Public Policy Discourse in Zambia: A Step Back and Zoom Out Perspective

Speech Delivered by Director-General of the Higher Education Authority (HEA), Professor Kazhila Chinsembu, at the Official Opening of the Inaugural HEA Winter School, Ndola, Zambia, 9th July 2025.

We live in a time when outrage is easy, but understanding is rare. Headlines flash, pundits scream, and media platforms reward the most outspoken voices—not the wisest.

We have traded hard questions for hot takes, moral courage for partisan theatre, and civic engagement for performative outrage.

What passes for policy debate today is often little more than intellectual junk food: overprocessed, emotionally charged, and empty of real issues and intellectual nourishment.

Most of us live within policy decisions without participating in conversations that bring about their full design.

This essay provides a bird's eye perspective on public policy discourse in Zambia. It is a step back and zoom out perspective.

Looking from above, we begin to see patterns-- how partisan bitterness muddles policy debate, how policy failures ripple, and how policy reforms stall.

Public policy discourse in our country is broken, floored— and we are all complicit.

We should spit our policy discourse out of the vile mouths of partisan pundits who profit off our polarization. They do not inform; they inflame.

If we want public policy worthy of the people, we need a discourse that is grounded in facts, not partisan factions; in justice, not bitterness.

It is time to reclaim our policy conversation—not just from bad political actors, but from bad habits. To think deeper. To speak truer. To listen harder. Because the future does not belong to those who shout the loudest—it belongs to those who learn, reflect, and act with purpose.

We should all engage in policy discourse because ignorance is not neutral. It may even be a power vacuum other people are eager to fill. Without a grounding in public policy discourse, it is easy to be swayed by soundbites, fear-mongering, or partisan spin.

Resisting misinformation requires a clear understanding of public policy so that you can sieve real issues from empty rhetoric.

Public policy is not abstract; it is about power. Public policy is the blueprint for how governments address problems, allocate scarce resources, and prioritize goals.

From education to Constituency Development Fund (CDF), healthcare to infrastructure—public policy is the bridge between government and the daily realities of our people.

Public policy helps you understand how and why certain decisions affect you. Understanding public policy is not just for politicians and experts. It is a form of community duty and civic self-defence against ignorance and manipulation.

In a time of partisan noise and division, understanding public policy is one of the clearest ways to cut through the crap and chaos and move towards issues of public significance and moment.

It is important to understand public policy. But it is even more crucial to understand the public discourse that helps us arrive at public policy.

This lecture dissects public policy discourse in Zambia. What are the characteristics of our country's public policy discourse?

Recall that one of the functions of HEA is to undertake quality assurance. In this lecture, we argue that quality assurance should embody an honest assessment of our public policy discourse.

We also contend that higher education should help reclaim our public policy discourse from the toxic influence of public intellectuals who distort public debate. We must spit our policy discourse out of the vile mouths of partisan pundits.

If our model of public policy discourse is not inherently flawed, then it is moribund. The norms we use to engage in public debate no longer serve our collective interests.

Public discourse in our country hints at a broader stagnation and mental block characterized by huffing and puffing, rooted in the formation of echo chambers, hyper-partisanship, and performative politics.

In partisan echo chambers, our people are exposed to repetitive but selective information. Not only does this harden their convictions but it also leads to polarization and rigid standpoints.

Many of our public policy conversations are pointless partisan echo chambers, closed spaces where discussants have limited willingness to understand sound policy perspectives.

Our public policy discourse suffers from hyper-partisanship where policy discussion is first viewed through the prism of "us versus them".

Excessive partisanship breeds animosity, obstructs constructive dialogue, and hinders the consideration of alternative policy perspectives.

Public policy conversation in Zambia is also polluted by performative politics. Instead of dwelling on substance or facts, public policy discourse has degenerated into cheap publicity stunts, social media posts and open public shows for carefully crafted rhetoric to whip up emotions intended to mobilize political support.

Rather than focusing on concrete conversation of real issues and substantive policy outcomes, performative politics breeds chronic cynicism, toxicity, fierce hostility and a lack of collaboration or consensus on important national policy proposals.

Our country's system of public policy discourse is unproductive because it is submerged in a dangerous political web of deceit, innuendo, and propaganda.

Numerous columnists in our newspapers and a large number of pundits on our radio and television stations, tinged with notoriety, sow toxic and regrettable seeds of deceit, innuendo and propaganda into our public policy arena. Their politically charged analyses, divisive rhetoric and distorted narratives leave many sober-minded citizens feeling raw.

Extremist political analysts present a formidable but problematic influence in public policy discourse in Zambia. They bring a distinct— but potentially dangerous —set of capabilities and traits that conspicuously shape, distort, hijack, or defile public policy discourse in our country.

Frequently posing as public intellectuals or commentators, extremist political analysts, do not bring valuable insights to policy reform in Zambia.

If we are to advance as a nation, we should unshackle our public policy discourse from the grip of cunning public intellectuals and partisan media.

As a matter of fact, partisan media, never mind our doom and gloom public policy arena, is the forum where attempts at public policy reform go to die.

Worse still, we have partisan academics who turn anti-intellectualism into a populist badge of honour. Others use pseudo-intellectualism to amplify and justify twisted narratives that feed partisan fundamentalism and rigidity in policy guideposts.

Instead of debating public issues with empirical evidence and grace, partisan public intellectuals create their own dramatic spectacles where they propagate twisted narratives with charisma. They oppose every attempt at reforming policy, and they do this by making the road to public policy reform very slippery.

Their focus is not just on the emotional manipulation of the public; they also make divisive tribal statements sound palatable and entertaining.

Let us just say that some of our pundits in Zambia are scholarly demagogues. They are charismatic speakers and persuasive writers who leverage their intellectual prowess to manipulate public opinion, often using deceptive arguments or appealing to specific groups with tailored and sweetened messages.

Partisan scholars are media-savvy. They understand how to go viral and dominate social media platforms. They exploit polarization to fuel outrage and boost engagement with their strongholds of political supporters.

For many partisan scholars who are public policy analysts in the media, the logic of capturing public attention is more important than the logic of bringing reason into the public policy arena.

We contend that partisan scholarship can lead to a lack of objectivity and a distorted view of reality, as the scholar's pre-existing beliefs influence their interpretation of evidence.

Now, the real danger is when their language of public discourse becomes emotionally charged and tribal, or when their twisted narratives become laced with victimhood or vengeance.

Public discourse in Zambia has lost meaning. It is hollow, not for lack of issues, but for lack of objective truth and substance.

The end effect is that nuanced evidence-based policy debate is drowned out by incessant political propaganda and the overreach of partisan spectacle and dogma.

And while they perform, the machinery of governance grinds on—often unnoticed, unchecked, and untouched by the people it claims to serve.

In the heat of our vile public debate and petty partisan gridlock, serious contributions from neutral and sober minded experts and members of the public are constantly and disappointingly fizzled or cancelled out.

We have failed to cultivate a public policy arena that steers our nation out of its own self-stitched political hatred and grief.

Without innovation and transformation, our public policy discourse will continue to be futile, unproductive, repugnant and moribund.

We need to change course. To do this, higher education should stimulate our keen understanding of public policy. It should stimulate our faculties of thinking and enrich our powers of cogitation and political wit.

We call upon all our institutions to reframe public policy discourse, to reimagine a plausible vision where empirical knowledge derived from public engagements becomes a powerful vehicle for developing our country.

Sadly, we note with dismay that our conduct and model of public discourse is tilted towards sensationalism, unsubstantiated claims, rumours, anecdotes, twisting of facts, and policy sabotage.

Meaningful intellectual discourse is oftentimes impugned by pettiness, hostility and hotheadedness.

Our public arena for policy conversation is acrimonious, deceptive and toxic. It does not meaningfully enrich the learning and research experiences of students in our higher education institutions.

Public policy discourse in Zambia is messy, punctuated by political hate and steeped in extremist partisan bias and bitterness. It is pregnant with bile and venom.

Many of our columnists and analysts are loose canons. And it is not that the chaos they pose to ignite by their divisive public rantings and writings would be a terrible surprise. Chaos is in fact what they fervently and vehemently desire.

Which is why, by all intents and purposes, our hostile and volatile public policy discourse is blocking our country from getting ahead. The need for a sanitized issue-based public policy arena has never been as urgent as it is today.

It is a Herculean effort for our students to latch on to innovative, meaningful, purposeful and worthwhile developmental ideas given that our public policy dialogue is frequently poisoned by bitterness, propaganda, prejudice, biased and skewed viewpoints, and destructive power struggles.

Many of our students are inundated by political noise and propaganda. Our local context for teaching and learning is aberrant and jaundiced by cynical standpoints. It causes cognitive dissonance in our students. It is self-defeating and it undermines students' deeper reflection, understanding and success.

A local teaching and learning environment imbued with deceptive intelligence and intentional spread of misleading and anecdotal information is detrimental to our students.

Higher education must refocus our students' attention onto important topics. It must keep the eyes of our students on the ball.

Higher education must forge meaningful data-driven policy conversations that foster rational arguments for national development.

Socioeconomic blueprints founded in and welded to the thought processes of political demagogues, rogue scholars, and policy saboteurs will not develop our country.

It is not farfetched to suggest that policy inertia and policy sabotage are hindering the development of our country. There are moments when a nation must rise above pettiness and forge a collective policy agreement.

Now, more than ever before, the need for higher education and the need for civic education cannot be overemphasized.

It is imperative that we operationalize a School of Government with a nuanced approach to produce a new critical mass of patriotic citizen intellectuals ready and hungry enough to discuss and implement sound public policy reforms.

This is neither a call to illiberalism nor political correctness. It is a call to our patriotic duty to produce a new cadre of citizen intellectuals ready to take on the important responsibility of shaping civic thought and moderating public policy discourse.

Without this critical cadre of scarcely skilled and patriotic citizen intellectuals, our honest attempts at reforming socioeconomic policies will continue to be stuck in the doldrums of intellectual noise and political gridlock.

Higher education must provide scholarly drive to address the current state of stagnation and momentum in policy reform. It must provide a path to get our country out of the current policy doldrums.

Higher education using its most valuable and well published knowledge workers should confront social media and political noise makers with researched data, empirical evidence, and credible facts.

Higher education should address policy sabotage and nationalistic scholars must not surrender to policy mercenaries.

Higher education should not be timid in the face of those bent on distorting the truth, creating policy distractions, and twisting facts.

It is disheartening to note that public discourse in our country is often driven by intellectual grandiosity and delusions of grandeur by biased public intellectuals that seek a misguided sense of self importance.

Our system of higher education ought to cultivate new virtues where erudition stunts intellectual grandstanding and academic rigour defuses empty intellectual pomposity.

Genuine and seasoned scholars must now rise and save our public discourse from the incessant and idle criticisms emitted by self-appointed armchair experts without publications and h-index.

If not properly cited or handled, second-hand information can easily ruin genuine academic and professional enterprises.

Scholars in our higher education institutions must bring a unity of purpose into our efforts to develop our nation. They should bring data into our national consciousness.

Founded in anecdotes and fuelled by spurious reasoning, our current landscape of public discourse is in many cases very impertinent hence its relevance is neither here nor there.

We call upon scholars in our higher education and research institutions to saturate our national discourse with empirical evidence. Commitment to sharing of empirical evidence does not in any way mean we should abandon or curtail the dissemination of dissenting viewpoints.

Our academics should serve a new unity of purpose underpinned by the need to enact policy that will produce favourable impacts on livelihoods. Higher education institutions should advance the use of data analytics as an important pillar for national economic planning.

Our universities must publicly share quantitative, qualitative and empirical facts to take the sting out of our acrimonious and divisive politics.

Empirical knowledge is the most critical ingredient that will make the attainment of socioeconomic development a tractable challenge.

In conclusion, we argue here that a healthy, content-driven and consensus-building public policy arena is difficult to build in Zambia because of three important structural obstacles: echo chambers, hyper-partisanship, and performative politics.

Thus, again, if our system of public engagement with empirical knowledge is not broken, then it is dying slowly.

Stated differently, our public policy arena has exhausted its capacity to generate meaningful, inclusive, or effective deliberations to serve our dynamic society.

Higher education should now confront this stark reality and glaring dichotomy that threatens the future of our country.

It is not in dispute that our public policy discourse needs fresh voices and insights. Higher education must excite minds across the entire public policy spectrum and ecosystem. It should spark a new hunger for credible public policy conversations.

When it is all said and done, public policy discourse contains the stories we collectively write about who we are and what we believe we owe one another.

It is not just about debates on radio or in Parliament. It is about whether a child goes to school, whether the school has desks, whether CDF is utilized on time, and whether justice is real or rhetorical.

It is the invisible architecture and narratives of our common life, shaping opportunities, freedoms, burdens, and futures. Public policy discourse is the space for power play.

And when public policy discourse fails—when it is distorted by partisanship, or neglected by citizens—the consequences are not imaginary. They are lived, every day, by real people.

It is time to reclaim public policy from the pundits, the lobbyists, and the self-appointed governance experts—to wrest it from the spectacle and return it to the citizens. Not as experts, but as citizen intellectuals—curious, courageous, and committed to building a better common life.

This is not someone else's fight. This is ours.

Thank you.