

The Role of Parliamentary Library and Research Resources in Supporting Parliamentarians to be Well-informed: The Case of Uganda

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Abstract:

In many a developing world context like Uganda's, evidence - literacy among legislators had been poor for many years. This had left both legislative debates and decision-making processes in Parliament to be driven more by personal opinion and political sentiments, rather than objective facts and empirical evidence. The introduction, however, of a pioneering and innovative Legislative Research and Library Services, one of the very first of such services on the African continent, has revolutionized legislative debates and decision-making.

This paper, taking the case of Uganda, underscores the role of Parliamentary library and research resources in building well-informed legislatures. The evolution of library and research resources in Uganda's Parliament as well as the innovations and outputs are discussed. Through innovative library and research resources, well informed Parliaments can be created.

Keywords: Parliamentary Library, Legislative Research, Evidence-based

1.0 Uganda: An Overview

Uganda is located in East Africa bordering Kenya in the east; Tanzania and Rwanda in the south; Sudan in the north; and the Democratic Republic of Congo in the west. Uganda has a population growth rate of 3.2 percent with its population growing from 24.2 million persons during the national population census of 2002 to 34.1 million persons by mid 2012. It is predominately an agricultural country and 65.6 percent of the working population is engaged in agriculture, forestry and fisheries (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2012).

Uganda obtained independence from British colonial rule in 1962. This was a landmark in the history of Uganda characterized by promulgation of a constitution and formation of the first Parliament of Uganda, among other things. The Uganda Parliament is unicameral and is currently composed of 385 members. The country has undergone various political systems, which include mainly the multiparty systems, military rule and movement system. The current political dispensation is a hybrid multi-party system with republican and presidential attributes (Parliament of Uganda, 2011).

Research Resources generated by the Library and research services are today right at the heart of our democracy, supporting Parliamentarians to be well-informed. They play a key role in generating and disseminating information services and products to strengthen Parliamentary democracy. The availability of both library and research resources are very crucial for legislators to effectively perform their representative, oversight and legislative functions. At any level of the legislators work; whether committee, plenary or constituency, good information allows them to understand problems, consider solutions, influence policies or strategies, and identify areas of weaknesses (Dietrich-Schulz, 2008)

While Parliaments have existed in Africa for more than three decades, library and research services in many parliaments are in infancy (as reported at the recent Heads of Parliamentary Libraries Workshop held in Rome, Italy, in December 2009). Yet Parliamentarians' need for independent information is perhaps greater in developing democracies and economies where, as the case is in Uganda, the government is the gatekeeper of most of the information relevant to policy making and where few nongovernmental alternatives exist (*Informing Democracy*, 2008).

2.0 Evolution of Library and Research Services in Uganda Parliament

While the 1st Parliament of Uganda was formed at independence in 1962, research services were not introduced until 1999. With support from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Uganda Parliamentary Technical Assistance Project (UPTAP) was launched and implemented by the State University of New York (SUNY). The project was significant in re-establishing Library services and introducing Research services into legislative business in the Parliament of Uganda. This project fast tracked the establishment of research services to provide nonpartisan, objective analysis and well-researched information to

committees, members, and senior staff on issues related to Parliament business.

Library and Research Services were created as sections under the Department of Library, Research and Information Services. To that effect, ten Research Officers (in different disciplines) and 5 Librarians were recruited. Because staff did not have experience in legislative work, interfacing with politicians was an uphill task. Since inception, Library and Research Services have been committed towards providing Committees and MPs with comprehensive, reliable, relevant and authentic information to enable them to make informed legislative decisions.

During the restructuring of the Parliamentary Service in 2004, the Library and Research Sections were elevated to Divisions under the Department of Library and Research. In 2012, the Library and Research divisions were upgraded into two fully-fledged Departments, namely the Department of Library Services with a staffing capacity of 16 staff; and the Department of Research Services with a staffing capacity of 39 officers with qualifications and skills that mirror the critical sectors of the Government of the Republic of Uganda. In 2013, the Library and Research divisions were upgraded into two fully-fledged Departments, with Directors at the helm. The evolution of both departments is a sign that library and research resources are being recognized in the Parliament of Uganda as key contributor to performance and improved democracy.

Because staff did not have experience in legislative work, interfacing with politicians was an uphill task. This has been addressed gradually through attachment of staff to developed legislatures in the different parts of the world with a view to benchmarking best practices; and training in relevant fields. Nevertheless, since inception, the Library and Research Services have been committed to providing committees and MPs with comprehensive, reliable, relevant and authentic information to enable them to make informed legislative decisions.

The two departments are instrumental in the provision of objective, factual, non-partisan and timely information. This facilitates Committees and Members of Parliament to debate and make decisions in an informed manner. The research service has grown albeit with many challenges such as limited resources, need for better systems, policies, gaps in knowledge, limited skills and networking opportunities. However, it should be noted that the provision of legislative research and analysis in the Parliament of Uganda, is also a function of the Parliamentary Budget Office; the Departments of Legal & Legislative Services; and Development Partners, except that the scope for each department tends to vary.

3.0 Contribution of Library Services to building a well-informed Parliament

Innovative and dynamic library and research resources have had enormous contribution to the effectiveness and efficiency of any Legislature. The steady growth of both library and research services since their inception in 1999, is a watermark in the political history of Uganda. In an information age, where legislation and decision-making processes in parliaments must be driven more by objective and scientific evidence, rather than by abstract political opinion and

sentiments, the role of library and research resources cannot be overemphasized. This is where the importance of library and research resources has become paramount. Library and research resources in Uganda have been vital in contributing to a well-informed Parliament by providing:

Since 1999 the Library has registered numerous milestones just to mention a few:

3.1 Reading Space for at least 30 library clients. More so, Architectural Plans have been completed in a bid to construct a functionally-designed Parliamentary Library to meet the changing information needs of Parliament. The new library will occupy a floor of the proposed new parliament chamber to be constructed next year.

3.2 **Full-time access to Internet:** 12 working stations are located in the library while another 10 are in rented premises enabling clients to access internet, etc. Wireless internet points are available in the Library. All MPs and staff have desktop computers and full internet connectivity in their offices. In addition, procurement of ipads for MPs is in progress.

3.3 **Digitization Project:** Heavy Duty Scanner has been installed to facilitate digitization of parliamentary proceedings, Committee Reports, Government publications, and other documents of historical value. Numerous reports have been digitized with a view to enhancing on-line access and ease dissemination.

3.4 **Networking with other parliaments and institutions** with a view to sharing information resources. Such networks include: Association of Parliamentary Libraries for Eastern and Southern Africa (APLESA); African Parliamentary Knowledge Network (APKN); Uganda Library and Information Association (ULIA); Consortium of University Libraries of Uganda (CUUL); World Library Congress (IFLA); Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), etc. With such networks it has become easy to outsource information beyond our boundaries.

3.7 **Electronic Document Delivery Services (EDDS).**

This service enables clients to access copies of documents. Electronic copies can be sent to a number of users without risk of losing the original copies of documents e.g. Acts, Bills, Statutory Instruments and Regulations, Decrees, Statutes, etc. Every MP and Staff of parliament have been assigned e-mail addresses and all the computers are networked through the local area network (LAN). Also groups of people with similar information needs have been assigned group e-mail addresses. Such groups include staff under particular departments; MPs assigned to particular Committees or people of the same interest group. These collective email addresses assist us in the dissemination of information to the said groups through the Selective Dissemination of Information (SDI) service.

3.8 The application of **e-mail messaging system** enables the library to deliver notices to users for overdue books, notices for meetings and marketing information products and services.

3.9 **Online Information Services:** Users can search our online repository, catalogue, Internet and CD-ROMs and a variety of other subscribed on-line together with other external sources which enrich the information services provided. The online catalogue is running on an integrated library system called Koha which was initially installed with the assistance from

UNDESA¹ earlier in 2007. Recently, the koha system was upgraded to a newer version. The online public access catalogue (OPAC) can be accessed with the help of the library staff or through the intranet address <http://koha.parliament.go.ug>.

The library has also initiated a **digital repository project** in which a parliamentary e-library is being developed. The intranet address is <http://elibrary.parliament.go.ug>. The Library has joined the Consortium of University Libraries (CUUL), thereby subscribing to on-line resources at discounted rates. This has widened the information resource base for Members and staff of parliament.

The support to committees therefore is made easy. A request can be sent to the library's shared collective e-mail address library@parliament.go.ug with a follow-up phone call; and a copy of the information needed is then sent to the requesting committee or member. The materials sent can be searched automatically with the computer (ipads) that the members are increasingly using in committees.

3.10 The Dspace Digital Repository System now developed for the storage of the full text versions of the Hansards, Committee reports, Acts of Parliament, Bills and other parliamentary papers. These are very strategic areas for support to Members and committees of parliament. Our index is increasingly getting popular for members and staff of parliament.

3.11 Since 2012 the Library has taken over the management of the **Parliamentary Records Management System** with a view to streamlining the creation, processing, routing, storage and retrieval of records.

3.12 Staffing: Staffing has increased from one Library assistant to a new structure that provides for 16 Library Staff. Staff have been trained to keep abreast of new developments in information management e.g. Integrated Library Management Software Applications; Open Source Software Applications; Application of Social Media in Information Management and Dissemination; Knowledge Management, etc.

4.0 Contribution of Research Services

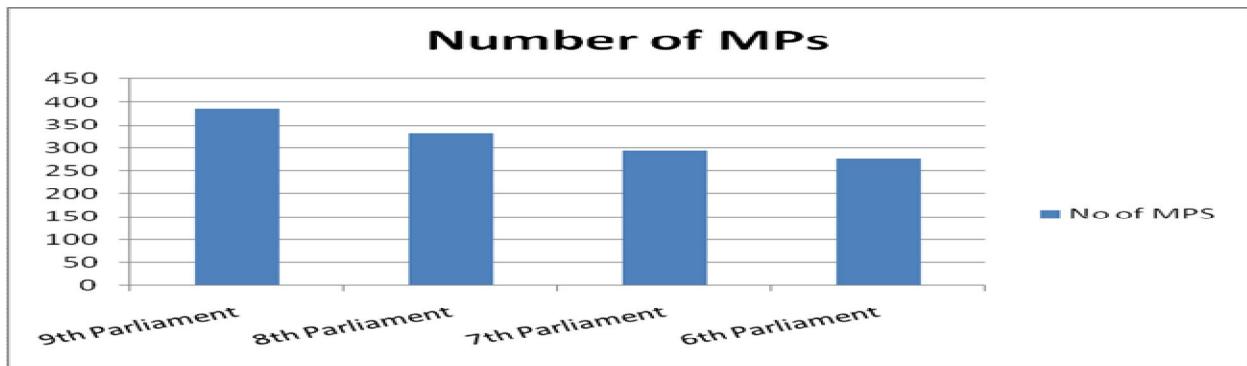
The contribution of Parliamentary Research Services in Parliamentary Business has been significant in enhancing the role of the legislature towards democratic growth in Uganda. Such services have enabled members in committees and plenary to generate consensus during deliberations and debates due to available information on alternatives and options on contentious issues. Indeed, Parliamentary Research has been instrumental in Parliamentary Business of the Parliament of Uganda in the last 13 years, through:

¹ UNDESA is the United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs

4.1 Generating consensus in an ever increasing size of Parliament:

The Uganda Parliament has increased overtime from 276 MPs in the 6th Parliament to 332 Members of Parliament in the 8th Parliament, and to 385 members in the 9th Parliament as seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Size of Parliament of Uganda over Time



Source: Parliament of Uganda, 2011.

Despite the increase, there has been an average turnover (MPs) of over 60 percent in the last three Parliaments. With the increase in population, changes in constituencies, creation of new municipalities and districts, the size and structure of the Parliament of Uganda is anticipated to continue subsequently. Parliamentary Research has been instrumental and shall continue to play a pivotal role as the institutional memory to enhance parliamentary business at individual MP, Committee and Plenary levels.

4.2 Enhancing Effectiveness and efficiency of the Committee System

In any democratic parliamentary system, the Committee system has been instrumental for effective processing of the work of Parliament. Such business is increasingly being executed through standing, sectoral, adhoc and select committees, which require research services in order to be evidence-based. The number of committees increased from 22 in the 7th Parliament to 25 in the 8th Parliament, and to 28 in the 9th Parliament. The current capacity of 39 staff for the Department of Research Services will ensure that each of the 28 committees are well serviced.

4.3 Support to Multiparty Dispensation

With the introduction of multiparty politics by the 8th Parliament the number of research requests increased by over 100%. The nature of research requests and the technical analysis has also changed under the multiparty dispensation; there is greater diversity of views than it was with a single party system. Thus research has become more technical and more relevant facet in Parliamentary business than ever.

4.4 Addressing emerging Research Areas on the development agenda

In addition to the technical support, research and analysis offered to accountability and other committees, new research areas have emerged requiring more Researchers and new skills over the last three Parliaments. The new research areas include climatic change, energy, oil and gas, financial crisis, ICT, energy, and globalization among others. These new contemporary issues were considered the Parliament when expanding structures for legislative research. With research specialist in these areas, it would have been a toll order for the Parliament to execute her business. In the new structure, the Parliamentary Commission intends to recruit new specialist and skills to address such emerging areas.

4.5 Ever increasing form and structure of Government

Over the years, the Executive Arm of the Government of Uganda has witness enormous growth in the number of Ministries, Departments and Agencies used to deliver services to the increasing population. This kind of growth and expansion of the Government, which the Parliament is to hold accountable for their actions and inactions, requires efficient and effective research and analysis services to generate critical information for decision making. The Parliamentary Research Service together with the analysis conducted by the Parliamentary Budget Office and the Legal & Legislative Departments have been crucial in supporting the Parliament of Uganda to overcome this challenge.

4.6 Regional integration and international affairs

World over there has been initiation and growth in regional blocks and international institutions created as a result of treaties that Governments have signed. For instance, Uganda is a member of the East African Community, the Common Market for Eastern and South Africa, the World Trade Organisation, and the United Nations among others. Indeed Parliament has a role to play in facilitating, monitoring and evaluating such relationships, in which the Government of Uganda has made commitments with the international Development Partners. Parliament is able to execute this mandate effectively through legislative research.

4.7 Enhanced support towards Private Members Bills and Motions

Over the last three Parliaments, the Members of Parliament have taken keen interest to initiate Private Members Bills to address key policy and problem areas that the executive arm of Government was taking time to handle. The Parliamentary Research Service has been instrumental in supporting such MPs.

4.8 Parliamentary Oversight visits and public hearings

Legislative Research services have also made a sound contribution to Parliamentary Oversight activities. In some instances, research staff have conducted pre-visit studies to understudy various issues in different parts of the country before members conduct the field visits. This has enabled the MPs to interrogate in a better manner issues on the performance of the budget, policies, plans, programmes, projects and interventions.

4.9 Oversight on Program Effectiveness

Oversight on program effectiveness is one of the most important Parliamentary programs in the fight against poverty, yet it is also a major challenge. Parliament has traditionally relied on information generated by the Executive organs themselves, to make deliberation and decisions. Yet such information has not been always accurate or reliable. The library and research service has since 2001 teamed to conduct field surveys for Parliament. These basically involve collecting primary data from local governments and evaluation the performance of government programs. The reports compiled are then presented to relevant Sectoral Committees of Parliament for deliberation and action.

By undertaking field studies and conducting primary data, we have been able to provide Members and Sessional and Sectoral Committees with timely and high quality original information about the performance of government projects and programs. This has been quite invaluable to Parliament in context where the Executive arm of government has traditionally evaluated itself and presented its own information to Parliament; and which information has at times been found skewed to serve executive interests.

4.10 Strengthened Support to Accountability and adhoc Committees of Parliament

The contribution of research to Parliamentary business in Uganda is indeed outstanding with the support to Accountability Committees and the Adhoc Committees constituted to investigate specific areas of performance of the Government. The Accountability Committees includes the Public Accounts Committees with leadership drawn from the Opposition. These committees are faced with a challenge of reviewing huge volumes of documents generated by constitutional bodies such as the Office of the Auditor General and documents produced by witnesses summoned. The Researchers play significant role in simplifying the terms of references, producing briefing papers, profiling the evidence into agreed upon themes, providing technical advice, as well as supporting the drafting of reports.

5.0 Challenges to enhancing a well-informed Parliament

One of a Member's most important needs is to receive, understand and evaluate information and pass on information and opinions in Parliament and committees and elsewhere to the Government and to individuals and groups. Being well informed and having up to date information is thus vital if a Member is to understand and debate the great range of legislation and other issues dealt with by the House and provide an effective representational link between his or her constituents and the Parliament. The library and research service has encountered a number of challenges in the Legislative environmental that affect library research communication to achieve this goal. These can be summarized as follows:

5.1 A weak reading culture: Despite considerable progress made by the library and research service to instill a reading culture among members, many of them lack the time to wade through in-depth information and research reports. Major national and regional, and

sometimes overseas, newspapers and journals tend to be more of a priority, rather than in-depth reports on different policy areas.

5.2 Time constraints: The above is aggravated by the fact that Members of Parliament often have very little time to review and internalize information due to competing demands on their time.

5.3 Comprehending information: Again, like many other Parliaments in Africa, Parliament in Uganda by its nature is made up of representatives with varying social and academic backgrounds and expertise. The immense range of policy issues with which parliament deals (e.g. Energy Crises, or budget deficit) makes it difficult for any single MP to be an expert in all areas.

5.4 Political, ethical and technical considerations: Library and research services are being provided in a political environment of a young multiparty democracy. Uganda adopted a multi-party system in 2005. This affects, to a greater or less extent, what problems are analyzed, who does it, how it is done, what decisions are made as a consequence, and how those decisions are implemented. Legislative information and research has had to cope with politics.

5.5 Library and research policies and systems: Despite the library and research services existing for close to 14 years in Uganda, operating policies and systems have not evolved at pace to support the ever increasing size and structure of the Parliament of Uganda.

5.6 Limited resources, both financial and human to expand the scope of library and research services to accommodate the growing information needs of the Parliament of Uganda. With the increased use of information and communication technologies, coupled with a new policy where legislators can use ipads during plenary sessions; provision of innovative library and research services is the only way to go.

6.0 Addressing the Challenges to enhancing a well-informed Parliament

6.1 Resource packaging: In order to try to minimize challenges towards enhancing a well-informed parliament, it has, become absolutely critical that library and research information is repackaged and presented in the shortest and most attractive and meaningful formats possible, for use by Members of Parliament.

6.2 Clarity of language – Communicating research findings in the right language to the target audience helps determine the usefulness of the information to the Members. Since Members of Parliament are such a heterogeneous group, we have made efforts to ensure that library and research information is repackaged with minimum scientific and technical language for it to benefit all categories of Members.

6.3 Capacity building: Librarians and researchers need to communicate better with MPs to

enable them have more evidence informed policy making. They need skilling in producing better quality briefs and to make presentations to committees and explain technical information. Capacity building workshops have been organized, in order to increase the policy makers' capacity to demand, read, understand and use library and research evidence appropriately.

6.4 The Library and Research service has recruited more staff, training and acquired more resources like books and computers to service Parliamentarians better. These resources are committed towards retooling parliamentary staff with the latest information technologies and research methods, in order to build up the institutional competences of the Assembly.

6.5 Through various levels of supervision and guidelines contained in the Research Manual measures have been put in place to ensure that overall the briefings and reports generated make fairly good use of the available published and grey literature; the briefing is clear and transparent about the data sources used, and these are fully referenced.

6.6 Library and research policies and systems: Strengthening and supporting the institutional framework for providing library and research through updating systems and policies. For instances there is need to have library and research Policies which clearly stipulate the standards of services offered against which performance can be measured.

6.7 Limited resources: In the modern world the library is expected to go virtual in providing services while parliamentary research is expected to expand beyond desk reviews to conducting exceptional surveys on policies and topical issues, public expenditure tracking surveys, and constituency profiling briefs. Such a paradigm move requires enormous resources.

7.0 Conclusion

The evolution and contribution of library and research services in the work of parliaments can no longer be ignored in growing democracies. Library and research resources do facilitate generation of consensus, debates and decision making at both the Committee, Plenary and constituency levels of the work of legislators. This has provided an efficient research and reference service to which members of Parliament are increasingly turning for help and reference. The information service has been essential, among other things, highlighting policy alternatives and drawing attention to policy consequences; and providing access to information as a prerequisite for in-depth analysis and debate. In Uganda the library and research services have steadily grown in resources, structure, systems and policies over the last 14 years; albeit not to pace to effectiveness and efficient service the ever increasing, changing and demanding needs of legislators.

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Biography:

Mr. Innocent Rugambwa joined Parliament of Uganda as a Legislative Librarian in February 1999. His main assignment was to establish a library for members of Parliament and staff. Since November 2004, he was elevated to the position of Director, Library and Research Services; and since 2012 Director, Library Services, Parliament of Uganda.

Previously, he worked as Librarian with the National Agricultural Research Organisation (NARO) and the Judiciary. He is the former President of the Uganda Library and Information Association (ULIA); Treasurer of the Association of Parliamentary Libraries of Eastern and Southern Africa (APLESA); and Information Coordinator, IFLA Section on Library & Research Services for Parliaments.

He holds a Bachelor of Library and Information Science Degree; and Master of Science in Information Science. He has attended and presented papers in conferences at national, regional and international level. Innocent has also published articles in the International Information and Library Review; and Library Trends. He is an accomplished Library and Records Management Consultant.