Parliamentary Institutes as Centres of Excellence for Capacity Development, Research, Training, Knowledge and Information Management – Prospects and Challenges: A Literature Review and Lessons from Kenya and Uganda

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Abstract

The philosophy that knowledge production and capacity building are critical to effective development is not new, and its pertinence in the context of African democracies is being increasingly recognized. To this end, there has been a proliferation of Parliamentary Institutes in Africa and all over the world. In essence, the rationale behind the establishment of Parliamentary Institutes is to provide independent and quality research, analytic and capacity building services to Parliamentarians with the ultimately end of creating well-functioning Parliaments. Such centres of excellence, it is argued, are critical in developing skilled Parliamentarians who are able to make informed decisions and develop relevant, effective and responsive policies. South Africa is committed to building a developmental state with the ultimate aim of actively steering economic development to alleviate poverty and address the needs of its citizens. Transformation into a developmental state requires intense capacity informed by critical thinking and analysis skills. As South Africa has become a developmental state, there is a need to define the role of the Legislative Sector in the state. Could the establishment of such an institute assist the South Africa Legislative Sector to play a meaningful role in this development? The purpose of this paper is to review the existing literature and also to present lessons learned from Kenya and Uganda’s parliamentary institutes as centres of excellence for capacity development, research, training and knowledge and information management.

Introduction

Parliaments are an important component of national governance systems. In essence, parliaments are primarily responsible for legislation (law-making), oversight, public participation and
representation (Hudson, 2007). Hudson (2007) further explains that ‘legislation’ entails passing the laws which form a country’s legal framework, while ‘oversight’ refers to keeping an eye on the activities of the executive and holding the executive to account – particularly focusing on budget and checking that spending decisions are in line with government’s priorities, and finally ‘representation’ is about collecting, aggregating and expressing the concerns, opinions and preferences of citizen-voters, i.e. representation refers to public participation. When these roles of parliament are played effectively, parliament can contribute to the effective governance elements, namely: state capability, accountability and responsiveness.

However, parliaments are said to be ineffective as they rarely perform their key roles and mandates (explained above) with efficiency and effectiveness in most African countries. This is owing to the fact that parliaments often “lack the knowledge and skills to do their jobs effectively…” (Hudson, 2007:4). In addition, it is strongly acknowledged that parliaments continue to lack institutional capacity and resources, and this hinders parliamentarians in performing their functions satisfactorily adequately. Thus, parliamentary capacity development and strengthening have become significantly important for improving the performance of parliaments in exercising their main functions of oversight, public participation and law-making.

Therefore, the strengthening of parliamentarians and support staff is an “important element of work to foster capable, accountable and responsive governance” (Hudson, 2007:7). This is based on the premise that effective parliaments are an essential and integral component of democratic and responsible governance. Furthermore, parliamentary training and capacity building should be geared towards providing parliamentarians with specific skills and knowledge necessary to fulfill their mandates. According to the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) Parliamentary Tool Kit (2005), parliamentarians require continuous education and training programmes and professional development to keep them updated on emerging democratic and governance trends. This is equally important for returning and new or incoming parliamentarians and staff.

The literature suggests that parliaments themselves often lack the institutional capacity to perform their roles effectively thus becoming ineffective as institutions. The parliamentary institutes, a case under examination in this paper, have been viewed in many countries as a solution to the challenge of poor parliamentary performance. The purpose of this paper is to
review the existing literature and also to present lessons learned from Kenya and Uganda’s parliamentary institutes as centres of excellence for capacity development, research, training and knowledge and information management.

**Defining the parliamentary institutes**

There is no single definition of parliamentary institutes. In Pakistan, a parliamentary institute is defined “as a premier institution, created by an Act of the parliament, to provide legislative, research, capacity building and public outreach services to members of national and state legislatures” (Goraya, 2012:1). This institution was created to provide quality research and capacity building services for parliamentarians and parliamentary functionaries. In Canada, it is viewed “as an independent NGO originally established to provide contracted research for committees within the Canadian House of Commons” (Miller, Pelizzo & Stapenhurst, 2004: 9). In South Africa, a parliamentary institute is viewed “as a membership-based non-governmental organization which serves as a cross-party parliamentary forum” (Parliamentary Institute of South Africa, 2012: 1). In Cambodia, a parliamentary institute is defined “as a new independent parliamentary support institution based in the Senate compound of the Cambodian Parliament” (Session, 2011:2).

The parliamentary institutes may differ from one country to another, but they all have a common function that is, to provide support, conduct research and provide information, as well as giving training to parliamentarians and support staff. They all strive to be centres of excellence in performing the roles for which they were established.

**History and establishment of parliamentary institutes**

Miller *et. al.* (2004) and Hudson (2007) noted that parliamentary institutes were established as a solution to the problem of weak parliaments and libraries. Miller *et. al.* (2004) further argued that while these institutes may be intended to compensate for the weaknesses of parliamentary library resources, their roles and functions are much broader than those of parliamentary libraries. Three
types of parliamentary institutes can be identified from an organizational view, namely: (1). ‘internal institutes’ referring to those that are part of the parliamentary bureaucracy or administration; (2). ‘external institutes’ referring to those that are independent and external to parliament; and (3). ‘mixed institutes ‘referring to those that display the features of both internal and external institutes (Miller et.al., 2004).

Some examples of internal institutes are the “Legislative Information Centre (LIC) in Bangladesh, the Parliamentary Institute in the Czech Republic, and the Bureau of Parliamentary Studies and Training (BPST) in India” (Miller et.al., 2004:8). Contrary to these, examples of the external institutes are the “Parliamentary Centre in Canada, Center for Legislative Development in the Philippines, and Foundation for the Development of Parliamentarism in Russia” (Miller et. al., 2004:8). While the King Prajadhipok Institute (KPI) in Thailand is a good example of a mixed institute –“it is originally created as a division of the Secretariat of the Thai House of Representatives and is formally linked to the Parliament (i.e. internal facet) and working as an independent and autonomous institute (making it an external institute)”(Miller et. al., 2004:8)

The location of the parliamentary institutes is very critical. These institutes need to be operationally autonomous in order for them to perform their task adequately (Miller et. al., 2004). In other words, they need to be free of control by government, of partisan influence and of the influence of the institutional figures such as Speaker of the House. Despite their operational autonomy, these institutes need to be sufficiently attached to the parliamentary system (Miller et. al., 2004). The ‘mixed institute’ approach to a parliamentary institute, seems to be better positioned to provide the best solution as they are external and autonomous from any sort of influence, but to a certain extent linked to the parliament and able to satisfy parliament’s informational and capacity needs.

The trends

Asian perspective: Review of Pakistan and Cambodia countries

Asian countries have successfully established effective parliamentary institutes. For the purposes of this paper, Pakistan and Cambodia countries will be reviewed. Pakistan has established a
sustainable institute for legislative research and capacity building for Parliamentarians and parliamentary staff (The Parliamentarian, 2011). The institute is called the ‘Pakistan Institute for Parliamentary Services’, also famously referred to as PIPS. Because of a checkered history of democracy marred by decades of dictatorship, the Parliament of Pakistan could not evolve an institutionalized system of supporting legislators and providing technical assistance in performance of their law-making, public participation and oversight functions (Goraya, 2012). The Pakistan Parliament, unlike its counterparts all over the world notably: India; Bangladesh; Australia; Canada; UK; US; South Africa; the Philippines and the Czech Republic, had no independent research and informational support for its Members (The Parliamentarian, 2011). Thus the Pakistan Institute for Parliamentary Services was established formally as an exclusive and independent, the first of its kind to provide research and capacity building for the Parliamentarians through an Act of Parliament in 2008 (The Parliamentarian, 2011).

Interestingly, the Pakistan Parliament realized that it was deprived of the power of knowledge that comes from timely, accurate and credible information and objective analysis on the most sensitive of national matters until the institute was established (The Parliamentarian, 2011). This institute is “dedicated to parliamentary excellence, and it looks forward to develop into a centre par excellence by a dedicated team of professionals” (The Parliamentarian, 2011). The professionalism and merit, which reflects integrity and accountability in the functioning of the institute is the crux for it to be a centre of excellence. Essentially, the institute is responsible for equipping Parliamentarians with cutting-edge strategies and tools to perform their public participation, law-making and oversight functions effectively and efficiently.

Cambodia, a country on the Asian continent, also established a parliamentary institute called the ‘Parliamentary Institute of Cambodia (PIC)’. This institute aimed to become a centre of excellence in parliamentary development, supporting and enhancing the capacity and improving the performance of parliament (Session, 2011). The context which brought this institute into existence was the fact that Cambodia had a strong executive branch and a much weaker parliament. As the executive was continuously strengthened, the parliament remained weak due to continued limited understanding of its value and utility, and inadequate technical and financial support available for its development (Session, 2011). Hence, the need for, and intention to, establish a parliamentary institute or centre to support the legislature came about and was also
outlined in the Strategic Frameworks for the Parliament of Cambodia. In addition, it is also important to note in this regard that parliamentarians themselves acknowledged that they need to further improve their capacity and capability to play their roles effectively (Session, 2011). The creation of a permanent independent body to support the parliamentary democracy of Cambodia – the ‘Parliamentary Institute of Cambodia’, was established in response to the issues presented above.

**European perspective: Review of the Czech Republic and the United Kingdom**

Like Asian countries, European countries have successfully established parliamentary institutes. The Czech Republic and the United Kingdom – countries in Europe - will be reviewed in this paper. In the **Czech Republic**, the Parliamentary Institute was established in 1990. This institute performs scientific research and training tasks for Chambers of Parliament, Parliamentary Committees and other sub-bodies (Glacova, 2008). The scope of the Parliamentary Institute's work is made to fit the needs of Parliament. It adheres to the rule of impartiality: information, research, opinions, studies and expert appraisals that are provided explore all available materials and resources and do not express politically-based opinions, treating all users on an equal basis (Glacova, 2008). Any collected personal data about Deputies requesting opinions is also kept confidential.

In the **United Kingdom**, a number of organisations (parliamentary institutes) are involved in parliamentary strengthening activities of various forms. These are: the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association UK, the Inter-Parliamentary Union UK, and the Westminster Foundation for democracy (Hudson, 2007). According to Hudson (2007), all these institutes have an excellent access to UK parliamentarians and they organize numerous conferences, seminars and study visits which enable parliamentarians and parliamentary staff to exchange information and ideas about the work of their parliaments, including the roles they play in promoting good governance and poverty reduction. These institutes are relatively autonomous, and aimed at promoting parliamentary democracy (Hudson, 2007).
Are there best practices? Lessons from Kenya and Uganda

Literature reveals that the establishment of parliamentary institutes is a relatively young phenomenon, with origins from the mature democracies such as Canada. Other countries such as India and Pakistan have followed suit becoming some of the well-established and well-known parliamentary institutes in the world. African countries such as Mozambique, Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya and Uganda have patiently started establishing their parliamentary institutes in an attempt to strengthen their parliaments and relatively young democracies (Stapenhurst, 2004). However, despite these trends, there is no documented evidence of best practices regarding the establishment and functioning of parliamentary institutes. Instead, the trend appears to be “learning from other parliaments and customize”. This is the approach countries such as Kenya and Uganda have adopted, in establishing the Centre for Parliamentary Studies and Training (CPST) and Institute for Parliamentary Studies (IPS) respectively. Relevant representatives from these two countries, for example, have travelled to well-established parliamentary institutes or training centres in Europe and Asia to learn. Upon finishing these visits, they have concluded that “there are no best practices” regarding the establishment and management of parliamentary institutes (Mwambua, 2012; Okumu, 2012).

The diagram below (Figure 1) shows broadly, how the two countries have conceptualized a parliamentary institute. It should be noted that, this diagram was developed following engagements between the authors of this papers and representatives from Kenya’s CPST and Uganda’s IPS. It is however, not prescriptive regarding a process that can be followed in conceptualizing and establishing a parliamentary institute.

Box 1: The Case Study of The Kenyan Centre for Parliamentary Services and Training (CPST)

The establishment of the CPST was resolved by the Kenyan Commission of Parliamentary Services in November 2008. The Centre was developed with the vision of becoming a “Centre of Excellence Parliamentary and Governance Affairs” in Kenya. It is grounded on the mission to enhance the capacity of Hon. Members and Staff of Parliament for the effective and efficient execution of the mandate, roles and functions of Parliament in democratic governance.

Mandate of CPST:
Initiating and conducting research studies, courses in a format that is appropriate for the exposition and enhancement of the knowledge, skills and experience of the parliamentarians, staff serving in Parliament and other persons whose functions/work relate to and/or interact with that of Parliament.

The role and function of the CPST:
- Enhancing the capacity of the Hon. Members, staff of the Parliament and others, by offering learning and training opportunities/courses through suitable modules.

A well established and reputable parliamentary institute

*NOTE: *as deduced from the establishment of the Kenya’s CPST and Uganda’s IPS

Figure 1: The broader process of establishing a parliamentary institute in Kenya and Uganda

Countries that have well-established institutes, as well as those that are in the process of developing these institutes have a common goal, that is, to develop the capacity of parliamentary members and staff. However, in terms of developing specific tools for achieving the strengthening of their parliaments, Kenya and Uganda have adopted somewhat different approaches (Figure 2). Uganda’s IPS has focused on establishing a discussion platform with current and ex parliamentary members and staff with an aim to identify training and capacity building deficiencies. It is hoped that this discussion process will eventually lead to the development of a training manual, which will be used as a framework going forward. The manual will then be adapted, as dictated by training and capacity building needs in the future. On the other hand, Kenya’s CPST has emphasized on the development of a curriculum, which will then be used as a framework for training. This curriculum has subsequently been exposed to a
review process with the aim of identifying gaps and strengthening the structure and design of the different modules.

**Figure 2**: The process of capacity building and designing the “training tools”

Evidently, it would appear that Kenya’s approach to developing training tools for capacity building and training is outward looking in terms of sourcing external expertise (academics, consultants, etc.) to strengthen their curriculum, whereas Uganda is focusing on utilizing internal expertise such as former members of parliament and staff to develop a training manual.

**Key principles that guide parliamentary institutes**

Parliamentary institutes around the world are guided by a set of principles. These principles are aimed at ensuring that parliamentary institutes, as centres of excellence, provide relevant, adequate and effective support to parliamentarians and their support staff. Hudson (2007) argues that these guidelines ensure that parliamentary centres of training respond to specific parliamentary demands, and address challenges and causes of these challenges. In achieving this, the context and political dynamics need to be taken into consideration. Below is an attempt to elaborate on these principles based on a literature review as well as experiences from Kenya and Uganda. However, it should be noted that this list of principles is not prescriptive and exhaustive.
Exclusive, independent and quality research

By description parliamentary institutes are non-partisan organizations that are established to provide specific support to Members and staff of parliament. Under normal circumstances, it would be expected that political parties, especially a leading political party, do not interfere with the processes and functions of parliamentary institutes. In some countries, parliamentary institutes are completely autonomous. Autonomous institutes are often self-funded, independent and conduct objective research. Examples of these completely autonomous institutes include the Pakistan Institute for Parliamentary Services (PIPS). It must however be noted, that in other countries, parliamentary institutes do enjoy such autonomy. This is especially the case in countries where parliamentary institutes are funded through government programmes, or in some cases, through intergovernmental relationships between countries and their development partners. The Kenyan Centre for Parliamentary Services and Training (CPST) is an example of a semi-autonomous parliamentary institute. It is funded by and is answerable to the Parliamentary Services Commission which operates through government funding (Mwambua, 2012).

Parliamentary Institutes (PI’s) or training centres should offer independent and objective research that is intended to enhance the functioning of the legislature in its oversight role. Well-equipped parliamentary institutes or centres should be able to conduct quality research, which will strongly and positively influence the oversight functions of parliaments or legislatures.

Guided by a sound legal framework

Parliamentary institutes and their capacity building or strengthening cover a wide range of issues. These issues have various implications, including political, financial and even social implications. Often, these implications have legal implications for institutes or for parliaments. Legal regulations therefore, become a critical component for the proper functioning of parliament institutes. Legal regulations provide a framework for governance, structure and functioning of institutes. The CPST in Kenya, as an example, was founded on a solid legal foundation. Just like any entity or institution, an Act or regulations cover power issues and functions of an institution or individuals that serve in various capacities or levels in an institution. For example in Kenya, the establishment of a governing board for the CPST is
spelled out clearly in the legal notice (Act). In addition, the Act pronounces the powers and functions of the Board in the functioning of the institute (Kenya Subsidiary Legislation, 2011).

**Capacity building and enhancement of performance**

One of the primary functions of parliamentary institutes is to build the capacity of parliamentary members and support staff to ensure that parliaments deliver accordingly and satisfactorily on their duties of oversight and service delivery in general. Members “come and go”, and this causes a certain level of instability with regards to long term skills development and institutional memory. The situation and extent of this problem is worse in some countries than others. In 2008, Kenyan parliament experienced a complete overhaul regarding the composition of parliament. This resulted in a complete loss of existing skills, knowledge and memory in and about the institution. This necessitated training and induction of new Members on various aspects of parliament and its functioning. Here, the focus was on building capacity to ensure that Members, regardless of the time they had spent in parliament, were able to deliver on their mandate and duties. In essence, parliamentary institutes should be able to capacitate new parliamentarians in a ways that there is no destruction in the parliament’s functions of oversight and service delivery.

It is widely acknowledged that parliamentary institutes can be seen as a mechanism for enhancing this, through the provision of various expertise, technical and non-technical. Additionally, parliamentary institutes can further be seen as a mechanism of enhancing public consultation and outreach practices.

**Drawing from other international experiences**

Some countries, especially in the developing world, are argued to be characterized by poor governance and parliamentary performance (Hudson, 2007). This has resulted in extensive and deep ineffectiveness of service delivery in developing countries. Interestingly, there is a developing trend of establishing parliamentary services and training centres in many developing countries with the aim of addressing these governance and service delivery challenges. In Africa alone, countries such as Mozambique, Ghana, Nigeria, Uganda and Kenya have established these training and capacity building centres. Despite this trend, it is argued that the process is often ‘*a trial and error*’ undertaking. For example, the CPST drew experiences and lessons from other
countries. However, as discussed above, it should be acknowledged that there are no best practices regarding parliamentary strengthening and capacity building. Instead, parliamentary institutes are designed and respond to the needs and context of a specific country (Kioko, 2012; Mwambua, 2012). The situation has been complicated by the lack of documentation of impacts and success outcomes in parliamentary strengthening (Hudson, 2007).

**Credibility and Accountability**

Strengthening parliaments is an important aspect of fostering capable, accountable, responsive and credible governance in developing countries. Hudson (2007) argues that although parliamentary capacity building is not the only way of improving performance, the credibility and accountability of parliamentary institutes plays a significant role in enhancing the effectiveness of legislatures. While accountability can be seen in the beginning, the credibility of parliamentary institutes may not be obvious during the early stages/inception of the institutes (Hudson, 2007). To enhance its credibility, CPST has drawn from existing international and national centres of training and capacity development, including those that are not involved in parliamentary services. In addition, they have involved specialist consultants to design a set of modules that will be delivered, especially to new to Members and staff. The latter is characterized by “training the trainer” concept which is aimed at building capacity within the institute, as part of the long term strategy.

**Flexibility and adaptability**

It is perceptible in many democracies that parliaments and the entire legislative institutions function within a dynamic, non-static and politically-charged environment. In such an evolving environment, both parliamentarians and support staff perform their duties, often, under immense pressure to deliver immediate results to relevant stakeholders. The environment that is characterized by a quest for immediate results, therefore, requires that parliamentary institutes design their programs such that they are flexible and adaptive enough to cater for the unique needs of each parliamentary term. The capability of parliamentary institutes to adapt to new political environments is important, particularly, in view of the fact that one parliamentary term is always different from the next. The Institute of Parliamentary Studies in Uganda, for example, has adopted a tailor-made and customized approach for capacity building.
Challenges and prospects of parliamentary institutes

It has been mentioned above that the establishment of parliamentary institutes is a relatively new phenomenon, and as such, it is characterized by a suite of challenges. These challenges range from infrastructural to human resources and sustainability challenges. However, despite these challenges, the authors of this paper argue that there are prospects for parliamentary institutes around the world, both in developed and developing democracies. Below is an attempt to elaborate on the nature and extent of these challenges and prospects for parliamentary institutes.

Infrastructural Development

There is evidence of lack of skills and institutional capacity in many young legislatures. However, challenges regarding basic infrastructural requirements for effective and efficient parliamentary institutes are often not given satisfactory attention. Rahman (2005) argues that, in addition to poorly developed and weak institutional capacity, problems relating to information, accommodation, adequate computer and library facilities require substantial interventions. For example, the CPST is faced with accommodation and training room shortages (Mwambua, 2012). As a result, the institute is forced to rely on other neighbouring institutions for accommodation. If this fails, training is often cut short to accommodate the needs of the participants of the training and workshop classes.

Adequate Human Resources

Human resources is the soul and the engine of any institution. Putting together a seasoned, committed and merit-based, pool of human resources, remains one of the most demanding challenges parliamentary institutes face (The Parliamentarian, 2011). The Pakistan Institute of Parliament Studies recognized that in order to deal with human resource challenges they would have to develop a “well-knit” team of professionals, through establishing collaborative relationships with academic and policy institutions. In Kenya, CPST currently has ten dedicated staff members. However, these staff members were deployed from the various departments of the parliament and sometimes the staff are expected to perform duties for these departments and abandon their responsibilities as staff of CPST. According to Mwambua (2012) and Kioko
(2012), there are periods where people’s commitment to the CPST is not seen as a priority by those in power, namely, the Parliamentary Services Commission.

**Sustainability of parliament institutes**

Lack of adequate funding is arguably one of the major challenges faced by parliamentary institutes. It is noted that many of these institutes are funded by donor agencies and/or governments. The shrinking sources of revenue for both donors and governments, particularly, in times of economic meltdown poses a serious threat to the sustainability of these institutes. Parliamentary institutes are, thus, expected to diversify their sources of revenue to ensure viability. Importantly, the issue of funding is central to the effective functioning of such institutes as it determines their scope and overall functioning. Institutes that rely heavily on government for funding may be susceptible to influence thereby compromising their autonomy and independence.

**Prospects for parliamentary institutes**

It is evident from the literature and lessons from Kenya and Uganda that, parliamentary institutes have a crucial role in strengthening parliaments and ensuring that parliaments continue to perform their functions meaningfully. It is also apparent that parliamentary institutes have a future around the world, in both young and matured democracies. The success and prospects of parliamentary institutes rely on how effectively and efficiently they deal with and address the various challenges that they may encounter. We argue that, the future of parliamentary institutes relies heavily on adequate resource allocation, mainly financial and human resources. Importantly, parliamentary institutes will need to focus on building capacity through working with and building the capacity of the broader civil society. This can be achieved through the establishment of mentorship, internship and research programmes. Moreover, parliamentary institutes will remain to be central depository of knowledge and institutional memory of parliamentary work.
Conclusion

Parliamentary institutes, also referred to as centres of excellence for training and capacity building for parliamentarians and staff, have become more and more relevant and imperative for effective and efficient functioning and performance of parliaments. Of significant importance, are the structures of these institutes and the conceptualization of capacity development. There are no best practices in this regard, and this has resulted in different countries adopting different approaches, especially when it comes to the development of training and capacity building tools. However, the literature has shown that in terms of the broad process, there are commonalities across the world. The well-established institutes started as an idea, which developed into a full concept. The concept evolves to specific tools that respond to specific training and capacity building needs that are unique to individual parliaments. We argue that there is a need for more research on the feasibility of establishing such an institute in the South African context. Such research should inform the purpose of establishing a parliamentary institute as it is evident that different countries establish these institutes in response to different sets of needs.
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