



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 with the help of national governments and regional institutions must own and lead the process and provide long-term support in order to maintain crucial gains. This is more important in an age where development evaluation has moved from a purely donor-based activity to a tool for optimising on performance improvement and learning for development. The support of governments needs to be more innovative and holistic, focusing on institutional development, individual training, and creating an enabling environment for the promotion of an evaluation culture (OECD-DAC, 2014).

This practice brief highlights the capacity development efforts by stakeholders in the parliamentary space through Twende Mbele and the Centre for Learning on Evaluation and Results (CLEAR-AA) peer learning programme. It looks at some of the challenges facing parliamentarians – both generators and users of evidence, and the benefits of taking part in the peer learning programme where the with the help of capacity development partners as facilitators, meet and share best practises.



Figure 1: Parliamentarian meeting 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 a public sector institution, parliaments have the fundamental role of ensuring open and free political deliberations and the representation of 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.

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

- evidence use for legislative oversight
- capacities for evidence use in parliaments
- systems of monitoring and evaluation in parliaments

The peer learning program is broad in nature as it brings together a diverse group of stakeholders involved in the parliamentary space. The grouping includes librarians, Clerks, researchers, content advisers, M&E Officers, Parliamentary Budget Officers, and Strategic Planning Officers – depending on the parliament – to members of parliament (MPs). The development partners comprise of mostly consultants, specialists, trainers, teachers, practitioners and facilitators, who act as facilitators and train parliamentarians where there are gaps.

Challenges faced by parliaments in building capacity for evidence use

Despite continued work parliaments and parliamentarians 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 evaluation, 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 different types of evidence such as newspaper reports, as an important tool in effective policy and decision-making process.
- Lack of resources and capacity to synthesise, translate and use evidence in parliament. Through their law-making powers, parliamentarians are required to use evidence to back up results, expectations and consequences. The law-making function of parliament frequently requires expertise and capacity which is usually provided by under-resourced parliamentary support staff.

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 for bridging the gap between non-members of parliament (parliamentary staff), who generate the evidence, and members of parliament (MP’s), who demand and use evidence; encouraging parliamentarians and parliaments to institutionalize evaluation; and empowering them to ask for evaluation evidence to respond to their demand. Peer learning allows network members to support each other in real time.

In the parliamentary peer learning context, parliamentarians construct their own meaning and understanding of what they need to learn. Essentially, these parliamentarians and support 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 as a formalised form of learning has helped parliamentarians and parliamentary support staff to learn effectively. At a time when resources are stretched and demand for specialists are increasing, it offers participants the opportunity to learn from each other. It gives them considerably more practice than traditional instructive teaching methods in taking 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 who have access to information that can be applied with the contextual nuances needed.

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 understand the issues they face on a day-to-day basis and transfer learning better than any consultant or trainer could.

That level of insight does wonders for parliamentarians and parliamentary support staff. For insights on how to better generate and use evidence parliamentarian do not trust who an external trainer who has a parliamentary consulting certificate, but rather another parliamentarian who's already gone through the same problems and has come up with an effective solution. That shared experience builds a connection between parliamentarians based on trust and respect.

People are more comfortable in peer learning situations than they are in traditional training environments, which rely on authoritative outsiders. By replacing an outsider with someone who the audience immediately feels a connection with, people are more receptive learners. So, in order to promote this process, facilitators must incorporate factors to build trust and respect among participants. For Twende and CLEAR-AA this has meant multiple, face-to-face meetings with practical outcomes. Meetings are facilitated, rather than directed, and requests for new knowledge are catered for through bringing in technical experts. A Whatsapp group allows participants to stay in touch between meetings, promoting ongoing sharing and learning, as well as access to new opportunities and resources. This is further bolstered by including both parliamentarians and the support staff in the network.

The peer learning program has since taken on a new project – led by participants – to design an online app that facilitates, tracks and stores information and research requests (and data) in parliaments. While still in the early development phase, this one example of how working with committed champions, able to influence parliamentary systems, can lead to gap identification and organisational development.

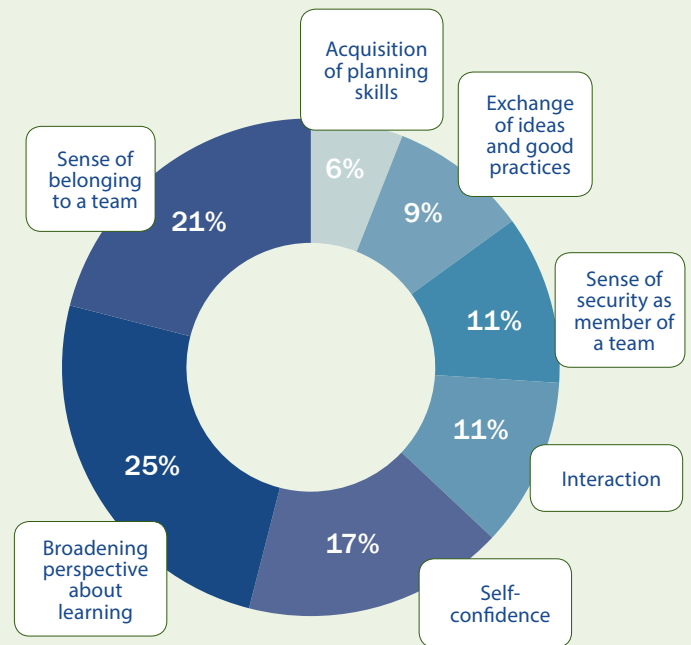
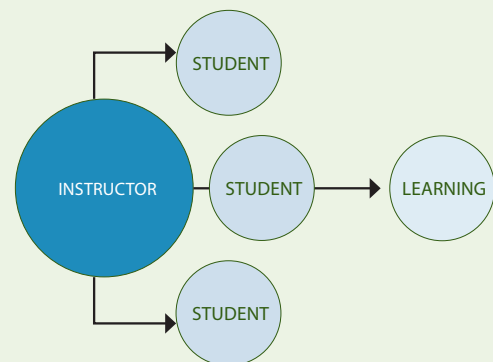


Figure 3: Personal benefits gained through peer-learning – Eugenia Arvanitis (2017)

TRADITIONAL LEARNING

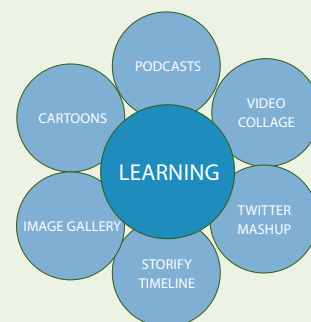
Instructors transfer knowledge



Instructors + knowledge transfer = learning

PEER LEARNING

Peers share projects



Peers + sharing projects = learning

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

Conclusion

In Africa, the peer learning approach to capacity development for parliaments has only just begun. As parliamentarians and support staff continue in their efforts – with the support of development partners – to strengthen national M&E systems by promoting the use of evidence in their parliaments. This can successfully be done by establishing regional peer learning networks and communities of practice along with the architecture needed for sustaining the systems of evidence in parliaments. But this will only succeed if it is championed by all the stakeholders – both in parliament and outside.

References

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

JOSEPHINE WATERA

