

INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION

The right and freedom to know and to be heard

The MDC's policy thrust on communications is to offer people access to information, education and entertainment. The MDC believes that the free flow of public information, giving citizens the right to know and be heard, is a hallmark of a functioning democracy.

The MDC government will repeal repressive legislation that restricts access to information, and encourage investment in a variety of media services. It will not own any newspapers, and it will open the airwaves to competition. It will encourage community media, and international journalists will be welcome. The MDC believes that an informed society is able to participate in the design and execution of public policies and is more resourceful and creative in addressing its social challenges. A major objective of the policy is to provide the public with timely, accurate, clear, objective and complete information about government policies, programmes, services and initiatives.

CORE PRINCIPLES

The right to information and freedom of expression form some of the core principles of a healthy democracy. The MDC recognizes the importance of communication for:

-  **Inclusiveness.** All citizens should have access, in their own language, to information about matters of public concern. This means that information should be made widely available through a wide range of channels, including the mass media and new technologies such as the Internet. It also means that people from all walks of life in all Zimbabwean societies should be helped to develop the skills they need to access and use that information. This is particularly important in the case of minorities, disabled citizens and other groups that might be systematically excluded from participation in the public sphere.
-  **Diversity.** Zimbabweans citizens come from widely diverse social and cultural backgrounds and hold a wide variety of political views. The MDC will therefore respect the full range of views that are in public debate.
-  **Participation.** Citizens should have a right to express their views, be heard, and have the opportunity for dialogue with decision-makers.

Communication as an Empowering Tool

The MDC's communications policy will centre on citizens' needs. It will therefore focus on providing the tools and facilities – the forums for debate and the channels

of public communication – that will give as many people as possible access to information and the opportunity to make their voices heard. This policy objective will be achieved through:

- ✎ Improving civic education. Civic education is the responsibility of the government. Civic education is crucial for enabling people to exercise their political and civic rights and to become active in the public sphere.
- ✎ Citizen interconnectedness. The maintenance of interconnections between citizens is a vital component in society. This is a seedbed for respect and tolerance among citizens. The aim is to foster a sense of belonging and togetherness.
- ✎ Connecting citizens to government institutions. The MDC will make a deliberate effort to open feedback channels between government institutions and the country's citizens. This two-way communication will foster democracy and seek to make institutions more responsive, open, accountable and accessible to citizens. Institutions must inform Zimbabweans about opportunities to participate in public consultation and citizen-engagement initiatives, thus also ensuring that institutions of the government are visible, accessible and accountable to the public they serve and that all government institutions work collaboratively to achieve coherent and effective communications with the public.

In order to encourage a variety of opinion and the free flow of information, no investor will be allowed to hold majority ownership in more than one communications/media area.

POSTAL AND TELECOMMUNICATIONS SERVICES

The MDC will retain the Posts and Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe (POTRAZ) as a regulatory authority to deal with opening up private-sector participation in postal and telecommunication services.

Postal Services

It is accepted that a post office is an important institution in the daily lives of the people and that this remains an important system for the provision of certain services. To this end the Zimpost will be taken over by a new board reporting to Parliament. However, POTRAZ will make sure that the atmosphere is conducive for private-sector participation in this sector in order to decentralize postal services to all corners of the country. The board will operate under the following mandate:

- ✎ To turn postal services and the POSB into fully commercialized enterprises.
- ✎ To review all operations and staffing so as to enable the organization to meet its goals in terms of customer satisfaction and operational efficiency.

- ✎ To operate with a surplus of revenue over expenditure.
- ✎ To protect the savings of the people investing with the POSB, ensuring that this organization can undertake a full range of customer services, eventually taking on the character of a fully fledged financial institution with special attention being paid the needs of small-account holders.
- ✎ To ensure that audited accounts are produced within six months of the year-end each year and are submitted to the minister and to Parliament.

An MDC government will require that rural postal services operate with all the traditional services, as well as telephone, Internet, photocopying and typing services. These services will be established within a 20-kilometre radius of all rural communities.

Telecommunications

Internationally, the telecommunications industry is playing an increasingly crucial role in economic and social development. The availability of a good and affordable telecommunications infrastructure and, associated with this, a widening range of telecommunications services and applications at internationally competitive prices are decisive corporate-location factors. This sector has been the subject of considerable attention in recent years, and in many countries the system has been broken up and privatized, the reason being that a state-controlled institution finds it difficult to stay abreast of developments and that the private sector is in a better position to finance new development and respond to customer needs.

The MDC's communications policy programme is aimed at encouraging investment and innovation in the communications sector. The communications infrastructure will be developed on primarily commercial terms using competitive technologies. The availability of communications services will be ensured throughout the country; network construction will be promoted, also with public funding, in areas where such services are not commercially available. The government will improve the availability of high-speed connections by promoting the construction of optical fibre and wireless networks. The MDC government will therefore immediately review the existing arrangements in the industry and then adopt reforms that will:

- ✎ Transform all state-controlled organizations to ensure their independence and freedom to act in the public interest.
- ✎ Review the legal framework within which the media operates, with a view to liberalizing both electronic and print media to allow for open competition, ensuring, however, data protection and privacy, and safeguarding intellectual property rights, patents and copyrights.
- ✎ Maintain and improve the national grid and international telephone links via satellite.

- ✎ Ensure that POTRAZ licenses operators and monitors call charges, and acts against any collaboration between operators that might take place to the detriment of consumers.
- ✎ Create the conditions for genuine broadband services in all major centres.
- ✎ Adjust the allocation of radio frequencies for greater flexibility and efficiency. The registration of frequencies will be maintained within POTRAZ.
- ✎ Examine the contracts of private media companies currently operating in Zimbabwe to ensure that they meet worldwide standards of corporate governance.

Mobile Phone Network

The MDC government will open up investment in the mobile phone networks. Through POTRAZ, private-sector participation will be encouraged in this critical sector to enhance cheap and reliable networks with nationwide coverage that ensure that each person can communicate. The MDC will encourage cell phone companies to share distribution facilities.

Fixed Phone Network

While an MDC government will support a publicly funded fixed telephone company, POTRAZ will ensure that private-sector participation will also be encouraged in order to provide low-cost telephone services and to widen the options available to the public.

INFORMATION

One of the most basic human rights is for individuals to have the right to information that will enhance their lives. Corruption thrives where there is secrecy. A lack of access to information about the work of government leads to an unaccountable public administration that is open to abuse. Where there is little transparency and limited scope for public scrutiny, public officials are able to hide or cover up corrupt practices and blunders.

In a democratic society, people need information in order to evaluate whether their representatives have performed satisfactorily and whether they deserve to be re-elected. In participatory structures, people are even more actively involved and have the opportunity to contribute to local and national government decision-making between elections. They can do this only if they are adequately informed.

In order to be adequately informed there must be not only an open, transparent system of government but also a variety of channels of communication, places where the information can be accessed, and the skills needed to understand, interpret and evaluate the information provided (information literacy).

There are a number of reasons why information literacy is important. More information is produced today than ever before, and individuals must be able to use this information to the best of their ability. With the proliferation of information being stored on computers, information literacy and computer literacy go hand in hand. However, the two are not synonymous.

Previous government initiatives have been based on computer literacy alone, without the realization that information literacy is a far broader and more difficult area to address. People need to be equipped with the skills necessary to be able to use information. Developing countries, especially, have a critical stake in how successfully they cope with the trade, environmental, energy, health, agricultural, industrial, population and other challenges facing them as they enter the Information Age. Putting in place national information laws and policies, including sector-specific information policies, is a key building block needed to meet those challenges.

An MDC government will not only remove barriers to information in terms of building networks and providing content, but will also take the lead by establishing initiatives and programmes to aid the promotion and education of the population with regard to information literacy. While it is important to educate and train information professionals, the goal should be that all citizens are information literate so as to increase their effectiveness in working life and enhance their ability to function in society.

It will be the intention of an MDC government to accede to the UNESCO Florence Agreement and its Protocol, which commit governments to facilitating the free flow of information across borders by reducing tariff, tax, currency and trade obstacles to the international circulation of educational, scientific and cultural materials.

There is no law in Zimbabwe that obliges public officials to supply relevant information when requested to do so by the media or to reply to questions put to them by the media. In the past it has been very difficult for the public and the media to extract information about public matters from government officials. The media has had to go through a lengthy and often futile process to obtain information from officials. The private media was often faced with the dilemma of whether to publish stories emanating from unofficial sources or leaks within government departments when it was not able to extract or confirm any information from official sources.

It is therefore necessary to come up with appropriate legislation to deal with these weaknesses, and to this end a national information policy will be devised. The Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act is totally inadequate and in any event needs to be repealed. A new Freedom of Information Act is required to lay

down appropriate procedures for obtaining government information among other things.

Censorship and Freedom of Expression

The MDC subscribes to the general principle stated in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, that ‘Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.’

However, the MDC also recognizes that freedom of expression is not absolute. It may cause harm to others and must take into account other rights and interests, such as privacy, the protection of children and public order. Limits to the freedom of expression are therefore inevitable. However, any restrictions should be the exception and free expression the rule. In any case, the rapid growth of information and communications technologies, and in particular the Internet, means that censorship has become increasingly difficult to implement as information can easily cross national boundaries.

The MDC believes that censorship should not be imposed unless it is truly necessary to protect some other vital objective. It is central in a democratic society that people should be left to make their own judgements about what they wish to say, read or see, free from State or other control, unless there will be real harm to others. The MDC government will therefore review the Censorship and Entertainments Control Act with a view to removing unnecessary regulations and controls.

Voluntary Media Council

An MDC government will immediately facilitate the creation of a voluntary media council, which will have the sole responsibility for the accreditation and registration of journalists. This self-regulatory council will also oversee issues of ethics of journalists and media houses. The regulation of the advertising industry will also be also be facilitated through this council.

The Mass Media Trust

Although this has private as well as public interests in its shareholding, it has been used by the government as a vehicle for the total control of the print media owned by the Trust. Because this is a business on its own, it would be the intention of the government to review its role with the aim of closing the Trust down and disposing of the various newspapers and businesses that it controls.

The Public Broadcaster

An MDC government will make sure that the airwaves are freed and liberalized. It will ensure the creation of a non-partisan public broadcaster that serves the interests of the people and provides a nationwide service. It will reflect the diversity and broad aspirations of the Zimbabwean people.

The MDC government will completely review the operations of the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation and decide future policy towards the electronic media. It will look into:

-  The full privatization of the electronic media.
-  The future of public broadcasting both in television and radio.
-  The introduction of more players in the broadcasting industry, with special emphasis on community radio.
-  The introduction of competitive technologies that open up the industry and reduce the cost of access.
-  The protection of the media from undue state interference and direction.
-  The definition and protection of public interests.
-  What should happen to the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation, its accumulated debt and personnel.

Zimbabwe Information Service

The MDC government will retain the Zimbabwe Information Service as a government information service that is interconnected with bureaux throughout the country to enhance two-tier communication between central government and all parts of the nation. The ZIS will be the conduit between the government and the ordinary people of Zimbabwe and will be responsible for disseminating information to the public via library services, information centres, and mobile cinema and television units.

Library and Information Services

A network of properly equipped, resourced and staffed libraries provides the best opportunity for the public to access information throughout the country. The National Library and Documentation Service (NLDS) will therefore be re-branded and revitalized to be capable of co-ordinating an effective national public library and information service in both urban and rural areas. National bibliographic services currently operated at the National Archives will become the responsibility of the NLDS. In addition, other libraries (e.g. subscription, parastatal, university, research libraries, etc.) may opt to join as partners in its network.

The NLDS will endeavour to establish public library and information services in as many population centres as possible, all libraries acting as information hubs to allow members of the public access to the Internet in addition to printed material such as

newspapers and reference books. The government will also be able make use of these to disseminate information about its programmes, policies and services.

The NLDS will function as a consortium, providing centralized acquisition and processing services to member libraries, which would themselves be able to concentrate on the services they provide directly to their users.

Funding will be provided by central and local government in order to ensure that core services are available free of charge in all libraries, but this could be supplemented, for example, from charges for additional services. There are benefits in local communities controlling and administering local services, as this could give some competition to employ the best staff and to be able to provide the best service. All libraries would be expected to form library users' committees, elected annually by the communities they serve, in order to ensure they are responsive to users' needs.

The continued professional training of librarians to degree level at universities will be encouraged, as will the training of library assistants to certificate and diploma levels at technical colleges. The expansion of library and information services will offer many more job opportunities both at professional and paraprofessional levels.

A library will be part of the required facilities at all secondary schools, with core resources provided from per capita grants. School libraries will hold print and non-print information resources, as well as providing Internet access. To run their libraries, schools will employ a qualified school librarian, who will also educate students in information skills.