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Chapter 9

Enhancing digital governance in African parliaments: The case of the African parliamentary oversight tool

Khumo Pule, Takunda J. Chirau & Steven Masvaure

Abstract

In the 21st century we have seen a paradigm shift in governance, from traditional analogue governance systems to digital systems driven by Information Communication Technologies (ICT). Despite introducing terms such as e-governance and e-parliament to signify this digital evolution, parliamentary evidence generation predominantly clings to analogue methods. The COVID-19 pandemic expedited the shift of parliamentary activities from physical engagement to online platforms. However, a significant technological divide persists in internal processes and research procedures for evidence used in African parliaments. In response, the Centre for Learning on Evaluation and Results Anglophone Africa (CLEAR-AA) developed the African Parliamentary Oversight Tool (African POT), which is a mobile application research management tool to undertake digital transformation for evidence generation and use in African Parliaments. This paper examines how the African POT helps take analogue systems into the digital era. Furthermore, it examines the role of the POT in strengthening evidence use in African parliaments, using the Parliament of Zambia as a case study. The methodology adopted in this chapter is essentially centred on action research pursued during the designing, co-planning and piloting of the African POT with the Parliamentary representatives from Kenya and Zambia, as well as the authors' experiences and insights gained from leading such interventions. The findings indicate that the African POT creates new opportunities for evidence generation and synthesis, a repository for research reports and monitoring and evaluation data, digitalisation of existing parliamentary research processes, and improvement of data curation and evidence synthesis systems. The results posit slow yet gradual progress in adapting research management information systems. Political ideologies often take precedence over the available quantum of evidence. Overall, the findings indicate that it remains uncertain whether the evidence produced through the African POT is considered during the process. At the practice level, this study is a situational analysis of the usability and experience of both designers and users of the POT, and provides parliamentary staff, development practitioners, knowledge brokers and other actors in the space of evidence generation and utilisation with helpful knowledge for consideration when

navigating the complexities of introducing and implementing digital governance through mobile applications, particularly in volatile spaces such as parliaments.

Introduction and background

Since the turn of the 21st century, there has been an acceleration in the pace of transforming governance analogue systems into digital systems to help simplify and improve the efficiency of these systems. The transformation is being effected through the adoption of ICT tools to streamline government processes and increase efficiency. This transformation has resulted in the emergence of new terms – such as 'e-governance', 'civic tech' and 'e-parliament' – that represent the technological changes that governance systems are going through. But in the accelerated pace of digitalisation there have been few notable technological changes in how the evidence that feeds into parliamentary processes is requested, generated and used. This has resulted in most parliaments still using analogue systems to request and generate the evidence that informs parliamentary committee work and the work of the general assembly. However, despite this limitation there has been some progress in adopting digital tools for engaging with citizens and citizen participation (Machiri & Pade-Khene, 2020). Given the shift brought about by digital advancements, there is a need to examine how digital tools can help parliamentarians request and generate evidence that informs decision-making for representation, legislative and oversight roles.

The COVID-19 disruption ushered in an urgent need for parliaments to re-examine how they conduct their business (Fitsilis & Costa, 2023). The pandemic facilitated a rapid shift in automation or digitisation of parliamentary activities from face-to-face engagements to online engagements (Mencarelli, 2022). The shift has extended to how parliamentary committees conduct their business, to deliberations, and to actual parliamentary voting. The shift has accelerated the transformation of parliament systems; however, the current focus is more on transforming the specific activities or processes of parliamentarians with limited technological transformation in terms of internal processes such as research processes that generate evidence for parliamentary deliberations and decision-making (Missingham, 2011). Traditionally, the focus on parliaments has been on promoting the e-parliament concept, which is centred on the use of information technology tools for public participation and with limited focus on automating how parliamentary evidence is requested and generated. To address this gap, CLEAR-AA designed a digital tool (the African POT) that manages and facilitates how members of parliament request research evidence from parliamentary

researchers. Furthermore, it is anticipated that the POT will strengthen evidence generation that is reliable, and that the evidence will be put to suitable use in African parliaments.
This chapter aims to describe and explain the experiences and challenges of (and recommendations for) using the African POT in transforming analogue systems for the digital era. The specific research questions are as follows:

- What is the role of the African POT in promoting the oversight role of parliament?
- How does the African POT facilitate the process of evidence-based decision-making in parliaments?
- What are the broader implications of digital transformation on evidence generation, application, and cultural shifts within African parliaments?

A parliament or legislature is a "predominantly elected body of people that acts collegially and that has at least the formal but not necessarily the exclusive power to enact laws binding on all members of a specific geopolitical entity" (Barkan, 2009). The world over, parliaments perform three specific roles, which may be termed legislative, representation, and oversight over the government (Blomgren & Rozenberg, 2015). The legislative function pertains to the power of the parliament to make laws for the government. The representation role arises from how members of parliament are elected; they are elected as citizens' representatives, and the expectation is that they will be the voice of the citizens who elected them. The oversight role allows parliament to monitor and oversee government actions.

For parliament to perform these key roles there is a need for evidence that supports legislative and oversight roles. This evidence comes from different stakeholders and sources; hence the need for the digitisation and automation of the process of requesting and generating evidence. Parliaments are an important "pillar of democracy, as they are responsible for enacting laws, debating and establishing political priorities, allocating resources, representing different constituencies and political parties and overseeing the executive branch of government" (Cheema, 2005). To support this important pillar of democracy, parliamentarians must have access to synthesised evidence that informs their decision-making. In most parliaments, internal parliamentary researchers (who are requested by the members of parliament to synthesise available evidence and present it to them) generate evidence that feeds into parliamentary processes.

There have been advances to automating and digitalising the work of parliaments through the e-parliament concept. The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU, 2018) presents this definition: "e-

Parliament places technologies, knowledge and standards at the heart of its business processes and embodies the values of collaboration, inclusiveness, participation and openness to the people." The implication is that digitisation and automation will lead to increased evidence requests and generation of evidence, improved information access and dissemination, and enhanced oversight. Despite the importance of e-parliaments in facilitating the efficiency and impact of parliaments, in sub-Saharan Africa there has been limited uptake of automation and digitisation of parliaments (Hanna, 2017). There is also limited literature about e-parliaments, especially in terms of sub-Saharan Africa.

Evidence from several African parliaments suggests that there are limited human resources to generate evidence within parliaments (Blaser Mapitsa et al., 2020), hence the need for efficient and effective ICT to maximise the generation and synthesis of evidence. Current literature on the introduction of ICT in parliaments shows that the focus is mainly on strengthening the use of technology and public participation under e-governance. Few approaches focus on strengthening the use of technology for research within parliaments. Nigeria, Ghana and South Africa have moved towards digitising parliamentary work. Nigeria has an e-parliament/online parliamentary news and information dissemination website, while Ghana has a Parliamentary Watch application for better accountability. There is a symbiosis between Ghana's Parliamentary Watch and the African POT in that content such as parliamentary reports, publications and other legislative documents are searchable on the application for use in oversight, representation and debates. In South Africa, Members of Parliament (MPs) are equipped with ICT tools for the purpose of using Social Media Technologies (SMTs) and the internet to engage with the people of the country, at any time and from any location. Chatora (2012:2) describes these as "internet-based tools and services that allow users to engage with each other, generate content, distribute, and search for information online. This interactive or collaborative nature of these tools makes them social".

The United Kingdom has parliamentary proceedings on different social media platforms, such as websites, blogs, YouTube, etc. Furthermore, each item has its own page on the parliamentary website, allowing citizens to follow up on different proceedings (Williamson et al., 2011:15). In Chile, "participatory media are powerful tools of political change which can reinforce the communication between society and political authorities, and enhance political participation" (IPU, 2016:58-60). The Chilean Congress launched the Democracia en Vivo platform, enabling citizens to watch bill discussions during parliamentary sessions and offer

their opinions to MPs in real time. Citizens can interact directly with their legislators, and receive rapid responses to their complaints (IPU, 2016:58-60).

Overall, it appears Chile and the United Kingdom's parliamentary use of ICT tools is aimed at strengthening democracy and increasing public engagement in various ways. While this is also the case with Nigeria, Ghana and South Africa, the African POT brings another perspective on research management systems. Despite this, only limited published research has explicitly addressed research management system tools such as the African POT in the Global South, particularly in Africa. This indicates that African parliaments are still entrenched in transitional ways of doing research, and that other sources of evidence influence their decision-making and policy-making processes. The following section describes the African POT.

Digital technology adoption and its influence on evidence use in parliaments

The connection between evidence and decision-making has frequently been studied in the policy sciences. The question 'Does evidence matter in decision- and policy-making?' has often been asked by researchers, especially in politically charged environments such as parliaments. Many contextual elements influence the complicated and non-linear relationships between evidence and policy (Cairney, 2016; Parkhurst, 2017). Khumalo et al. (2021) contended that although African parliaments have taken on a more significant role in scrutinising government policies and holding the executive accountable, understanding how internal power struggles limit the use of evidence in decision-making and policy-making has been neglected. Yet parliaments play an important role in shaping policy- and decision-making, combined with other vital effects such as ideology, stakeholder interests and values, and public opinion (Nutley et al., 2019).

Draman et al. (2017) identified the factors that influence evidence use in parliaments as macro and micro factors. The macro factors comprise external or contextual factors relating to MPs that affect how they utilise evidence – for example, the nature of democracy and political context. In countries where the political environment is contested, evidence is often used to push certain agendas or narratives (Mkandawire, 2015 & Parkhurst, 2017). In some cases, evidence is used to critique the government, while a ruling can be used as evidence to trumpet their success. What is important to note is that in these situations, evidence can be manipulated to suit a particular narrative.

Micro-level factors are related to individual attitudes, beliefs, ideologies, values and norms that shape MPs' attitudes towards evidence use. Access to evidence, timeliness and quality of evidence are equally essential for MPs. This has been supported by Goldman and Pabari (2021), who argued that Parliament operates with limited or incomplete information or unclear goals, leading to reliance on unofficial evidence or personal biases. This is despite the existence of institutional architecture for facilitating evidence use, including research divisions/units, monitoring and evaluation (M&E) units, libraries and the internet. Such architecture is often weak and ineffective, for example there may be outdated collections of knowledge products in libraries, and unreliable internet services. Units responsible for synthesising evidence are often poorly staffed, and cannot meet parliamentarians' evidence demands (Oronje & Warira, 2018). Engel and Waller (2020) concluded in their analysis of strengthening evidence in African parliaments that various factors shape how evidence is used in parliaments – for example, institutional factors, e.g. parliamentary structures, resources and procedures; political factors, e.g. party politics, ideology and power dynamics; individual factors, e.g. MPs' capacity, expertise and incentives; and evidence factors, e.g. accessibility, credibility and relevance of evidence. By understanding these macro and micro forces shaping a parliament's relationship with evidence, we can work towards creating a more informed and evidence-driven legislative environment (Goldman & Pabari, 2021).

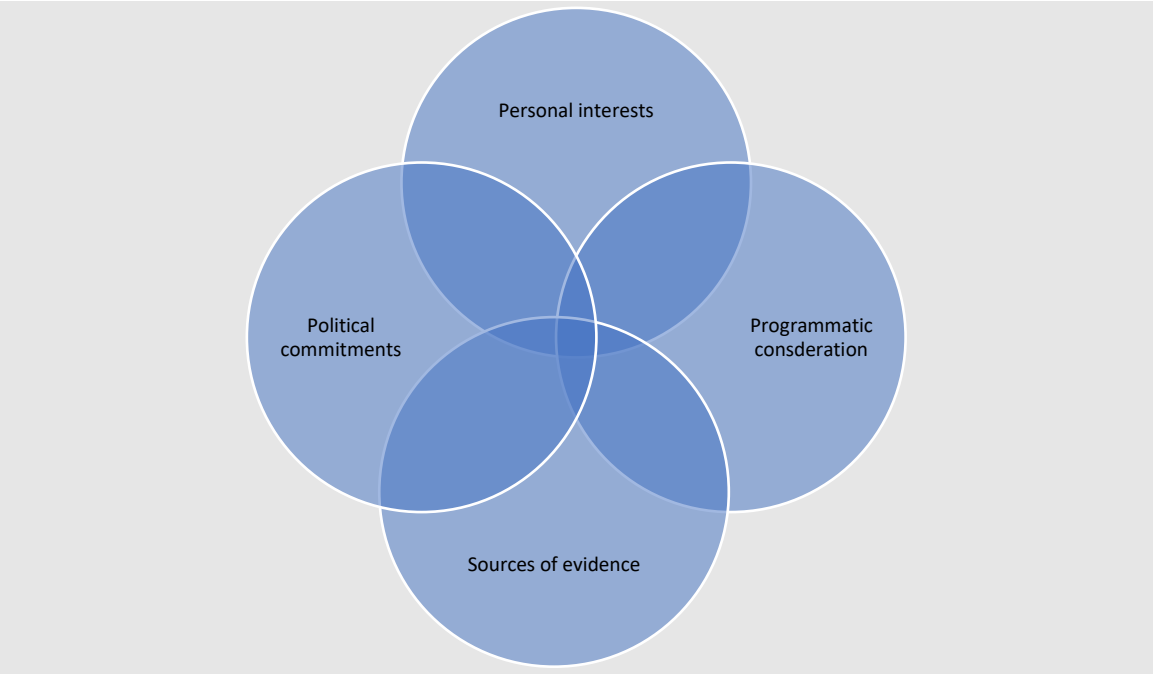
Britchfield and Sasse (2020:3) argued that "even when ministers and officials have access to evidence, they are not always good at using it". Despite the participation of professionals such as economists, social and applied researchers and statisticians, when decisions are made, these experts are not 'in the room' with the cabinet ministers. This implies that their comprehension of the evidence cannot be applied to developing decisions and policies. Furthermore, there is no clarity on who is responsible for evidence use. According to Britchfield and Sasse (2020:5), "Everyone owns this issue, and so no one does." This suggests that no effort has been made to comprehend and prove that the evidence has been used effectively.

Conceptual framework

Various factors beyond rational decision-making influence the evidence used in parliaments (Masvaure et al., 2021). These factors include political party commitments, programmatic commitments, sources of evidence, and personal interests. Such elements impact how MPs

request and utilise evidence in parliamentary committees. Figure 1 illustrates the processes of evidence requests and usage in parliaments.

Figure 1. Conceptual framework – factors influencing the use of digital technologies for evidence generation and decision-making in parliaments



Political commitments are closely tied to MPs' political parties. Research indicates that MPs often seek evidence that supports their party's manifesto commitments. For instance, MPs from the ruling party may favour evidence produced by the executive, and dismiss evidence that contradicts government positions (Keefer & Khemani, 2009). This tendency implies that parties are inclined to request evidence that aligns with their stance, potentially overlooking evidence that diverges from their position. This is particularly relevant in the context of digitisation, where MPs with predetermined positions may disregard evidence that challenges their views.

Programmatic considerations are also crucial in how evidence is requested in parliaments. MPs are likely to seek evidence related to the financial feasibility of programmes before making decisions. Additionally, evidence requests may focus on how decisions align with legislative frameworks and policy directions. Although such requests can be considered rational, it's important to note that party discipline, or the party whip system, can influence

evidence requests and utilisation. The party leadership often makes final decisions on specific issues, which can stifle evidence requests (Bhatia, 2020).

Parliaments consider various sources of evidence beyond tools such as the African POT. Academic researchers, internal monitoring of data, media reports and lobbyists all influence decision-making. For example, media stories can affect the type of evidence requested and how it is handled within parliamentary committees (Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2011). Personal opinions also significantly shape the kinds of evidence that MPs request. Commitments made during political campaigns, and personal interests, can impact MPs' legislative agendas and their use of evidence. When personal or political aspirations take precedence, the critical use of evidence may be compromised (Masvaure et al., 2021). The conceptual framework of the study in this chapter examines how various factors influence the adoption and utilisation of digital technologies for evidence generation and decision-making within parliaments. It specifically focuses on how these factors affect the use of digital tools, such as the African POT, in improving evidence-based parliamentary processes and decisions.

Methodology

The chapter draws from action research which is a collaborative approach that combines theory with practice through cycles of diagnosing issues, implementing actions, and reflective learning (Avison,1999). This approach was pursued during the co-planning, designing and piloting of the African POT with parliamentary staff representatives from Kenya and Zambia, alongside the authors' experiences and insights gained from leading this intervention. The experience of planning and convening training workshops in Zambia and South Africa (with Kenyan representatives) provided the authors with unique insights into the structure and functions of the African POT and the varied capacity profiles of parliamentary researchers, pursued during the course of co-planning, designing and piloting the African POT with the parliamentary staff representatives from Kenya and Zambia, as well as from the authors' experiences and insights gained from leading such interventions. The chapter also draws from an interview conducted in 2024 with the Zambian National Assembly's research unit and from a survey administered in Zambia in 2022, targeting 146 MPs without portfolio. The response rate was 38.4%, which accounted for 56 respondents. There are also reflections drawn from the authors' experiences and informed opinions, sometimes not based on empirical findings. As such, the paper should be treated as a contribution to more extensive

ongoing strategic conversations about digital governance through mobile applications, particularly in complex spaces such as parliaments, where myriad factors are considered when making decisions and creating policies.

Findings

African Parliamentary Oversight Tool

The Centre for Learning on Evaluation and Results – Anglophone Africa (CLEAR-AA) works in English-speaking countries to improve and support evidence generation and use in African parliaments. In 2021, CLEAR-AA 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, those of Kenya and Zambia.

The African POT is an online research management tool. It is CLEAR-AA's digital intervention for undertaking digital transformation in evidence generation, use and culture in African parliaments, and so contributing to better governance. This platform digitalises some existing evidence processes; but in the long term, it is designed to bring about organisational, cultural and process changes that allow for a culture of evidence-based decision-making. It serves a diverse audience, encompassing MPs, researchers, heads of research, M&E teams and external users. Although initially conceptualised with these specific users in mind, its functional flexibility allows for customisation, making it adaptable to various contexts and extending its usability for governance purposes beyond its initial scope.

Functioning as a centralised platform, this tool not only streamlines evidence generation and synthesis but also proactively addresses issues of efficiency and coherence within the oversight process. Doing so aligns seamlessly with the imperative to enhance parliamentary effectiveness by mitigating capacity deficits and promoting evidence-based decision-making.

At its core, the POT functions as a dynamic catalyst for innovation. It goes beyond traditional parliamentary functionalities by serving as a one-stop application for evidence generation and synthesis. MPs can request evidence on specific topics relevant to their constituencies, empowering them with verifiable information.

The African POT also functions as a repository for research reports and M&E data; it not only meets current information needs but also makes significant contributions to creating and

sustaining institutional knowledge, and to archiving and accessing that knowledge. It leverages technology to digitise the traditional parliamentary research process. This transition from manual to digital not only expedites tasks, but also enhances the accuracy and reliability of the information generated, contributing to more informed oversight activities.

Figure 2. African Parliamentary Oversight Tool purpose and functionality

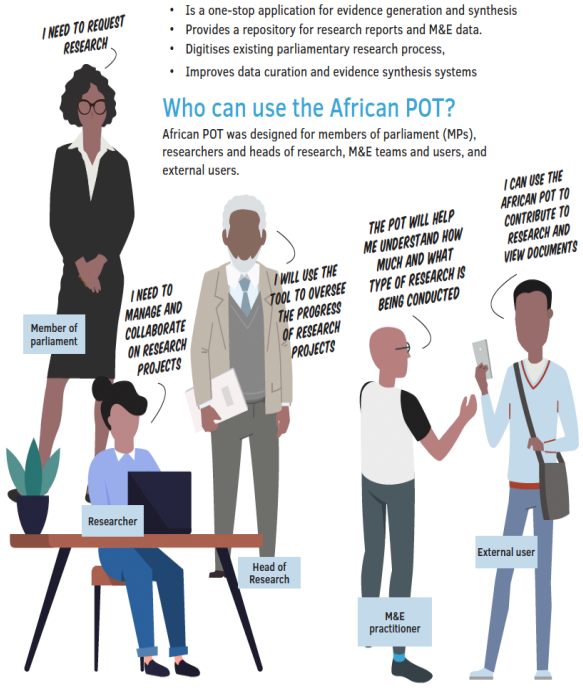
What does the African POT do?

The African Parliamentary Oversight Tool (African POT):

- Is a one-stop application for evidence generation and synthesis
- Provides a repository for research reports and M&E data.
- Digitises existing parliamentary research process,
- Improves data curation and evidence synthesis systems

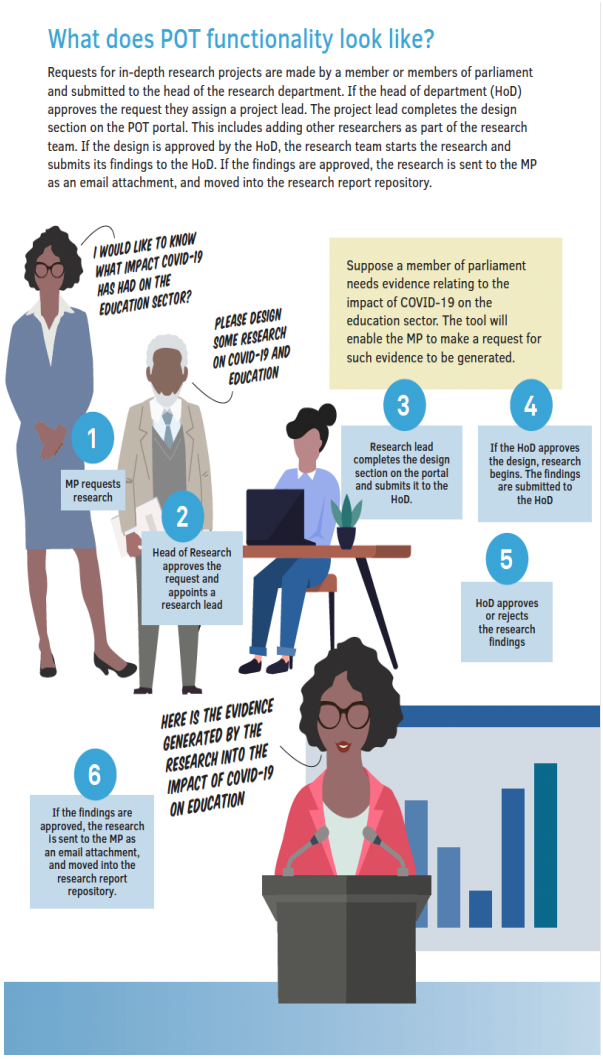
Who can use the African POT?

African POT was designed for members of parliament (MPs), researchers and heads of research, M&E teams and users, and external users.



What does the African POT aim to achieve?

The purpose of the African POT is to support and strengthen the oversight mandate of parliaments by channelling evidence more effectively between parliamentary staff and MPs. The ultimate aims are to improve data generation and use, and to bolster institutional memory and the ability of parliaments to execute their oversight mandates.



*What d***oes the African POT** *d***o?**

As seen in Figure 2, the African POT is a digital platform specifically designed to strengthen parliamentary oversight by providing MPs and associated research teams with easy access to evidence. The African POT serves multiple functions aimed at enhancing evidence-based decision-making, improving transparency, and increasing the efficiency of research processes within parliamentary settings. Its key functions include:

- **Centralised evidence repository**: The African POT acts as a comprehensive repository for research reports and M&E data, serving as a single access point for diverse evidence sources. By centralising research findings, data and reports, it reduces the time MPs and research teams spend searching for information, allowing for quicker, more informed decision-making.
- **Evidence generation and synthesis**: Beyond storage, the African POT enables the generation and synthesis of evidence. It supports users in creating new research

reports and data analyses tailored to specific oversight needs, ensuring that the evidence is not only accessible but also relevant and up-to-date. This function helps MPs understand emerging issues and receive answers to specific queries.

- **Digitised research workflow**: The African POT digitises the entire research process – from the submission of research/information requests, to the final report – providing a streamlined, transparent workflow. This digital transformation reduces paperwork, enhances collaboration among MPs, researchers and M&E practitioners, and improves the efficiency of managing complex research projects.
- **Enhanced data curation and analysis**: The tool includes features for data curation, enabling users to organise and manage data effectively. By categorising and indexing research content, the African POT helps users quickly locate evidence on relevant topics, promoting deeper analysis and making it easier to track historical and ongoing research efforts.
- **Collaboration and knowledge sharing**: Designed to facilitate teamwork, the African POT allows MPs, researchers, and other stakeholders to collaborate on research requests and share insights. This collaborative feature ensures that diverse perspectives and expertise inform research projects, enhancing the quality and impact of findings.

What does POT functionality look like?

Figure 2 further illustrates that the African POT operates through a structured process that allows MPs to request research or information on specific topics. Here's how the process works:

1. **Request submission**: A member of parliament requests research on a specific topic and submits it to the Head of the Research Department (HoD).
2. **Approval and assignment**: The HoD reviews and approves the request, then assigns a research lead to manage the project.
3. **Research design**: The assigned research lead creates a research design, detailing how the project will be conducted, and submits it to the HoD for approval.
4. **Approval of design**: If the HoD approves the design, the research team begins working on the project.
5. **Findings submission**: On completion, the research findings are submitted to the HoD for approval.

6. **Distribution of findings**: Once approved, the findings are sent to the requesting MP as an email attachment and archived in the research report repository for future reference.

The utility and usage of the African POT

Monitoring reports from the African POT indicated a surprisingly low usage rate among MPs, despite concerted training efforts aimed at promoting the tool. The reports suggested that many MPs, particularly backbenchers, preferred traditional methods or alternative research management systems over the African POT. A six-day electronic survey conducted between 14 July and 22 July 2022 targeted 146 MPs without portfolio, of whom 56 participated. The survey results revealed that the underutilisation was primarily due to unfamiliarity with the tool, and a preference for existing systems that MPs found easier to navigate. Moreover, some MPs reported technical difficulties when accessing the POT, further discouraging its use.

This finding suggests that the training provided may not have been sufficiently tailored to address the MPs' specific needs and technological competencies, or that the tool itself may not have been adequately integrated into their daily workflows. Further investigation suggests that the low usage may also be attributed to a lack of continued training and motivation among MPs. Since the African POT was a new tool, it is likely there was a need for sustained marketing and awareness-raising efforts to keep the system top-of-mind. Without ongoing reinforcement, MPs may have reverted to familiar methods, reducing the adoption and effectiveness of the tool. Additionally, the initial training might not have been sufficient to build the necessary confidence and proficiency, leading to hesitancy in using the system regularly.

The African POT has streamlined the process of information requests by reducing reliance on physical procedures. One of the most significant changes it brought about has been a reduction in the dependency on physical procedures for information requests. Before the implementation of the POT, MPs were required to physically visit the research unit, fill out forms, and wait for responses; a process that was both time-consuming and cumbersome. With the introduction of the African POT, MPs can now submit requests electronically, which has streamlined the process and significantly reduced the time needed to obtain information. However, despite these improvements, some MPs still preferred face-to-face interactions, citing concerns over the reliability of the digital system and the impersonal nature of electronic communication.

Additionally, the exact impact of these changes on parliamentary efficiency remains to be fully quantified, suggesting a need for ongoing monitoring of the tool's usage. This would help identify any issues that arise as MPs continue to use the tool and allow for timely updates or adjustments to maintain efficiency and user satisfaction. Continuous monitoring would also help understanding of whether the tool is being used to its full potential, and to adapt it to the evolving needs of parliamentary processes. It would ensure that the African POT remains a valuable resource with the ability to adapt and improve over time, preventing any regression to older, less efficient practices.

The African POT has improved parliamentary efficiency and transparency by digitising information and research requests, which has reduced delays and enabled quicker access to information. It has contributed to a marked improvement in the efficiency and transparency of parliamentary proceedings. By digitising the information and research requests process, the African POT has reduced the delays associated with the physical handling of documents, enabling MPs to access necessary information more quickly and reliably. This has been particularly beneficial during parliamentary sessions, where timely access to information is critical. Moreover, the digital records maintained by the African POT have enhanced transparency, allowing for better tracking of requests and responses. However, while the tool is theoretically effective, its practical application has been hampered by inconsistent use and technical issues. Despite being designed for remote access, some MPs encountered significant challenges that hindered seamless remote utilisation. These challenges were primarily related to:

- **Connectivity issues:** Inconsistent internet access, particularly in regions with weaker infrastructure, made it difficult for some MPs to connect to the system reliably.
- **Technical support:** A lack of readily available technical support for troubleshooting issues when accessing the tool remotely led to frustration and disengagement. MPs less familiar with digital tools may have struggled without immediate assistance.
- **User familiarity:** Some MPs, especially those less accustomed to digital systems, faced a learning curve in navigating the tool, which affected their ability to leverage its remote capabilities fully.

These barriers highlight the importance of ensuring robust technical infrastructure and support, along with continued training, to maximise the remote functionality of the African POT. While the POT has the potential to revolutionise parliamentary oversight, these challenges suggest that further refinement and support are necessary to ensure its full

adoption and effectiveness.

Accessibility issues with the African POT, including difficulties with parliamentary email access, email configuration and password management, have led to widespread frustration among MPs. Many MPs reported difficulties with accessing their parliamentary emails, configuring email addresses, and managing multiple passwords. Although the African POT itself does not require multiple passwords, MPs were frustrated by the additional password needed for it on top of the many passwords they already managed for other systems.

These technical hurdles led to widespread frustration, and in some cases complete disengagement from the tool. The requirement to use a separate email address for the African POT further complicated the process, with MPs expressing reluctance to manage multiple sets of credentials. This finding highlights a critical barrier to the successful adoption of the African POT: the need for a more user-friendly interface and streamlined access procedures. Without addressing these issues, the tool's potential to enhance parliamentary efficiency and oversight will remain largely untapped.

African POT's effectiveness compromised by lack of integration

A significant challenge faced by MPs in utilising the African POT was the lack of seamless integration with existing parliamentary systems. MPs reported that navigating between different platforms to access the African POT was time-consuming and confusing, leading to inefficiencies and reduced effectiveness. This disjointed experience not only frustrated MPs but also diminished the African POT's role in facilitating evidence-based decision-making. The absence of a unified platform where all parliamentary tools and resources could be accessed compounded these issues, leading many MPs to revert to more familiar methods of information gathering. The findings underscore the importance of system integration in ensuring that digital tools such as the African POT are not only accessible, but also fully embedded within the existing workflows of parliamentary operations.

Some MPs were unaware of the African POT

The African POT's effectiveness was further compromised by a significant lack of awareness among MPs, with 40% of the backbenchers who participated in the survey reportedly unaware of the tool's existence. This was particularly evident among newer MPs, who often did not receive adequate briefings or training on the African POT due to the high turnover

rate within the parliamentary body. The high turnover, which can reach up to 70% following elections, creates a constant need for re-training and re-introduction of the tool to new MPs. This finding suggests that existing orientation and training programmes are insufficient, and that more robust, continuous educational efforts are required to ensure that all MPs are not only aware of the African POT, but also understand its benefits and how to use it effectively.

Resistance to adoption and preference for traditional methods

Resistance to the adoption of the African POT among some MPs emerged as a notable barrier, with many expressing a preference for traditional methods of information gathering, such as phone calls or physical forms. This resistance was partly due to a lack of familiarity with the African POT, and the perception that it was more cumbersome and less reliable than existing methods. Additionally, some MPs viewed the transition to digital tools as unnecessary or inconvenient, particularly those who were less comfortable with technology. Overcoming this resistance will require targeted efforts to demonstrate the benefits of the African POT, such as improved efficiency and access to information, as well as ongoing support to help MPs transition to the new system. Without such efforts, the African POT's full potential may never be realised.

External hosting has led to technical and security concerns

The decision to host the African POT externally, rather than on parliamentary servers, raised several technical and security concerns. MPs reported frequent issues with accessing the tool, experiencing slow load times or complete inaccessibility, which led many to revert to alternative methods for obtaining information. The external hosting arrangement also generated apprehension about data security and privacy, with some MPs questioning the safety of their information when stored outside the parliamentary infrastructure. These technical difficulties and security concerns contributed to a lack of trust, and reluctance to fully embrace the tool. To address these challenges, it is crucial to consider the benefits of internal hosting, or alternative solutions that provide greater reliability and security, thereby enhancing the overall user experience and fostering confidence in the tool's utility.

High post-election turnover is a challenge to long-term effectiveness

The high turnover rate of parliamentary members – sometimes as high as 70%, following elections – presents a significant challenge to the long-term effectiveness of the African POT. Each turnover requires new MPs to be trained and familiarised with the tool, effectively

resetting the progress made in previous years. This constant need for training not only strains resources, but also disrupts the continuity of the tool's usage and development. Moreover, the frequent changes in parliamentary membership can lead to a loss of institutional knowledge, making it difficult to build on past experiences and improvements. To address this, there is a need for more sustainable training programmes and strategies that can withstand the frequent turnover and ensure that the African POT remains a valuable resource for all MPs.

Alternative solutions have been implemented

In response to the challenges posed by the African POT, the National Assembly of Zambia's research unit has implemented an alternative solution by providing MPs with a dedicated email address for direct communication. This initiative was intended to offer a more straightforward and familiar method of requesting information, bypassing the technical issues associated with the African POT. However, many MPs continued to prefer physically visiting the research unit to fill in forms manually, indicating a strong preference for personal interaction and a lack of confidence in the digital system. This finding suggests that while alternative solutions may provide temporary relief, they do not address the underlying issues of the African POT and may even reinforce the preference for traditional methods. A more comprehensive approach is needed to improve the POT's usability and encourage its adoption among MPs.

The African POT has had minimal impact on daily parliamentary activities

Despite the potential of the African POT to transform parliamentary operations, its influence on daily parliamentary activities has been minimal. The low awareness of the tool, coupled with resistance to change and limited system integration, has prevented it from becoming an integral part of MPs' workflows. However, there is potential for improvement, particularly with the increasing number of younger MPs who may be more open to adopting digital tools. To realise this potential, targeted efforts must be made to raise awareness, address technical challenges, and demonstrate the practical benefits of the POT. Without these efforts, the tool's impact will remain limited, and the investment in its development will not be fully realised.

Recommendations

To effectively harness the potential of digital research tools within parliamentary systems, it is crucial to implement a comprehensive strategy that enhances adoption, improves usability,

and strengthens support mechanisms. The following recommendations outline key actions to ensure that digital research tools are effectively integrated, widely accepted, and aligned with broader strategic goals. By addressing challenges such as high turnover rates, resistance to change, and the need for continuous training and support, these recommendations aim to foster a culture of innovation and enhance the overall efficiency and effectiveness of parliamentary functions.

Enhance digital adoption strategies

- Tailored change management strategies should be applied to address resistance to new digital tools by focusing on user-friendly designs and ensuring smooth integration with existing systems.
- Comprehensive training and continuous support should be provided to facilitate a smoother transition and increase acceptance of digital tools.

Improve accessibility and usability

- The design of digital tools should be intuitive and straightforward; minimising the need for additional credentials and simplifying navigation will enhance accessibility.
- Integrating different platforms or digital tools should be made easier, to improve the overall user experience. Providing clear instructions and strong support is recommended to help users feel more confident and engaged when using digital tools, ultimately leading to better adoption and satisfaction. Moreover, these clear instructions and support are necessary to help users manage their accounts and overcome technical difficulties.
- Digital tools should be designed to be adaptable and resilient, capable of functioning effectively under various conditions, including crises.
- Digital tools should be seamlessly integrated with a country's existing parliamentary systems to ensure compatibility and ease of use. Ideally, these tools should also be hosted within the country, which promotes data sovereignty, strengthens security, and allows for greater control over sensitive parliamentary information. Local hosting supports compliance with national data protection laws, facilitates easier technical support, and fosters national ownership, ultimately contributing to the sustainability and adaptability of parliamentary digital infrastructure.

Strengthen onboarding and training programmes

- High turnover rates should be addressed by establishing a standardised onboarding process, including thorough training on essential digital tools, best practices and workflow integration for new MPs and those facing emerging challenges.
- Ongoing briefings and updates should be provided to keep all members informed about digital tools and practices, with training materials regularly updated to reflect any changes or improvements.
- Targeted education sessions and workshops should be developed to bridge knowledge gaps and promote the advantages of digital tools.

Address high turnover challenges

- Strategies should be developed to maintain the effectiveness of digital tools despite the frequent turnover of parliamentary members.
- Processes should be created for quickly integrating new MPs and ensuring continuous use of digital tools.

Increase awareness and communication

- Strategic communication campaigns should be created to raise awareness of digital tools among MPs, emphasising their benefits and functionalities.

Leverage constituency offices for support

- Constituency offices should be integrated into the digital oversight framework to enhance the effectiveness of digital tools.
- Constituency office staff should be trained in the use of digital tools to provide localised support and improve parliamentary research and oversight.

Foster a culture of innovation

- A culture of openness to technological advancements in the parliamentary body should be promoted.
- MPs should be encouraged to embrace new digital tools and integrate them into their daily activities.
- Initiatives should be supported that highlight the benefits of innovation and provide platforms for MPs to share their experiences and feedback.

Align digital tools with strategic goals

- Digital tools should be aligned with broader digital governance and national development objectives. This alignment will support digital transformation efforts and enhance parliamentary efficiency.

Discussion of findings

The findings reveal both positive advancements and significant challenges regarding the implementation and utilisation of the African POT within the National Assembly of Zambia (NAZ). This underscores the broader implications for Africa's digital transformation and governance.

The introduction of the African POT has led to notable improvements in parliamentary processes in Zambia, particularly in reducing dependency on physical procedures for information requests. This signifies a positive shift towards embracing digital tools for enhancing parliamentary efficiency and effectiveness. The collaboration with CLEAR-AA has played a crucial role in streamlining processes and facilitating greater accessibility to information for MPs.

CLEAR-AA's involvement has not only contributed to the development and implementation of the African POT but has also provided ongoing support and guidance to MPs, thereby enhancing their capacity to utilise the tool effectively. This collaborative effort highlights the importance of partnerships between parliamentary bodies and external organisations in driving innovation and facilitating positive change within parliamentary systems.

Building on CLEAR-AA's involvement in enhancing MPs' capacity to utilise the African POT effectively, it's evident that despite these efforts, significant challenges persist regarding its effective utilisation in the Zambian parliamentary context. These are serious hurdles to realising the potential benefits of digital tools for governance. Accessibility and other complications obstruct MPs from fully leveraging the tool's functionalities, highlighting the need for user-friendly interfaces and streamlined processes.

These challenges underscore the pressing need to address accessibility, awareness, and usability issues that inhibit the adoption and effectiveness of digital tools in African parliaments. Limited awareness among MPs and parliamentary staff about the potential of digital tools to enhance governance reflects broader issues related to digital literacy and

technological adoption within African governance structures. A lack of familiarity with tools such as the African POT means MPs may not fully understand how digital platforms can improve parliamentary processes, from evidence-based decision-making to efficient information management.

Compounding these issues is the high turnover within parliamentary bodies, as new MPs enter without the institutional knowledge and experience necessary to leverage digital tools effectively. This lack of continuity emphasises the importance of sustained capacity-building and ongoing awareness campaigns to equip incoming MPs with the knowledge and skills required to harness digital tools for effective governance. Without these efforts, each new parliamentary cycle risks starting from scratch, leading to inefficiencies and a failure to build on prior technological advancements. Training programmes, specifically tailored to address both general digital literacy and the unique functionalities of parliamentary tools like the African POT, are crucial. Such programmes not only introduce MPs to digital tools but also illustrate their direct relevance to daily parliamentary duties, enhancing the likelihood of long-term adoption.

The persistence of traditional methods for information requests in many African parliaments reflects a deeper reluctance to embrace digital technologies. This hesitancy slows progress towards more transparent and efficient governance practices. Traditional practices, often reliant on paper-based processes, are familiar and comfortable, and transitioning away from them requires a shift in mindset. Overcoming this resistance demands concerted efforts to educate MPs on the tangible benefits of digital tools, such as enhanced data accessibility, quicker response times, and streamlined communication processes. Such education efforts could include workshops, peer learning sessions, and demonstrations of successful case studies from other parliaments. By showcasing how digital tools align with parliamentary responsibilities and promote transparency, MPs may be more inclined to view them as valuable assets rather than disruptive changes.

Resistance to digital adoption is not solely due to lack of awareness or familiarity; technical challenges also play a significant role. Many African parliaments face infrastructural limitations, including insufficient internet connectivity, outdated hardware, and inadequate technical support. These issues restrict the effective use of digital tools, even among MPs who are willing to adopt them. Addressing these technical obstacles necessitates both

financial and strategic investments in technological infrastructure, as well as dedicated capacity-building initiatives. MPs and staff need to be equipped not only with digital skills but also with troubleshooting abilities to manage day-to-day technical issues, ensuring smooth and consistent use of platforms such as the African POT. Through these combined efforts, African parliaments can strengthen the foundations required for successful digital integration, empowering MPs to access data, communicate efficiently, and make informed decisions.

Despite these challenges, the gradual integration of digital tools within African parliaments hints at the potential for transformative change. Although the current influence of the African POT on parliamentary proceedings may be limited, the tool's introduction marks a significant step towards modernising governance practices across the continent. By embracing digital platforms, African parliaments have an opportunity to enhance transparency and accountability, amplify citizen engagement, and streamline decision-making processes. The African POT, for example, allows MPs to access evidence-based resources more readily, promoting informed discussions and improving the quality of legislative outputs. As digital tools become more entrenched in parliamentary workflows, there is potential for them to fundamentally reshape how MPs interact with both data and constituents, fostering a more inclusive and participatory governance model.

The interconnectedness of Africa's digital transformation and governance modernisation is evident in the adoption and utilisation of tools like the African POT. Although considerable strides have been made, challenges related to accessibility, resistance to change, technical limitations, and lack of awareness persist, reflecting the complexities inherent in integrating digital solutions within established governance frameworks. However, with targeted investments in technological infrastructure, capacity-building programmes and institutional reforms, African countries can harness the transformative potential of digital technologies to foster transparency, efficiency, and inclusivity in governance. The road to digital transformation presents both challenges and opportunities for African governance. Overcoming these obstacles requires collaboration between governments, civil society and development partners to ensure that digital tools serve as enablers of responsive, accountable and equitable governance.

Addressing these multifaceted challenges will not only propel African countries towards a more digitally advanced future but also lay the foundation for governance structures that are responsive to the needs of citizens. As African parliaments increasingly adopt digital tools, they are better positioned to fulfil their oversight mandates, improve service delivery, and contribute to sustainable development goals. Through a combination of infrastructural upgrades, educational initiatives, and an unwavering commitment to embracing innovation, Africa's digital governance journey holds promise for a future where technology-driven transparency and accountability become the bedrock of parliamentary proceedings. By fostering a culture of innovation and adaptability, African countries can lead the way towards a governance model that is both inclusive and forward-looking, setting a precedent for digital transformation across the continent.

Conclusion

The exploration of the African Parliamentary Oversight Tool (POT) in the context of the National Assembly of Zambia reveals significant potential for digital tools to enhance parliamentary processes and governance in Africa. Through action research and engagement with parliamentary representatives, the African POT has demonstrated its ability to streamline evidence generation, promote evidence-based decision-making, and facilitate parliamentary oversight. Despite challenges such as technological divides and cultural shifts, the experiences gained from implementing the African POT offer valuable insights for navigating the complexities of digital governance tools in parliamentary settings. To further advance the impact of the African POT, future efforts should focus on addressing technological divides, enhancing user training and support, and fostering a culture of digital innovation in parliamentary institutions. By continuing to prioritise digitalisation efforts and by leveraging the lessons learned from initiatives such as the African POT, African parliaments can harness the power of technology to strengthen democratic governance systems and better serve their constituents in the digital age.

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