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Digital Transformation in African Parliaments

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Centers for Learning on Evaluation and Results
ANGLOPHONE AFRICA

CLEAR-AA LEARNING NOTE

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DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION IN AFRICAN PARLIAMENTS

CLEAR-AA'S WORK IN INTRODUCING DIGITAL REFORMS THROUGH THE AFRICAN PARLIAMENTARY OVERSIGHT TOOL (POT) FOR AFRICAN PARLIAMENTS: LESSONS FOR DATA GOVERNANCE

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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

- **Definition and purpose of digital transformation in African Parliaments**
- **Data governance considerations in digital reforms in African Parliaments**
- **CLEAR-AA's recommendations for practitioners engaged in digital governance and implementing digital interventions in African Parliaments**

Development and evaluation agencies that operate in African Parliaments find themselves operating at the intersection of evidence processes and digital reform agendas in African Legislatures. Digitisation and digital reforms are not new to African Parliaments, as legislatures across the continent have been adopting digital tools in their regular workflows and digitising existing manual processes for the last 20 years. However, what is under reported in practitioner circles are the recent digital governance concerns around data management, as well as what digital transformation entails and the challenges implementing practitioners are likely to face. Notably, the discourse around implementing digital transformation and data governance in African Parliaments has tangible consequences on the effectiveness of parliaments' ability to deliver their oversight, representation and legislative mandates.

This learning note draws on lessons from the piloting of the African Parliamentary Oversight Tool developed by the Centre for Learning on Evaluation and Results – Anglophone Africa's (CLEAR-AA) in two African parliaments. It further outlines lessons and recommendations to guide practitioners in implementing successful digital transformation initiatives in African Parliaments.

The African POT is an online research management tool that emanates from CLEAR-AA's commitment to support and improve evidence generation and use that furthers better decision making. The African POT is a digital intervention project that undertakes digital transformation in evidence generation, use and culture in African Parliaments. This happens through a mobile application that integrates the evidence process, from the demand side by the MP. Evidence is then synthetized by parliamentary researchers to facilitate MPs use of evidence This platform digitalises some of the existing 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. The key issues of consideration in piloting the African POT involved data governance, security and vulnerability, implementation challenges related to staff capacity, technical language and the type of commitments required from practitioners and parliaments in implementing the tool.

DATA GOVERNANCE

Data governance is concerned with the policies that direct how data is managed. Therefore, data governance is the framework that specifies how data is generated, used, stored and ultimately destroyed. Robust data governance frameworks pay particular attention to both security and ethical implications throughout the data cycle. Given the often-sensitive work parliaments are asked to carry out, and that they are highly political and contested spaces, the existence and knowledge of clear and directed data governance frameworks are crucial in ensuring the integrity of any digital intervention.

Consequently, data governance questions pertinent to parliaments that CLEAR-AA has learned from the experience of piloting the African POT include: what data is in the public interest and should be disseminated publicly? Should data generated within a national parliament be stored solely on servers within the same country? How do parliaments guard against misuse of data?

DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

While often used interchangeably, there are important distinctions between digitization, digitalization and digital transformation. Digitization is typically concerned with the conversion of analogue information into a digital format, such as in record keeping, to improve the management of information. Digitalization, on the other hand, is a strategy to reform processes, and evolve the work conducted. Finally, digital transformation concerns people's relationship to these change processes. Analysing digital transformation in parliaments can be threefold. Firstly, understanding and evaluating how technological interventions have influenced organisational culture. Secondly, the extent to which leadership structures have embraced and moved forward proposed changes, and lastly asking whether processes have developed in ways that realign with parliamentary mandates.

CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTING DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION IN PARLIAMENTS

Challenges related to capacity, resources and political will in introducing digital reforms into African Legislatures are well documented, but what often goes under discussed are the challenges practitioners and parliamentary officers face in navigating the technical language, requirements and opportunities when digital governance intersects with the traditional analogue evidence ecosystem. Parliamentary officers are expected to meaningfully decide on the specification, design and function of digital tools, despite, understandably, not knowing the language and operations of digital application development. Likewise, parliamentary ICT departments are often introduced to bridge this gap but their day-to-day work is not related to application development but rather the maintenance of servers, issuing computer hardware and fixing equipment. Parliamentary officers and ICT departments are also not ordinarily responsible for creating or navigating the data governance frameworks that external practitioners ask them to advise on during digital intervention projects.

Overcoming these hurdles are equally challenging for development and evaluation practitioners, and these experiences are likely to be shared across many digital intervention processes in Africa's public sector.

LESSONS

Digital interventions and reform agendas tend to be overly ambitious, and sometimes poorly communicated. Practitioners run the risk of failure by creating a gap in expectations and reality. Therefore, it is critical to manage expectations by securing an agreement of the proposed technical options and explaining the limitations of any digital intervention. Likewise, there is a need for a shared understanding of what successful reform would be, particularly in terms of the expectations, intended use and imagined utility.

Conversely, practitioners need to ensure parliamentary stakeholders understand digital transformations as long-term projects and impacts take time to be apparent. African Parliaments in particular have unique challenges that complicate digital reform initiatives. For instance, high MP turnover undermines the retention of institutional knowledge and increases the amount of resources that would need to be routinely deployed to train and on-board new representatives. As a result, some parliaments are reluctant to implement esoteric or highly technical processes.

Digital governance frameworks need to be identified during conceptualisation or need to be created using best practices where they do not exist or are not clear. Based on the piloting experience from the African POT, practical and ethical issues around data management became more difficult to navigate once the working prototype was ready for onsite testing. In this instance, data management concerns that were brought up during the pilot threatened an entire reworking of the tool.

This lesson stems from the unevenness in awareness, knowledge and skills among parliamentary officials on the potential arising from data, security and data governance. In the context of building a culture of evidence use, it also reinforced the importance of continuously building skills and knowledge among relevant officials and MPs on digital security matters. An additional insight specifically for practitioners supporting parliaments is the need for a principled posture towards data governance. Failure to integrate a supportive, reflexive approach runs the risk of threatening political will supporting the digitalization journey.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Practitioners should uncover existing data governance frameworks or suggest processes based on best practices.
- Practitioners should establish a mutual understanding of the scope and function of the technical intervention, as well as the final expectations of the tool(s), intended use and imagined utility.
- Practitioners and parliaments should act on the renewed importance of continuously building skills and knowledge among relevant officials and MPs on digital security matters.

FIND OUT MORE

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