AFRICAN PARLIAMENTS

*Evidence systems for governance
and development*

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

3D	Three-dimensional
4IR	Fourth Industrial Revolution
ACRES	Centre for Rapid Evidence Synthesis
AFIDEP	African Institute for Development Policy
AFLI	Africa Leadership Institute
AfrEA	African Evaluation Association
ALP	African Legislature Project
APNODE	African Parliamentarians' Network on Development Evaluation
BDP	Botswana Democratic Party
BEPP	Bureau of Evaluation of Public Policies
BEPPAAG	Bureau of Evaluation of Public Policies and Government Action Analysis
BVR	Biometric Voter Registration
CDFs	Constituency Development Funds
CSC	Committee Score Card
CSIR	Council for Scientific and Industrial Research
CSOs	Civil Society Organisations
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
DPME	Department of Performance (later planning) Monitoring and Evaluation
DRS	Department of Research Services (DRS)
EALA	East African Legislative Assembly
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EIDM	Evidence-Informed Decision-Making
ETWG	Evaluation Technical Working Group
EVI	Electronic Voter Identification
FES	Friedrich Ebert Foundation
FRELIMO	Frente de Libertação de Moçambique
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GEF	Government Evaluation Facility
GNPBO	Global Network of Parliament Budget Offices
GPFE	Global Parliamentarians' Forum on Evaluation
GTAC	Government Technical Assistance Centre
HEIs	Higher Education Institutions
HR	Human Resources
HSRC	Human Sciences Research Council
ICT	Information and Communication Technologies
IDS	Institute of Development Studies

IIAG	Ibrahim Index of African Governance
INASP	International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications
IoT	Internet of Things
IPAB	Benin Parliamentary Institute
IPU	Inter-Parliamentary Union
KEWOPA	Kenya Women Parliamentary Association
KEWOSA	Kenya Women Senators Association
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MDAs	Ministries, Departments and Agencies
MEJN	Malawi Economic Justice Network
MPs	Members of Parliament
MPL	Members of Provincial Legislatures
NCOP	National Council of Provinces
NEDLC	National Economic Development and Labour Council
NES	National Evaluation System
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organisations
NMETWG	National M&E Technical Working Group
NPM	New Public Management
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OPM	Office of the Prime Minister
PARMAN	Project for Support of the Strengthening and Modernization of the National Assembly
PBOs	Parliamentary Budget Offices
PC-EIDM	Parliamentary Caucus on Evidence-Informed Oversight and Decision-Making
PCOs	Parliamentary Constituency Offices
PFMA	Public Finance Management Act
POT	Parliamentary Oversight Tool
PPE	Personal Protective Equipment
PRS	Parliamentary Research Service
RSP	Revolutionary State Party
RTS	Results Transmission System
SADC-PF	Southern African Development Community Parliamentary Forum
SCOA	Standing Committee on Appropriations
SCOPA	Standing Committee on Public Accounts
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SSA	Sub-Saharan Africa
Stats SA	Statistics South Africa
SWAPO	South West Africa People's Organisation

UNACEB	State Budget Control and Assessment Analysis Unit
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UNEG	United Nations Evaluation Group
VOPES	Voluntary Organisations of Professional Evaluators
WBI	World Bank Institute
ZANU-PF	Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front
ZEPARU	Zimbabwe Economic Policy and Analysis Research Unit

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A SYSTEMS THINKING PERSPECTIVE ON EVIDENCE USE IN PARLIAMENTS

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Introduction

Parliaments are unique and complex political and bureaucratic institutions with inter-connected (and often disconnected) structures and processes, comprising actors both internal and external to parliament and who influence and affect evidence use in different ways. This chapter aims to unpack and apply a systems thinking perspective to explore and describe the system(s) of evidence use in African parliaments and the related implications at a generic level, bearing in mind that each parliament will have a unique configuration of components and factors making up its individual system of evidence use, as is discussed in subsequent chapters.

The chapter draws from literature on evidence use in African parliaments and CLEAR-AA's work on strengthening evidence use in African parliaments. The focus of this chapter is on African parliaments in general. This chapter is targeted at stakeholders who are involved in synthesising and providing evidence that is needed by parliamentarians and their committees to inform debate and discussions on policy and legislative issues; strengthening individual and institutional capacities for increased demand and use of evidence; and generating evidence that improves the understanding of the evidence system in African parliaments.

The chapter begins by defining systems thinking and moves on to place systems thinking in the context of evidence use. The later sections of the chapter provide a background to systems of evidence use in African parliaments and applies a systems thinking perspective to evidence use in African parliaments to reveal the interrelationships and interconnectedness of various elements and components of the system of evidence use.

Defining systems thinking

Systems thinking has its origins in the twentieth century in the natural sciences. Systems theory was expounded by Von Bertalanffy who wrote on general systems theory (Von Bertalanffy, 1972). Systems thinking was characterised using different terms such as general systems theory, systems dynamic, cybernetics and complexity science (Midgley, 2006). Until the late twentieth century, systems theory was criticised by scholars such as Churchman (1979) and Ackoff (1981) (as cited in Midgley, 2006) for its emphasis as a tool for portraying reality. The criticism led to the shift from viewing systems theory as a tool for representing

reality – which was problematic to conceptualising it as methods and tools available – to that of a tool for analysing complex systems. Such a shift led to the emergence of the term systems thinking. Barry Richmond coined the term ‘systems thinking’ in 1987 (Arnold & Wade, 2015) and defined it as “the art and science of making reliable inference about behaviour by developing an increasingly deep understanding of underlying structure” (Richmond, 1994, p. 6). Peter Senge (1996) later added to Richmond’s definition by defining systems thinking as “a discipline for seeing wholes and a framework for seeing interrelationships rather than things, for seeing patterns of change rather than static snapshots” (cited in Arnold & Wade, 2015, p. 4). Arnold and Wade define systems thinking as “a set of synergetic analytic skills used to improve the capability of identifying and understanding systems, predicting their behaviour and devising modifications to them to produce the desired effect” (2015, p. 7). The three definitions show that systems thinking is a skills-set which helps an individual to view, analyse and understand the various components and the interconnectedness and interrelationships of a complex system. This skills-set is regarded in this study as a systems thinking perspective. This chapter adopts Arnold and Wade’s (2015) definition of systems thinking.

A further examination of the definition shows that a systems thinking perspective focuses on examining the patterns of interconnectedness rather than memorising isolated facts. This contrasts with the traditional approach (reductionist) which examines systems by breaking them down into their separate elements (Loosemore & Cheung, 2015). Systems thinking has been used across various disciplines in the quest to understand complex or so-called ‘wicked problems’ – problems that are generally seen as complex, open-ended, and intractable and need to be approached from multiple, and sometimes competing, perspectives and which may have multiple possible solutions (Rittel & Webber, 1973). Adoption of systems thinking has been driven by the failure of the reductionist approach to solve complex or wicked problems. Reductionist approaches simplify complex systems and look at systems components as independent from the whole. By doing so, they negate the interrelationships between systems components while a systems thinking perspective is a “holistic approach, which tackles problems by examining the context of the system in which they occur and is particularly relevant to tackling ill-structured ‘messy’ problems” (White, 1995).

This objective of this chapter is to examine evidence use in parliament holistically from a systems thinking perspective, locating evidence use within the broader parliamentary system and related external influencing factors, recognising the broader parliamentary and governance system and the evidence system in parliaments as diverse, dynamic, and complex with interdependent components. The underpinning understanding in this chapter is that the system of evidence use in African parliaments is part of a larger system with various interconnected elements and components. The approach in this chapter is not to simply focus on the system of evidence use in parliament and view it as a system with members of parliament and suppliers of evidence only; cognisance is taken of the fact that there are structures (some influenced by power), relationships and other variables which affect evidence use in parliaments. Applying a systems thinking perspective enables individuals to understand the underlying mechanisms which influence evidence use in parliaments and the impact of these mechanisms on evidence use in parliaments. The desired outcome is that such an understanding will contribute to improving the system of evidence use in African parliaments and elsewhere.

Systems thinking in the context of evidence use in African parliaments

African legislatures, parliaments or assemblies are shaped by their country's colonial history and the adopted post-colonial ideology, with the British and the French systems of governance prevalent in Anglophone Africa and Francophone Africa respectively. Generally across Africa, parliaments are representative institutions established to represent citizens and mirror the range of citizens' preferences as conveyed in elections (Salih, 2005). Parliaments in Africa have a responsibility to develop and enact legislation and this process requires that evidence is used in order to influence decision-making and shape the legislation to reflect citizens' interests and development outcomes. Parliaments also fulfil the function of holding the executive arm of government to account for its decisions and actions (Crum, 2018). To perform these functions effectively, parliaments need to use evidence. The evidence required is sourced from internal parliamentary systems and various external sources including the government, the judiciary, civil society, experts, the media, higher institutions of education, international organisations, other legislative bodies, as well as from citizens. The interaction between these sources of evidence, the information provided, the users of the information and how the information is used, all form the system of evidence use in parliament.

When one applies a systems thinking perspective to the use of evidence in parliaments, there is a need to move away from the current reductionist approach which disregards interrelationships, interconnectedness and isolates components when solving problems. The reductionist approach also singles out specific components for attention and is given an explanatory weight on its own, separating it from the rest of the system (Bryant, 2002). By using the systems thinking perspective, one refrains from singling out components of evidence use in parliament such as sources of evidence, parliamentary committees, social groups, think tanks, Civil Society Organisations, members of parliament (MPs), the political as well as the socio-economic context, as all being independent of one another. Rather, these components are viewed as interconnected and components of a system which influences evidence use in parliaments. By examining the interconnectedness of these components, one moves from focusing and observing behaviour, actions, and processes happening on the surface to reveal the underlying structures and mechanisms that drive the use of evidence in parliament. Identification of these underlying mechanisms and structures allows for a clearer perspective to address the problems of poor evidence use in parliament. The table below differentiates systems thinking from reductionist approaches concerning systems of evidence use in parliaments.

Table 3.1 Systems thinking versus reductionist approaches

Systems thinking-oriented approach	The reductionist approach
Systems of evidence use in parliaments possess properties that are only possessed by the system as a whole and not by any isolated system.	Systems of evidence use in parliaments can be explained by the properties of its components.
The approach emphasises the importance of interconnectedness/interrelationships between various system components.	The approach disregards interrelationships and isolates components when solving problems.
Many factors are simultaneously evaluated to assess the dynamics of the system when solving problems.	One component is singled out for attention and is given an explanatory weight on its own.
The approach is non-linear and chaotic.	The approach uses a linear and predictable approach.

Source: Adapted from (Ahn et al., 2006)

Systems of evidence use in parliament are complex, as is the use of evidence in formulating public policies and decisions. This complexity is largely exacerbated by the wicked problems prevailing in public institutions and because the political

nature of decision-making in parliaments involves a variety of stakeholders with varying interests and different approaches to generating evidence. Such a complex system is difficult to understand if one uses the reductionist approach. This chapter introduces a systems thinking perspective to evidence use in parliaments. The approach in this chapter is to view the components of the system of evidence use in parliaments from a systems thinking perspective with the belief that these components are intimately interconnected and explicable only by reference to the whole. A systems thinking perspective also allows for the identification of the contributions of both internal and external stakeholders (non-deliberative practices) to parliament (the deliberative body) (De Mesquita, Smith, Siverson & Morrow, 2005).

Background to the system of evidence use in parliaments in Africa

At the heart of governance lies the relationship between citizens, institutions, politics and leaders (Helboe, Pedersen, Halpin & Rasmussen, 2015). These relationships are crucial to understanding how the system of evidence use in parliament (should ideally) operate. When parliament works as a strong effective institution, it assists other arms of government (the executive and the judiciary) to work accountably, capably and responsibly (Strøm, 2000). Across Africa, parliaments are reclaiming power from years of one-party states and dictatorships which left them weak and incapable of holding the executive arm of government to scrutiny and account (Cohen, 2019). Various studies have shown that because of local and international pressure to democratise, parliaments on the African continent are becoming more assertive and more involved in scrutinising government policies and expenditure (Azevedo-Harman, 2011; Draman, Titriku, Lampo, Hayter & Holden, 2017; Adar, 2018; Notshulwana & Lebakeng, 2019).

Previously, without proper separation of powers between the executive, judiciary and legislative arms of the state, parliaments were largely symbolic and parliamentary seats assigned were part of the reward system of a broad authoritarian system based on loyalty and conformity to groupthink (aligning with party political positions) which served to maintain the power base of the political party or leader. The dominance of the authoritarian system across Africa (the 'big man rule', dictatorships, and dalliance with the one-party state system) curtailed parliaments' capacity to perform their duties. Instead,

parliaments' subservience to the executive arm of government (Azevedo-Harman, 2011) drove the parliamentary agenda whilst parliaments acted as rubber-stampers of executive decisions (Barkan, 2009). It is argued that the colonial legacy of African countries and the decolonisation process weakened the design of the parliamentary system and failed to allow the parliaments in Africa to play the same role as those in established western democracies and, furthermore, hindered the strengthening of parliaments' independence. The implication was that the parliamentary function of oversight with regard to holding the executive accountable and scrutinising executive policy decisions was curtailed. Historically, parliaments were poorly funded and this situation still prevails with consequent crippling of holding the executive to account, since the ability to generate and synthesise evidence is limited because of lack of human capacity. Overall, these challenges subsequently lead to limited use of evidence by parliaments (Pelizzo & Stapenhurst, 2007).

As indicated earlier, African parliaments in the last few decades have been steadily reclaiming power from years of one-party states and dictatorships and are becoming more assertive in claiming and fulfilling their roles of holding the executive accountable. As described by Draman et al. (2017, p. 1), African parliaments are "evolving rapidly as part of dynamic social, political and technological development". However, the effects of authoritarian, non-democratic and patriarchal states and the impact of their respective journeys to democracy, have left African states and, by implication, parliaments with a wide range of internal, institutional and broader socio-economic and political challenges to address in addition to new challenges at national, regional and global levels. These challenges are exacerbated by the current global Covid-19 pandemic and its disastrous socio-economic effects. Parliaments, as 'guardians of the state' (the citizen representative in governance matters), need to have the necessary powers, capacity, resources, support and evidence to effectively fulfil their mandates. Evidence is a crucial element for the successful delivery and implementation of a parliament's core functions, such as formulation of legislation, holding the executive accountable and citizen representation.

Applying a systems thinking perspective to evidence use in parliaments allows for a deeper understanding of the ingrained complex behaviours related to legislative/policy decision-making and evidence use. This, in turn, can allow for better responses to improve the evidence cycle for informed policy decision-making and for holding the executive accountable. A systems

thinking perspective incorporates the macro and micro factors and systematic approaches to strengthening evidence use as outlined in the frameworks in Chapter 2. Evidence use moves beyond a limited focus on sources and access to evidence and emphasises the importance of focusing on both the internal parliamentary processes, systems, and structures as well as the external systems and structures which shape the demand, supply, and use of evidence, in contributing to policy decision-making and improved implementation practice.

The authors of this section state at the outset that the application of a systems thinking perspective alone is not a panacea for challenges associated with evidence use in parliaments. A systems thinking perspective, however, allows for a close examination of the interconnectedness of various elements and components which influence evidence use in African parliaments. By applying a systems thinking perspective, the following key points on evidence use in parliament are revealed:

- ▶ Evidence use is not influenced only by internal parliamentary structures and processes and other external factors play a significant role in influencing evidence use in parliament.
- ▶ An understanding of the country's socio-economic context, history, the nature of political leadership, decision-making processes and 'rules of the political game' is crucial to analysis and improvement of evidence use in parliaments.
- ▶ Availability of better knowledge and evidence will not necessarily transform into better use of evidence for decision-making (Király, Köves & Balázs, 2017).

In keeping with a systems thinking perspective, the authors contend that there are a range of institutional and political factors which influence decision-making processes including the use (or non-use or selective use) of evidence. The authors draw on the following theoretical assumptions to understand the factors influencing decision-making (including the extent to which evidence use plays a role). The first assumption emanates from De Mesquita's selectorate theory (2005) that assumes that a central goal of political leaders (including MPs) is to remain in power and to do so, they need to maintain the support of the selectorate (either a small or large group who support the leader, which in the case of parliamentarians include their main constituents). The theory further notes that this support is maintained and secured by the allocation of private and public goods. Private goods include specific benefits for a smaller support group (i.e. the selectorate) while public goods include broader benefits for the public at large (Arena & Nicoletti, 2014). Using the selectorate theory,

it is argued that the extent to which evidence is used and how evidence is 'selectively' used is often dependent upon whether MPs' political chances are affected by the issues being deliberated and the factors (including evidence) influencing such deliberations.

The second assumption is that MPs are often the echo chambers/mirrors of political institutions and political groups to which they belong and who have supported their election/appointment as political leaders (Rotberg & Salahub, 2013). Where political party loyalty takes priority in the decisions and actions of political leaders (as in many cases around the world and the African continent, whether in government or parliament), the political party's interests (in terms of ideology or stance on a particular issue) dictate the extent and ways in which evidence is selected, presented and used in parliaments (Parkhurst, 2017).

The third assumption is that before evidence reaches MPs or before MPs consider evidence, it goes through three major filters, cognitive, institutional and political, which shape how the MPs use evidence (De Mesquita et al., 2005). The cognitive filter is an MP's biases, values or interests that influence the choice to selectively accept or reject the evidence available. Institutions act as filters of evidence which is produced and presented to members of parliament. The institutional filters act in two ways: they can encourage evidence that supports existing institutionalised political ideas (or 'policy paradigms') or they can block evidence that could transform institutional political ideas that may present new challenges (Azevedo-Harman, 2011; Parkhurst, 2017). The authors argue that in some cases, institutional filters influence role players such as evidence producers (including internal parliamentary staff and external producers) to filter evidence so that whatever evidence is presented to MPs speaks to existing institutionalised political ideas. For example, in authoritarian regimes or where the corporate private sector has significant influence, the elites wield enough power to influence which evidence gets through to MPs and how MPs use evidence. They will also wield the power (through groupthink) to decide whether an MP has a future in parliament or not (an example is the recent situation of state capture in South Africa where MPs of the ruling party's position shifted with the leadership changes at the national level despite the evidence of state capture staying the same). The argument here is that if MPs strictly adhere to a specific groupthink (political party or interest group position) which determines the rules and the incentives for conforming to specific political

positions, then these elements will play a more dominant role in policy decision-making, including affecting the extent and ways in which evidence is used to ensure that the political party interests are supported.

Given these assumptions and including the filters noted above, it is clear that a wide range and complex set of factors and actors are at play in the use of evidence for decision-making in the parliamentary space. Hence the importance and potential value of applying a systems thinking perspective to ensure that the complex spectrum of factors and actors are carefully considered within the broad scope of a system of evidence use in parliaments in order to avoid a narrow focus on evidence alone.

A systems thinking perspective, therefore, reinforces the important conceptual shift from calls for ‘evidence-*based* policymaking’ to ‘evidence-*informed* policymaking’, acknowledging that there is a range of other factors interconnecting and influencing policy decision-making including political realities, budget constraints, societal and cultural issues, as well as personal values and beliefs (Draman et al., 2017; Cairney, 2016; Parkhurst, 2017). Important in this shift to ‘evidence-*informed* policymaking’ and, as Parkhurst (2017) suggests, the need for a shift to the *good governance of evidence*, is the acknowledgement and reminder that politics plays a central role in policy decision-making including how evidence is used (or not used) in political institutions such as parliaments. Parkhurst (2017, pp. 9-10) emphasises the need for a political approach to evidence use in policy decision-making that “considers multiple competing values, as well as the political-institutional context in which decision-making takes place ...”. The author goes on to point out that, in the same way, *improving* evidence use in policy “requires a decidedly political approach – one that recognises the realities of decision-making in contested policy arenas” (Parkhurst, 2017, p. 167). Rather than attempting a depoliticised approach to evidence use critiqued by various scholars (Cairney, 2016; Parkhurst, 2017), it is important to acknowledge and effectively navigate the politics of evidence use.

A systems thinking perspective on systems of evidence in African parliaments

Figure 3.1 illustrates the shared components of systems of evidence use in African parliaments according to the three categorisations illustrated as concentric circles including the outer sphere (the broader macro-context), the

middle sphere (external structures supporting evidence use in parliaments) and the inner sphere (internal parliamentary structures supporting evidence use) surrounding the core sphere – the central issue of evidence use and ultimately policy decision-making and oversight by parliaments – illustrating evidence as one factor, among others, including values, interests, ideology, etc. influencing policy decision-making. It is important to bear in mind that the interaction between the various components takes place between several different components and across the different spheres – all impacting on the core spheres of the factors including evidence use – influencing policy decision-making and oversight. The complex inter-relationships and interconnectedness between the different components and across different spheres (illustrated by the cross-cutting arrows) give effect to the operations of the evidence ecosystem in parliaments. The aim here is simply to capture some of the different components within the different spheres.

Figure 3.1 Components of the system(s) of evidence use in parliaments (Authors' illustration)

The broader macro-political context of African parliaments – as structural foundations

As discussed earlier, the broader political and historical context has a profound effect on African parliaments including how evidence is used in parliaments in relation to other factors informing policy decision-making. How African parliaments are constituted is influenced by three main factors: colonial and historical heritage influencing the powers and forms of parliament; each country's journey to independence and democracy; the political ideologies shaping those journeys steered by political party formations competing for power and influence. These aspects can be described as the structural foundations that define and shape the powers a parliament has in terms of its mandates and how it can effectively fulfil its mandates (including its use of evidence).

In the first instance, the colonial legacy has had a strong influence on the parliamentary powers and related practices. Countries with a Francophone colonial legacy (including the former Belgian colonies) tend to mirror the French parliamentary system as in Niger, Senegal, Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Burundi and Gabonese parliaments. Whereas the Anglophone heritage in countries such as Zimbabwe, Uganda, Malawi, Ghana and Kenya tend to lean towards the British Westminster system. The same applies to Lusophone countries with a Portuguese colonial history: Mozambique, Angola, Cape Verde and Guinea Bissau (GIZ, 2016, pp. 2-3; Draman, Titriku, Lampo, Hayter & Holden, 2017, p. 22). The implication of these different colonial legacies points to a more executive subservient parliamentary system. British colonies had relatively more exposure to legislative powers than their French and Portuguese counterparts: "... in contrast to the British colonial politics, which established quasi-legislative institutions, during French colonialism all political decision-making was exclusively concentrated in Paris... In Lusophone countries, the legislative practice was non-existent during colonialism" (Jolobe, 2012, p. 9). However, the legacy of the British colonial system has also been critiqued for reinforcing executive dominance and limiting the powers of the legislature; "Anglophone African countries show least separation [of powers] and most concentration of power; and Francophone countries have a higher degree of separation but also high levels of presidential power" (Van Cranenburgh, 2009, p. 54).

As in other parts of the world, African countries have opted for either unicameral or bicameral legislatures. Whichever option a country has opted for has implications on the rate, process and resources available for evidence use in parliament to perform its mandate. While it is difficult to generalise about which option has more advantages, bicameralism can serve to limit executive dominance: "...constitutional structures that protect legislatures from the executive dominance are generally better served by bi-cameralism than unicameralism" (Salih, 2005, p. 19). Again, the broader context is important, with Salih pointing out that "bi-cameralism is also better suited for severely divided societies by checking more effectively the power of the executive and exposing the failings of government. It allows more thorough scrutiny of legislation by double-checking with a broader spectrum of citizens' representatives" (Salih, 2005, p. 19).

The other point which must be noted is that the powers of many African parliaments have been severely restricted under single-party dominance. The resurgence of multiparty politics has been widely regarded as a positive development to enhance the powers of African parliaments. For example, Bowman (2010) and Salih (2005) note that pluralistic politics, especially the prevalence of competing political parties, means that parliaments have become representative of a wide range of opinions, 'ideological' trends and interest groups and, as such, are symbols of the citizen's sovereignty and, by extension, an exercise of overseeing on their behalf (Salih, 2005:21; Bowman, 2010). The majority of African countries have progressed from having one party controlling the executive and the legislative arm of government to allowing opposition parties and independent members to participate in legislative elections. However, countries such as South Africa, Tanzania, Zimbabwe and Mozambique are examples that have had the same ruling party since independence (Draman et al., 2017, p. 22). Furthermore, constitutions adopted by some African states have also enhanced the journey to democracy and the role of parliaments, for example, Kenya's 2010 Constitution cemented the role and position of opposition politics in parliament. These broader political and historical contextual factors have played, and in many cases, continue to play, important roles in (re)shaping African parliaments and influencing how they fulfil their mandates. The inclusion of opposition politics also had a positive effect on holding the executive accountable and on the use of evidence in scrutinising policy decisions both by parliament and the executive arm of government.

Applying a systems thinking perspective to internal structures supporting evidence use in African parliaments

The 'institutional architecture' of parliaments includes the political and administrative leadership that supports a culture of evidence use and invests in structures within parliaments that provide institutional support for evidence use such as research and M&E units and related infrastructures such as libraries and ICT. The interrelationships between the different components of the institutional architecture (and especially between the 'producers' and 'users' of evidence) are important in supporting evidence generation and use. While the various components will need to be effectively resourced to fulfil their specific mandates, their interactions and how they interact with their relevant counterparts play an important role in contributing to more effective evidence use. We argue that internal structures and mechanisms for generating and supplying evidence is influenced by a number of factors, such as the value given to evidence in decision-making by both the executive and the MPs, the resources allocated to generating knowledge and the general evidence use culture in the parliament. In a number of parliaments across Africa, researchers also indicated that despite making evidence available, MPs may not necessarily use the evidence for a range of reasons such as non-alignment with their values and interests, constituency needs, political party loyalty, and more practical elements such as time constraints, and accessibility of the evidence in terms of how it is presented (CLEAR-AA, 2018).

Experience shows that internal parliamentary structures do not always cater sufficiently for the demand for evidence from MPs because of inadequate resourcing, including human resources resulting in the limited number of staff members being unable to respond timeously to a large number of requests. The number of researchers in parliaments varies widely, for example, Malawi reportedly has 8 researchers and Kenya, 24 (AFIDEP, 2016, p. 5) which affects the ability of research departments to effectively support evidence use in parliaments. In response to this challenge, some African parliaments are reported to have formed units that offer specialised information and analysis to MPs by establishing Parliamentary Budget Offices (PBOs) to provide support on issues involving budgets (Draman et al., 2017: 27). The authors argue that if a systems thinking perspective is applied to these internal evidence generation and synthesis capacity challenges, it becomes evident that challenges are not only localised but are interconnected and interrelated to the independence

of the parliament from the executive and the perceived role of parliament. The authors argue that where parliaments claim their independence from the executive they will see the need to further develop their capacities to execute their duties.

Applying a systems thinking perspective to external evidence generators and suppliers

The traditional approach to investigating and analysing evidence use in parliaments has been to single out specific components and give each an explanatory weight on its own. In this section, the authors apply a simultaneous evaluation approach to assess the dynamics of the system of evidence use. As stated earlier, various organisations are involved in generating and supporting evidence use in parliaments. These organisations fall outside the internal parliamentary institutional architecture, but despite being external to the parliamentary institutional architecture they are interconnected and interrelated in several ways. These organisations play several key roles which can be broadly categorised into the following five areas: sources (producers) of evidence; advocates for evidence use; as 'monitors' to hold parliaments accountable to fulfil their mandates effectively; as capacity developers; and as donors – financially supporting initiatives internal and external to parliament that support evidence use. The external organisations include government entities, research organisations/think-tanks, parliamentary networks, advocacy organisations, the media, citizens, multilateral funders and capacity-strengthening organisations (CLEAR-AA, 2020; Draman et al., 2017; Hudson & Wren, 2007).

The authors argue that when evidence is generated, requested or delivered to parliament, the interrelationships and interconnectedness of parliament and these organisations play a key role in terms of the content and the availability of the evidence. As highlighted earlier, parliaments in the African context are not truly independent of the executive and, politically, in most cases, the ruling party which constitutes the executive also dominates the parliamentary committees' leadership role, which is key when deciding what type of information is requested and delivered to parliament. The authors add that there are no linear relationships which result in information being requested and delivered without the influence of a 'filter' – cognitive, institutional and political. These filters, when combined with the political objective of retaining power, limit the content and type of information delivered to parliament. These filters also

influence the effectiveness of parliament in holding the executive to account. The political factors that shape evidence in parliaments are expounded on in Chapter 5 of this volume. The example below demonstrates how the filters shape the parliamentary debates and information available to MPs.

In 2007-2008 the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe was involved in quasi-fiscal activities which involved buying farm implements and machinery and loaning the machinery to a narrow group of politically connected recipients through a programme called Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe Farm Mechanisation programme. The total value of the loans was in excess of USD 200 million. The recipients defaulted on the loans and in 2015 the Zimbabwean Minister of Finance tabled a debt assumption Bill of the loans in parliament. During the committee reading stage and parliamentary debate, opposition MPs demanded the list of the beneficiaries so that they could make an informed decision prior to voting on the Bill. However, the committee chairpersons and the speaker of parliament from the ruling party denied the motion. The minister implored the opposition members of parliament to let 'bygones be bygones' (Dailynews, 2015). Therefore, despite the list of the beneficiaries being available, the MPs voted without knowing who the beneficiaries were. Five years later, in 2020, the list was revealed and it was discovered that a large majority of the beneficiaries were executives and MPs from the ruling party. This case shows how different filters – political interests, interrelationships and interconnectedness – influence evidence use when parliament executes its functions. In this instance, the following issues become observable when one applies systems thinking:

- ▶ Despite the information being available, the committee chairperson and parliamentary leaders who were from the same party as the ruling party used their political and cognitive filters to prevent the list of beneficiaries from being presented in parliament.
- ▶ The implication was that the parliamentary role of holding the Reserve Bank to account and playing an oversight role on the Zimbabwean Consolidated Revenue Fund was curtailed because the political fortunes of the ruling party would be negatively affected.
- ▶ Personal political interests also superseded the constitutional role of parliament of holding the executive to account.

Using this case as an example, one can argue that political survival and adhering to groupthink is key in deciding on the type of evidence demanded or presented to parliament by various groups. One can also argue that if evidence has little political impact on the executive and MPs, its chances of being accepted are

high. Such events shape how external sources of evidence view parliament and also shape how they relate to parliament when it comes to evidence use and generation. In some cases, the parliamentary oversight role is curtailed in situations where the executive is too powerful or in cases where the executive and the parliament are controlled by the same political party (Masvaure, 2018). In such situations, the parliament and its committees act as institutional filters and decide what evidence is requested from the executive arm of government. This impairs the effectiveness of parliament. The IPU (2008) noted the following: "When the government (the executive arm) is the only source of information, or when available information is not transparent, parliamentarians are limited in their ability to hold governments to account, and an imbalance of power between the legislature and the executive may result" (IPU, 2008, p. 7).

For external organisations, such as think tanks where funding is mostly dependent on government, this may influence the processes and procedures of the think tanks and, in turn, how the evidence is collected and presented. Further to this, it may result in a biased approach in the selection of the evidence provided by certain research organisations when compared to their non-government-funded counterparts. While this is not always the case, the probability exists.

Considerations to strengthen the evidence system in African parliaments

In keeping with the principles of a systems thinking perspective to strengthen evidence use in parliaments, it is important to focus on the interrelationships and interconnectedness of the various components and stakeholders rather than focusing on performance of individual elements. Such a focus requires investing time and energy in understanding and building strong relationships between the different elements and components of the evidence system in parliaments. This can be more effectively achieved by:

- ▶ Understanding and appreciating the unique and integrated contribution of the different components of the system of evidence in parliament.
- ▶ Building strong relationships between the *people* involved in the various components involved in the evidence system in parliament.
- ▶ Being intentional about creating and effectively using opportunities for interaction to strengthen linkages which can include strengthening communication channels,

cross-component goal setting, and shared reflection on what works well and ways in which to address challenges.

- Appreciating the importance of the interconnectedness and interrelationships between internal and external parliamentary stakeholders.

The importance of adequately investing in understanding internal and external structures, entities and processes that work to strengthen evidence use in parliaments cannot be underestimated. Many parliaments are under-resourced and under-capacitated in terms of structures which generate and synthesise evidence such as parliamentary research and M&E units. In a recent tracer study conducted by CLEAR-AA (2020), parliamentary representatives participating in capacity-strengthening opportunities reported that institutional support (related to political will that values the importance of evidence use) was the main factor determining whether it was easier or more difficult to apply and transfer the learning and skills gained in their respective institutions. Limited financial resources were often cited as the reason for the symptomatic lack of political will and the absence of an institutional buy-in culture. Investment in evidence generation and use is therefore closely tied to political will and, by implication, indicative of an institutional culture that values effective evidence use.

Parliamentary networks such as APNODE and parliamentary caucuses often struggle to function optimally due to limited funds as, in many cases, they are not part of the formal parliamentary structure of specific parliaments and tend to rely on external development partners for support, which focuses largely on secretariat functions and capacity building support but is more limited in terms of supporting participation in networking activities. Similarly, parliamentary monitoring organisations rely on donor organisations/independent foundations to ensure that they are able to play their roles effectively and have the necessary autonomy to hold parliaments and government sectors accountable. These intertwined engagements between donors, development partners, capacity building entities, and 'evidence structures' again emphasise the interdependent and interconnected system of evidence use.

Expanding on the analogy that "ecosystems have to be adaptive to respond to change", Stewart et al. (2019, p. 7) introduce innovation as an important element of the evidence ecosystem, highlighting the importance of exploring and experimenting with new approaches, methods and tools and by being adaptive to constantly, rapidly changing (socio-economic and political) environments. This is particularly important in view of the Covid-19 pandemic

with its consequent cross-cutting global impacts. With the availability of many advances in technology, new possibilities to improve approaches for greater efficiency and effectiveness should be explored. To ensure that innovative approaches are indeed useful in improving evidence use, it is important to ensure buy-in and ownership of the innovation from institutional leadership and the innovation's main users. It is also important to explore and develop innovative solutions by means of meaningful participatory approaches involving the direct users of the innovation during the development process to ensure relevance, suitability, applicability, and usability.

The structures within and external to parliament engage with the evidence system in different ways and should strive to work together effectively by building strong relationships and by exploring synergies to complement each other's work rather than working in silos at each step from evidence production to its use. "Institutions and roles which provide more than one ecosystem function help connect the entire system; opportunities to develop these should be explored... These institutions and people also act as pipelines in evidence ecosystems, the absence of which impedes the flow of evidence." (Shepherd, 2014, pp. 5-6).

To strengthen the capacity of support organisations, the systems thinking perspective is useful to enable moving beyond technical aspects to consider and integrate the wide range of factors influencing evidence use in the parliamentary context. The systems thinking perspective is key in exploring the use of evidence in terms of the whole, rather than just parts. Furthermore, a systems perspective can make capacity-strengthening organisations more aware of and sensitive to how their intervention approaches affect other elements in the system and, by implication, the broader system.

Conclusion

Systems of evidence use in African parliaments are not homogenous. Hence, the application of a systems thinking perspective enables one to cut through the different layers and aspects of evidence use in order to understand how the various elements and components are interconnected in order to influence the behaviour of a system of evidence use in parliament. It is important for the various entities and actors in the evidence system to identify and be aware of the factors within the system that either support or impede and then to build

on those that support evidence use to contribute to better policy decision-making. On the other hand, there is also a need to explore and advocate for solutions to mitigate the constraining factors. Adoption of an evidence-informed policymaking position from a systems thinking perspective allows for an awareness of other factors contributing to policy decision-making and oversight. Such insight is essential when deciding whether these factors should play a leading role and for evidence to play a supporting role or vice versa.

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