CONCEPTUALIZING CAPACITY BUILDING NETWORKS FOR AFRICAN PARLIAMENTS

Any capacity building initiatives for African Parliaments should be firmly anchored on each country's historical and cultural circumstances involving not only its political culture but also the ability of its institutions and people to manage development on its own in a smooth, efficient and sustainable way. In this context, therefore, the challenge for capacity building for Parliaments lies not in training people or strengthening organizations per se. More importantly, it has to deal with complex, rather intangible things such as changing norms, values, political culture, social capital and incentives. To be sure, the recent hesitant pace of development in most African countries may not always be the lack of capacity that is the problem, but the inappropriate use or neglect of the available capacity. The ineffective and inefficient capacity utilization for development could, at times, be a significant part of the problem. This unfortunate policy management predicament calls for a deliberate re-orientation of national and sub-regional political cultures that celebrate the norms of democratic governance, transparency and accountability.

One of the unconventional mechanisms for strengthening institutional capacity of Parliaments in developing countries has found expression in the creation and promotion of operational networks at the national, sub-regional, regional and international levels. Networking is a process designed to foster institutional development and technical capacities. It involves collaboration and cooperation among partner institutions and individuals in sharing information and experiences on current and emerging issues.

The express purpose of parliamentary networks is for parliaments and parliamentarians to learn from their peers of other countries and regions. The learning process includes the exchanging of knowledge, comparing of notes, sharing of experiences of best practices and nurturing the professional solidarity necessary to confront mutual challenges. The underlying rationale for sharing and exchanging knowledge and experiences essentially arose from four basic imperatives. Firstly, the vast knowledge that is globally available may not always be easily accessible to some African Parliamentarians and Parliaments. Worse still, what may be even readily available in African libraries may be rarely professionally repackaged into user-friendly, non-technical briefs for an averagely educated Parliamentarian. Such tough policy choices call for a designedly mobilization of resources to support African Parliaments in professional knowledge management. This organic process would include creating knowledge, preserving knowledge, using knowledge and sharing knowledge across national borders.

Secondly, parliamentary debates and oversight duties cover a wide range of subject matter. In this sense, therefore, particularly all new members, regardless of their academic and professional accomplishments, need to be systematically exposed not only to standard Parliamentary rules and procedures, but equally importantly, to specialized knowledge on pertinent issues such as HIV/AIDS, regional cooperation and integration, globalization, international terrorism, unethical conduct and corruption, debt management, national resource mobilization and expenditures and the like. There is, therefore, a compelling need for a purposively resource mobilization to establish, manage and execute structured, regionally-based training programs that consciously encourage and nurture networking and knowledge and experience sharing initiatives for Parliaments and Parliamentarians.

Thirdly, effective and efficient Parliaments are usually serviced by adequately supplied infrastructures of research and documentation. The rationale behind this claim is that knowledge is, or at least, it should be an essential component of a badly needed evidence-based policy management in any poverty-stricken developing countries. The urgent call to mobilize international resources to support Parliamentary research units and documentation can hardly be overemphasized. Enhanced research capacities (in-house and/or subcontracted to national and regional think tanks and universities) are likely to improve and expand the access to quality information that is critical to parliamentary interventions in policy debates and oversight functions. Moreover, only strengthened national and sub-regional parliamentary research units would be expected to venture into forming dense sub-regional information sharing networks and partnerships that would, in turn, generate significant multiplier effects on the effectiveness of parliaments, governments and the civil society organizations.

Fourthly, through network-organized study visits, meetings and conferences, leaders of Parliaments get the opportunity of exchanging experiences. Such meetings are usually considered critical knowledge tools through which Parliamentarians and senior staffers shape, nurture and share democratic norms, values, experiences and standards. However, most parliaments in Africa tend to set aside miniscule budgets to facilitate such study tours, work attachments, twinning arrangements and indeed for only a handful senior MPs and staffers. There is, therefore an urgent need to mobilize resources to support formally structured, network-based learning visits in order to strengthen the capacity of African parliaments. Additional resources will facilitate not only increased study visits but also increased number of participating members.

Finally, although most parliaments in Africa have created websites, the information posted is usually limited, basic, static and often outdated. Worse still, most parliaments have yet to fully grasp the benefits of information and communication technology (ITC). Ideally, this very important tool should be exploited to improve research methods and communication among parliaments and among parliamentarians, and between parliaments, the executive branches and the civil society. It has the capacity to promote a more open, network-based working and learning environment by encouraging, for example, Speakers or special Committee Chairs and Vice-Chairs to draw the attention members and relevant civil society groups to global best practices posted on specific websites and request their respective comments. In this regard, too, there is an urgent need to mobilize adequate resources to support not only massive training of MPs and their staffers in ITC use, but equally importantly, to support structured, sub-regionally-based e-parliament initiatives. The East African Legislative Assembly and the SADC PF would serve as sub-regional hubs for e-parliament networks. They will serve as the clearinghouses for information, knowledge, data banks, best policies and practices. All these networks, individually and collectively, would go a long way toward improving the capacity of African Parliaments and in revolutionalizing their respective political cultures.

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