



TWENDE MBELE



PRACTICE BRIEF

Peer learning as an approach to improve the work of African parliaments

Introduction

Developing capacities in parliament for evidence use is a long-term process wherein parliaments themselves must own and lead the process to ensure evidence use informs decision-making. The support to parliamentarians therefore needs to be innovative and holistic, focusing on institutional development, individual training, and creating an enabling environment for the promotion of a culture of accountability and learning.

This practice brief highlights the capacity development efforts by stakeholders in the parliamentary space, particularly the peer learning programme to strengthen evidence use in parliaments coordinated by Twende Mbele and the Centre for Learning on Evaluation and Results – Anglophone Africa (CLEAR-AA) and implemented with a range of capacity development partners and parliamentary representatives. It looks at some of the challenges facing parliamentarians and parliamentary staff – as generators and users of evidence - and the benefits of taking part in the peer learning programme.



Figure 1: Peer Learning workshop in the Parliament of Uganda.

“I see myself getting better at what I do. In Uganda we are putting in place guidelines for evidence use for parliamentarians, which is an idea we picked up from the parliament of Malawi. The peer learning programme has allowed us to document and make our parliamentary work processes smarter.”

JOSEPHINE WATERA



Figure 2: Outside the Parliament of South Africa.

Background

As public sector institutions, parliaments have the fundamental role of exercising oversight over the executive, ensuring open and free political deliberations and representing citizens. Through their core functions of legislation, representation and oversight, parliaments “sit at the centre of the web of domestic accountability” (Menocal and O’Neil, 2012). They hold the executive branch of government to account on behalf of the people, ensuring that government policy and action are both efficient and commensurate with the needs of the public.

During 2018 CLEAR-AA in partnership with Twende Mbele, the African Parliamentarians’ Network on Development Evaluation (APNODE), the African Centre for Parliamentary Affairs (ACEPA) and the African Institute for Development Policy (AFIDEP) implemented a programme to facilitate peer learning in the parliamentary space. The aim of the peer learning programme is to strengthen:

- capacities for improved evidence use in parliaments, and
- systems of monitoring and evaluation in parliaments

The peer learning programme is broad in nature as it brings together a diverse group of stakeholders involved in the parliamentary space. The grouping includes Members of Parliament (MPs), researchers, content advisers, M&E Officers, Parliamentary Budget Officers, and Strategic Planning Officers from various parliaments across the East, West and Southern regions of the continent). The development partners comprise mostly of representatives of organisations working to strengthen the role of parliaments on the continent who act as peer learning facilitators, also contributing their perspectives and insights to the learning process.

Challenges faced by parliaments in building capacity for evidence use

Despite continued work with parliamentary role-players to improve evidence use, the mainstreaming of evidence use into parliamentary roles remains slow (Kone, 2018), this is mainly due to the following challenges:

- Parliamentarians suffer a high turnover rate due to the electoral nature of their office, such that capacity can be lost after each election. When parliamentarians gain skills in evidence such as evaluative approaches these skills are lost to their parliament if they lose their electoral seat and/or leave parliament.
- Attracting and keeping parliamentarians interested in evidence has been a major challenge. This issue is manifested through a lack of demand or slow progress to accept and draw on different types of evidence, as important tools in effective policy and decision-making process.
- Lack of resources and capacity to synthesise, translate and use evidence in parliament. Through their oversight and law-making powers, parliamentarians are required to use evidence to back up decisions, expectations and consequences. The oversight and law-making function of parliament frequently requires expertise and capacity which is usually provided by under-resourced parliamentary support departments.

Peer learning in the parliamentary context

Parliamentary networks are one way through which African parliaments’ capacities to support the use of evidence in decision-making processes can be strengthened. Networks enhance these capacities for both parliaments (as institutions) and parliamentarians (as individuals) to improve their oversight, policy making and decision-making roles. This is done by undertaking multiple activities to bridge the gap between parliamentary staff who generate the evidence, and members of parliament (MPs) who demand and use evidence; encouraging parliamentarians and parliaments to institutionalize evaluation and empowering them to ask for evaluation evidence.

In the parliamentary peer learning context, parliamentarians and parliamentary staff from different parliamentary contexts are provided with a facilitated platform to identify their learning needs, and to construct their own meaning and understanding by learning from each other. Essentially, these parliamentarians and parliamentary staff are involved in searching for, collecting, analysing, evaluating, integrating and applying information to solve problems and to make decisions. Thus, participants engage themselves intellectually, emotionally and socially in constructive conversation and learn by talking and questioning each other’s views and reaching consensus or dissent.

The peer learning programme is a formalised form of learning that has helped parliamentarians and parliamentary staff to learn effectively. It encourages participants to take greater responsibility for their own learning. While it is not a substitute for training and other structured capacity development activities, it is an important addition to the repertoire of activities that can enhance the quality of capacity development and increased use of evidence in parliaments by making participants active learners by drawing on and sharing information based on their direct experience.

Making peer learning more effective

Peer learning can be an effective tool for capacity development when participants are able to share similar experiences, allowing them to better understand and address the issues they face on a day-to-day basis.

That level of insight does wonders for parliamentarians and parliamentary support staff since the shared experience builds a connection based on trust and respect.

In addition to content knowledge acquisition, peer learning nurtures and fosters the following aspects in participants:

- self-directed learning skills laying the foundation for life-long learning;
- critical thinking and problem-solving skills;
- communication, interpersonal and teamwork skills; and
- learning through self and peer assessment, and critical reflection.

So, in order to promote these elements, facilitators must incorporate factors to build trust and respect among participants. For Twende Mbele and CLEAR-AA this has meant including a series of discussions including preliminary and follow-up needs analysis and reflection with parliamentary representatives and other key stakeholders to ensure that the content and approach effectively contributes to improving evidence use in parliaments. Discussions are facilitated, rather than controlled, and requests for new knowledge and skills are catered for by requesting parliamentary representatives to share good practices and lessons learnt and also by bringing in technical experts, for example focusing on research analysis and synthesis, and on M&E practice. Furthermore, participants and facilitators stay in touch between peer learning events through a dedicated social media platform promoting ongoing sharing and learning, as well as access to new opportunities and resources.

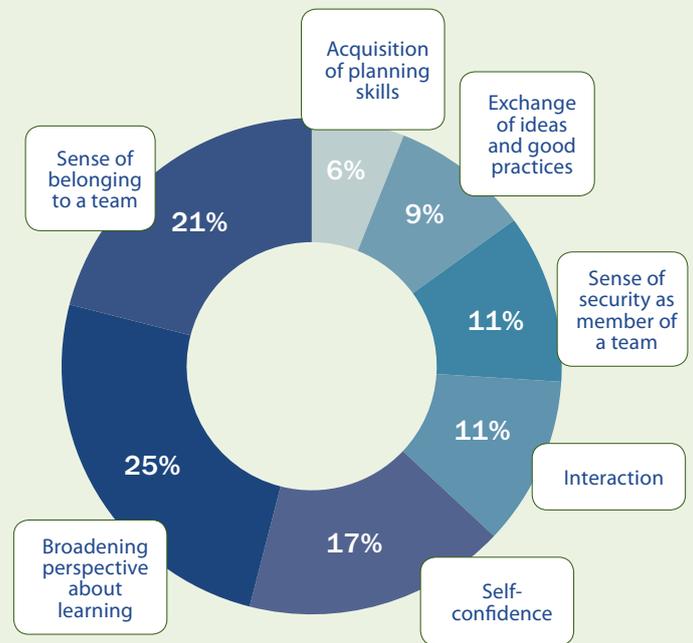
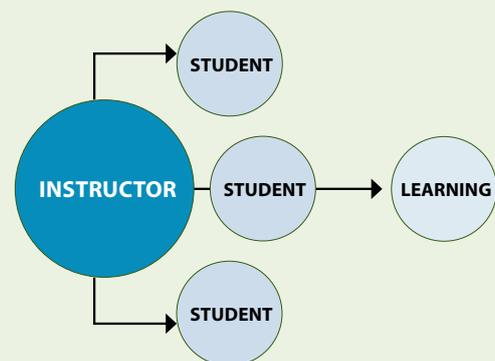


Figure 3: Personal benefits gained through peer-learning – Eugenia Arvanitis (2017)

TRADITIONAL LEARNING

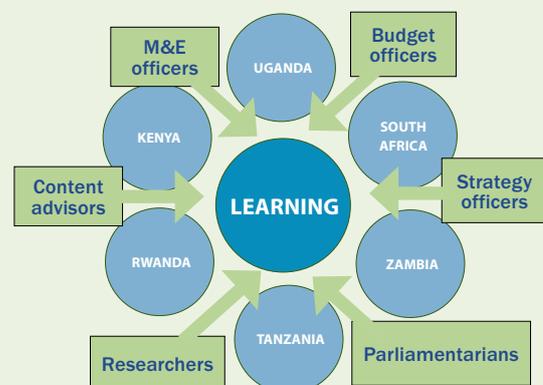
Instructors transfer knowledge



Instructors + knowledge transfer = learning

PEER LEARNING

Peers sharing experiences



Peers + sharing experiences = learning

Figure 4: The difference between traditional learning (top) and peer learning (bottom)

Conclusion

The peer learning approach is considered a valuable and important contribution to strengthening capacity for effective evidence use in parliaments. This approach can be further strengthened by supporting and establishing regional peer learning networks and communities of practice along with the architecture needed for sustaining systems of evidence in parliaments. But this will only succeed if it is championed by key stakeholders – both in parliament and outside.

References

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“This is a great example of iron sharpening iron.”

JOSEPHINE WATERA

