

SECTION 1

INTRODUCTION

This section provides information on why constituency work is important and some of the methods of constituency outreach. There are many MPs in Malawi who are already active in their constituencies and working hard to improve the lives of their constituents. Examples of their activities have been included in this section. This section should give you some ideas for activities that you can undertake in your constituency. This section also includes a copy of the proposal to create constituency offices for MPs. If you have any questions or comments about this section, please talk to one of the MPs listed at the start of this handbook.

INTRODUCTION

WHY SHOULD I WORK IN MY CONSTITUENCY?

Your work in Parliament is very important. As an MP, you are responsible for making the laws that govern Malawi and ensuring that the government works efficiently and responsibly. Parliamentary work can be exiting and interesting. Membership on parliamentary committees, participation in parliamentary debate and maybe even your work in the Cabinet may seem like the most important parts of your job. However, parliamentary work is only half your job. There are important reasons for working in your constituency:

Your Constituents Demand It

Your constituents know that you are in Parliament to represent them, and they expect to be able to meet with you, face-to-face, on a regular basis. Your constituents want to tell you their problems directly, and to discuss the challenges facing the people in your constituency. Public opinion research has shown that most Malawians feel the greatest responsibility of their MP is to be accessible to the electorate. If you are not active in your constituency, it is impossible to fulfill this responsibility. Making yourself accessible to your constituents is one of the best methods of ensuring that you are re-elected in 1999.

You Are a Representative

The most important principal in a democratic society is that all people have an elected representative. As the representative of all your constituents, you have a responsibility to understand the problems, concerns and priorities of your constituents, and to ensure that the government works in their interest. If you are not active and engaged in your constituency, you cannot fulfill these responsibilities and your constituents are denied their democratic right to representation. In other words, constituency outreach is an essential part of your job.

Your Constituents Want Development

Most Malawians are concerned about local issues. Your constituents want food, safe water, education for their children, good roads and access to loans. They want real development in their own communities. You have an intimate knowledge of your constituency, and you can quickly learn what the people in your area really want. As an elected leader, you can help organize and initiate development projects that address the most pressing concerns of your constituents. Promoting development activities improves the lives of your constituents and increases your popularity and chances for re-election.

You Have Power

Being an MP gives you a great deal of stature and respect. You have the right to question civil servants and government officials about their activities in your constituency. You have access to information and resources that most citizens do not. You can negotiate with government and donors on behalf of the people you represent. You can act as a bridge between your constituents and the sometimes complex and confusing government. Using your power for the benefit of your constituents will bring you their support and will ensure that things are accomplished in your constituency.

HOW DO I DO CONSTITUENCY WORK?

Members of Parliament in Malawi face many challenges. The 1994 elections gave many people high expectations, some of which are impossible to fulfill. Malawi is poor and most citizens have very pressing problems such as lack of food, lack of safe water and illiteracy. Transportation and communication infrastructure is poor and some constituencies are very large or have many thousands of constituents. Malawi's democracy is very new, and many people do not yet understand what role they need to play in society. Most importantly, MPs have few resources to help them effectively service their constituencies. These challenges make your job difficult, but they also make your job more important. As an MP, you can have a real impact on the quality of life of your constituents by giving them a voice in the democratic process and encouraging development in your constituency.

Despite the many challenges, there are MPs in Malawi who are effectively representing their constituents, fulfilling many of their expectations and bringing development to their constituencies. This section outlines some of the methods of constituency outreach that are being used successfully in Malawi right now. You might have tried some of these methods yourself. Others might be new to you and might give you ideas for activities in your own constituency. It is important to remember that there are no right or wrong ways of working in your constituency. Only you and your constituents can judge what works best in your area.

Community Development Projects

Initiating, facilitating and encouraging community development projects in your constituency is one of the best ways to bring benefits to your constituents and to increase your popularity. Malawians are also willing in most cases to undertake development work on a self-help basis, so you can accomplish a lot with relatively little money. As one European Ambassador to Malawi with wide experience in Africa stated recently "The self-help spirit is alive in Malawi like no other country I have ever seen." You can encourage the admirable self-help ethic among your constituents and help bring noticeable benefits to the people in your community.

Self-Help Projects

Although self-help projects are relatively inexpensive, they often fail because the little funding that is needed is not available. There are currently several institutions or funds in Malawi that specialize in funding small scale, community led projects. A list of these organizations has been included in Section 5 of this handbook. As an MP, you can often help groups or communities in your constituency to secure funding for projects that they have identified themselves. You can help constituents fill out forms, provide an address so the funding agency can contact your constituents, or offer to oversee the project on behalf of the funders. Many MPs have already secured funding for a wide variety of projects in their constituencies. An MP in the north helped his constituents find funding from MASAF and the European Union to build several primary school blocks, an MCDE centre and a bridge. An MP in the south helped initiate several self-help projects with funding from MASAF, the American Ambassador's fund and the European Union, convinced a private farmer to pay for a piped water project for a local village and encouraged students and parents to mould bricks for the expansion and renovation of every single primary school in his constituency. One MP has found funding to build over ten primary schools in his constituency in just one year.

Once funding for self-help development projects is found, you can often simply supply advice and encouragement for the rest of the project. Visiting the project site frequently and helping the community comply with the reporting requirements of the funding agency can ensure that the project is completed and that the funding agency will be willing to donate to the community again in the future. One MP in the south spends at least two days a week visiting development projects in his constituency.

Nongovernmental Organizations

You can also promote development in your constituency by working with NGOs and encouraging them to undertake projects in your constituency. By finding out which NGOs are working in your constituency and meeting with representatives of these NGOs, you can help them determine what projects are priorities for your constituents. By working with an NGO, you can also associate yourself with the project the NGO is undertaking and increase your popularity. For example, an MP in the south knew his constituents often drew water from polluted streams during the rainy season. He convinced World Vision International to fund the digging of four shallow wells and helped supervise the project. An MP in the centre has developed a long term relationship with another international NGO that continues to fund agricultural and infrastructure projects in her constituency. A list of NGOs and religious organizations active in Malawi is included in Section 2 of this handbook.

Credit and Loans

Another method of promoting the development of your constituency is assisting your constituents to secure loans. A number of organizations now lend money to groups or individuals to promote private business and agriculture. A list of these organizations and sample application forms are included in Section 5. You can help your constituents by providing application forms and information from lending institutions, organizing constituents into groups to secure loans when necessary, helping constituents to complete

loan forms, following up loan applications with lending agencies and encouraging representatives from lending agencies to visit your constituency and conduct meetings. Several MPs from different parts of the country have helped large numbers of their constituents to secure loans from DEMATT, NABW, MRFC and other organizations.

Government

Despite Malawi's financial problems, much development work in the country is still carried out by the government. As the elected representative of your constituency, you are in a unique position to help ensure that government officials in your area do their jobs and that your constituents receive a fair share of government resources. You can encourage the civil servants working in your area by working to ensure that they receive their salaries on time, lobbying Ministers to provide resources that civil servants need to do their job and encouraging dialogue between government officials and your constituents. You can also help the government by checking on civil servants to ensure they are doing their work and by criticizing inefficient government employees. One MP in the centre had several boreholes in her constituency repaired simply by telephoning the district water office repeatedly to ask when the work would be finished. Another MP in the south drove from her constituency to Blantyre, picked up a technician from the Ministry of Irrigation and Water Affairs, drove him to a broken borehole and insisted that he fix it immediately. Such actions can be extremely popular with your constituents.

Working With Committees

One of the goals of working in your constituency should be to maintain a high public profile, to keep informed of events and issues in your constituency and to make yourself accessible to your constituents. One of the best ways to achieve these goals is to meet with and participate on as many local committees as possible. Regular committee meetings allow you to meet with key opinion leaders, hear the views of constituents and associate yourself with the work of the committee.

The District Development Committee

All MPs are members of the DDC in their district. The DDC is an important forum where development priorities are identified and development funds are disbursed. It is essential that you attend DDC meetings whenever possible. If you do not attend DDC meetings, you risk losing the respect of important leaders such as chiefs and civil servants. You also risk having development funds spent in constituencies other than your own or on projects that are not a priority for your constituents. At a recent DDC meeting in a district in the South, MPs were asked to identify a location for a secondary school in each constituency. One secondary school was allocated for each constituency, plus two extra. Two MPs at the meeting requested and were granted a second school for their constituency. These two MPs doubled the number of secondary schools to be built in the constituencies simply by attending one DDC meeting.