current budget. The weekly Parliament sittings are also broadcasted through the Facebook Live platform to allow citizens to have real-time engagement with the Parliament sittings. Other private media outlets and organisations that provide live broadcasts of Parliament sittings are permitted to record and broadcast chamber and committee sessions. Furthermore, the Question-and-Answer session held every Wednesday in the National Assembly and Thursday in the Senate allows Members to seek clarification from the Executive on issues of national importance on behalf of the public. Furthermore, Parliament has opened toll-free lines through which citizens can provide

feedback pertaining to any issues of interest which fall within the jurisdiction of Parliament. To add on, Parliament constantly carries out stakeholder satisfaction surveys which provide invaluable feedback on the performance of Parliament.

Distinguished Colleagues, The use of the aforementioned tactics has not been without its challenges. Our efforts to properly involve the public in our processes and procedures are nevertheless hindered by resource limitations. To enable the successful implementation of these initiatives, both human and financial resources are important. Our Twitter handle was hacked twice in 2022 as a result of our frequent use of social media tools, making them vulnerable to cyberattacks. Also, as we extended our participation in the social media sphere, misinformation, and disinformation activities against our content intensified. Without appropriate countermeasures, misinformation and disinformation have a high potential to undermine efforts made to engage the public. Additionally, while we urged our Presiding Officers and Members to use social media as a way to interact with the public, we learned that this endeavor had a cost as fraudulent accounts were quickly formed. Unexpectedly, some of the fake accounts have been publishing helpful content. However, the need to maintain the credibility of the institution and to ensure that only authorised content is made available to the public demands that we take control and own the distribution channels at our disposal. Moving ahead, preparations are being made to hire a specialised officer to handle cyber threats. We have also enlisted the aid of our legal staff in relation to inadmissible petitions in order to provide details on the expected format and content.

Esteemed Colleagues, I will conclude my communication by pointing out that it is pertinent that we purposely pursue the ideals of opening up our institutions to the effective participation of citizens. Pursuant to that, our foregoing encouragement therefore should be that we continuously explore innovative ways to tear down the walls of citizen apathy in the work of Parliaments – walls beyond which the infinite vistas of an accessible, responsive, people-driven and inclusive Parliament await.