E-skills for Progressive Governance:
Supporting Evidence-informed
Policy Making in African Parliaments

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Abstract:

Evidence-based policy making is the hall-mark of parliamentary institutions and this is hinged on ready access to usable information. Information literacy therefore plays an integral role in bridging the access divide between users and on-line information resources. However, the proliferation of global electronic information resources and the corresponding dynamic on-line tools and applications in today's knowledge driven, web-based environments mean that the traditional information literacy skills are not enough if one is to easily find, evaluate and utilize this information effectively. Of-course the principles of information literacy remain essentially the same even for digital information literacy but the later requires new and somewhat complex competencies considering the ever-changing media and technologies required to access and manipulate these electronic information resources. The paper seeks to define digital information literacy and highlights the competencies required to access and effectively utilise electronic information resources and uses chiefly the INASP information literacy programmes and other allied projects for African parliaments as best practise case studies of how to improve the capacity of African parliaments to easily access and effectively utilize scientific information for evidence-based policy making. To be information literate, a person must be able to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate and use effectively the needed information. Digital information literacy also requires the ability to find, evaluate and use digital information effectively, efficiently and ethically. In order to locate and effectively use electronic information there are a number of 'e-skills' that are required. These range from Internet search skills that start with understanding how digital information is different from print information, knowing how to use not only the computer but also specialized tools for finding digital information and strengthening the dispositions needed in the digital information environment.

Keywords: digital information literacy, e-skills, federated search, INASP, parliamentary information services, search engine, strategies, web/library 2.0.

1. Introduction

The adoption of appropriate information behaviour to identify, through electronic media, information well fitted to information needs, leading to wise and ethical use of this information is the ultimate objective for any Parliament information service in a democracy in today's knowledge driven economy. Evidence-based policy making is the hall-mark of parliamentary institutions and this is hinged on ready access to usable information.

Information literacy therefore plays an integral role in bridging the access interface between users and on-line information resources. However, the proliferation of global electronic information resources and the corresponding dynamic on-line tools and applications in today's knowledge driven, web-based environments mean that the traditional information literacy skills are not enough if one is to easily find, evaluate and utilise this information effectively.

Objectives

The overall aim of the paper is to demonstrate the pervasiveness of digital literacy and the requisite e-skills in supporting evidence-based policy-making in African Parliaments in light of the proliferation of web-based electronic scientific information resources. The paper also utilises mainly the INASP and other projects to support information (digital) literacy in African Parliaments as a case study of what is being done to impart e-skills to both information services staff and legislators in Africa.

The paper seeks to achieve the following specific objectives:

1. Define information (digital literacy)
2. Demonstrate the importance of digital literacy in supporting evidence-based policy-making in African Parliaments
3. Highlight digital projects and other best practices supporting evidence-based policy-making in African Parliaments.
4. Make recommendations for effective information (digital) literacy and allied programmes in African Parliaments

Methodology

First-hand information has been obtained by the author through active participation in some of the projects and programmes outlined in this treatise. Online interviews were done and electronic questionnaires sent to parliament librarians and other stakeholders like programme managers to obtain insight into the relevant projects including analysis of secondary data sources like project reports. Social networks like blogs and e-groups also provided invaluable information in developing this paper.

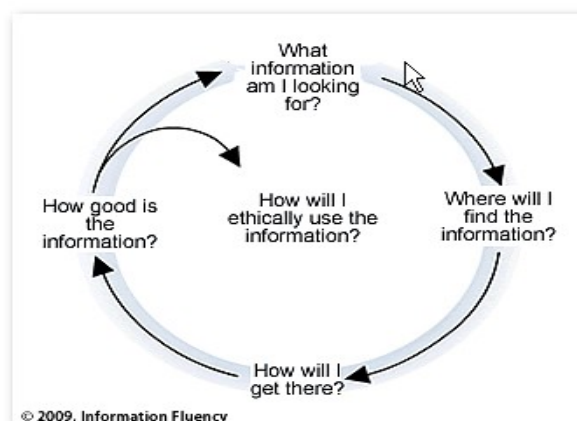## Evidence-informed policy making and digital literacy

Evidence-informed policy refers to public policy based on rigorously established objective evidence. This concept was derived from the idea of evidence-based medicine and is now meant to apply to all areas of public policy. An important aspect of evidence-based policy is the use of rigorous scientific studies to point out programs and practices that aim at improving policy relevant outcomes. These are policies that really deal with problems, that are progressive and influenced by evidence rather than a response to short-term influences. Evidence-based policies tackle causes and not symptoms. Evidence-based policy-making stemmed from the need to replace ideologically-influenced decision making with rationale. It is 'the integration of experience, judgement and expertise with the best available external evidence from systematic research' [1]. The evidence-based policy movement is about challenging old strategies for policy formulation, based, as they were, either on ideology or the preferences of elites. 'It purports to stand outside the political process, and the subjective whims of officials and politicians giving policy advice based on rational evidence rather than ideology or informed by sectional and partisan interests'[2]

Evidence-driven policy making is hinged on ready, sustainable access to relevant and usable scientific information. With the proliferation of electronic information resources in today's information and technology-driven society this apparently looks like an easy feat but in order to locate and effectively use electronic information there are a number of 'e-skills' that are required.   These range from Internet search skills that start with understanding how digital information is different from print information, knowing how to use not only the computer but also specialized tools for finding digital information and strengthening the dispositions needed in the digital information environment coupled with the web 2.0/3.0 phenomenon. Digital information literacy and the corresponding e-skills development therefore becomes an integral component in enabling evidence-based policy making in African Parliaments.
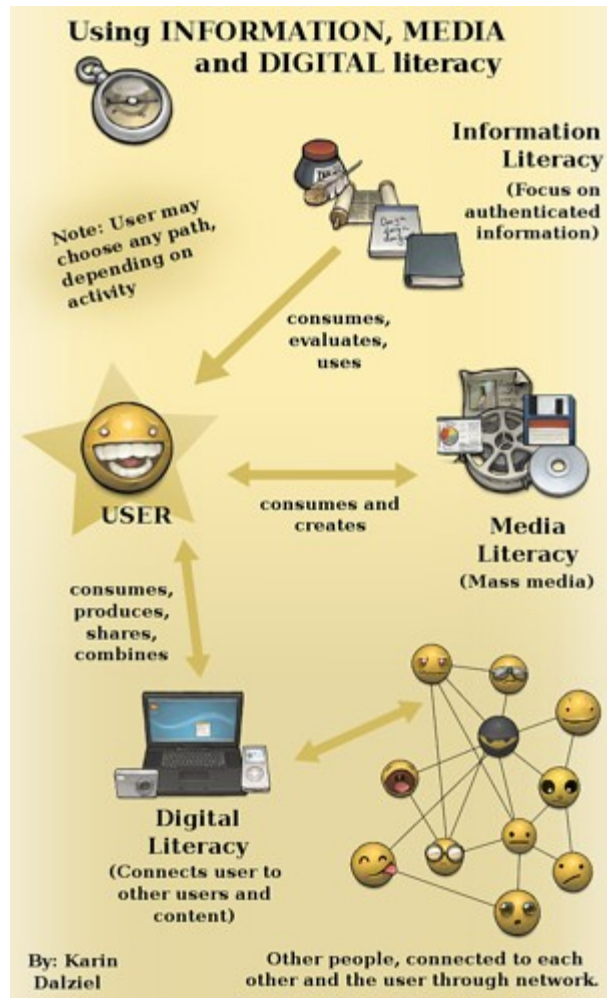
The principles of information literacy remain essentially the same even for digital literacy but the later requires new and somewhat complex competencies considering the ever-changing media and technologies required to access and manipulate these electronic information resources. To be information literate, a person must be able to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate and use effectively the needed information. Digital information literacy also requires the ability to find, evaluate and use digital information effectively. The Prague Declaration (2003) actually states that information literacy (that incorporates digital literacy) "...is a prerequisite for participating effectively in the information society, and is part of the basic human right of life long learning." [3]

In-fact, put in its broader perspective, digital literacy actually points to a set of knowledge and competencies required to adapt (using technology) to technological, social and economic changes in society. It should cover a range of areas; skills and understandings that ensure getting the most out of users' engagement with technology. It includes e-awareness and well-being, collaboration, social networking and communication skills, rights and responsibilities, ethical and environmental issues, commercial practices, privacy and security issues, digital identity and citizenship, along with finding, evaluating and applying scientific and non-scientific information in day-to-day decision-making.

It is against this backdrop that e-skills become the backbone of evidence-driven policy making as they enable access and effective use of scientific knowledge. Although this paper emphasizes evidence-driven policy making, digital literacy and e-skills development in parliaments, it is a culture that should permeate across the national fabric. However, 'there is often a 'gulf' between the culture of science and the general social culture in the South' [4] It is unfortunate that this is a concept that is not receiving the widespread attention that it duly deserves. E-skills development should cut across nationally and publicly amongst the major organisational stakeholders (across government, industry, and education), informed by the local conversations of learners, parents, education sector and industry.

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The 'Traditional' information literacy Model

Using INFORMATION, MEDIA and DIGITAL literacy

Information Literacy (Focus on authenticated information)

Note: User may choose any path, depending on activity

consumes, evaluates, uses

USER

consumes and creates

Media Literacy (Mass media)

consumes, produces, shares, combines

Digital Literacy (Connects user to other users and content)

By: Karin Dalziel

Other people, connected to each other and the user through network.

The 'Modern' Digital literacy Model [5]

Developments

A number of parliamentary inistitutions make extensive use of ICTs in most of the tasks, particularly in managing documents and supporting the legislative process. Several initiatives in Africa underscore the potential value
 of knowledge networks for exchanging information among parliaments
 to support the creation and application of ICT capacity.
Therefore there are a number of e-skills development initiatives to support and build capacity in African parliaments and the International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications (INASP) www.inasp.info, though its Programme for the Enhancement of Research Information is a quintessence of partnership programme that seeks to support e-skills development and ultimately evidence-informed policy making. To achieve this INASP, in one of its programme components, partners with policy makers and influencers to strengthen their capacity to deal with science and technology issues.

The aims of this component programme is to increase awareness of science and technology issues; improve the capacity of staff to provide balanced, comprehensive and timely information on policy relevant issues in S&T to decision makers; and to promote networking between scientists/researchers and policy makers/influencers.

In some of the projects, it has partnered with the UK Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST).

INASP has managed to run a number of information literacy programmes aimed at e-skills development in in parliaments of Eastern, Central and Southern African countries. These initially focus on training-of-trainers workshops for various country parliaments who will in turn facilitate information (digital) literacy training for legislators and members of staff in their respective parliaments. The beneficiary countries include Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Malawi. This is also in line with the some of the objectives of such bodies like the Southern Africa Development Community Parliamentary Forum (SADC-PF) which has developed a plan for the strengthening of parliamentary ICT capacity in the SADC region and

established a parliamentary ICT managers' forum for the SADC region www.**sadcpf**.org .

In Uganda, INASP's training in information literacy complemets an ongoing programme to build caopacity to handle science and technology in parliament which is being run by the UK Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST). This scheme has included a pairing scheme between a legislators and scientists; a study to evaluate the handling of science and technology issues in the parliamentary process and training for parliamentary research staff from across Africa on how to write science policy briefings.

Following this training workshop, an on-line forum, the African Parliaments Research and Information Network (Afripar) http://afripar.ning.com was established. Its goal is to promote the development and transformation of Africa through the provision of quality research and information services and attempts to achieve this through facilitating information sharing among parliamentary research and information staff in Africa, undertake research and provide information on science and technology issues and promote evidence-based policy development to policy matters in Africa.

According to the information on their website, Africa Parliamentary Knowledge Network (APKN), "is a network of African Parliaments which supports capacity building activities, common services, sharing experiences and best practices among African Parliaments. It is based on the founding principles of the Pan African Parliament (PAP) and the African Union which underlines the need for better coordination and collaboration among African Parliaments to meet the the multiple challenges posed by economic and social integration and the need to harmonize legislation in member countries. APKN builds on success of long established parliamentary networks. Such networks have made apparent the benefits of sharing experiences and learning from best practices. Not only do they allow exploiting regional and continental dimensions to create synergies, but also they provide the critical mass necessary to deliver quality, sustainable, capacity-building activities and common information services for all Parliaments." www.apkn.org/.

The Africa i-Parliaments is a project that covers Africa and has been established through the auspices of UN/DESA to "empower African Parliaments to better fulfil their democratic functions by supporting their efforts to become open, participatory, knowledge-based and learning organisations. It builds on experiences, lessons learned, and tools and applications developed during the implementation of the initiative - Strengthening Parliament Information Systems in Africa"www.parliaments.info/.

isiAfrica "is a site dedicated to mapping public information systems in Africa and tracking the progress African countries are making towards taking ownership of the development of these systems.

isiAfrica encompasses both e-Government (the use of ICT in public administration) and e-Governance (the use of ICT to promote transparency, democracy and civic participation in government" http://isiafrica.net/.

Results and Business Benefits

The INASP run information (digital) literacy and e-skills development programmes have raised awareness and equipped parliamentary research and information professionals with hands-on skills to manipulate web/library 2.0, on-line tools and other associated applications so as to improve access to, and effective utilisation of, scientific information resources thereby facilitating evidence-based policy-making in Parliaments. It is also hoped that the beneficiaries from these workshops will cascade these skills to legislators thereby improving their capacity to easily find and effectively utilise scientific information in the parliamentary process. In this regard this will also contribute to the realisation of INASP's PERii aim to strengthen the knowledge and skills of people working in research communication; improve participation in international knowledge networks including research communication policy and practice.

The other initiatives have run a number of e-skills training and e-capacity building programs aimed at equipping parliaments with staff capacity to manipulate and apply ICT's to legislative processes. This has in turn enabled, sharing of knowledge and best practices, faster easier access to global on-line electronic information resources – a giant step towards evidence-driven policy making! Through such initiatives like isiAfrica and i-Parliaments, systems have been developed like 'Akoma Ntoso' which "defines a set of simple, technology-neutral electronic representations of parliamentary, legislative and judiciary documents for e-services in a Pan-African context and provides an enabling framework for the effective exchange of "machine readable" parliamentary, legislative and judiciary documents such as legislation, debate record, minutes, judgements, etc." *Bungeni* is a Parliamentary and Legislative Information System solution for drafting, managing, consolidating and publishing legislative and other parliamentary documents, Parliaments more open and accessible to citizens.

The resultant e-skills development, on-line networks and the ability to participate in these have also brought about invaluable benefits to African Parliaments. They have created an early warning system for various phenomena and ensure knowledge to people who can act on time. These networks have been able to connect people and forge relationships across physical divides. An even more significant benefit is the increasing intellectual capital, amplified innovation and encouragement of social cohesion. On-line networks also promote the movement from knowledge-sharing to collective knowing. Most importantly, the e-skills development associated with social networking turn training into a continuous process, not divorced from normal business processes.

Conclusions

Underpinning in this discourse is the pervasiveness of ICT's in communication, communication here being two-way, active, iterative and inclusive. This communication is between experts and policy-makers, in order to strengthen research-informed policy dialogues and close the science-policy divide. In order for this communication to be effective and in order to pro-actively participate in these knowledge networks, there is need for continuous digital literacy programmes and e-skills development.

Policy-makers rarely have time to learn elaborate e-skills, find and absorb information therefore the knowledge systems and networks must allow easy manipulation of applications and technologies, information must be condensed and engaging and highlight possible policy implications.

Closely tied to this is the fact that the capacity of most African parliaments is not yet sufficient – at least for now- to allow participation in various on-line networks. Having scattered on-line fora and networks actually de-fragments various foci and can defeat the whole purpose! There is need to integrate or streamline allied knowledge networks into a consolidated one. This also prevents duplication of initiatives. Another way to go around it is to have a network like APKN acting as a clearing house for other networks.

Finally, while the application of ICTs and allied web technologies to parliamentary processes is an important component of the overall program, it is vital to have a broader mandate. There has to be the objective sharing information in all areas of parliamentary administration and support. It is even more desirable to extend the knowledge systems and e-skills development to other public sectors and not just parliaments so that there is all-stakeholder participation in evidence-based policy making.

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