Role of Community Leaders in the fight against HIV/AIDS

The Chairperson
Your Worships The Mayors of City and Municipal Councils
Chairpersons of Councils
Ladies and Gentlemen

May I begin my paper presentation this morning by quoting the words of one great man who said: “In the infancy of societies, the chiefs used to shape their societies, however, these days societies shape their chiefs.” What this means is that these days, the thoughts, beliefs, aspirations and dreams of chiefs, or should I say all leaders like you, are shaped and designed by what is taking place in the society that they live in. My presentation this morning is entitled 'The Role of Community Leaders in the Fight against HIV/AIDS'. Please note that I have said 'community leaders' and not 'traditional leaders'. By this I am assuming that Councilors, Chiefs, Headmen, and even Members of Parliament are all community leaders.

Ladies and Gentlemen, HIV/AIDS has been and still remains one of the biggest challenges facing our communities today. This makes the disease a huge challenge to the authority of any leader even much more than any political opponent you can ever get. Let me point out the major impacts of HIV/AIDS in a Chiefdom like Chikanta which is predominately agricultural based. Small holder agriculture is a vital sector for people in our communities countrywide. Unfortunately, it leads to the loss of bread winners, parents and guardians at the household and village levels which is likely to lead to increased poverty and food insecurity among affected families in our communities which are already burdened with effects of climate change and the like. In addition, that HIV/AIDS destroys both the traditional social security mechanisms that provide support to the elderly and orphaned children of AIDS victims as well as the agricultural and rural development institutions that provide technical and financial support to farmers. This has been reiterated by government leaders from time to time on the deaths of our extension officers due to the diseases.

The AIDS epidemic has imposed an enormous cost burden on the weakened households and villages due to: diversion of potential funds for farming hospitals and funerals, reduced times spent in the field cultivating and many more impacts. Most of us community leaders have seen and felt the impact of this disease.

Ladies and Gentleman, this calls for action. Action that is holistic and innovative. Unfortunately, despite being closer to the people, some of us community leaders have known made maximum use the authority and power that we possess to fight the pandemic. All community leaders at whatever level are custodians of power, strategy, culture and command high respect within our communities and beyond. That is why the involvement of community leaders in HIV/AIDS
interventions demonstrates the importance of the issue and therefore motivates greater participation of other community members. In addition, decisions concerning community strategies for improving the well-being of HIV/AIDS affected families are more effective with the leaders being part of the process.

The major role of leaders like us gathered here today in the fight against HIV/AIDS as we have seen it work in Chikanta is three fold. These summarize who we are and our potential:

1. We are Gatekeepers: all leaders in a community are to some extent keepers of the community gates with the potential to lock or unlock the doors to their communities. It is key for the community leader to take an active role in opening the door to outside advocates, lending them legitimacy or credibility in the community. This is essential for creating working partnerships in the community in order to manage the pandemic. We have through this approach in my community, made a policy to support NGOs and individuals that can help mitigate the impacts of HIV/AIDS. Currently, we have a strong partnership with NGOs like World Vision Zambia and Macha Hospital which is helping bring down the incidence rates through their various activities. We have learnt, that partnerships are key to the development of the future and we are prepared to run with them.

2. We are Social Marketers: Let me point out that a community leader develops a level of expertise and speaks out on the issue of HIV/AIDS him or herself. A leader is like a parent and it's the responsibility of every parent to mentor and foster the positive development of his and her children through the provision of advise. When a leader speaks, everyone listens. This provides an opportunity for the leader to reach out the innermost emotions of the people she or he leads and highlight issues related to HIV/AIDS. It is policy now for me and my fellow leaders in the chiefdom, to talk about HIV/AIDS in any gathering that we have with the community. This delivers an even stronger message than my role as a gatekeeper, since it more closely associated with my followers struggle with the diseases. This role gives us an opportunity to advocate against the stigma of HIV and AIDS and promoting greater awareness of the disease.

3. We are Capacity builders. Community leaders should work with government, NGOs and other stakeholders to develop strategies, to not only prevent the spread of the disease, but learn how to live with it and its consequences. Many opportunities exist for us to mentor our followers to understand the disease and its consequences. It is thus important for us to shape their culture, beliefs and practices positively so that all negative practices can be done away with.

As I come to the end of my presentation, let me give recommendations on how we can strengthen the role of community leaders in the fight against the disease.

1. To successfully implement community based programs, all leaders should be involved at all stages of the process in the fight against the disease. The leaders' role should be more than that of just approving the activities or mere gate keeping. Community leaders leading the fight against HIV should see themselves as mentors and role models for those that are not yet involved. It is key for us as community leaders to confront stigma, silence and denial and ensure participation of persons living with HIV and AIDS and other vulnerable groups in strategies to address the pandemic.

2. Institutions involved in HIV/AIDS, gender, poverty and human rights issues should work with the Leaders in order to put them at the center of the fight against HIV/AIDS and involve them in all policy formulation and implementation processes.
3. It is important for stakeholders in this fight to establish and maintain communication networks as well as resource centres in the communities, linking people with resources and services. Unfortunately, some NGOs have opted to setup base in town only leaving the rural areas that desperately need their services.

Ladies and Gentlemen, if we implement these issues in our community, we can be rest assured that the fight is won and we can go to sleep.