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# **Parliamentary networking as an instrument of capacity building: insights from East Africa**

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| 5

## **Abstract**

This study investigates the effectiveness of parliamentary networks in East Africa as a tool for capacity building. Given the circumstances prevailing in most African parliaments, there is growing consensus supporting the view that networks are one of the key capacity building instruments on the continent. To the extent that there are no dedicated formal colleges to train parliamentarians and parliamentary staff for their multiple functions, networking with sister institutions does serve as one critical mechanism for exchanging and sharing information, knowledge and internationally-acknowledged best practices in order to enhance institutional and individual capacities.

**Key words:** parliament, institutions, networking, capacity building, governance.

## **Introduction**

The available institutional and organizational capacity of parliaments in Africa tends to be insufficient, given the scope of their constitutional mandates. In principle, parliaments are regarded as the primary democratic institution through which the will of the people is made manifest, and they play a critical role in advancing social and political values that benefit all members *of a* community. They are mandated to oversee and keep the executive branch under control and under constant surveillance. In practice, however, parliaments tend to lack the requisite power and capacity to fully and effectively realize these mandates. For most of the first three decades of independence, Africa saw power move inexorably toward the executive branch and away from

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parliament, the judiciary and other national bodies of restraint (Ayee, 2003; Salih, 2005).

However, beginning in the early 1990s, a new wave of political liberalization and democratization began to sweep across the entire continent. In country after country, autocratic civilian governments and military regimes have been replaced with popularly elected governments. Moreover, citizens have begun to demand that their leaders be accountable and competent, and that they serve with integrity, honesty and commitment. The re-activated institutional structures and arrangements for democratic governance are gradually becoming part of the dominant constitutional discourse (Barkan et al. 2007; Wang, 2007). Related to this trend, donor support policies and programs are strategically tying development assistance resources to progress toward “good governance” by the recipient governments. More significantly, the growth of civil society organizations in both number and sophistication is pushing the role of parliament and the practice of popular participation to the political centre stage.

This study constitutes a preliminary attempt to ascertain the ability of parliaments to institutionalize networking as a tool of capacity building. The broad research question that guided the study was: how do ideas, norms, institutions and practices diffuse within one country (or between a group of countries) under the rubric of capacity building? It is to be noted that capacity building is a phrase used by development specialists to describe myriad efforts by development partners to assist developing countries to improve their governance processes. To examine the impact of networking on the effectiveness of parliaments, three specific questions informed the types of information we collected, and which institutions and actors we interviewed. First, we asked our respondents the extent to which inter-parliamentary networking had been recognized as an efficient *instrument* of capacity building. Second, we wanted to find out what challenges these incipient, and often inchoate parliaments were facing in institutionalizing networking as a tool for self-renewal and consolidation. Third, we sought to establish what institutional arrangements should be put in place to minimize the costs and maximize the benefits of networking. In answering these questions, special attention was paid to the role played by parliamentary leaders, reform-minded parliamentarians, professional staff, and civil society

activists in facilitating and/or obstructing networking initiatives. Their perceptions, impressions, perspectives and official policies and strategies formed the basis for our interpretation and analysis.

The article is divided into five parts. Following the introduction, *Part Two* is a discussion on why parliaments in Africa have uniformly adopted the concept and practice of inter-parliamentary networking. *Part Three examines* the structure and functions of two dominant parliamentary networking systems, namely the South-South networks and the North-South networks, as well as parliamentary networking through ICT. The far-reaching spin-offs from different parliamentary networking practices on institutional and individual capacity development in East Africa are discussed in *Part Four*. Finally, in *Part Five*, we present our conclusions.

### **Why Institutionalize Parliamentary Networks?**

It is worth remembering that historically, the weak capacity of parliaments in Africa is deeply rooted in political systems that tend to privilege the executive branch, a democratic culture that is typically weak, and the very limited capacity of the members of parliament (MPs) themselves. It has become an increasingly common practice to resort to inter-parliamentary knowledge-sharing networks as one of the basic tools for capacity building in Africa, due to the near absence of formal training institutions for MPs and parliamentary staffers in Africa, as well as the very high parliamentary election turnover, the weak knowledge base for a good crop of MPs and acute resource constraints. Parliamentary networking activities involve strategic collaboration and cooperation arrangements for producing, sharing and exchanging information, experiences and best practices in order to enhance institutional and individual capacities.

Three arguments are traditionally advanced in support of investing in parliamentary networking. First, the overriding objective of networking is to enable participating organizations and private individuals to learn what actually works elsewhere, what does not work, and what can and cannot be easily changed. The second argument is that networking initiatives enable participants to avoid the easy temptation to continue to pursuing mistaken policies, processes, and flawed parliamentary practices under the sheer weight of inertia. Third, the gradual adoption of information

and communication technology (ICT), one of instruments of networking, has demonstrated a huge potential for cutting operational costs, increasing economies of scale, and accessing more information than in traditional face-to-face encounters. Equally importantly, ICT has enabled civil society organizations to become part of a broader parliamentary knowledge-sharing loop. Surprisingly enough, holistic strategies for correcting parliamentary capacity deficits urgently, comprehensively, and effectively have remained singularly elusive in Africa in general, and in East Africa in particular (Andersson, 2002).

Although the imperative of evidence-based policy management in African parliaments should be taken seriously, its effective demand tends to be dismally low. For the four parliaments under study, policy and legislative processes were found to be largely a function of political expediency, rather than a carefully calculated rational choice. Unsurprisingly, resource allocations to critical knowledge management departments such as libraries and research, ICT, and international collaboration, almost always tended to get the barest minimum budgetary attention. While knowledge is always expensive to produce, adapt and use, resources devoted to these important departments in the East African parliaments have declined from year to year. Even though operating resources for these important department within parliaments are a tiny fraction of those parliaments' annual budgets, more often than not, they tended to be one of the first items to be pruned at every budget exercise, and/or if initially allocated sizeable resources, they were later re-allocated to the so-called other "pressing" activities of the parliaments. As a result, the units responsible for knowledge production and exchange were perennially characterized by a dire need of resources and by a poorly institutionalized knowledge sharing tradition.

Furthermore, other than the acquisition and use of daily national newspapers, all three parliaments under study have modest library spaces stocked with only a limited collection of books, journals and magazines. Books are few and out-dated, and in some cases where books and journals were available, they are simply useless bundles since the key articles or chapters have been ripped out. Based on our limited observations, it would appear that parliamentary libraries in East Africa could hardly serve as serious resource bases. They are primarily used as meeting places for MPs rather than as accessible repositories of

knowledge, new or otherwise. Worse still, all professional librarians and researchers we interviewed complained about very tight budgets for new acquisitions, irregular training programs, and poor participation in professional networking conferences, meetings, visits or attachments. Above all, parliamentary libraries in East Africa depend largely on irregular book and magazine donations from inter-library information exchange programs originating in the global North. Such unsolicited acquisitions are neither particularly useful nor sustainable.

## **The Structure of South-South Networks**

The strategic networking partner institutions for East African national parliaments are usually far-flung international institutions. The dominant networking paradigm, policies and practices in East Africa have historically tended to privilege inter-parliamentary collaboration with the global North. Often the South-South cooperation has been dismissed, discredited and marginalized. This embedded practice was essentially informed by the mistaken claim that there was, in fact, little that one could learn from sister institutions in the immediate African neighborhoods. It was also claimed that neighboring parliamentary and other institutions had gone through similar experiences and faced similar challenges. As would be expected, capacity building through information and knowledge networks in the region, though regular, has remained virtually unstructured, and the official sharing and exchanging of print parliamentary information and best practices has been largely *ad hoc*, informal and unsystematic. More specifically, there are few formal collaboration documents such as inter-parliamentary agreements or memoranda of understanding among East African parliaments. Nor has there been systematic budgeting for sub-regional networking activities. (Rugumamu, 2008).

The above claims would sound quite strange at first blush. However, misconceptions about the viability of South-South networks have had far-reaching consequences for the formation and development of parliamentary networks everywhere in the global South. First, professional associations of parliamentarians and parliamentary staff in the sub-region tend to be a rarity. There are virtually no equivalents of the Association of Presiding Officers, Clerks-at-the-Table, or the Association of Parliamentary Counsels. Second, there are even fewer

formal collaboration arrangements between East African parliamentary staffers and other parliaments elsewhere, other than those with India and South Africa. In fact, even the little parliamentary research output produced in the global South is mostly unavailable and inaccessible as a result of the selection criteria imposed by northern citation indices. Sadly, all this has taken place despite the fact that dense face-to-face South-South networking initiatives would be cheaper, their accumulated experiences are relatively similar, and they would benefit a larger number of participants (Carothers, 1999; World Bank, 2003; Rugumamu, 2007).

As Norman Girvan has succinctly concluded, the predominance of South-North parliamentary collaboration is a clear manifestation of both the psychological legacy of colonial rule in Africa and a reflection of power imbalances in knowledge as expressed in Northern dominance in its production, reproduction and dissemination (Girvan, 2007). Whereas, the colonial education tended to exalt the “civilizing” force of imperialism and devalue the “native” (whether that meant people, culture or knowledge), externally produced knowledge, claiming universal applicability, continues to condition what the global South tends to believe is necessary, desirable, possible and acceptable. By the same distorted logic, capacity building and institutional development in the global South would therefore require a systematic and gradual assimilation of the culture, values and norms of the global North. Other critics assail the adoption of “democracy templates” which are rooted in specific alien historical experiences, with little, if any, direct relevance to the concrete democratization problems of developing countries (Carothers, 1999). Indeed, what works for one parliament at one time may fail to work in another parliament at the same time or even in the same parliament at a different time. As such, one may legitimately claim that there are virtually no universally applicable prescriptive principles regarding “best practices”!

### **Structure of North-South Networks**

Parliaments have a long tradition of bilateral and multilateral cooperation on many levels and on a wide array of subjects. While the South-South parliamentary networks tend to be largely informal and meanly budgeted programs, North-South partnerships are usually structured, statutory,



robust, and have dedicated annual budget lines designated in foreign exchange as well as supplemented with membership fees. Typically, Northern parliamentary organizations are defined by long and checkered histories, with a global reach and accessible to a wider range of critical resources including finance, accumulated institutional knowledge and top-flight expertise. In the critical area of knowledge production and dissemination, for example, partner organizations in the global North are also linked to major universities, think-tanks and scientific institutes. As professional associations, international parliamentary bodies routinely advocate and press for selected changes in values, norms and practices to become part of the prevailing conventional wisdom. These bodies include, but are not limited to, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA), the Union of African Parliaments (UAP), the Joint EU-ACP Parliament, and the Association of European Parliamentarians for Africa (AWEPA). There are also parliamentary networks created and supported by the United Nations and the World Bank. All parliaments in East Africa, both national and regional, are members of all these structured networks (World Bank, 2003; Toye and Toye, 2005).

However, due to chronic resource constraints, such international networking activities and events tend to engage only a very limited number of participants from the global South. The experiences of Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania reveal that for every delegation of three MPs, there is usually one professional accompanying them to record the minutes. Moreover, in an earlier study, this author arrived at a similar conclusion when he noted that in most knowledge networking events, particularly those involving face-to-face meetings, conferences, symposia or workshops, they tended to be overly monopolized by the political leadership of parliaments (e.g. speakers, clerks and committee chairs). Then as now, we strongly recommended that since professional staffers are the knowledge backbones of parliaments, their weak participation in these knowledge networking initiatives puts East African parliaments at a very great operational disadvantage.

### **Parliamentary Networking through ICT**

ICT has become an essential tool for supporting many functions of parliamentary bodies throughout the world. It is a strategic and vital

resource at the service of parliaments. However, despite a global surge in ICT diffusion in recent years, the rate of adoption and use across countries differs considerably. Africa is perhaps the only continent in the world where ICT diffusion and use has witnessed dismal growth. For many citizens, the primary sources of information about their parliament remain TV broadcasts, radio programs and print media. The global digital divide is a real specter on the continent of Africa! Particularly with regard to sub-Saharan Africa, the sub-continent lags severely in ICT adoption and diffusion, despite the enormous benefits that other countries have enjoyed. As Gudrun Kochendofer-Lucius observes, 90 percent of all internet users are living in developed countries, and more than half the internet users worldwide (about 57 percent) are from the U.S., although the U.S. has only 5 percent of the world's population. Asia accounts for 17 percent of all internet users, South America for 2 percent and Africa for 0.7 percent (Kochendofer-Lucius 2000). The factors that hinder ICT growth and development in Africa are already legend. They include poor infrastructure, a fragile business environment, risk averse socio-cultural values, poverty, illiteracy and a lack of appreciation by top policy makers of the economic importance of this new communications tool (Sibanda and Musisi-Edebe, 2000).

ICT offers unparalleled opportunities for accessing and using information, managing knowledge and sharing resources among individuals and communities. Access to information and knowledge sharing have helped parliaments in developing African countries to connect and network globally, learn about and follow up on national and international legal frameworks and laws, sustain inter-parliamentary dialogue, foster parliamentary networks on global issues, and maintain more effective linkages and consultations with their local constituencies. The resulting benefits have included less corruption, increased transparency, greater convenience and cost reductions. Rather than re-invent the wheel, East African parliaments now have the opportunity to acquire and adapt much of the global stock of knowledge already available in rich Western countries, using electronic means. Most importantly, as communications costs plummet, the business of transferring and adapting some of the existing knowledge has become cheaper than ever. However, a significant proportion of our interviewees claimed that the pace of modernization of the parliaments in East Africa had bogged down, partly due to the deep-rooted distrust of resource

sharing using ICT and sensitivity with respect to government secrets, but also due to the lack of appreciation of the critical role that ICT plays in promoting management efficiency. As a result, the process of re-engineering and modernizing in East\_African parliaments has been relatively slow and often hesitant.

Through parliamentary networking with more developed parliaments, peer pressure and donor encouragement, almost all parliaments in the sub-region have gradually adopted ICT instruments to modernize parliamentary processes and improve their dialogue with citizens. They have begun making a steady but modest use of ICT in some of their business tasks, including the creation of websites. However, most of the dominant information management systems are largely manual, ineffective and inefficient. They are often poorly documented, unintegrated and cumbersome to use. As noted earlier, most of the networking among African parliaments takes place mainly on paper or by telephone, and rarely electronically transmitted. More often than not, professional exchange of ideas and best practices takes place informally at conferences or seminars where people swap ideas and experiences (Rugumamu, 2007).

By the time of this study, the adoption and use of ICT had gradually begun to be seen as a strategic and vital resource for all four East African parliaments. In varying degrees, they had all invested incrementally in ICT infrastructure, training and awareness raising. At the networking level, modest investments have gone a long way toward the training of IT experts and MPs, development of parliamentary websites, automation of some basic functions such as routine secretarial work, Internet use, budgets, parliamentary acts and document management systems, members of parliament profile database systems, session management systems, and bill tracking systems. By making the best use of well-functioning ICT systems, parliamentary professionals in the sub-region were gradually and routinely sharing knowledge, information, experiences and best practices with fellow professionals in the sub-region and beyond.

It was also reported that parliaments were resorting to video conferencing facilities, visiting each other's websites, and organizing the routine exchange of bills, parliamentary committee reports, white papers

and various pieces of information about laws and pending legislation. This may explain why similar acts were passed throughout East Africa during the same period. These included, among others, the Administration of Parliament Bill (delinking parliament from the executive), HIV/AIDS (Prevention and Control Act), the Electricity Bill (liberalizing the power sector), and the National Prosecution Bill (transferring prosecution activities from the Police Force to the Director of Prosecution). Our interviewees also observed that having access to such information and such technologies has significantly increased the capacity of staff and MPs in East Africa to address complex policy issues, and to develop effective legislation follow-on and follow-up. Furthermore, as more citizens turn to the Web for information about the work of their governments, their legislators and elected officials, these citizens grow disgusted, because the posted information turns out to be scanty, dated and usually not user-friendly (Rugumamu, 2007).

### **Networking Spin-offs: Delinking Parliament from the Executive**

After the re-introduction of multi-party politics in East Africa, parliaments have passed legislation that has steadily enhanced their institutional autonomy and gradually limited the powers of the executive. Thanks largely to a regularized exchange of parliamentary delegations, goodwill parliamentary missions, correspondence, and sharing of documents with sister institutions, all this has become possible. By borrowing a leaf from the “success stories” of parliamentary autonomy in European, Indian and South African state governance systems, the three national parliaments have struggled to establish parliamentary service commissions in order to institutionalize their respective autonomy and promote effectiveness. But how can we recognize an autonomous and institutionalized parliament when we see one? What verifiable indicators of autonomy and effectiveness should one look for? Several students of legislative affairs have developed concepts and measures to facilitate the cross-national comparison of legislative functions and behavior.

Nelson W. Polsby (1968) proposes that an institutionalized parliament is characterized by the establishment of well-defined boundaries, the growth of internal complexity, and the adoption of universal criteria and

automated methods of internal decision-making. The boundaries that separate the representative assembly from the rest of the political system should be clear and hardened. Moreover, institutionalized parliaments should be autonomous and structurally distinct from other political institutions and social groups, with very clear roles. Finally, their decisions should carry a separate meaning and force. Supporting the same line of argument, Joel D. Barkan and colleagues (2007) have proposed the need for supportive resources autonomy. The power of parliament to control the resources needed to function effectively and efficiently is considered a strong indicator of the independence of the legislature as a distinct branch of government, and an indirect means of assessing parliamentary authority. More pointedly, other writers such as John Carey et al. (1999) and Gerhard Loewenberg (2002) have suggested four specific criteria to gauge the level of autonomy of the parliament vis-à-vis the executive branch. They include: control of its own agenda, the capacity to acquire and analyze information independently of other political institutions, the capacity of the committee system to challenge the executive, and ability to pass legislation in opposition to the will of the executive. We have adopted these operational criteria to analyze the impact of recent developments in East African parliaments.

Reference has already been made to the fact that under pressure from executive branches, parliaments in East Africa systematically and repeatedly voted to revoke their own parliamentary privilege that had enabled them to act autonomously. They became so dominated and penetrated by outside forces, such as executives or political parties, that it was almost impossible to speak of them as having any autonomy as organizations, and therefore as institutions. The process of re-inventing parliaments in East Africa was inaugurated by the passage of almost similar landmark legislation in the Administration of Parliament Acts of Tanzania (1997), Uganda (1997) and Kenya (1999). More specifically, this legislation sought to create and expand the space for parliaments to act as “autonomous” policy makers and legislators. Prior to this, parliamentary affairs were directly controlled by the president’s office and their respective staff and budgets were run from that office. Parliamentary salaries, benefits and budgets were set by the executive. Similarly, parliamentary personnel were members of the public service.

These landmark laws established that parliaments would administer themselves. The Office of the Chairperson of the Commission was to be directly responsible to the parliament rather than to the president. Each Commission became a body corporate, and each parliament assumed the power to determine its own agenda and development plans and budgets. The respective Acts also establish a National Assembly Fund to “pay for all expenses that might be incurred under the Act”. In the words of one leading Kenyan parliamentary activist, Wanyiri Kihoro, “the three East African parliaments are now able to plan and draw budgets as the first charge on the Consolidated Fund” (Kihoro, 2007:8).

The Acts also provided for the establishment of an independent Parliamentary Service and a Parliamentary Service Commission to which the Service would be accountable. Commissions have the power and resources to recruit, hire, promote, fire and/or discipline staff. Viewed retrospectively, in the long run such incremental institutional autonomy is likely to promote a non-partisan professional administrative service. Interview and documentary research evidence drawn from all three national parliaments revealed that the legal provisions of the Parliamentary Service Commission established a very significant milestone in the implementation of the principles of separation of powers, and checks and balances. Although having the authority over funds and getting them are not the same, our interviewees reported that the treasuries in the three countries have consistently not paid parliaments all that they requested. Yet, in our view, they have begun a long and tough journey toward independence and full institutional development. They have gained significant autonomy not only over their budgets and staffing, but also the ability to work directly with a dense network of actors outside of parliaments (e.g. civil society organizations, the private sector and international development partners) without looking over their shoulders at the executive branch.

This historic legislation not only heralded a long and protracted struggle of ‘delinking’ parliaments from the executive branch, but they have also triggered a series of other significant democratic reforms in the region. Learning from the Indian Parliament, parliamentary commissions in East Africa have put in place robust internal institutional frameworks to support the building of parliamentary autonomy and effectiveness. Such strategies include: upgrading the quality committee systems, hiring the

best and brightest parliamentary staffers, and integrating civil society actors into their day-to-day operations. Moreover, they have established predictable procedures for holding public hearings on proposed legislation at which cabinet ministers, senior civil servants and representatives of civil society are questioned. According to the officials we interviewed, the three parliaments have developed almost identical committee systems with stable memberships, distinct jurisdictions, and specialized expertise. These have taken control over the legislative agenda and voting rules. Equally importantly, commissions are not simply hiring the best professionals, but they are also improving the quality of their working conditions. With more autonomy and resources, national parliaments in the sub-region have emerged as one of the key and assertive governance players. Not infrequently, they have passed the litmus test of debating and passing bills despite serious executive branch objections (Cassidy, 2000).

Finally, as emerging autonomous institutions with significant donor support, the three parliamentary commissions have each developed their own long-term strategic plans. The commissions have also developed strategic working partnerships with their respective executive branches. Kenya's 12-Year Strategic Plan (2000-2012), for example, focuses on reforming the staff establishment, raising salaries and benefits, acquisition of a modern library, upgrading research resources, and instituting sweeping institutional reforms to create a functioning legislative and oversight machine. Besides its own internal resources, which were significantly raised, the Kenyan Parliamentary Commission also applied and received considerable international donor support. Since 2002, each Kenyan M.P. has had his or her own fully furnished office, and the number of committee rooms has been increased. Similarly, new procedures to meet the growing expectations for transparency and for projecting an accurate external image have been developed. Such initiatives have included the establishment of a Public Relations Office to bridge the huge communication gap between the parliament and the people. Two such initiatives include telecasting live parliamentary proceedings and other important events, as well as the development of a parliamentary newsletter, named "Bunge" and other related publications to educate the general public on parliament, its history and functions. In the process, opposition party leaders on the respective parliamentary commissions have negotiated and agreed on

ways to develop their institution by resolving lingering conflicts and often divisive political issues (Nakamura and Johnson, 2003).

### **Spin-offs of Networking: Enhanced Oversight Capacity**

In their oversight functions, parliaments monitor the activities of the executive for efficiency, probity, transparency, and fidelity in order to ensure that appropriated funds are used legally, effectively and for the purpose for which they were intended. In fiscal matters, the majority of our interviewees confirmed that parliaments in East Africa were largely marginalized by their respective executive branches, from the drawing up of the budget, debating and approving the budget, to how approved resources are finally used. Until very recently, the formal budget-making powers did not provide for debating, accepting or rejecting the executive branch's proposed budget. All constitutions, except that of Uganda, did not provide for changing the budget. As was argued earlier, the consequences of rejecting the budget could be too troubling to contemplate, including the dissolution of parliament and calling for new elections.

Even without considering the worst possible scenario, the parliaments under study lacked the internal expertise to discuss the proposed budget intelligently and analytically. Usually, national plans and budgets have been presented in intimidatingly thick volumes, in language that is complex in argumentation and too difficult for uneducated minds to understand. Furthermore, it was always the executive branch that determined for how long the Public Accounts Committee would meet, what kinds of information would be made available to them, which ones would be classified as "confidential" for security reasons, and the extent to which they could engage in public hearings or hire short-term experts to assist them in analyzing the budget. Surely, the respective committees missed the opportunity of debating and assessing the welfare implications of military and security expenditures on health, education and poverty reduction. Arguably, the role of parliaments in the entire budgetary process remained virtually ritualistic (Rugumamu, 2007).

Slowly but inexorably, the implementation of the oversight function began to change as well. With the adoption of common World Bank-



supported Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) in all East African countries, the passage of the Parliamentary Administration Act, the strengthening of supreme audit institutions, and by adopting various best practices from India, the U.S.A. and South Africa, the role of parliaments in the participatory governance process gradually assumed an increasingly central role. Without directly targeting parliaments, PSRPs, for example, require that the economic policy should be developed, implemented and evaluated through a mutual dialogue between key actors. They also require public access to tentative medium-term spending plans through the Medium-Term Expenditure Framework budgets. These novel participatory openings were imaginatively appropriated by parliaments to assert their oversight function in a more detailed and critical fashion than ever before. The Act also brought in new actors and reconfigured relations among old actors in these parliaments. Moreover, in Uganda such developments triggered the adoption of one of the most progressive policies in this regard with the passing of the Budget Act of 2001, which substantially increased parliament's budgetary powers. With a quorum of one-third, parliament can change the national budget. Above all, the work sessions of the Uganda Public Accounts Committee are open to the press, officials from the supreme audit institution, the Accountant General's Office and the Criminal Investigation Department. The Act seeks to enhance parliament's ability to shape the budget rather than keeping it secret until the day of the official budget speech.

At the time of undertaking this research in 2007, parliaments in both Tanzania and Kenya were putting in place common and harmonized scrutiny structures. In 2003, one Kenyan M.P. introduced a private member bill seeking to establish the Parliamentary Budget Office. These are significant assertive developments that one would not have predicted only two decades

### **The spin-offs of Networking: Progressive Norms and Standards**

Within the Southern African Development Community (SADC) sub-region of which Tanzania is a member, the inter-parliamentary networking process has had far-reaching implications in promoting

progressive international norms, standards and practices. These have included, most notably, ensuring a fair representation of the less powerful and disenfranchised groups in society in power and decision-making positions, as well as consolidating democratic processes. In September, 1997, the signing of the SADC Declaration on Gender and Development by the Heads of State and Government was a radical shift away from concern for gender discrimination to concern for gender partnership. It set a 30-percent threshold by 2005 for female participation and representation in positions of power and decision-making.

This landmark decision was partly a follow-up to the Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action, partly one of the obligations connected to the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination, and more recently, a commitment to the 2000 U.N. Millennium Summit goals. Since the signing of the Declaration, there has been a dramatic rise in women's parliamentary representation across a range of countries driven either by enlightened constitutional amendments, reform of electoral laws and systems, or by political party decrees sanctioning a quota system for female representation. As with all electoral quota-based formulas for distributing resources and correcting imbalances in decision-making, the adoption of the quota system should be seriously considered by all those countries that have not done so. At the time of this writing, the Tanzanian and Ugandan parliaments had joined South Africa, Mozambique, Burundi, Seychelles and Rwanda to surpass the 30-percent SADC-PF benchmark. Such laudable performance compares very favorably with the world average of about 15 percent (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2007).

The growing impact of the SADC-PF Declaration on Gender campaign did not simply start and end in the Southern African region. The implementation of these progressive norms and standards subsequently has captured the imagination of parliamentary activists in other countries, regions and organizations in Africa. As observed by Aili Mari Tripp, "nowhere in the world has the rate of increase in the political representation of women been as fast as in sub-Saharan Africa over the past four decades. The number of women legislators increased ten-fold between 1960 and 2003, jumping from one percent in 1960 to 14.3 in 2003" (Tripp, 2003). More specifically, it is noteworthy that Article 4 (I) of

the Constitutive Act of the African Union (AU) calls for the promotion of gender equality in Africa. The A.U. further committed itself to a 50/50 representation of women by 2010. Since then, the visibility of women in African politics has grown dramatically. First, of the ten African Union Commissions, five are headed by men and five by women. Second, Article 4 of the Pan African Parliament Protocol, for example, enjoins member states to be represented by five members, at least one of whom must be a woman. Third, but less specific, is Article 50 of the Treaty that established the East African Legislature, which mandated national parliaments to elect 9 members who would represent, as much as feasible, the various political parties represented in the National Assembly, as well as the shades of opinion, gender and other special interest groups in the partner states. Above all, by prudently applying a constitutional guarantee, a quota system and innovative electoral structures, Rwanda phenomenally increased women's political participation. With an 80-person Chamber of Deputies, the Rwandan women had won 48.8 percent of the seats during the October, 2003, elections (Powley, 2008).

Furthermore, gender empowerment campaigns have gone even further and are now challenging what are considered erroneous assumptions that there are gender-neutral national budgets and macro-economic policies. The gender budget advocates claim that public resources should be allocated in a way that recognizes the different roles that women and men play in the economy, their different special needs and the need for a more equitable sharing of the benefits through the national budget. It is also claimed that gender-responsive budgeting can serve as a powerful oversight tool to hold governments accountable with respect to international agreements on gender equity. Learning from the enviable experiences of Australia and South Africa, the gender sensitive MPs in Uganda and Tanzania have enlisted the support of NGOs to undertake regular gender budgeting analyses in their respective countries. A growing number of such studies have succeeded in promoting the adoption of more open, transparent and participatory processes that apply gender analyses to national budgets and make informed recommendations, for a fair resource allocation to redress historical injustices against the marginalized sections of their respective societies (SADC, 2007; Byanyima, 2002).

Rather curiously, the Kenyan Parliament has witnessed a slower march of women to parliament. It has yet to seriously and fully address political equity between the sexes or undertake a gender budgeting process. Kenyan women, like most in Africa, continue to be disadvantaged vis-à-vis men with regard to education, legal rights, health and access to resources. Although Kenya is a member of the United Nations and has subscribed to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and agreed to the principle of equity, the state and society would seem to remain inherently exclusivist. Relatively marginal constitutional and policy efforts have been made to address the interests and aspirations of historically marginalized groups and peoples. Both the decision-making institutions and the policy processes have been characterized by gross gender imbalance and bias. The balancing of ethnic composition and interests in government and parliament has historically taken precedence over political parties, institutions, value systems, or ideology. In fact, during the 9<sup>th</sup> Parliament which completed its tenure in December of 2007, 204 or 91.9 percent of Kenya's 222 parliamentarians were men, while 18 or 8.1 percent were women, the lowest in the East and Horn-of-Africa sub-regions (Johnson, 2002; Chesoni, 2006).

## **Conclusion**

To the extent that there are no dedicated formal colleges to train would-be MPs to handle their multiple functions, networking with sister institutions does serve as a useful instrument for exchanging and sharing information, knowledge and best practices. Equally importantly, the promotion of properly planned and organized networking initiatives for professional parliamentary staff was rated by almost all persons we interviewed as one of the most cost-effective ways of training and developing the skills of the relevant personnel. Above all, the adoption and effective use of ICT by some parliaments seems to have widened not only their research scope, but also to have expanded knowledge and information sharing with the private sector and civil society organizations. The latter are now able to participate in the policy and legislation processes of national and sub-regional parliaments. By learning from the best practices around the world, all three national parliaments passed the Administration of Parliament Acts that re-instituted parliamentary power vis-à-vis the executive. This newly acquired institutional power, though far from being adequate, has

significantly enhanced these parliaments' ability to scrutinize more ably the activities of the executive than was the case previously. Similarly, another spectacular outcome from networking initiatives was the adoption of gender-friendly policies and practices in Uganda and Tanzania that are gradually empowering women to participate in major decision-making in their respective countries.

We noted that effective knowledge borrowing, adaptation and use tend to be very expensive undertakings. Making prudent use of foreign-acquired knowledge requires a considerable national investment in establishing the necessary institutional support systems, competent and diverse expertise, as well as effective knowledge distribution networks to filter it through a conscious process of selection, evaluation and adaptation to local circumstances. More than anything else, the problems with global knowledge use are essentially about the difficulties of their transferability. Every idea has a historical, institutional and structural context. It is inextricably connected to the local circumstances. The concepts, assumptions and beliefs through which the people understand and interpret the world around them tend to be society-specific. Scientific institutes, universities, think-tanks and state agencies in the global North are linked together to build national systems of knowledge production in order to solve context-specific problems. As a result, there are no universal truths. It is therefore recommended that knowledge that is borrowed should not only be unpacked before use, but the unpacking process should always seek to fully uncover the underlying assumptions, rules of production and belief systems, before recommending wholesale adoption. The best way to replicate foreign-generated best practices is to ground them in the history, culture, traditions and social and economic realities of respective countries. Parliaments would, therefore, be required to assemble a critical mass of knowledge workers who would participate in borrowing, organizing, learning and processing the information, and then integrate these invisible processes into their daily routines until they became fully institutionalized.

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