Legislative Research Services Adaptation to a Dynamic Political & Institutional Environment: The Case of Uganda.

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Abstract

Parliaments have over the last decade been changing in many places. The changing nature of parliamentary representation and systems has been occurring in at least three major ways: One – increase in size of parliaments: In countries like Uganda, parliament has been rapidly growing in size as the national population or electorates grow. Two – the introduction to multi-party systems: Parliaments like Uganda's, which had for decades operated under one party systems have evolved into multiparty institutions. Three: increasing role of Parliamentary committees: With the work done by the parliament in modern times increasingly becoming not only varied in nature, but also considerable in volume, parliamentary committees have evolved to assume centre stage in legislative decision-making, becoming focal points of legislative oversight of governments.

The changing nature of parliamentary systems and representation in the manner outlined above has not only increased the need for timely, up-to-date, accurate and well researched information for effective decision-making, it has also created challenges for research units. The Research Service in Uganda has had to transform and develop: (a) different types of research, (b) different methods of research, and (c) different skills to meet emerging research and information needs of Committees.

This paper, using our country experience, illustrates the changing nature of parliamentary systems and representation, the challenges and the response of the research service, in a dynamic institutional and political environment, with ethical and technical imperatives. While the political context of each country is unique, parliaments and information services tend to face common challenges, including how best to avail timely, up-to-date, accurate and well researched information for effective decision-making and parliamentary deliberations. We hope that the paper will stimulate debate and offer some insight and inspiration into the changing nature of parliamentary representation and systems and how best parliamentary research/information systems can respond.

Key words: Legislative Research, Dynamic environment, Adaptation.

1. Background

1.1 Introduction

The nature of Parliamentary systems and representation have been changing in different regions of the world. This has not only presented legislative research and information services with considerable challenges, it has also necessitated legislative research and information services coming up with a variety of initiatives to meet the emerging needs. This paper examines how Research and Information Services in Uganda have evolved and innovated to respond to the changing research and information needs of a changing Parliament in Uganda.

It's composed of four (4) sections, in addition to this introductory section that also gives a historical overview of Uganda, its Parliament and its research and library services. Section two (2) examines the dynamic changes in the environment of the Parliament in Uganda in terms of size, system and operation, the research and information needs of members and committees arising out of the changing environment and the challenges this poses to research and library services. Section three (3) looks at how the research services are evolving and innovating to respond to the information and documentation needs of members, the challenges encountered as well as the lessons learnt.

There is a diversity of legislative research services and libraries with different histories, political contexts, mandates and levels of resources. Nonetheless, all our legislative research services and libraries around the world share a common goal – to ensure that Members of Parliament have access to timely, up-to-date, accurate and well researched information for effective decision-making. We hope that the paper will stimulate some ideas on the changing nature of parliamentary representation and systems in different parts of the world and how best legislative research and information services can respond to meet the needs of our stakeholders.

1.2 Uganda and Parliament of Uganda: a historical overview

The nation of Uganda is located in East Africa and borders the following nations: Kenya in the east Tanzania and Rwanda in the south, Sudan in the north, and the Democratic Republic of Congo in the west. Formerly under British colonial rule, Uganda obtained independence in 1962. It has a population of about 35 million people and it's predominately an agricultural country with 65.6 percent of the working population engaged in agriculture, forestry and fisheries.[1]

The Uganda Parliament is unicameral [has one legislative or parliamentary chamber or house] 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).

The Parliament in Uganda has undergone a sequence of changes, right from being a colonial unit linked to the colonial office in London to an independent National Assembly in 1962. Key of the political changes include the suspension of the 1962 constitution and the subsequent military coup of 1971, which suspended the operations of parliament.[2]

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[1] Uganda Bureau of Statistics. (2012). Statistical Abstract. Government Printer. Kampala, Uganda.

[2] See, for example, Parliamentary Centre Africa Programme. 2012. Africa Parliamentary Index (API). Accra: Parliamentary Centre Africa Programme.

The overthrow of Idi Amin in 1979 and the subsequent elections of the 1980s led to the restoration of parliament as an arm of government. The political instabilities that characterized the country in 1980s and the resulting change of government in 1986, however, changed the way parliament in Uganda was constituted. For nearly 10 years, Uganda's parliament was constituted as the National Resistance Council (NRC). After the promulgation of the new constitution, the Parliament in Uganda was reconstituted after the presidential and parliamentary elections in 1996 under the Movement system3 of government.

According to the 1995 Constitution, Article 78(1), Uganda parliament is composed of the following:[3]

• Members directly elected to represent constituencies;
• A woman representative, who is directly elected from every district;
• Representatives of the army, youth, workers, persons with disabilities and other groups as Parliament may determine, and who are elected through constituency colleges; and
• The Vice-President and Ministers who, if not elected Members of Parliament, are ex-officio members without the right to vote on any issue requiring a vote in parliament.

The term of Parliament is five years from the date of its first sitting after a general election. The current Parliament (9th Parliament) started in May 2011 and ends in May 2016.

1.2 Research and Library Services in Uganda Parliament

In a context where the government is the gatekeeper of the bulk of the information relevant to legislation and policy making, and where few nongovernmental alternatives exist, parliamentarians' need for independent information is indispensable.[4] Against this background, research and library services are today at the heart of Uganda's democracy, supporting legislators to effectively perform their representative, oversight and legislative functions at the level of the committee, plenary and constituency.

Research services are relatively new in Uganda Parliament. Whereas Uganda's First Parliament was formed at independence in 1962, Research services were only introduced in 1999 (with support from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), under the Uganda Parliamentary Technical Assistance Project (UPTAP) and implemented by the State University of New York (SUNY).

2. The Changing Parliament and the Challenges posed to Research and Library services

National Governments and Parliaments all over the world are increasingly under greater pressure from their electorates to provide better services and to deliver to meet citizens' needs. They are also under increasing pressure to account for public funds and respond to public concerns.

Consequently, national Parliaments are changing in different parts of the world. As Parliaments change, so has been the information and documentation needs of Members. Thus the rapidly changing legislative

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[3] *Constitution of the Republic of Uganda* [Uganda], 22 September 1995, available at:
http://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b5ba0.html [accessed 29 July 2015].

[4] Informing Democracy: Building capacity to meet parliamentarians' information and knowledge needs. (2008, October). Background paper. Reports and documents no.59. Retrieved November 4, 2009, from http://www.ipu.org/PDF/publications/inform_dem_en.pdf.

environment requires legislative research and information services to adapt and meet the merging information challenges.

In Uganda, Parliament of Uganda has changed in three major ways: size, system and operation.

(1) Changing size and composition of Parliament

Owing to politics and public pressure for greater and more equitable representation of the various socio-economic groups, and also due to the increase in population, changes in constituencies, and the creation of new municipalities and districts, Uganda Parliament has been growing in size almost every year. The increase in the size of Parliament is directly related to the ever-increasing demarcation of local government (districts). The main reason given for their increase is to improve service delivery and developmental outcomes. This is in line with Article 179 of the 1995 Uganda Constitution, which allows for the creation of new districts (electoral constituencies) based on effective administration and the need to bring services closer to the people; and the need to better manage or reduce ethnic conflicts in the countryside, by enabling ethnic minorities who were formerly marginalized to obtain their own districts.

Article 179(4) specifically states that any cause for the creation of districts or Administrative Units shall be based on the following: the necessity for effective administration; the need to bring services closer to the people; to take into account the means of communication, geographical features, density of population, economic viability; and the wishes of the people concerned.

The size of Parliament has thus increased from 276 MPs in 1996 to the current 385 as shown below.

Figure 1: Size of Uganda Parliament
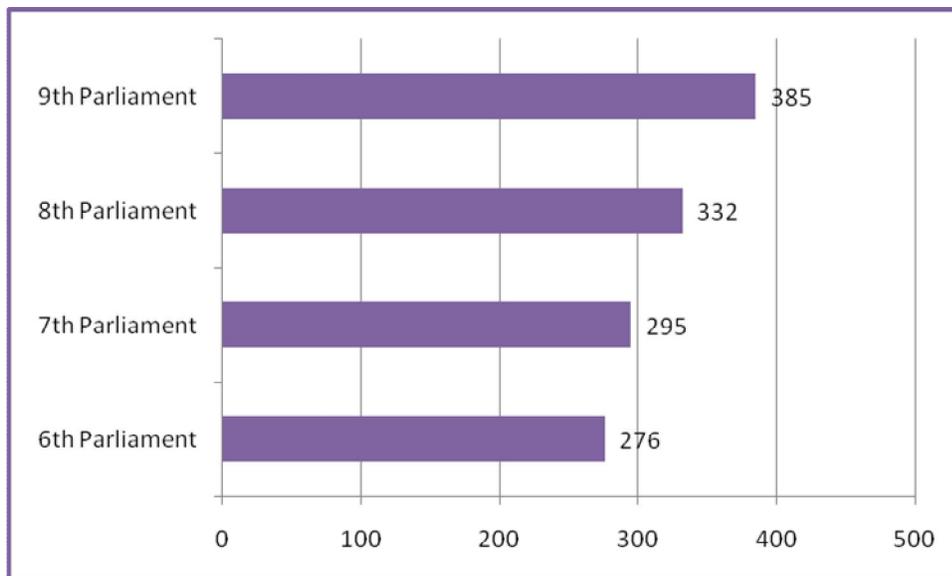
Source: Parliamentary Research Service

Last month Parliament approved the creation of 65 new constituencies, which means the size of Parliament will increase next year by at least 65 new members.

Challenges to research and documentation services

The ever-increasing size of Parliament has posed a number of challenges for research and information services in Uganda as follows:

➢ The ever increasing size of Parliament means an ever increasing ratio of MPs per researcher and increased workload for the legislative research staff.

➢ This is made more challenging by an increasing shift in the expectations of new MPs, demanding research reports in shorter deadlines and citing emergency debates or news reports.

➢ There is an increasingly high turnover from one parliamentary session to the next one, with up to 70% of the legislature being newly elected. This further compounds the problem, as it necessitates a persistent need to orient and sensitive and equip new Members with information on appreciating and making requests for available research services in a realistic way.

➢ As parliament increases in size, let alone by its very nature, it is increasingly being composed of representatives with varying and low education backgrounds and whose skills to absorb information is low. This has demanded researchers and librarians to ensure that research information is repackaged and presented in a different form for use by Members of Parliament.

The ever-changing size and composition of Parliament poses a constant challenge for parliamentary research and library services, whose officers are nevertheless expected to deliver timely, high-quality and meaningful answers to requests by MPs. This has required finding better ways of responding, as will be discussed in the subsequent sections.

(2) Changing political systems

Uganda's 1995 Constitution was amended to allow for a pluralist system of Government, which ended the one-party or "Movement" (quasi one-party) political systems that had dominated the country for much of her post-independence history.

The current 8th Parliament is the forth parliament in Uganda to operate under a system of multiparty politics since the 1980s. The leadership of Parliament has taken steps to transform the House to meet the requirements of a pluralist system. Parliament's Rules of Procedure were amended to make way for multiparty political system to operate in Uganda. In addition, a code of conduct was included under Rules to assist Members in the discharge of their obligations to the House, their constituents and the public at large.

Relevant Articles (Article 82a) were added to create the role of the official opposition party leader and the privileges attached the office. A shadow cabinet was formed as well as Parliament's watchdog committees chaired by Opposition MPs.[5]

Challenges to research and documentation services

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[5] *Constitution of the Republic of Uganda* [Uganda], 22 September 1995, available at:
http://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b5ba0.html [accessed 29 July 2015]

The change in political system and representation has created concomitant challenges for research and information services in Uganda as follows:

- There is increased partisan political competition, which often puts legislative research findings in conflict with partisan interests. The previous quasi one-party system of government had enshrined the principle of "individual merit" into Uganda's parliamentary system. The rationale for this system was that citizens could vote for individual MPs based on their personal talents, rather than for their party affiliation. The rationale for this 'no party' style of democracy was that Ugandan society was too fragmented from years of war and economic degradation to handle partisan political competition.

  The previous "party-less" parliaments allowed MPs, even ruling party MPs to countervail the Executive on numerous occasions without being seen as anti-government. MPs formed and joined coalitions and caucused on issues to draft legislation or resolutions to solve problems based on object researched information without fear of backlash from Party whips. This freedom from party discipline not only contributed to the legislature's independence and rapid institutional development, as well as a healthy tension in executive-legislative relations, it also enhanced the object use of information from research services.

  Consequently legislative research is increasingly being conducted in a partisan political environment and where it has to cope with politics. Whereas the aim of legislative research is to provide the best possible objective advice based on thorough research, lawmakers from the ruling party tend to operate more to minimize their loss of political power, while those from the opposition operate more to maximise their chances of seizing it.

- MPs from the Opposition tend to mistrust information/reports generated by the executive arm of government (and sometimes for good reasons as sometimes reports have been inaccurate or recycled). There is mistrust between the executive and opposition in the legislative branches of government. Being a member of the opposition is very different from being a member of the government. Some in the Opposition see legislative researchers more as pro-Executive and therefore rely more on their "political" personal research assistants for research. They are relying on a vast array of information provided by the proliferation of civil society interest groups most of which, however, have in common the desire to sway the parliamentarians to their particular way of thinking. The motives of those providing the information are about the promotion of a point of view or a specific course of action.

  They are thus missing the uniquely valuable resource of the Parliamentary research services mandated is to provide non-partisan information. The opposition in Uganda faces several challenges in a sense that it is young, fragile and weak – consisting of not more than one third of MPs in a parliament of 340 MPs.[6]

  Regularly legislative decisions are taken around the idea of political interests, sometimes disregarding objective research and information from research services. Legislative researchers should not be inclined to particular beliefs or ideologies in conducting research and should always avoid presenting personal views. However, paying attention to the political environment and considerations and presenting clear options that harmonise the various interests, while upholding ethical values remains a

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[6] Government of Uganda 2014. Five -Year Strategic Plan for the Parliament of Uganda 2014 – 2018. Fostering Parliamentary democracy and people-centered sustainable development. Government Printer. Kampala, Uganda.

challenge. This is more so when legislative research findings are in direct conflict with a given political ideologies.

(3) Changing function of Parliament: Emergency of the Committees as the engine rooms of legislation and oversight

In Uganda, like the world over, the increasing complexity of parliamentary work has led to an increasing role of parliamentary Committees as the engine rooms of legislation and oversight. In their legislative role, parliamentary committees need reliable and timely information to monitor issues, develop policy solutions, predict consequences, and influence government decision-making.

Parliament in Uganda has three categories of functional committees, namely: standing, sessional and select committees. At present it has 12 standing committees, 13 sessional committees and 3 select committees. The standing committees are constituted two times during the life span of the Parliament. Sessional committees are constituted at the beginning of every Parliament session while select committees are constituted as and when need arises. Each committee is made up of 20 Members of Parliament, a Chairperson and Vice Chairperson designated by the Chief Whips and Whips of the Parties represented in the House.

The oversight function of Standing Committees is conducted with support from the technical departments of the Parliamentary Service. In strengthening the exercise of this role, opposition MPs chair Accountability Committees. Out of the 30 committees in the Parliament of Uganda, four of the accountability committees are led by the Opposition. These are: the Public Accounts Committee (PAC); the Local Government Public Accounts Committee (LGAC), the Committee on Commissions, Statutory Authorities and State Enterprises (COSASE) and the Committee on Government Assurances (CGA).

Committees in Uganda Parliament are tasked with scrutinizing government budgets, ministerial policy statements, and examining the performance of government agencies. They also tasked to perform the oversight function by conducting investigations. To be able to do this, the Committees rely on information generated by government agencies (line ministries) as well as by accountability state institutions, especially the Office of the Auditor General and the Inspectorate of Government.

Challenges to research and documentation services

The emergency of parliamentary Committees as the engine rooms of legislation and oversight has posed a number of challenges for legislative research and information services:

- ➢ Committees need objective, specialized and localized information to monitor the success of ongoing programmes and to identify areas of weakness; which information, however, that so often cannot be randomly collected in an environment where there are few independent research institutions and hardly any independent think tank or from any other source, but requires objective research.

- ➢ Committees' need for independent information is even greater in a context like Uganda's, where government is not only the gatekeeper of information relevant to policy-making, but also where such information is unreliable; and where few non-governmental alternatives exist. In Uganda, government is the major source of information, and sometimes such information is not reliable, and thus limits committees' ability to hold governments to account.

➤ Committees are overloaded with information and reports from different sources - lobbyists, the media, the Internet and academia - some of it irrelevant or misleading - and rely on parliamentary research and libraries services to find the accurate, relevant and objective information essential for decision-making.

➤ Committees find themselves faced with an imbalance of power in terms of research and information *vis-a-vis* the Executive arm. While the Executive branch has a lot of support from a large professional staff from the Ministries, Departments and Agencies, Parliament has not had enough that kind of support. Yet the research and library services are expected to bridge this gap of expertise and ensure that MPs and committees have access to accurate and up-to-date information to ensure proper oversight on the executive's performance.

3. The response of Research Services

The Uganda parliamentary Research Services have tried to adapt to the changing environment, although considerable gap and challenges remain. The evolution and innovations to respond to the information and documentation needs of the changing Parliament in Uganda have not involved a revamp or many entirely new services, but rather new approaches to old services – that is to say – finding ways to meet client demand and achieve better quality or increased efficiency, as well as small changes to existing services and which have produced some good value.

In order to meet the above needs, research services have had to evolve and innovated to respond to the information and documentation needs of members in the following ways and with mixed results:

(i) **Creation of an independent and interdisciplinary Research team:** In order to adapt to a rapidly changing Parliament in terms of size, as earlier indicated, the Research division was in October 2012 upgraded to department status, separate from the department of library, although working very closely. This was in order to provide optimum professional research support to an expanding Parliament.

The new department has two functional divisions - *Finance & Economy division* – responsible for generation of information and data on Finance and Economy, Science and Technology issues; and the *Social Services division*- which is responsible for generation of information and data on social, legal and political sectors of the economy and society for Parliament. The two divisions are further divided into sections -Finance and Economy, Science and Technology, Statistics, Social Development, as well as the Legal and Political sections – each headed by a principal research officer expert in the respective field.

This has been followed by an expanded recruitment of research officers from 21 in the year 2004 to the current number of 39 researchers. These are tasked to provide nonpartisan, objective analysis & well-researched information to committees, members, and senior staff. This is a multidisciplinary team with technical orientation and with qualifications and skills that mirror the critical sectors of the Government of the Republic of Uganda and over which Parliament exercises oversight. The team includes social scientists, political scientists, lawyers, economists, accountants, statisticians, environmental scientists, agro-business officers, engineers, and oil and gas scientists as well as education and gender specialists.

The creation of an independent research department and putting in place an expanded interdisciplinary research skills staff bases has gone some distance in meeting the research needs

of Parliament. However, the ever-increasing size of parliament leaves legislative research services with an ever-increasing need to
Expand or otherwise innovate, to cope with rapid the expansion and other dynamics associated with representation.

Regarding Parliament being increasingly made up of representatives with varying backgrounds and expertise, with many members elected not on the basis of skill but to best represent their interests, research services are phasing out lengthy, in-depth research papers in favour of more concise and simpler briefing materials and fact sheets .   Legislative research services are also trying to adapt and work closely with clients to better understand and meet their information and knowledge needs. We now emphasize the value of meeting clients one on one and asked to fill out research request forms – clarifying their information requests and how they want data presented.

(ii) **Enhanced technical support to committees:** In order to address the issue of the changing nature and demands of Parliament work through Committees, technical research officers have been assigned to each of Parliament's 28 standing (13), sessional (15) committees. Besides working together as a section, at least each of the officers is assigned to a committee of his specialty.

The researchers are tasked to conduct quality research and offer technical advice to Committees, conduct studies on new Bills and policies to inform committees, provide technical briefings and advice to Committees on, among other things, allocation of resources, accountability and Government assurances; support Committees in conducting investigations, and to conduct monitoring and evaluation studies on government policies and programmes in order to support Committees' oversight work.

The trend toward subject-area specialization as the work of supporting parliamentary committees has enabled us to provide more focused and technical support to the committees. Committees are, however, increasingly making challenging research requests, such as non-partisan evaluations of government programmes and projects, value for money audits, etc., and at shorter notice. Although circumstances have improved, there are still unmet committee information needs. The need for access to expertise in both research methods and subject matter to produce rigorous and objective assessments remains. Greater competencies are required by research services to provide better value for our parliamentary clients, but there are limited resources and expertise, which affects the provision of quality service.

(iii) **Capacity building for research staff:** We've had to train and build a skills base in two critical areas, namely - **systematic scientific skills** and **creative skills**. The goal is to build the capacity to deliver sustained support tailored to the specific information requirements of our parliamentary clients. The scientific skills have included equipping research staff with abilities in clarification of ideas and the development of standardized procedures for collecting and analyzing legislative data. The skills are now being used in carrying out competent and creative research.

The scientific skills include the following: (a) information structuring - skills to sharpen the legislative researcher's ability to clarify ideas; information-collection skills - equipping the legislative researchers with approaches and tools for making accurate observations of persons, objects, or events; and information-analysis – equipping legislative researchers with the ability to draw conclusions from empirical evidence. The **creative skills** have involved training researchers to apply the basics of 'policy analyses' to generate relevant information for law making and

informing policy choices; thereby equipping them with critical thinking and critical analysis of issues.

Despite bridging the skills gap, the ever increasing demand by Committees for in-depth and expert analyses and debate of issues is putting pressure on Parliamentary research and information services to continually have upgraded and requisite researching skills. A turnover of experienced Parliamentary staff to higher paying research organizations, but whom the Service has taken considerable resources to train further complicate the issue.

There is need to further develop strategies to support the evolution of parliamentary research services so that they can provide more value for our Parliamentary clients.

(iv)   **By providing continuous ethical training to research staff** to provide information that is impartial and unbiased, the Research services have provided part of the solution increased partisan political competition that often puts legislative research findings in conflict with partisan interests. We've further worked to position the Research service as impartial as possible. Our goal has been to position Parliamentary Research services as a one-stop shop for non-partisan information and knowledge, synthesized from different sources, and covering the full range of public policy and institutional memory.

Despite such efforts, some in the Opposition see legislative researchers more as pro-Executive, while some on the side of the ruling party see legislative researchers more as pro-Opposition.

In a rapidly changing environment, legislative research services continue to be faced with an ever-increasing need to absorb new ways of dealing with partisan political competition, as parliamentary democracy emerges at different speeds, in different contexts like ours. We will be glad to learn comparatively from a wide range of international perspectives and experiences in developing and implementing successful and innovative strategies to address this challenge.

4. Lessons learnt

- Legislative Research services are being provided in a political environment that is dynamic in contexts like ours. If they are to remain relevant and effective, legislative Research services must deal with the dynamic Parliamentary political and institutional environment, as it leads to equally profound changes in the research needs and demands of our Parliamentary clients.

- Dealing with a dynamic Parliamentary political and institutional environment requires, among other things, building Parliamentary Research capacity to deliver high-quality research and information services to a diversity of Parliamentarians and committees, and in an impartial, objective and politically sensitive way.

- **Systematic scientific** and **creative skills are required of research and information officers** to be able to deliver sustained support tailored to the specific information requirements of our parliamentary clients in such a dynamic environment.

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