

Zambia debates: increasing engagement between citizens and political candidates



Key messages



- Media can play a role in the delivery of transparent, credible and informed content that contributes to social accountability during elections.
- Television and radio debates provide an opportunity for citizens to meet and engage with their candidates and help to encourage greater accountability from political representatives.



The debates featuring key contenders in the elections 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**



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The context



A new constitution caused landmark changes to the 2016 general elections in Zambia, such as a clause requiring candidates to have at least 50 per cent of the vote to be elected. It was important to help the electorate understand key constitutional changes and provide a credible platform so they could make informed choices.

The response



The BBC Media Action, local community radio stations, the Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation (ZNBC) and Muvi TV came together to produce a debate series for the 2016 elections. Some of the support for this intervention came from SIDA in form of skills development.

The debate series gave citizens a chance to get to know their candidates and provide a space for dialogue.

The BBC Media Action provided technical, editorial and production support to ZNBC, Muvi TV and 16 community radio stations to ensure the debates were editorially sound and credible. Reporters and producers also received skills development training and support. Training sessions with reporters included issues on good governance, transparency and accountability.



Presidential debate

The challenges



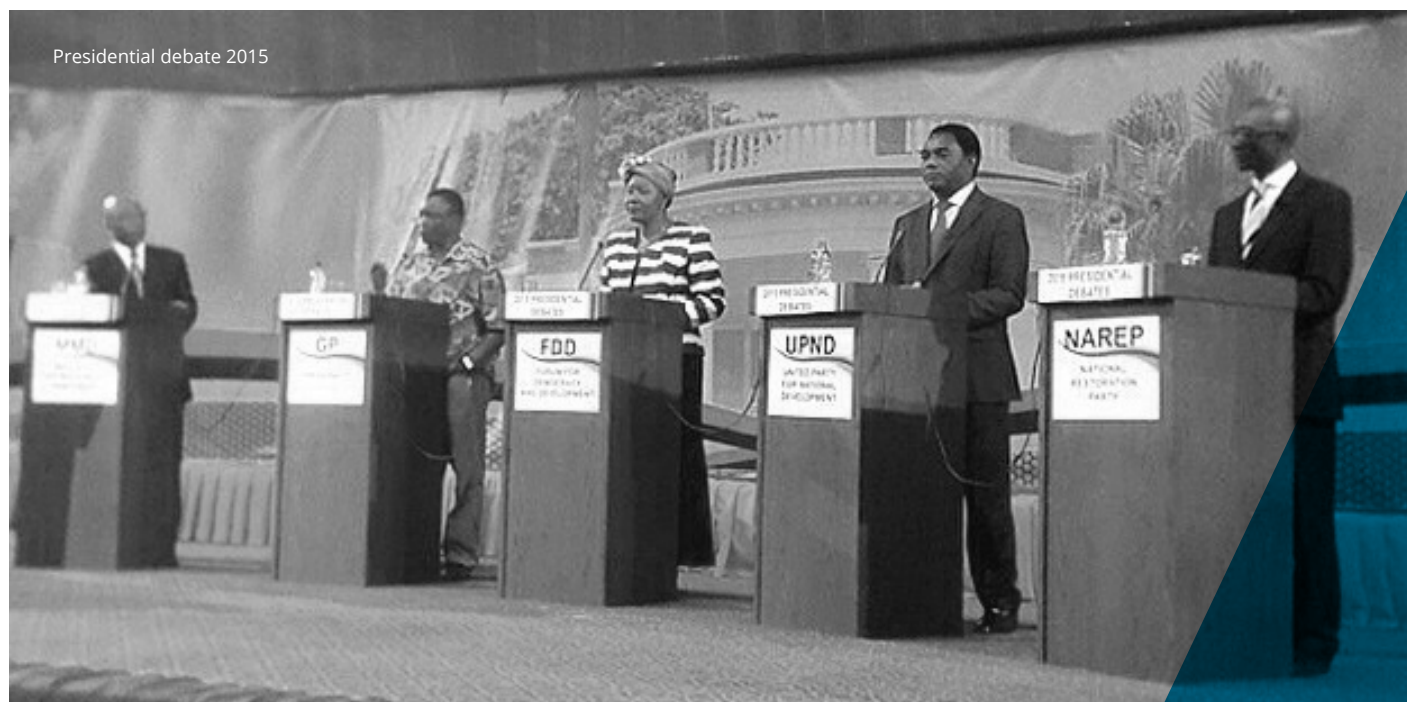
The challenges emerged when trying to ensure the media debates were coordinated on various stations and executed for greater impact.



...Such debates must be conducted in every election and not just during the presidential election process; because we learn a lot of things here, we even know who to hold responsible when we don't see things happening...



Respondent from a debate **at Kabangabanga Radio**



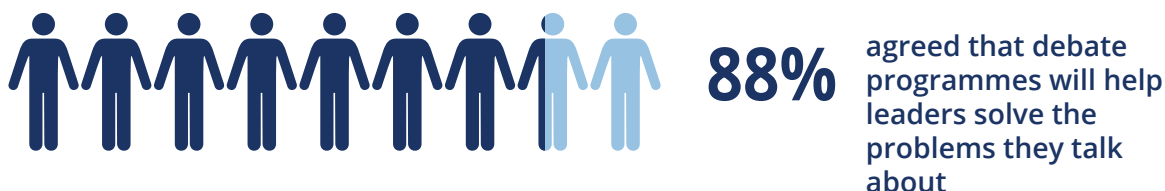
The results

11 debates held



A total of 11 MP and Mayoral debates were held across Zambia, all of which were broadcast on local FM partner radio stations. Two of these debates were broadcast on ZNBC television and two were broadcast on Muvi TV. In addition, one running mate debate, and one presidential debate were broadcast on Muvi TV and transmitted on 14 stations across the country. Approximately 1,600 viewers were reached and had the chance to participate directly in the debates as audience members during the broadcasts.

Positive audience reception



244 good governance radio programmes aired

Six radio stations successfully broadcast 244 radio programmes on good governance. These broadcasts have helped increase accountability by enabling members of the public to interact with public office holders. As a result, documented commitments, changes in behaviour and perceptions on the roles and responsibilities by government officials were observed.

...We need more programmes of this nature in our community; next time you should go in the rural areas as well because people learn a lot of new things with these platforms...

Respondent from a debate at **Radio Liseli**

Lessons learned



The need to encourage collaboration

Providing independent balanced reporting can be a challenge especially for state owned media houses. In this case, when the ruling party refused to participate in the debates it put the state owned media house in a difficult position. It was difficult for them to stay unbiased and in the end they pulled out of the TV debates.