Parliamentary networking as an instrument of capacity building: insights from East Africa

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Abstract

This study investigates the effectiveness of parliamentary networks in East Africa as a tool for capacity building. Given the circumstances prevailing in most African parliaments, there is growing consensus supporting the view that networks are one of the key capacity building instruments on the continent. To the extent that there are no dedicated formal colleges to train parliamentarians and parliamentary staff for their multiple functions, networking with sister institutions does serve as one critical mechanism for exchanging and sharing information, knowledge and internationally-acknowledged best practices in order to enhance institutional and individual capacities.

Key words: parliament, institutions, networking, capacity building, governance.

Introduction

The available institutional and organizational capacity of parliaments in Africa tends to be insufficient, given the scope of their constitutional mandates. In principle, parliaments are regarded as the primary democratic institution through which the will of the people is made manifest, and they play a critical role in advancing social and political values that benefit all members *of a* community. They are mandated to oversee and keep the executive branch under control and under constant surveillance. In practice, however, parliaments tend to lack the requisite power and capacity to fully and effectively realize these mandates. For most of the first three decades of independence, Africa saw power move inexorably toward the executive branch and away from

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parliament, the judiciary and other national bodies of restraint (Ayee, 2003; Salih, 2005).

However, beginning in the early 1990s, a new wave of political liberalization and democratization began to sweep across the entire continent. In country after country, autocratic civilian governments and military regimes have been replaced with popularly elected governments. Moreover, citizens have begun to demand that their leaders be accountable and competent, and that they serve with integrity, honesty and commitment. The re-activated institutional structures and arrangements for democratic governance are gradually becoming part of the dominant constitutional discourse (Barkan et al. 2007; Wang, 2007). Related to this trend, donor support policies and programs are strategically tying development assistance resources to progress toward “good governance” by the recipient governments. More significantly, the growth of civil society organizations in both number and sophistication is pushing the role of parliament and the practice of popular participation to the political centre stage.

This study constitutes a preliminary attempt to ascertain the ability of parliaments to institutionalize networking as a tool of capacity building. The broad research question that guided the study was: how do ideas, norms, institutions and practices diffuse within one country (or between a group of countries) under the rubric of capacity building? It is to be noted that capacity building is a phrase used by development specialists to describe myriad efforts by development partners to assist developing countries to improve their governance processes. To examine the impact of networking on the effectiveness of parliaments, three specific questions informed the types of information we collected, and which institutions and actors we interviewed. First, we asked our respondents the extent to which inter-parliamentary networking had been recognized as an efficient *instrument* of capacity building. Second, we wanted to find out what challenges these incipient, and often inchoate parliaments were facing in institutionalizing networking as a tool for self-renewal and consolidation. Third, we sought to establish what institutional arrangements should be put in place to minimize the costs and maximize the benefits of networking. In answering these questions, special attention was paid to the role played by parliamentary leaders, reform-minded parliamentarians, professional staff, and civil society

significantly enhanced these parliaments' ability to scrutinize more ably the activities of the executive than was the case previously. Similarly, another spectacular outcome from networking initiatives was the adoption of gender-friendly policies and practices in Uganda and Tanzania that are gradually empowering women to participate in major decision-making in their respective countries.

We noted that effective knowledge borrowing, adaptation and use tend to be very expensive undertakings. Making prudent use of foreign-acquired knowledge requires a considerable national investment in establishing the necessary institutional support systems, competent and diverse expertise, as well as effective knowledge distribution networks to filter it through a conscious process of selection, evaluation and adaptation to local circumstances. More than anything else, the problems with global knowledge use are essentially about the difficulties of their transferability. Every idea has a historical, institutional and structural context. It is inextricably connected to the local circumstances. The concepts, assumptions and beliefs through which the people understand and interpret the world around them tend to be society-specific. Scientific institutes, universities, think-tanks and state agencies in the global North are linked together to build national systems of knowledge production in order to solve context-specific problems. As a result, there are no universal truths. It is therefore recommended that knowledge that is borrowed should not only be unpacked before use, but the unpackaging process should always seek to fully uncover the underlying assumptions, rules of production and belief systems, before recommending wholesale adoption. The best way to replicate foreign-generated best practices is to ground them in the history, culture, traditions and social and economic realities of respective countries. Parliaments would, therefore, be required to assemble a critical mass of knowledge workers who would participate in borrowing, organizing, learning and processing the information, and then integrate these invisible processes into their daily routines until they became fully institutionalized.

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