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PARLIAMENTARY AFFAIRS

Parliament
in focus
Zimbabwe

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Executive Summary

An exploration of the institutional factors affecting evidence use at Parliament of Zimbabwe presents a complex picture. Within the institution, resources constitute the main barrier, and the Parliament of Zimbabwe is by far the most resource-constrained of the three Parliaments we profile in these papers. The Research Department, which serves both the House and the Senate, consists of just eight research officers. IT connection is also a key challenge, as is access to up to date resources in the library. However, Parliament stands to benefit from an ambitious new Strategic Plan, backed by its Multi Donor Support Programme, which recognizes and seeks to address capacity gaps in research and information support. There are other encouraging developments within the institution such as the establishment of a Budget Office, and the introduction of quality management standards across the administrative arm. Overall, we emphasize that the institution is evolving and that transformative approaches to evidence are not only the result of an enabling macro environment but also of strengthened technical and institutional capacity.

VakaYiko work with Parliament of Zimbabwe included:

- Training for information support staff (research, Hansard, ICT, Library, Committees) using the EIPM Toolkit: how to find, assess and communicate evidence for decision making (INASP, 2016).
- Mentoring support to the Research Department including support for the establishment of their Parliamentary Evidence Series of roundtables connecting researchers and policymakers
- Participation in a learning exchange programme with the parliaments of Ghana and Uganda, including a visit to Uganda to observe Parliamentary Research Week and to Ghana to take part in a learning exchange workshop

Watch: documentary by ZeipNET www.youtube.com/watch?v=O64OoTIV3Cc

Introduction

In this profile, we explore some of the main factors we identified through our ‘Evidence in African Parliaments’ paper in the context of the Parliament of Zimbabwe.¹ We draw on our experience working with Parliament over the past several years, which has been documented through multiple needs assessments, surveys, workshops, events and reports. Complementing this with interviews with information support staff, we describe Parliament’s information support system and identify some of the key constraints and opportunities within this.

Overall, despite severe resource constraints, Parliament of Zimbabwe has made some notable developments in recent years with regards to use of evidence. While an exhaustive investigation into all of the factors is far beyond the scope of these ‘Parliament in focus’ profiles, it is our intention to draw attention to some of the most predominant issues which have emerged from our research and experience. This may provide some initial insights to inform future investigations or capacity development programmes.

What is evidence-informed policy making?

“Evidence-informed policy is 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.

“We do not see it as a policy that is exclusively based on research, or as being based on one set of findings. We accept that in some cases, research evidence may be considered and rejected; if rejection was based on understanding of the insights that the research offered then we would still consider any resulting policy to be evidence-informed.” (Newman, Fisher and Shaxson, 2012)

For evidence to routinely and systematically inform policy making, our view is that at least three interlinked elements should be in place:

- **Individuals** in public institutions with the skills to access, evaluate and use a range of types of evidence (including citizen knowledge, administrative data, practice-informed knowledge and research)
- **Processes, systems and cultures** in public institutions for systematically identifying and meeting evidence needs
- **An enabling environment** of engaged stakeholders such as citizens, media and civil society that links evidence producers and users
- The **Context Matters Framework** outlines a series of six interrelated sets of factors that affect the use of evidence throughout these levels. It can be accessed online at www.politicsandideas/contextmatters (Weyrauch et al., 2016)

1. In line with the Context Matters framework approach, our full analysis explored both macro-level and institutional-level factors affecting evidence use at Parliament. In this summary paper we share some of our findings from the institutional-level analysis. Our scope did not permit a full systematic investigation into each of the factors; rather we highlight some particular factors we find relevant, especially those concerned with organizational management, resources, capacity and processes.

Institutional factors affecting evidence use in the Parliament of Zimbabwe

Our assessment of the internal institutional factors affecting evidence use in Parliament suggests that many of the key areas of opportunity relate to experience and reforms dating from the period of inclusive government (2009-2013), as well as Parliament's new Strategic Plan (2014-2018) and the role of development partners.

Organizational strategy

The Parliament of Zimbabwe's current Strategic Plan (2014-2018) builds on previous parliamentary reforms that the Parliament began to implement in 1999. These reforms emphasized the need to strengthen the capacity of MPs to contribute more effectively to parliamentary proceedings as well as increasing public participation in the legislative process.² The Plan calls for greater input of civil society and expert technical and legal advice to support MPs during the budget and other legislative processes, making it imperative that information services seek evidence from external sources. Among a host of strategies to improve administrative support for MPs, there is a specific focus on the development of knowledge management systems and building research capacity within the parliament (Parliament of Zimbabwe (a), 2014-2018). This plan could potentially serve as a catalyst for mainstreaming the use of evidence in the Parliament of Zimbabwe in the coming years.

About the Parliament of Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe's Parliament is bicameral, consisting of the Senate and the National Assembly. The current Parliament is in its 8th term and has a total of 350 Members comprising 80 Senators and 270 Members of the National Assembly.

The administrative arm of the Parliament is headed by the Clerk and the management is organized along five directorates namely: Information Services; HR and Administration; External Relations; Journals and House Procedures; and Financial Services. In addition to these, the Parliament has a Parliamentary Program Coordination Unit (PCU) which manages the Multi-Donor Parliamentary Support Programmes.

The Committee on Standing Rules and Orders (CSRO) is the body charged with all institutional policy making at Parliament. Among other functions, its mandate is to appoint Members for portfolio and thematic committees, Committee Chairpersons and is also responsible for policies on the conditions of service for the staff of Parliament.

Financial resources and donor support

A serious lack of financial resource is described in Parliament's Strategic Plan, as well as in our interviews with parliamentary staff.³ The Plan identifies limited resource and inadequate budgets as a particular weakness and "Resource Mobilization" is highlighted as a key strategic issue the parliament aims to address (Parliament of Zimbabwe (a), 2014-2018). Most members of Parliament's current Multi-Donor Parliamentary Support are focusing on supporting Parliament with the significant task of aligning 400 different pieces of existing legislation to the new Constitution. This support includes technical and tactical issues and benchmarking including stakeholder engagement and offers multiple avenues for evidence use. It also presents an unusual opportunity for development partners because previously such support could have been perceived as a regime change agenda particularly when looking at security, electoral, human rights and other freedom-oriented legislative reforms.⁴

A particular area of resources which is relevant to evidence systems is ICT infrastructure. In Parliament of Zimbabwe, there is some ICT infrastructure - for example the Hansard department has state of the art recording devices, and there are also efforts to provide MPs with tablets. There are also efforts around moving towards an 'e-Parliament', which has implications for future gathering, storage and communication of evidence. Our experience and interviews

2. See Parliament of Zimbabwe website: www.parlzim.gov.zw/about-parliament/parliamentary-reforms

3. According to interviewees, parliamentary research and information services are under budgeted. However, staff were quick to add that Zimbabwe is experiencing economic stagnation, and government departments and institutions have been some of the worst hit.

4. Our interviewees pointed out that while this donor support provides an important opportunity for evidence use, it also carries the risk of a donor-driven agenda within Parliament, particularly around evidence.

indicate, however, that the biggest IT challenge confronting parliamentary staff remains internet connectivity. This impacts on service delivery in the area of information support, as research requests are often made with short notice, but narrow bandwidth and slow browser speeds make it difficult for researchers to quickly access and synthesize research.

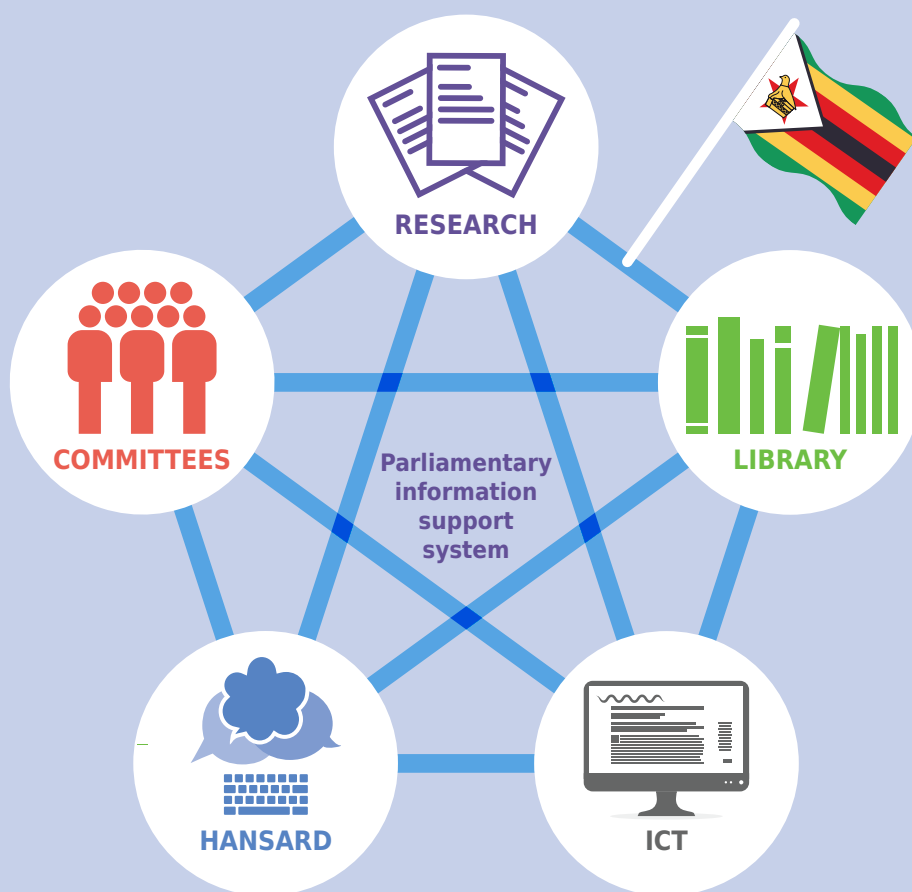
Linked to the issue of IT challenges and other resources is the problem of limited access to journals and other forms of academic research. This is a significant barrier to the use of research evidence in Parliament; due to funding gaps many of the resources in the Library are out of date, making it difficult for MPs and staff to access up to date research. As part of the VakaYiko programme, efforts have been made to connect the Parliamentary Library with many of the free and cost-effective initiatives available. A directory of free online sources of evidence was produced and embedded on the Parliament website by ZeipNET,⁵ which has also worked with INASP to broker discussions between the Parliament Library and the Zimbabwe University Libraries Consortium to explore sustainable and cost-effective research access solutions.⁶

Human capacity: staff and MPs

Information support staff

The information support system in the Parliament of Zimbabwe has three core departments - Research, ICT and Library - all grouped under the Information Services Directorate. In addition to these core departments, several other units are also involved in serving information needs of MPs and staff: Committees, Hansard, Public Relations and External Relations.⁷ The newest

Figure 1: Zimbabwe parliamentary information support system



5. www.parlzim.gov.zw/get-involved/e-journals/content/161-e-journals

6. For more on the issue of access to research in parliaments, see INASP 2017.

7. In mapping exercises conducted in Aug and Nov 2016 with parliamentary staff, participants found that the Research Department's strongest working relationships are with ICT, Library and Committees, while the relationship with Hansard, Public Relations and External Relations are weaker.

part of this system is the Parliamentary Budget Office, which while still in its early stages, is expected to provide specialized evidence around the budget process for MPs and indicates a new window of opportunity around evidence use.⁸ While Parliament's Strategic Plan clearly defines the roles and responsibilities of each of these information support departments, according to one interviewee, "clarity of departments and roles exists in principle, but in actual sense, [is] not strong enough" – suggesting that the system could benefit from strengthened interdepartmental collaboration and coordination.

The Research Department, which can be seen as the core of Parliament's information support system, has eight staff supporting 350 MPs and Senators and 26 committees.⁹ The Department conducts both primary and secondary research in order to respond to evidence needs of MPs and committees. It seeks secondary information from internal parliamentary records as well as external sources such as MDAs, research institutions, Think Tanks, CSOs etc, and is also mandated to conduct field studies. It also manages the Parliamentary Informatics Database, consisting of constituency information and data such as the number of type of health and social services available, the number of clinics, veterinary facilities, sports and recreation facilities. The management and updating of this data is an ongoing rolling process.

The Department has the lowest ratio of research staff to MPs (1:43) among countries we have profiled. This presents a significant challenge to the Department, limiting its scope for evidence coverage across all sectors as well as for longer term, proactive and in-depth research. While to date, the Department has benefitted from a number of training programmes funded by donors and offered by various external partner organizations, staff capacity remains a critical challenge, and this is reflected in the Strategic Plan.

One of the gains reported by ZeipNET under the VakaYiko programme is the relationships that have been built between the Research Department external evidence providers (ZeipNET, 2016). These relationships are at a nascent stage and have yet to fully develop to support evidence use in parliament, although there are encouraging new initiatives such as the Parliamentary Evidence Series, launched by the Research Department during the VakaYiko programme. Such relationships with local research institutions have the potential to mitigate the effects of understaffing in the Research Department.

MP capacity

A persistent issue emerging from our investigation, which is also recognized in Parliament's Strategic Plan is MP skills and knowledge for evidence use. Aside from the obvious political factors affecting MPs' use to evidence, baseline studies conducted under the Seventh Parliament detail significant skills shortages among MPs relevant to their ability to absorb and use evidence in decision making. Like other countries in the region, Zimbabwe experiences high turnover of MPs, so capacity strengthening of MPs is likely to be an ongoing need with each new Parliament.

“I now use Google Scholar articles, and relevant policy documents from government and other stakeholders to draft my background reports.

For example, when drafting motion points for the Portfolio Committee on Women's Affairs, I sought information from a civil society organization called ZWALA as a partner in evidence gathering on child marriages.

VakaYiko training participant, Parliament of Zimbabwe 2016

“As long as we do not have the right people with the right skills and knowledge in the bureaucracies, we lose out. Some of these things go down the cracks and we never really get the results that we need out of these policies.

The assumption that the MPs ...know it all is very wrong. There is need for support systems in terms of training them and make them understand their mandate. Equipping them with skills to perform this mandate is critical. This involves a lot of capacity building but unfortunately that kind of support is not there in Parliament besides what is being done through development partners.

Senator Monica Mutsvangwa, quoted in ZeipNET documentary

8. See, for example, Parliamentary Budget Office, 2017

9. The Parliamentary reforms that began in 1997 expanded the Research Department to eight research officers. Parliamentary Committees were also extended at the same time to cover different sectors of the economy, resulting in an increased demand for research services and in turn, expecting research and information provision to be more policy oriented.

Institutional processes affecting evidence

As in other countries, the Standing Orders, which govern the conduct of Parliamentary business, provide for various official institutional mechanisms for evidence use. For instance, they require committees to use evidence in the course of their work, particularly during the consideration of Bills that are before the House. Order 105(2) states that:

The portfolio committee shall consider the bill and shall have power to call for and receive evidence from the public on that bill (Parliament of Zimbabwe, b).

There is also an emphasis on strengthening committees for effective oversight through field visits and public hearings.

An additional potential base from which to support the systematic use of evidence in Parliament is via institutional quality management systems. In 2012 the Parliament of Zimbabwe acquired an *International Organisation for Standardization* (ISO) 9001:2008 Certification in Quality Management Systems (QMS) in order to improve service delivery. As a result, there are now Service Level Agreements (SLAs) that guide departments in the provision of service, and prescribe the modalities of requesting and receiving services from the various departments within Parliament, including in the area of information support. This reduces the turnaround time for parliamentary services and regulates working relationships between departments.

While SLAs promote a systematic approach to service provision, there are challenges in implementation. Our interviews suggest that this at least in part because MPs fail to complete administrative requirements – for example, feedback forms designed to evaluate the content and quality of services are often not returned. This has important implications for evidence use, as it limits the ability of the Research Department to understand and effectively target MPs' information needs. As with the other parliaments we profile, there are also no formal processes for external quality assurance of evidence. Research Officers reported in interviews that the Department does not have any systems in place to consult experts and academics based at universities and research institutes to review their products.

Conclusion

In addition to the challenge presented by the broader political situation, which weighs heavily on Parliament, an overarching barrier to evidence use in the Parliament of Zimbabwe is resources. This manifests particularly in a small research team and in poor ICT infrastructure. Despite this, however, there are important windows of opportunity to embed systems for evidence use, including a Strategic Plan which is supportive of research and evidence, the establishment of a Budget Office, and the introduction of new quality management standards. The legacy of the coalition government for Parliament has been not only a new Constitution that promises increased autonomy, but also the experience of multi-party government and the corresponding shift in behaviours and attitudes within Parliament. Furthermore, there is growing investment in institutional capacity, and Parliament is evolving in ways which have the potential to see more robust approaches to information and evidence in future.

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