



# Strengthening Evidence-Use and Oversight Capabilities through Digital Interventions in African Parliaments

LESSONS FROM DEVELOPING AND PILOTING  
THE AFRICAN PARLIAMENTARY OVERSIGHT TOOL (POT)  
IN TWO AFRICAN PARLIAMENTS

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## ABOUT CLEAR-AA

The Centre for Learning on Evaluation and Results – Anglophone Africa (CLEAR-AA) is one of six regional centres housed in academic institutions across the globe to build the capacity of countries, people and institutions to plan, measure and report on development programmes – a process referred to as monitoring and evaluation (M&E). CLEAR-AA's work in supporting and improving M&E contributes to better governance and improved development outcomes across Africa.

## IN THIS LEARNING NOTE

- Detailed description of how digital interventions can improve oversight and evidence use capabilities in African parliaments
- Examining the contested and political context that digital interventions in African parliament operate in
- Exploration of the role that participatory parliamentary-owned processes have played in the successful development, piloting and implementation of the African Parliamentary Oversight Tool.
- CLEAR-AA's recommendations for conducting digital interventions to strengthen evidence-use in African parliaments.

As part of the Centre for Learning on Evaluation and Results – Anglophone Africa’s (CLEAR-AA) work to improve and support evidence generation and use processes in African parliaments, CLEAR-AA has embarked on a digital intervention programme in African parliaments through the development and piloting of the African Parliamentary Oversight Tool (African POT) in two African parliaments. The African POT is an online research management tool and is CLEAR-AA’s flagship digital intervention project to undertake digital transformation in evidence generation, use and culture in African Parliaments. This platform digitalises some of the existing evidence processes, but in the long term is designed to bring about organizational, cultural and process changes that allow for a culture of evidence-based decision making to flourish.

This learning note aims to detail the key processes of introducing digital tools into African parliaments that improve oversight capabilities, as well as presenting opportunities and challenges experienced from this process. The lessons presented here from CLEAR-AA’s experiences in designing the African POT are intended to equip parliamentary officers, development practitioners and other actors involved with introducing digital tools into parliaments with the skills and considerations to navigate what are often contested spaces.

African legislatures’ challenges around resources, capacity and reliable data are well documented; so are practitioners’ attempts to alleviate these challenges through the introduction of digital tools. What is underdeveloped in the literature, however, is the extent to which these innovations are used, how these tools are being used and why some interventions are more successful than others are. This learning note challenges digital and development practitioners to wrestle with difficult questions around how to maximise benefits from digital interventions, how failures can provide useful lessons to future practitioners, and how parliaments and practitioners can navigate politically contested contexts.

Ultimately, this learning note investigates how specific oversight functions can be bolstered through digital interventions. It seeks to contribute to the thinking of future digital interventions in African parliaments that share CLEAR-AA’s goal of reducing the gap between MPs as citizen representatives and citizens.

## CONTEXT

Traditionally, parliaments have three mandates: oversight, legislation and representation. Oversight is particularly evidence intensive and complex, as it specifically requires elected representatives to hold the executive branch of government accountable for its role in delivering services and conducting government business. This is only possible with constant, reliable and credible evidence. African parliaments have to deliver on their mandates while also overcoming resource, capacity and executive constraints.

African Parliaments are also often limited in the financial, leadership and time resources they can allocate to researching, implementing and adopting well-meaning digital interventions. Similarly, parliaments can often find they have limited technical skills and capacity to deploy to digitization efforts that could make evidence generation and synthesis more efficient and transparent. Finally, African parliaments are constricted by overbearing Executives that restrict the legislature’s ability to use evidence-based reporting to fulfil their mandates.

As a result of some of these contextual intricacies, systems of evidence use in African parliaments are uneven, with capacities, processes, and practices unstandardized, often leaving the performance and results of these systems unclear.

## OPPORTUNITIES

There have been contentions on the effectiveness of technical interventions and reforms in rising above highly politicized arenas like parliaments. However, there is growing research suggesting the effectiveness of technical interventions as they attract minimal contestation due to their objectives and intended application often being non-political. As a result, tools like the African POT contribute to the numerous attempts to de-politicising evidence and supporting parliamentarians to make decisions based on credible evidence. While supporting research and M&E departments to produce useful data and reports with fewer accusations of bias, interventions like the African POT can help retain institutional knowledge through data repositories.

As it would be explored in the lessons section below, piloting of digital interventions such as the African POT can break down silos and produce synergies between departments within parliaments. This is because the development, implementation and localisation of digital interventions require participatory processes between different functions of parliament. These relationships can be useful in carrying out parliamentary responsibilities that are beyond the scope of the intervention.

## LESSONS

A key lesson that has emerged from the tool is the instrumental role participatory parliamentary-owned processes have played in the development, piloting and implementation of the African POT. The fact that digital reform is not possible without continuous participation, ongoing championing and visible leadership buy-in cannot be overstated. Participatory processes of introducing the POT have contributed to creating an enabling environment, including showcasing vocal leadership around transparency and evidence use. Being participatory in the design, development and piloting of the POT has also contributed to bringing together institutional knowledge around the complex and unique bureaucracy of parliamentary evidence systems.

Another lesson has been around both the promises and limitations that a specific tool can play in strengthening systems of evidence. While the African POT itself can mediate certain relationships, for example, between parliamentary researchers and the MPs themselves who demand and use the evidence, it can only play a limited role in shifting institutional dynamics. Without other ingredients needed to foster organizational change, specifically at technical, institutional, and cultural levels, the tool itself could still be caught in the same environment of contestation and uneven systems that it hopes to change.

The technical skills to accommodate digitization within Parliaments varies considerably across and even within institutions. Most Parliaments have offices with mandates to take on-board digital initiatives. Similarly, while a digital oversight tool does not itself shift processes of evidence use, it introduces a level of transparency and accountability to some processes that have the potential to shift power dynamics within the institution.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Parliamentary researchers and officers, as well as external evidence practitioners need to prioritise securing the on-going participation and buy-in of Members of Parliament when designing interventions that support the use of evidence for effective policy making. Ultimately, MPs are central to the evidence use process and therefore stand to receive optimal benefit from timeous evidence generation and ease of accessibility through digital platforms.

Practitioners should design interventions that not only meet compliance, but that seek to achieve systemic change i.e. cultural and practice change around attitudes of evidence use.

Parliaments and practitioners should invest in the development of the technical skills of MPs, researchers and other parliamentary staff.

Parliaments and practitioners should investigate ways of creating a culture for intra-parliamentary participatory processes. For digital interventions that seek to improve evidence use to operate optimally, they require both systemic and cultural transformation. This includes promoting the demand for evidence among MPs, building the capacity to access, synthesize and use evidence, and perhaps most critically, a constructive and trusting relationship between parliaments and evidence generation practitioners.

## FIND OUT MORE

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2. Khumalo, L, Blaser Mapitsa, C and Morkel, C. forthcoming. Systems of Evidence Use in African Parliaments.
3. Leston-Bandeira, C. (2007). The impact of the internet on parliaments: a legislative studies framework. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 60(4), 655-674.
4. Salih, M. A. M., Hout, W., Bofo-arthur, K., & Momba, J. C. (2005). Introduction : The Changing Parliaments. In M. Salih (Ed.), *African Parliaments : Between Governance and Government* (pp. 3–24). Palgrave MacMillan US.