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Strengthening Evidence Use in African Parliaments

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2020-10-14
CLEAR-AA and Twende Mbele
https://hdl.handle.net/10539/29843

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LEARNING NOTE | OCTOBER 2020

STRENGTHENING EVIDENCE USE IN AFRICAN PARLIAMENTS:

PEER LEARNING AND COLLABORATION

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IN THIS LEARNING NOTE

- Introduction to the CLEAR-AA and Twende Mbele's approaches to strengthen evidence use in African parliaments
- The value of embedding M&E within a broader evidence use framework
- The fruits of peer learning in strengthening parliamentary capacity
- The challenges and advantages of collaborative parliamentary capacity-strengthening programmes
- Recommendations for improving parliamentary capacity strengthening initiatives in Africa

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 with the purpose of building 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.

ABOUT TWENDE MBELE

Twende Mbele (meaning Going Forward Together) is a peer learning partnership of African governments and regional organisations interested to use monitoring & evaluation (M&E) to strengthen government performance and accountability. The Twende Mbele Programme currently involves six core country partners (Benin, South Africa, Ghana, Uganda, Niger and Kenya), with two regional evaluation capacity development partners (CLEAR-AA and IDEV at the African Development Bank).

INTRODUCTION

Since 2016, CLEAR-AA and Twende Mbele have been running a range of initiatives to strengthen the use of evidence by African parliaments

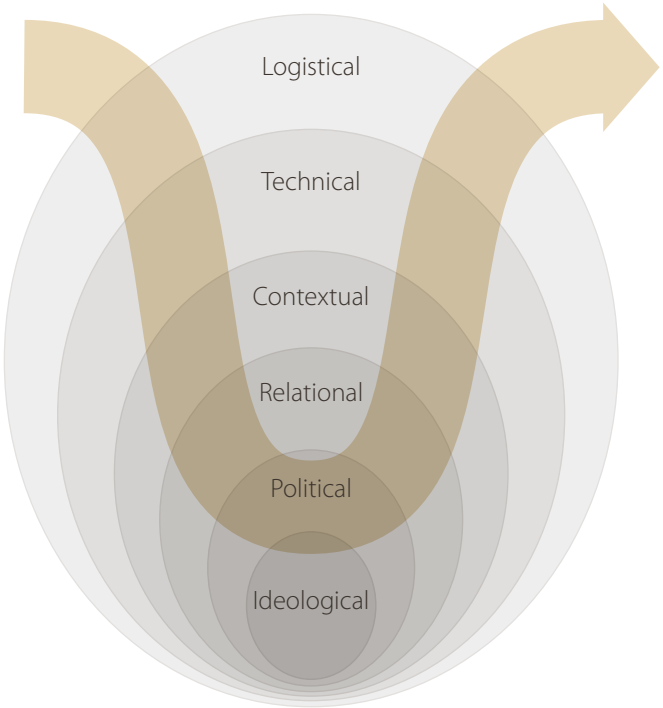
> The capacity strengthening initiatives are premised on the understanding that parliamentarians and parliamentary staff can serve as strategic allies in advancing the use of evidence to deepen democracy.

By *evidence use* in this context we mean using relevant, credible information to back legislative decision-making and oversight. Recognising that evidence use is one of a number of important factors which influence policy decision-making, our understanding aligns with the description of evidence informed policy making (EIPM) as:

> *"… that which has considered a broad range of research evidence, evidence from citizens and other stakeholders, and evidence from practice and policy implementation as part of a process that considers other factors such as political realities and current public debates"* (Newman, Fisher & Shaxson, 2012 cited in INASP, 2016:24)

The six-sphere framework

(Source: Crawley, 2017)



Our joint parliamentary work aims to draw attention to parliaments as evaluative institutions. The approach highlights the importance of applying evaluative thinking to critically assess, synthesise and use evidence in support of parliament's oversight, legislative and representation roles. Our approach is based on the understanding that monitoring and evaluation is not only an important source of evidence but also a systemic vehicle for generating evidence. Furthermore our approach emphasises the importance of engaging with the range of factors that affect evidence use – from deeper ideological, political and other contextual factors to more peripheral logistic and technical factors, drawing on Crawley's six sphere framework to unpack these factors (Crawley, 2017).

This learning brief is largely based on the findings of a recently completed tracer study (2020) aimed at better understanding the effectiveness of the capacity strengthening initiatives jointly implemented by CLEAR-AA and Twende Mbele since 2017 including:

- Training workshops for parliamentarians on monitoring and evaluation for oversight organised with the national chapters of the African Parliamentarians' Network on Development Evaluation (APNODE) in Benin, Uganda and Tanzania.
- Training of Trainers (Tot) workshops for potential facilitators of training workshops for parliamentarians and staff on M&E for oversight with the aim of increasing the cohort of trainers in the different regions to deliver and further develop the oversight monitoring and evaluation course for parliamentarians.
- The Regional Peer Learning Programme to strengthen evidence use for legislative oversight in African Parliaments implemented in collaboration with key partner organizations working to strengthen capacity in parliaments. The programme was implemented through a series of peer learning workshops bringing together representatives from 10 parliaments and partner organisations in the East, Southern and West African regions[1]. The approach included a series of facilitated platforms for representatives to share and learn from each other's experiences on evidence generation and use.

1. The parliaments involved included Rwanda, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, South Africa, Malawi, Zambia, and Ghana as well as the regional bodies of the East African Legislative Assembly (EALA), and the ECOWAS Parliament. The main partners included the African Parliamentarians' Network on Development Evaluation (APNODE), CLEAR-GIMPA (Ghana Institute of Management and Public Administration, the African Centre for Parliamentary Affairs (ACEPA), the African Institute for Development Policy (AFIDEP), UNWomen, the Parliament of Kenya's Centre for Parliamentary Studies and Training (CPST), and the Parliament of Uganda's Institute of Parliamentary Studies (IPS).

Key collaborating organizations

Successes of the capacity strengthening initiatives

The tracer study revealed some significant effects of the capacity strengthening initiatives at the individual and institutional levels.

Key individual level effects	Key institutional level effects
✓ became more analytical and results-oriented	✓ the development of guidelines for evidence use in parliaments
✓ strengthened ability to interrogate results beyond the output levels to the outcome levels	✓ instituting strategic plans at the broader parliamentary institutional level and at specific parliamentary department levels
✓ increased confidence to engage in debates and decision-making	✓ improved departmental reporting
✓ improved contribution to the work of committees and parliamentary practices in general	✓ enhanced input into the establishment of a national M&E directorate

Participants attributed these positive effects to:

- a capacity-strengthening paradigm that embeds M&E inside a larger framework of evidence use
- the knowledge and skills they gained to analyse and assess evidence
- their increased awareness of the importance of evidence use and M&E
- interacting with their peers from other institutions.

Embedding M&E within a broader 'evidence use' framework

Results of the tracer study affirm that the focus on evidence use more broadly – rather than solely M&E – allowed participants to gain an integrated understanding of evidence use including (but not limited to) the role of M&E. This was reinforced for participants by situating the skills and knowledge within a contextually relevant framework of evidence systems in parliaments, while leveraging an evaluative thinking paradigm to critically assess, select, synthesise and use evidence effectively.

THE FRUITS OF PEER LEARNING

Sustained engagements

The peer learning approach and the related collaboration with peers from other institutions led to sustained, supportive engagements – advisory and mentoring in nature – between programme participants following the official Regional Peer Learning Programme. The peer learning approach facilitated cross-learning between different parliaments and capacity-building organisations. Profiling good practices for evidence use in the various parliaments and capacity-building organisations provided a valuable basis for participants and their organisations to continue learning from each other and working together beyond the programme to strengthen evidence systems.

An equal playing field

The approach employed in the regional peer learning programme to bring together MPs and staff from different parliaments worked well in supporting learning across different roles in parliaments and across different parliaments.

> By breaking down traditional hierarchies, the approach allows MPs and staff to feel more comfortable to share their concerns and challenges and to explore solutions with each other.

On a more equal footing, they can share and work through their different but interrelated and interdependent challenges in generating and using evidence. Because participants are from different parliaments and each has come as representative of learning and support rather than representing a position in a hierarchy, the expected tensions can more easily become a healthy dynamic.

Contextual nuance

Parliamentary systems (including systems of evidence use) are determined by national (or regional) governance norms and standards and political dynamics. Capacity strengthening initiatives need to be informed by a sound understanding of and engagement with the contexts specific parliaments operate in. Capacity strengthening initiatives should include reflective and analytical discussions for participants to translate what they are learning into their surrounding political economy and incentive systems. When we create environments for open exchanges that acknowledge the complexities of the parliamentary environment, real strategies emerge for catalysing change and we build support for development.

> Peer learning allows role players to understand capacity strengthening content in a more nuanced way and to discuss its application in ways that are more likely to lead to change.

CHALLENGES AND ADVANTAGES OF COLLABORATIVE PROGRAMMES

Working collaboratively on the different programmes, especially through the regional peer learning programme, has shown us that the capacity strengthening sector in the African parliamentary space wants to share ideas, learn from each others' approaches, and engage in joint activities to complement each others' strengths.

Common challenges for organisations working to strengthen capacity in the African parliamentary space

- duplication of content
- training fatigue
- inefficient time and resource use.

One role that capacity building institutions can play to ameliorate some of the development sector's inherent flaws (noting the challenges above) is to take on some of the onus for coordinating longer term capacity strengthening programmes with the various organisations working with parliament, ensuring relevant resourcing is attached.

Developing the partnerships for a collaborative programme requires a significant investment of time. We need to explore and understand partners' fit for collaboration in terms of their focus, approach, values, interests and expectations. In the case of the regional peer learning programme for example, we spent an initial three month period researching potential partners and engaging in a scoping visit to identify and build relationships with potential partners, and then further developed the relationships through the joint planning and implementation through the series of events over the one year period. In retrospect we needed more time for the initial research and relationship building before the joint planning and implementation.

A collaborative programme also requires flexibility to work in different ways with different partners and to allow for input into the proposed approach that may lead to changes to the original conceptualization. Ideally, partners need to invest in joint resource mobilisation strategies that will allow for greater shared responsibility for direction setting, implementation and management playing to the different strengths of the partners. For example, one organisation might be stronger in conceptualising the programme design, another might bring innovative facilitation ideas to implement the programme, and another might play a stronger role in managing the programme.

All of our capacity strengthening experiences showed a need for stronger partnerships. Partnerships not only make programmatic work more effective, but also create polycentric power, which can challenge some of the difficulties associated with operating within existing power structures. Additionally, partnerships outside of parliament – with civil society organisations, academics and other role players – can help shift the dynamics of entrenched discussions, and change the way conversations take place.

RECOMMENDATIONS

How to improve parliamentary capacity strengthening initiatives in Africa: Ideas for organisations supporting parliaments

Content

Customise the content to suit different parliaments and different categories of participants. Focus more strongly on research methods and advocacy. Maintain content on evaluative thinking, strengthening evidence systems and integrating a focus on the role of M&E within the broader evidence use framework.

Scope

Ensure activities reach a more diverse range of participants from parliaments, particularly at the start of the new parliamentary term. Identify potential champions of evidence use and support current champions since they may be better positioned within parliamentary systems to influence change. Incorporate follow-up workshops and mentoring activities with specific parliaments, but also convene and support participation in more regular regional learning platforms. These could for example include regional peer learning workshops (as coordinated by Twende Mbele and CLEAR AA), as well as regional seminars and conferences such as those organised by APNODE, the African Evidence Network and the African Evaluation Association (AfrEA) which have in the past served as valuable platforms for interaction and shared learning among representatives from different parliaments and organisations supporting parliaments as well as representatives from other sectors.

Awareness

Raise awareness among the parliamentary leadership on the importance of strengthening evidence use to ensure buy-in and support for the initiatives.

Learning

Support participants to better navigate the factors that enhance and constrain how they apply and transfer what they have learnt to ensure that evidence informed decision-making has a more meaningful, sustained impact in parliaments. We have identified this as an area requiring more attention in our approach which could for example include support to participants to develop action plans of how and what they would do with their new skills once they return back to work.

Coordination

Plan a coordinated workstream with collaborating organisations to deal with some of the inhibitors of working in the space, such as resource constraints, getting buy-in, and limited time available during the parliamentary calendar. This will also reinforce collaborative peer learning approaches.

FIND OUT MORE

Crawley (2017) "The six-sphere framework: A practical tool for assessing monitoring and evaluation systems" available online at: https://doi.org/10.4102/aej.v5i1.193

INASP (2016) "The VakaYiko Evidence Informed Policy Making Toolkit" available online at: https://www.inasp.info/sites/default/files/2018-04/EIPM%20Toolkit-Ed2-FULL.pdf

CLEAR-AA is producing a collaborative book with our colleagues from the various partner organisations and parliaments as part of its parliamentary capacity-strengthening programme. Systems of Evidence Use in African Parliaments is scheduled for completion by March 2021. The chapters will outline further insights and lessons for ways in which evidence use in parliaments can be strengthened. The insights and lessons are captured through various case studies of evidence use systems in different parliaments, and a broader focus on the political context of evidence use in parliaments, approaches to systematize evidence use, the implications of the 4th industrial revolution, and parliament's role in dealing with complex problems in the context of rapidly changing global conditions.

THE VIEWS EXPRESSED IN THE LEARNING NOTE ARE THAT OF THE AUTHOR

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