Good Morning Ladies and Gentlemen!
I deem this as a grand opportunity to be able to talk to you on a subject that is very close to my heart. I come from Zambia—a vast country in Central Africa that is historically connected to Scotland in several ways! This is the country where the famous Scottish Missionary Dr. David Livingstone with the help of the local people—Chuma and Susi sighted the Mosi-oa-Tunya (the smoke that thunders!) also commonly known as the Victoria Falls. Our major tourist town, Livingstone is named after him and in addition to that, one of our museums is keeping his original notebook and the jacket he wore when he first visited the beautiful falls. Early this year, we were privileged as a country to play host to some of his great, great grand children who visited Zambia to commemorate the 150 years of the sighting of the falls. As a country, we are greatly honoured to be associated with this great servant of the Lord who in many ways changed the social life of Central and Southern Africa through the Good News from the Gospel that he preached among the local peoples. Even though he died on our soil yet his name continues to preach to many souls in various ways.

**Political Context**
The political landscape of Zambia dramatically changed after the country reverted to multiparty party democracy in 1991. Prior to this, there was very little room or political space to challenge or hold government to account for its various actions. Civil society and the non-governmental sector were extremely weak before 1991 as everyone who did not toil the government line was perceived to be an “enemy” of the state and thus was ruthlessly dealt with. However, when multiparty democracy was reintroduced, a number of freedoms were promulgated which gave space for civil society and the private sector to be established. Currently, there are various civil groupings and bodies operating in Zambia and each one of them pursing a specialised agenda or area of interest. A number of vocal non-governmental organisations (NGOs)—some with very heavy foreign backing have come out strongly challenging government on various fronts but all in the context of improving the governance arena. I come from a faith-based organisation—the Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection (JCTR) that has over the years been engaged in official processes in several ways. Guided by the social teaching of the church, the JCTR has been a torchbearer for the voiceless people on a number of social and economic issues as well as in the political sphere around good governance.

Obviously issues of transparency and accountability are critical in entrenching the norms of good governance. In recent years, the JCTR with a number of other stakeholders such as the church organisations, Zambian Parliament, trade unions, the academia, women’s movements, and various civil society organisations (CSOs), have been pushing the government to embrace the tenets of accountability, openness and transparency as prerequisites for sustainable human development. But these issues are not just exclusive to the local players; they are also high on the donor agenda especially the World Bank and selected bilateral governments who have been using them as a pre-condition for delivering aid to our government. Of these, transparency and accountability have the
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function of being a check on compliance to the formal rules of democracy and the principles of good governance. However, it is only through citizens’ participation that that check becomes operational and in a democracy citizens have a right to information on the affairs of their elected government. Transparency is also conducive to better decision-making in government and therefore is a pre-requisite for effective participation by legislatures and civil society in general. Our only disappointment as JCTR is that the Government seems to be more accountable to its donors than the local institutions and ordinary citizens. In this respect, Parliament is rendered irrelevant, as government tends to bypass it on important global policies whose impacts have a bearing on national policies. For instance, the Zambian government does not consult parliament on external loan acquisition, aid, trade and external debt policies. Yet the same government is quick to discuss these issues with its donors commonly known as co-operating partners in the official parlance.

**Actors in Engagement**
Zambia boasts of a very vibrant civil society comprising mainly of faith-based movements, trade unions, students’ movements, women’s movements, human rights movements, anti AIDS movements, among many others. Over the years, these groupings have had a profound influence in shaping the form and content of official policy making processes in Zambia. The groups engage in various forms of advocacy and lobbying at different levels of policymaking. For instance, the civil society in Zambia under the auspices of the Civil Society for Poverty reduction (CSPR)—a large civil society network that was conceived with the help of the JCTR and with over one hundred member organisations across the country came together in October 2000 with the main objective of ensuring that civil society from different backgrounds and in diverse locations effectively participated in the formulation of Zambia’s Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP). The Zambian PRSP was officially launched in July 2002 and the final document captured nearly two-thirds of the submissions made by the network members. The depth of unity shown by civil society during the PRSP formulation was later extended to the formulation of the aid policy for Zambia, preparation of the Transitional National Development Plan (TNDP), and in recent months to the formulation of the Fifth National Development Plan (FNDP) for Zambia, among many other policy documents.

**Incentives and Disincentives for Engagement**
Zambia is a liberal society and has embraced a number of human freedoms as espoused in our national constitution. Since parliament and many civil society organisations serve the same constituencies in terms of targeted groups and to some extent share similar developmental goals, there is therefore great incentive for the two to work together. For instance, JCTR and the Catholic Commission for Justice, Development and Peace (CCJDP) have been working closely with the Zambian parliament around issues of loan acquisition and management as well as budget formulation and analysis. The JCTR decided six years ago to set up the provincial outreach programmes (POPs)—these are rural networks aimed at mobilising people at the grassroots into the debt cancellation and fair trade campaign. Through these structures, the JCTR has been able engage the MPs through the “meet your local MPs” platforms. The CCJDP also established a Parliamentary Liaison Office to specifically relate to MPs both in their home constituencies and the capital city when parliament is sitting. Other platforms organised by the JCTR/CCJDP for MPs are faith-based “retreats” for Catholic MPs to help them find strength in their vocation for serving the people.
Generally, it has been observed that the nature and composition of parliament has a bearing in terms of the extent to which it can or cannot work with civil society. For example, the current composition of the Zambian Parliament has over two-thirds of the members coming from the ruling party and these members may not always want to be seen to be working with CSOs especially on “controversial” issues where government is perceived to be failing the people. In that case, there is no incentive for the two to work together because they are seen to be diametrically opposed forces. I have in mind the adoption of the draft constitution where the CSOs have clearly stated that it should be done through a constituent assembly while government and its Members of Parliament (MPs) are saying that it should be through parliament.

There is also a general perception about the levels of interaction between MPs and their constituents that most MPs neither consult their constituents nor give them feedback on parliamentary proceedings. There are also cases where some MPs have voted in favour of a motion even when such a motion is in direct conflict with people’s interests. For example, in 2005 the Zambian electorate clearly stated that they were opposed to their MPs receiving mid-term gratuity. The MPs simply ignored those demands and went ahead to vote for the mid-term gratuity at a time when public schools didn’t have textbooks and desks, clinics didn’t have essential drugs, rural roads were impassable and so on.

**Opportunities and Barriers to Engagement**

Zambia is in a democratic dispensation; there are certainly opportunities for CSOs and parliament to work together for an accountable government especially as we pursue issues of good governance in the management of public affairs. Promoting a good governance agenda at country level has to take into account the wide range of external influences e.g. the demands placed on our governments by the donor community especially the policy impositions from the Bretton Woods Institutions (BWIs). However, there are several platforms both at national and regional levels where CSOs and parliament have worked together to push for accountability in government. Multi-stakeholder dialogues mainly initiated by the CSOs have been held in the country to promote accountability and transparency in Government. At the regional level, we have the SADC Parliamentary Forum-CSO Dialogues where we have been able to engage regional MPs on a number of policy issues ranging from trade, debt, poverty reduction strategy papers (PRSPs), to political and economic governance, among many other topical issues. However, barriers to engagement could be in form of bureaucratic procedures that tend to hinder easy access to parliament. For instance, before a meeting can take place between CSOs and MPs, one has to write to the Speaker through the Clerk of the Assembly to seek his/her permission and then using his/her discretionary powers he/she might or might not sanction the meeting.

**Mechanisms for Engagement**

Generally speaking, there is no proper mechanism put in place through which CSOs and Parliament can engage together for accountable government especially at local community level. This is so because many MPs do not reside in their constituencies. However, in the last two years the Zambian Government has been setting up offices for MPs in their constituencies in order to promote a working relationship between the MPs and the various stakeholders.

**Issues of Engagement**
Issues for engagement vary from trade, aid, debt, national budget, NEPAD, MDGs, Regional Integration, good governance, to HIV/AIDS, etc. Some of the issues are dictated by the prevailing circumstances at a given time.

**Outcomes of Engagement**
The outcomes are varied and mixed. Through the collaboration between CSOs and parliament certain policies have been made to respond to people’s immediate needs e.g., the removal of user fees on primary education and healthcare provision for poor people in the rural areas. Government has also been made to prioritise certain demands e.g., the fight against poverty is high on the government agenda. This is as a result of pressure from CSOs and Parliament respectively. Slowly and steadily we are seeing government opening up its doors to the public especially in terms of information disclosure on debt relief resources for purposes of accountability and easy monitoring by independent watchdogs.

However, weaknesses/negatives in outcomes would mainly be in form of the ‘on-off-on-off’ kind of relationships between CSOs and some MPs especially on areas where the two may not readily agree. There are also areas where both CSOs and MPs have pushed for reforms but with little success (e.g., the demand to have some presidential powers clipped has not yielded satisfactory results). Government has simply ignored these demands.

**Lessons from Engagement**
The last fifteen years in Zambia have clearly changed the political landscape, as government has generally been able to embrace various democratic ideals, which promote good governance. However, we should be alive to the fact that challenging government in an environment where the executive is very strong can be very difficult if not outright risky. In our case, it is generally said that we have not yet had a bad leader but have bad constitutions in the forty-one years of political independence. During the same period, a space was created that led to the rebirth of a vibrant and robust civil society while at parliamentary level there was a metamorphosis from a parliament serving a single political party to a parliament serving several political parties. More and more demands are being placed on parliament to be accountable to the electorate just as much as government should be accountable to its people.

**Quick Suggestions and the way forward…**

1. Government should demonstrate unwavering commitment to fully embrace the principles of accountability and transparency in the management of public affairs

2. The Executive should stop interfering with parliamentary proceedings so as to entrench the principles of separation of powers among its three organs

3. Parliament should continue to push for policies that promote transparency, accountability and prudence in the usage of public resources

4. If we are committed to strengthening parliamentary processes, there is need to be engaged in the capacity building of political parties where MPs are drawn from

5. Strong parliaments need constitutional and legislative reforms in order to secure a more even balance of power among the executive, legislature and judiciary

6. Parliament should cultivate strong bonds with civil society for strong impacts on the communities they serve

7. Civil society should take a deliberate move to build its own capacities to be able to engage effectively with parliament on public policy issues. We need to remain engaged in challenging
governance environments. But we need a policy approach that is informed by good analysis. It should be realised that it is not so much the quantity of engagement that will count but the quality of such engagement.

There is also need to improve participation and empowerment of civil society organisations through an official and institutionalised arrangement rather than depending on ad hoc arrangements and the discretion of government.

I thank you all