

## Action from the grassroots to parliament: access to essential medicines gets an airing in Zambia

The unique positions of stakeholders participating in the Medicines Transparency Alliance Zambia, means that the group are able to initiate discussions at many levels from grassroots to parliament. This is of great value in highlighting critical issues about the lack of access to essential medicines experienced by many citizens in Zambia and makes progress towards finding some solutions.

The Medicines Transparency Alliance (MeTA) aims to test the idea that cooperation and commitment by stakeholders to disclose and analyse data around the medicines supply chain will lead to better access to essential medicines.

MeTA is an approach and a process of dialogue and exchange between different interest groups able to voice their opinions, disclose their data, and work collectively for change over time. This approach is fundamentally shifting relationships and ways of working and represents a change in the way business is done by governments, by companies and by the civil society organisations and citizens who hold them to account. The MeTA pilot phase is operating in seven countries: Ghana, Jordan, Kyrgyzstan, Peru, Philippines, Uganda, and Zambia. This article focuses on MeTA Zambia and what has so far been achieved by bringing together different stakeholders to address the problem of lack of access to essential medicines.

Recent events in Zambia in the medicines industry have put a spotlight on access to essential medicines. The Medicines Transparency Alliance Zambia is taking the opportunity now to raise awareness at all levels from the grassroots to parliament about the right to health and about access to medicines. How can they do this? Ultimately, the multi-stakeholder nature of the group means that a variety of approaches can be taken. The MeTA Council in Zambia consists of twenty-five stakeholders from the government, local private companies, and civil society organisations. All have an interest in the medicines industry, and those interests at times are conflicting. All too, have varying values and ways of working. So how does MeTA function and why does it work for MeTA Zambia?

Goodwell Lungu, Executive Director of non-governmental organisation, Transparency International Zambia, explains why they are involved: 'We believe as Zambians that MeTA has come at the right time and it will be able to help us to ensure that there is less corruption and more transparency in the medicines supply

chain. In Zambia we are working with multi-stakeholder groups. There are civil society organisations, private sector organisations, as well as the government – in particular the Ministry of Health. All these particular groups have dedicated time towards planning for what sort of activities we need to implement and what each of the sectors' role will be. We are happy that all the three sectors have taken part in the planning of what sort of activities will be undertaken."

Stakeholders in MeTA Zambia hold unique positions in different places. This allows for a variety of approaches to be taken. For example, Honorable Lazarus Chota, is Member of Parliament since 2006 for the opposition party. He is also Vice Chairman of the Zambian Chapter of the Executive Committee African Parliamentarian Network Against Corruption and in May 2009, he was elected as Chairman of the MeTA Zambia Council. This has created opportunities to address parliament to promote the issue of access to essential medicines.



*Goodwell Lungu, Executive Director of Transparency International, Zambia: believing that MeTA has come at the right time*

**Honorable Lazarus Chota, Chair of MeTA Zambia Council; Chama Nshindano, MeTA Project Coordinator; Owas Mwape, MeTA Zambia Council member; and Violet Kabwe, MeTA Zambia Consultant**



*Using modern technology to help the meeting along*

MeTA Zambia have debriefed all MPs about the aims of MeTA, which has generated a lot of excitement about the issues. The Council worked with the Secretary to the Cabinet to facilitate smooth communication to the key ministries and provided materials about MeTA through the Cabinet Office. This entry point was critical, because it allowed official introduction to MeTA. The Council now has plans to raise a motion in parliament and discuss access to medicines and the medicines supply chain on floor of parliament. Honorable Chota is on the Committee of Legal Affairs, Human Rights and Gender. He will request one MP to raise a motion and another to second it. His participation in MeTA and this kind of influence means that MeTA Zambia is able to get these issues discussed at a high level.

At the other end of the scale entirely, MeTA Zambia

is using community outreach approaches to raise awareness of the importance of the right to health and access to medicines. To bring these issues to the community, and to raise awareness of rights and what MeTA Zambia is aiming to achieve, they used radio outreach and road-shows. In August 2009, a live radio phone-in show was broadcast in two districts. Local community members were able to discuss their concerns or ask questions about medicines. The community radio involvement has so far taken place in two rural areas. MeTA has organised capacity building workshops with radio stations so they themselves can start to mainstream MeTA issues on their radio programmes over the next few years.

These two examples demonstrate the broad approaches that MeTA is able to take because of its multi-stakeholder nature. Stakeholders from different sectors are coming together, sitting round the same table and discussing what steps need to be taken, at which level, in order to make progress towards access to medicines for all citizens. This approach is, so far, proving very beneficial for MeTA Zambia.

### [www.MedicinesTransparency.org](http://www.MedicinesTransparency.org)

MeTA is a multi-stakeholder alliance working to improve access and affordability of medicines for the one-third of the world's population unable to access essential medicines due to high cost or local unavailability.



## CPD Challenge

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*Lots to discuss: Violet Kabwe, MeTA Zambia Consultant is on the left*