

Strategic approaches to evidence at the Parliament of Ghana

Strengthening institutional-level use of evidence in decision making

Systematic use of quality, independent evidence is essential for a parliament to effectively scrutinize the executive and represent the citizens of their country. However, parliaments are complex, dynamic and highly political institutions, with many different stakeholders providing and using evidence through myriad formal and informal channels. A constantly shifting web of external and internal factors shape how this evidence is used, ranging from the macro-level social, economic and political environment to a parliament's legal relationship with the executive, its internal capacity and organizational culture, and issues of resources, management processes and leadership¹.

In order to help address these challenges, over the course of three and a half years (2013-2017) the INASP-led VakaYiko Consortium² worked with the Parliament of Ghana in strengthening research and information systems to support evidence use in decision making.

In its first three years, the VakaYiko programme sought mainly to increase capacity at an individual level, targeting research and information support staff in five key departments and seeking to strengthen their skills in accessing, appraising, and communicating evidence for policymakers³. These training workshops took a learner-centred approach to adult learning, emphasizing exploration and self-reflection through practical and participatory group work including techniques such as stakeholder mapping, case studies and



The Parliament of Ghana. Photo credit: Jonathan Ernst / World Bank

The Parliament of Ghana

Since Ghana's return to multi-party democracy with the adoption of the 1992 Constitution, Parliament has evolved from a House with one-party representation to a 275-member House with an almost equal ratio of majority and minority parties. Its staff strength and departments have also increased since 1993. The Parliamentary Service, which is headed by the Clerk, is now organized along three divisions, namely: i) the Legislative Management Division ii) Information, Publications and Research Division and iii) the Finance, Human Resource and General Services Division.¹³ Restructuring has been ongoing since 2012, and in the context of the pending strategic plan and updated organogram, there is some lack of clarity around these delineations.

Research, Library, ICT, Hansard and Committees Departments all play an active role in the gathering and supply of evidence within Parliament¹⁴. The Research Department has 10 Research Officers and a host of support staff assisting with secretarial and administrative duties, serving 40 committees and 275 MPs. The Library has a staff strength of five and ICT, four. The Committees have on average three to four people (two clerks and support staff) serving each Committee. Hansard, which produces the official publications of the House and Committee debates, is comprised of 62 staff.

This text is based on our Evidence in African Parliaments paper www.inasp.info/evidenceinparliaments

¹³ See GINKS Review of Information Support Systems at Parliament of Ghana (2015) and ACEPA: Evidence in Parliaments (forthcoming, 2017). ¹⁴ See GINKS Review of Information Support Systems at Parliament of Ghana (2015).

¹Evidence and Parliaments (www.inasp.info/evidenceinparliaments) explores these factors in more detail. ² VakaYiko was one of five consortia supported by DFID's Building Capacity to Use Research Evidence (BCURE) programme. Headed by INASP and active in four African countries, the Consortium's work in Ghana was led by the Ghana Information Network for Knowledge Sharing (GINKS) and the African Centre for Parliamentary Affairs (ACEPA).



scenarios, critical interviews and peer learning as well as individual action plans. Staff members from five departments across the Parliament of Ghana's information support system were trained: Hansard, Research, Committees, ICT and Library.

In its later stages, partly in response to the wealth of insights and ideas that emerged from these workshops and the action plans, the VakaYiko programme began to explore more deeply the internal and external contextual factors shaping how evidence is used in Parliament. This includes both formal structures, such as internal management and administrative procedures, as well as 'softer' or more informal factors related to leadership, organizational culture and the external social and political landscape. This article

reflects on one approach we tested to respond to these factors in a deeper way. In addition to the experience from the main research conducted by ACEPA as part of the VakaYiko extension in 2016 to inform our approach

Navigating organizational factors: reflecting on our approach

In the six-month extension phase of VakaYiko, INASP, ACEPA and GINKS worked with information support staff at the Parliament of Ghana through two workshops to consider how Parliament could take a more strategic approach to navigating factors affecting evidence at the organizational level. This would involve beginning to shift from

a reactive and responsive mode of information support to a more strategic, anticipatory approach which proactively identifies evidence needs and devises methods of meeting them within time, political and other constraints. It would also involve more active collaboration between information support departments, strengthening the relationships between them and aiming to foster a holistic information support system that can respond to needs across Parliament's multiple evidence channels.

'Evidence strategy' approaches have in the past been very long term and intensive processes undertaken in ministries⁴. While it was far beyond our scope in our timeframe to complete an 'evidence strategy' process, our short six-month window did give us an opportunity to begin to consider what the first steps towards a strategic approach to evidence in a parliament might look like. Given the dynamic and highly politicized nature of parliaments, we developed a flexible approach around a core series of elements that could be applied to any emerging policy issue, or institutionalized within existing management processes and systems.

Our aims were:

- To test and refine key elements of a strategic approach to evidence with Parliament of Ghana's information support staff
- To provide a step-by-step 'How To' to enable staff implement the strategic process conducted in the workshops for future policy issues
- To identify key emerging principles for strategic approaches to evidence in parliaments which Parliament of Ghana may want to consider as part of its organizational and strategic restructuring.

What does evidence-informed policy mean in the context of parliaments?

Systematic use of quality, independent evidence is essential for a parliament to effectively scrutinize the executive and represent the citizens. When working on evidence-informed policy making in parliaments, it is important to take an approach that engages with politics, takes a broad view of evidence, and pays attention to institutional processes.

As parliaments are inherently political institutions, evidence must be seen as one of many factors that feed in to policy making, alongside political realities, budget constraints, and societal and cultural issues. Policy making is non-linear, involving multiple different actors including the executive, legislature, civil society, international agencies and others. Evidence is intertwined with this political landscape.

Policymakers need a wide range of different kinds of evidence to inform decision making, from citizen knowledge gathered through stakeholder consultations to expert practice-informed knowledge, to administrative statistics, to research. Parliaments have many different evidence mechanisms and actors at their disposal, from public hearings to commissioning internal and external research.

The process which evidence goes through, from the point of gathering to the presentation to the decision maker, is as important as the evidence itself. Even the best evidence, if not provided at the right time, interpreted in a rigorous way, or appropriately matched to the policy question, will not be of use to policymakers. Parliamentary information support units are at the forefront of this process, operating within the complex environment described here.

³ See INASP Evidence-Informed Policy Making Toolkit (2015) for full course materials. ⁴ See examples from the Department of Environmental Affairs in South Africa (Wills et al 2016) and the Department of Food, Agriculture and Rural Affairs in the UK (Shaxson 2014)



What key factors affect evidence use at the Parliament of Ghana?

While it is beyond the scope of this article to provide an exhaustive list of all the factors in relation to the Parliament of Ghana, several that were fundamental to the design of our approach merit mentioning here.



Practical learning informs approach

Our approach was informed by our practical learning from our work in the VakaYiko programme, as well as by three key overarching frameworks. The first of these is ITAD's 'Four Dimensions of Change', which outlines a multi-level approach to capacity development and which informed our understanding of organizational capacity and its links to other levels of capacity, in particular the importance of relationships.⁵ The second is the Politics & Ideas/INASP 'Context Matters' framework, which identifies key organizational factors affecting evidence use and which guided our background diagnostic as well as some of the activities in our workshops.⁶ The third is ODI's

'Guidelines and Good Practices for Evidence-Informed Policy-Making in a Government Department', which provided a useful starting point for understanding an institutional approach to evidence use, and also guided some of the activities in the workshops. Together these three frameworks shaped our understanding of what institutional capacity for evidence looks like: that is, the formal and informal relationships and processes within an institution enabling the systematic use of a range of quality evidence to inform decision making.

Key principles

The following key principles also informed the approach:

- **Emphasize adult learning:** INASP takes a thorough approach to designing, monitoring and

evaluating adult learning initiatives.⁷ The workshops were designed to make the most of adults' existing expertise and provide opportunities for immediate application as well as for participants to shape the agenda itself.

"VakaYiko was the beginning of our real collaboration with other information support units and the collaboration is now very strong."
 Mohammed Nyagsi, Director, Ghana Parliament Research Department¹

- **Work across the information support system:** Feedback from training conducted in the first phase of our programme, as well as from our work with other parliaments indicated that, in order to explore organizational barriers, it would be more effective





Scientific research is one of the types of evidence scrutinized in parliaments. Photo: Chris Dobson

to bring together multiple units of Parliament's information support system than to work only through the Research Department. These diverse perspectives gave us greater understanding of the factors affecting evidence use across the organization, as well as allowing the information support units to strengthen working relationships between each other, which is itself a key element of organizational capacity.

- **Go beyond the technical:** We wanted to avoid taking a purely technical approach to addressing organizational factors, which we know are as much about informal systems, organizational culture and power dynamics as they are about formal systems and structures. We were keen to explore an approach that would focus on relationships and try to be open about politics, considering how Parliament's information support units could more strategically navigate this landscape.

- **Use a policy issue as an entry point to institutional**

strengthening: Learning from the VakaYiko programme had pointed to the importance of combining longer-term, more institutional capacity development efforts with flexible, shorter interventions taking advantage of particular policy windows⁸. With this in mind, we wanted to use one policy issue as an entry point to uncover broader institutional issues. This helped us focus what could have otherwise been an enormous task, as well as ensuring that discussions were grounded in practical realities such as timescales, politics and media coverage which are fundamental to the way evidence is used in parliaments.

What we did

We identified seven key elements of a strategic approach to evidence in a parliament. Overall, the steps aim to support collaboration between information support units on both a technical and strategic level to meet evidence needs. They begin from a participatory reflective process that considers the complementary

roles of each information support department. The steps subsequently involve mapping the political, organizational and other factors affecting key evidence processes before identifying how each department can contribute to improving these processes. While acting primarily as a tool for collaboration across the information support departments, the strategic steps also therefore uncover wider organizational issues.

Understanding Parliament's information support system

In our first workshop, we began by building a map of the information support system in Parliament, identifying what the key contributions of each department are and the strengths of the relationships between them. We then moved into a creative exercise in which participants selected one of several photographs that they felt best represented Parliament's information support system and explained their interpretation to their colleagues. This built a diverse and at times contradictory picture of the organizational culture of evidence use within Parliament. For instance, each of the information support departments identified itself as the central 'hub' of the system, giving rise to interesting reflections on the drivers and motivations of evidence use. Common threads in the stories included both the importance and the difficulty of engaging with MPs; the sense of formal procedure in Parliament, which was viewed by some as orderly and predictable and by others as cumbersome and obstructionist; and the collaborative, symbiotic relationships between the information support units. During these discussions we began to build a shared list of factors affecting evidence use in Parliament.

⁵ Puntun (2014). ⁶ Weyrauch et al (2016). ⁷ See 'INASP's Face to Face Training Evolution' (INASP, 2016).





Maize seeds: an agricultural bill was the subject of scrutiny in the workshops

Selecting a policy issue

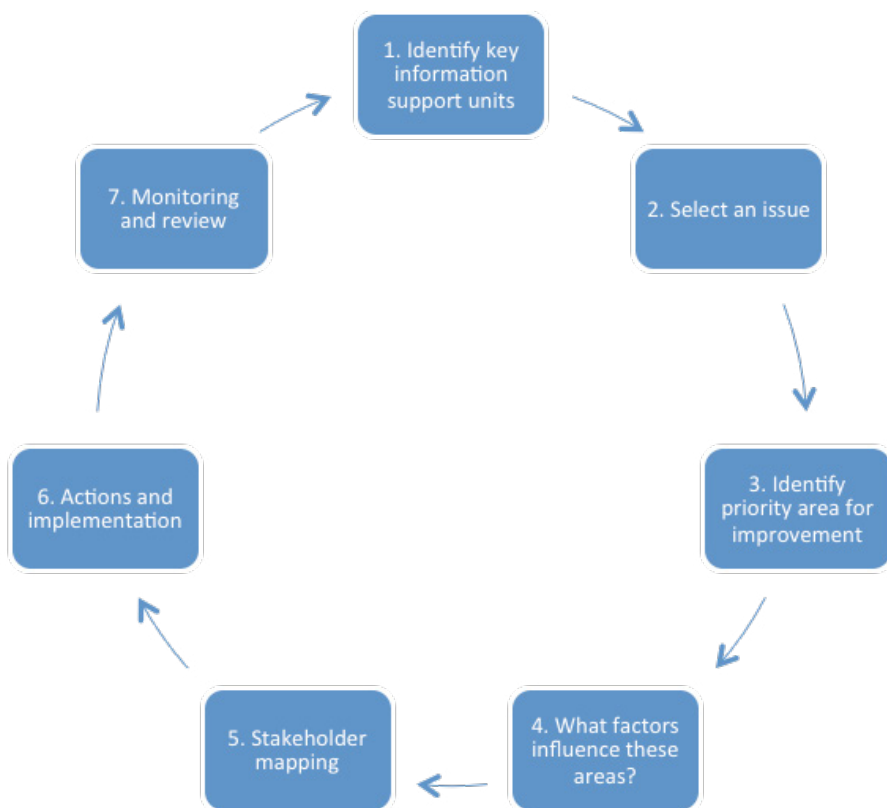
Staff then selected Ghana's Plant Breeders' Bill as an entry point for their strategic discussion, in order to consider how the process could

look in practice. The Bill had been stalled since its second reading, as a result of intense controversy and contested evidence, but was expected to arise for consideration again in the new parliament. The

Bill, which concerns protection of breeders' rights to secure control of the commercialisation of new varieties, is part of a series of pieces of legislation that will shape Ghana's future use of GMOs.

Staff categorized Parliament's approach to evidence on the Bill as 'emerging', meaning that while some evidence is being demanded and used, Parliament could not yet be described as functioning in an 'informed' way on the issue. Although the Bill has been a topic of high interest within Parliament, with MPs frequently requesting information about the issue and an active and engaged Committee on Agriculture scrutinizing it, the information support departments face a number of challenges in gathering complete and reliable evidence on GMOs and communicating it to MPs in a way that meaningfully informs the debate. They felt there was still some way to go before Parliament could be said to have an 'informed' approach to GMOs.

Using the example of the Plant Breeders' Bill, we worked through each of the seven steps in the



¹The forthcoming paper on Evidence and Parliaments from ACEPA (2017) explores these factors in more detail. ² VakaYiko was one of five consortia supported by DFID's Building Capacity to Use Research Evidence (BCURE) programme. Headed by INASP and active in four African countries, the Consortium's work in Ghana was led by the Ghana Information Network for Knowledge Sharing (GINKS) and the African Centre for Parliamentary Affairs (ACEPA). ³ See INASP Evidence-Informed Policy Making Toolkit (2015) for full course materials. ⁴ On the whole, VakaYiko tended to take institutional-based approaches rather than issue-based approaches when working with parliaments. However, a successful issue-based approach in Kenya demonstrated the value of using narrow 'windows of opportunity' (Asiti and Ochieng 2015). For more on issue-based approaches vs institution based approaches in parliamentary strengthening, see Cheeseman and Dodsworth, Navigating Trade-Offs in Parliamentary Strengthening.



strategic process. The first step involved identifying broad priority areas for improvement. In the case of the Plant Breeders' Bill, this focused on better citizen consultation, stronger links with experts and researchers to gather evidence, and more politically astute communication to decision makers. Next, participants used the list of factors they had built in the opening session and conducted 'force field analysis' to identify how they worked in practice, in this particular policy issue, as constraints or enablers. They then moved on to map the stakeholders affecting the debate, before returning to the information support system map they had created to consider which departments were best placed to take up which emerging opportunities and engage with which stakeholders. They produced a collaborative action plan outlining how they could work together to support a more robust approach to evidence on the Plant Breeders' Bill, from strengthening internal processes for synthesizing citizen evidence submissions, to making research products more accessible through the website, expanding links with research institutions and raising awareness among MPs about the services offered by the information support departments.

Reviewing and validating

We opened the second workshop with a similar creative exercise to the first workshop. This time, participants were asked to select a picture that they felt best captured the new Parliament's approach to evidence. Next we conducted a participatory review of the process and of the draft 'Strategic Approaches' document that had emerged from the first workshop. As part of this we discussed the sequencing, content and purpose of each of the steps and revised our model together. We also identified a series of emerging overarching



Cocoa beans are an important crop in Ghana

organizational issues that had featured as 'common threads' throughout our discussion. These included planning and scheduling, visibility of information support departments and their recognition at strategic level within Parliament.

Testing the approach on a new issue

When we had agreed on the components of the strategic approach, participants tested it on a second policy issue. This time the issue chosen was not a bill but a key campaign promise in the recent election: free senior high school. Participants felt certain it would come before Parliament, although opinion was divided as to whether this would be in the form of a new bill, an amendment to an existing

bill, or as part of the budget.

Testing the approach on a different type of policy issue enabled us to build a more nuanced understanding of how strategic approaches would differ depending on the issue; for instance, in the case of the Plant Breeders' Bill, where evidence was feeding in to scrutiny of a bill, the relationship between the research and Committees departments was fundamental, as well as with Public Affairs, which would be convening public dialogues around the Bill as part of a standard process. However, if the Free Senior High School proposal appears as an amendment or as part of the budget, the main 'user' of evidence shifts from the Committee to the individual MPs, requiring a shift in approach from information support departments.



We also discussed at length the political implications of providing evidence on an issue that is a key part of the Executive's platform, in the context of an Executive-dominated system, and reflected on possible angles and entry points. This confirmed the importance of the first step in the process: identifying the stage and type of issue. The route by which it will arrive at Parliament has important implications for which information support departments are involved, who the 'users' are and how the issue is framed.

Recommendations emerging from the workshop centred on the following themes:

- Strengthening inter-departmental collaboration and dialogue between information support units
- Planning for evidence needs in advance
- Raising the visibility and profile of evidence issues, and the information support departments, within parliament
- Investing in the capacity of information support units

'Strategic Approaches to Evidence' guideline document

The final seven steps, along with the emerging organizational issues and recommendations to address them, were combined into a 'Strategic Approaches to Evidence' document for internal use within Parliament. This document aimed to provide a practical guide for staff to implement the approach in future, and for management to begin to address some of the institutional areas for improvement. The document was reviewed and validated by the staff, and at the time of writing was beginning the process of being presented to senior leadership.

Emerging effects

Here we outline some of the effects of the process which are starting to become visible. These are based on a participatory review session conducted as part of the last workshop, as well as daily Exit Cards and final feedback forms. In addition, we draw on impressions from follow-up meetings with key stakeholders.

Strengthened relationships between information support departments: Many participants commented that they found the inter-departmental approach useful and enlightening, as they were able to work with colleagues they had not engaged with before. In the participatory review session, participants agreed that they had met new colleagues they had not worked with before, and pointed to the principle of sharing resources and expertise as an important learning. The experience of jointly exploring the strategy and producing the report is itself an example of interdepartmental collaboration.

"In group activity sessions participants could interact and share ideas. Useful in building strong relationships." participant via feedback form

Learning about the strategic approach: In our review session and feedback forms, many participants told us they had found learning about the idea and components of a strategic approach itself useful. In particular, they identified specific aspects such as stakeholder mapping and force field analysis which allowed greater consideration of political issues, as most useful.

Capacity to implement the strategic approach in future: Participants expressed a high degree of confidence in their ability to implement the approach themselves in future, with none reporting that would not feel

confident doing this. Some mentioned that additional support, either in the form of the practical 'Strategic Approaches' tool or otherwise, would assist them.

"I feel confident implementing the approach in future especially as the strategic document is now available, it can always guide us through the process." Participant, via feedback form

Institutional adoption of approach: At a follow-up meeting in March 2017 with five directors from relevant departments, it was agreed that the 'Strategic Approaches to Evidence' document emerging from the workshops should be adopted as a policy within Parliament. Discussions are ongoing at senior leadership level about how to operationalize this encouraging development.

"Very useful - it should be the key to delivering information to MPs." Participant, via feedback form

Lessons learned

Here, we offer some key lessons to inform future efforts to support strategic approaches to evidence in parliaments, including areas where further exploration/research could help:

Timing is a key consideration when working on evidence in parliaments⁹, and we felt this was the main constraint of our approach. Our six-month initiative fell between parliaments, which meant we were not able to engage directly with the Committees and MPs. While the change of government and the new Parliament halfway through the process led to interesting reflections on shifting evidence culture in the institution, we felt that the process would have benefited from a closer relationship with committees and MPs. For future initiatives, flexibility from donors and implementing partners will be crucial in order to initiate and implement such strategic discussions in response to



a 'live' issue and in partnership with a specific committee. We aimed to mitigate this by building an element of capacity development into the workshop, as well as providing the practical 'How To' note, to help staff feel confident in implementing the approach in future.

Moving from a responsive to a proactive approach is a key consideration for parliamentary information support departments across the world. A variety of different factors influence the degree to which a parliamentary information support service is able to move through the scale from a 'reference' function, in which they provide facts in response to queries, to perform more in-depth synthesis and 'horizon-scanning' in which they also proactively identify evidence needs in advance and conduct in-depth research¹⁰. An unanswered question from our approach was to what degree Parliament of Ghana's information support units can be expected to make this transition in their current staff and operational configuration. While inter-departmental collaboration and dialogue is welcomed and can support this shift, one cannot ignore the fact that with just 10 research officers for 275 MPs, the Parliament of Ghana's information support system may not at present be well enough resourced to perform both the reactive and the proactive function.

Reflections on 'evidence strategies' in parliaments: The 'Guidelines and Good Practices' produced by ODI to inform strategic approaches to evidence in a government department were fundamental to our design of this approach¹¹. In exploring and testing with the Parliament of Ghana, several issues emerged which, while not at odds with the overarching principles presented by ODI, merit particular attention when working

with legislatures:

- Parliament's formal structures and procedures are highly influential in the way evidence is used, and the different channels by which an issue reaches Parliament have important implications. There is no shortage of channels and procedures for engagement as Parliament is a very outward-facing institution and is constantly in dialogue with multiple stakeholders. Rather, the challenge is in developing an agile, robust and streamlined information system that can effectively synthesize the evidence flowing from multiple channels in this sprawling institution.
- Politics is potent in Parliament as in a government department, but the sense of deliberation and scrutiny in Parliament means that Parliament's culture and philosophy of evidence is different. The fact that parliamentary information support services provide evidence to multiple different parties for the purpose of informing their debates and/or holding the government to account means that they are constantly navigating delicate political territory. This reinforces the need to develop a trusted reputation for high-quality nonpartisan evidence which is both bipartisan and nonpartisan.
- Streamlining evidence within planning procedures is as important within Parliament as within ministries. In Parliament, the Table Office is a key partner to engage to plan evidence effectively. However, Parliament is a dynamic institution that is constantly shifting. A key part of the information support departments' role remains to be responsive and flexible according to emerging needs.

- Parliament's information support units are required to provide evidence across a very wide range of sectors. This means that the importance of networks with external evidence providers in the local research community cannot be overstated when discussing gathering and synthesis of evidence, as Parliament simply does not have the capacity to meet all of its information needs internally.
- Information support staff in Parliaments need strong strategic and technical skills in communications, as they provide evidence directly to MPs, engaging with multiple different political actors from various parties on a daily basis. This means that the well-known principles and skills of strong communications such as understanding audience needs, selecting the appropriate channel and providing the information at the right format and time are particularly crucial in parliaments.

A holistic approach to programming: Our approach to capacity development emphasizes a multi-dimensional view in which individual, organizational-, network- and systemic-level capacities are all interrelated, overlapping and complementary. Most of the staff who participated in our strategic workshops had already been through an intensive VakaYiko training course in evidence-informed policy making, and some were also participating in a peer learning exchange with staff from other African parliaments¹². They were familiar both with the key concepts involved in EIPM, and with the action-oriented, participatory learning techniques employed in the programme. They also had an existing relationship of trust with some of the lead facilitators. Future strategic approaches that do not build on previous training or

⁹ We have reflected elsewhere on the challenges of working adaptively in political environments under DfID's Payment by Results model (see INASP, Approaches to Developing Capacity for the Use of Evidence in Policy Making 2016). ¹¹ Wills et al (2016) Guidelines and Good Practices for Evidence Informed Policy Making in a Government Department.



programme activities may need to plan for more or longer workshops than our two two-day sessions. Even with this background, we felt we could have benefited from more time for in-depth discussions. Also, while an integrated approach is valuable, it leads to challenges in coordination and delivery to ensure partner parliaments are not overburdened and activities are streamlined.

Reflecting from multiple perspectives: The nuanced picture of the information support system that was produced through sharing multiple perspectives, particularly through a creative process such as storytelling, captured valuable insights that could not have been achieved through working only with one or two departments. However, it became clear that the Library, Research and Committees departments are the key players in shaping evidence use in Parliament, because together they link evidence producers to users. In order to more effectively identify and plan for MPs' information needs in advance, these departments will be particularly crucial

Conclusion

By building on the trust and existing relationships established under the main VakaYiko programme, INASP and partners were able to use a brief six-month extension to explore what a more strategic, anticipatory approach to evidence might look like in the Parliament of Ghana. Our experience suggests that such an approach would need to involve inter-departmental collaboration as well as increased visibility of information support departments. A strategic approach should also build in ways to consider and navigate political considerations. This includes identifying and planning for MPs' information needs in advance. Increased staff capacity, particularly in the Research Department, as well as top level support and recognition of the role of evidence and research in Parliament, would also contribute to building a strong institutional culture of evidence. Parliament of Ghana's senior leadership, in committing to adopting and mainstreaming the approach piloted through these workshops, has taken an important step towards building strong and systematic culture of evidence use, underpinned by institutional mechanisms and policies.

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¹² Training workshops were carried out by GINKS in 2016. The peer learning scheme was led by ACEPA in 2016-2017 during the same period as the strategic workshops.

