Parliamentary Networking as an Instrument of Capacity Building

Evidence from East Africa

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the effectiveness of parliamentary networks in East Africa as a tool of 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. The article proceeds to discuss 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.

INTRODUCTION

The available institutional and organisational capacity of parliaments in Africa tends to be at great variance with the scope of their constitutional mandate. In principle, parliaments are regarded as the primary democratic institutions 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 in all their diversity. 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 realise their mandates. For most of the first three decades of independence, Africa witnessed power moves discernibly and continuously to the presidency and away from parliament, the judiciary and other national bodies of restraint (Ayee, 2003).

However, beginning in the early 1990s, a new wave of political liberalisation and democratisation began to sweep across the continent. In country after country, autocratic

civilian governments and military regimes have been replaced with periodically and 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 government are gradually becoming part, at the very least, of the dominant constitutional discourse (Barkan *et al.*, 2007; Wang, 2007). Related to this trend, donor support policies and programme are strategically tying development assistance resources to progress toward good governance by recipient governments. More significantly, the growth of civil society organisations both in number and sophistication is pushing the role of Parliament and the practice of popular participation to the political centre stage. Slowly but inexorably, a democratic political culture is taking root, where all the main political players are accepting democracy as *the only game in town*, à la Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan (Linz and Stepan, 1996).

This study constitutes a preliminary attempt to ascertain the ability of parliaments to institutionalise networking as a tool of capacity building. The broad research question that guided the study was: how do ideas, norms, institutions and practices disperse and 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 collected and which institutions and actors interviewed. *First*, respondents were asked the extent to which inter-parliamentary networking had been recognized as a veritable instrument of capacity building. *Second*, the challenges these incipient, and often inchoate parliaments were facing was required in institutionalising networking as a tool for self-renewal and consolidation. *Third*, it was established as to 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 interpretation and analysis.

The article is divided into five parts. Following the introduction, part two is a discussion on the formal functions of African parliaments, manifestations of capacity deficits, and their implications for democratic governance. Part three, reports the general context of capacity building in East Africa. Part four contains the study findings. Finally, part five is the conclusion.

INSTITUTIONALISING PARLIAMENTARY NETWORKS

Three arguments are traditionally advanced to support investing in parliamentary networking. *Firstly*, the overriding objective of networking is to enable participating organisations 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. *Thirdly* and finally, the gradual adoption of information and communication technology (ICT) as one

of the instruments of networking has demonstrated a huge potential for cutting operation costs, increasing economies of scale, and accessing more information than in the traditional face-to-face encounters. Equally importantly, it has enabled the civil society organisations 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 (Economic Commission for Africa, 2005).

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 legislation processes were found to be largely a function of political expediency, rather than a carefully calculated rational choice. Unsurprisingly, therefore, resource allocations to critical knowledge management departments such as the library 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 departments in Parliaments are a tiny fraction of the parliaments' annual budgets, more often than not, 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 House. As a result, the units responsible for knowledge production and exchange were perennially defined by a dire need of resources and by a poorly institutionalized knowledge sharing tradition.

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 were few and out-dated, and in some cases where books and journals were available, they were simply useless bundles: the key articles or chapters having 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 interviewed complained about very tight budgets for new acquisitions, irregular training programme 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 programme originating in the global North. Such unsolicited acquisitions were neither particularly useful nor sustainable.

TRAGEDY OF SOUTH-SOUTH NETWORKS

The strategic networking partner institutions for East African national parliaments are usually the far-flung international institutions. Historically, 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. The embedded practice was essentially informed by a mistaken claim that there was, in fact, little that one can learn from sister institutions in the immediate

African neighbourhoods. It was equally claimed that neighbouring 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 were 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 glance. 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. Firstly, 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. Secondly, 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 also, all this has taken place despite the fact that dense face-to-face South-South networking initiatives would be cheaper, their accumulated experiences relatively similar, and would benefit a larger number of participants (World Bank, 2003; Rugumamu, 2008).

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 devalued the *native* (whether it be 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, there are virtually no universally applicable prescriptive principles regarding *best practices*.

VIBRANT 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 have a meanly budgeted programme, North-South partnerships are usually structured, statutory, robust, and with dedicated annual budget lines designated in foreign

exchange as well as supplemented with membership fees. Typically, Northern parliamentary organisations 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 organisations in the global North are also inextricably 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, bodies such as 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, national and regional, are members of all these structured networks (World Bank, 2003; Toye and Toye, 2005).

Due to chronic resource constraints, international networking activities and events tend to engage 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 monopolised by the political leaders of parliaments such as speakers, clerks and committee chairs. Then as now, it is strongly recommended that since professional staffers are the knowledge backbones of parliaments, their weak participation in these knowledge networking initiatives put 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 of ICT diffusion in recent years, the rate of adoption and use across countries differ considerably. Africa is perhaps the only continent in the world where ICT diffusion and use have witnessed dismal growth. For many citizens, the primary sources of information about parliament remain TV broadcasts, radio programme and print media. The global digital divide is a real spectre for the continent, 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 Kochendoefer-Lucius observes, 90 percent of all internet users live in the OECD countries, and more than half the internet users worldwide (about 57 percent) are from the US, although the US has only five percent of the world's population. Asia accounts for 17 percent of all internet users, South America for two 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 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 been less corruption, increased transparency, greater convenience and cost reductions. Rather than reinvent the wheel, East African parliaments now have the opportunity of searching, acquiring and adapting much of the global stock of knowledge already available in rich Western countries using electronic means. Most importantly, as communication costs plummet, the business of transferring and adapting some of the existing knowledge has become cheaper than ever. However, a significant proportion of interviewees claimed that the pace of modernisation of parliaments in East Africa was bogged down partly by the deep-rooted distrust of resource sharing using ICT and sensitivity with respect to government secrets, and by the lack of appreciation of the critical role that ICT plays in promoting management efficiency. As a result, the process of re-engineering and modernising 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 the use of the ICT instrument to modernize parliamentary processes and improve 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. 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, networking of every form and shape among parliaments in the region is usually of a limited agenda, any information and knowledge exchange which takes place is mainly on paper or by telephone, and rarely electronically transmitted. More often than not, professional exchange of ideas and best practices take place informally at conferences or seminars where people swap ideas and experiences (Field work files, 2008).

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, 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 reported that parliaments were resorting to video conferencing facilities, visiting each other's websites, and organising the routine exchange of bills, parliamentary committee reports, white papers and various pieces of information about laws and pending legislation. This may perhaps explain why similar acts in East Africa were passed during the same period. These included, among others, the Administration of Parliament Bill (de-linking 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 Director of Prosecution). The interviewees for this research also observed that having access to such information and such technologies have significantly increased the capacity of staff and MPs in East Africa to address complex policy issues and 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 (Field work files, 2008).

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 enhancing their institutional autonomy and gradually limiting the powers of the executive. Thanks largely to a regularised exchange of parliamentary delegations, goodwill parliamentary missions, correspondences and sharing of documents with sister institutions, have become possible. By borrowing a leaf from *success stories* of parliamentary autonomy in European state governing systems, India and South Africa, the three national parliaments have struggled to establish parliamentary service commissions in order to institutionalise their respective autonomy and promote effectiveness. But how to recognise an autonomous and institutionalised parliament when it operates? What verifiable indicators of autonomy and effectiveness should one look for? Several students of legislative affairs have developed concepts and measures to allow cross-national comparisons of legislative functions and behaviour.

Nelson W. Polsby (1968) proposes that an institutionalised parliament is characterised by the establishment of well-defined boundaries, the growth of internal complexity, and the adoption of universalistic 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, institutionalised 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 resource 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, 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, capacity to acquire and analyse information independently of other political institutions, capacity of the committee system to challenge the executive, and ability to pass legislation in opposition to the will of the executive. These operational criteria have been adopted to analyse 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 voted time and time again 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 refer to them as having any autonomy as organisations, 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 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 establish 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 body corporate, and each parliament assumed the power to determine its own agenda, development plans and budgets. The respective acts do 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 provide for the establishment of an independent Parliamentary Service and 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 three national parliaments revealed that the legal provisions of the Parliamentary Service Commission established a very significant milestone in the implementation of the separation of powers and checks and balances principles. Although having the authority over funds and getting them are not the same, the interviewees for this research reported that the treasuries in the three countries have consistently not paid parliaments all that they asked for. Yet, 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 parliament – civil society organisations, the private sector and international development partners – without looking over the shoulders of the executive branch.

This historic legislation not only heralded a long and protracted struggle of *delinking* parliaments from the executive, 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 officials interviewed, the three parliaments have developed almost identical committee systems with stable membership, distinct jurisdiction, and specialised expertise. These have taken control over the legislative agenda and voting rules. Equally important, 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, and 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 MP has had his or her own fully furnished office, while 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 included the support for the establishment of a Public Relations Office to bridge a 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 protracted conflicts and often divisive political issues (Nakamura and Johnson, 2003).

SPIN-OFFS OF NETWORKING: ENTRENCHED 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 Heads of State and Government were radical shifts away from concern for gender discrimination to concerns for gender partnership. It set a 30-percent threshold for female participation and representation in positions of power and decision-making by 2005.

This landmark decision was partly a follow up to the Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action, partly as part of the obligations connected to the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination, and more recently as a commitment to the 2000 UN 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 compared very favourably 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 has henceforth captured the imagination of parliamentary activists in other countries, regions and organisations 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 legislatures 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(l) of the Constitutive Act of the African Union (AU) calls for the promotion of gender equality in Africa. The AU further committed itself to a 50/50 representation of women by 2010. Since then, the visibility of women in African politics has grown dramatically. *Firstly*, of the ten African Union Commissions, five are headed by men and five by women. *Secondly*, 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. *Thirdly*, but less specific, is Article 50 of the Treaty that established the East African legislative, which mandated national parliaments to elect nine members who would represent, as much as feasible, the various political parties represented in the National Assembly, shades of opinion, gender and other special interest groups in the partner state. Above all, by prudently applying a constitutional guarantee, a quota system and innovative electoral structures, Rwanda phenomenally increased women 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 macroeconomic 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 from the national budget. It is also claimed that gender responsive budgeting can serve as a powerful oversight tool to hold government 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 the historical injustices against the marginalized sections of their respective societies (SADC, 2007; Byanyima, 2002).

Rather curiously, the Kenyan Parliament has witnessed a slow 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 UN 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 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 9th Parliament which completed its tenure in December 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, 202; Chesoni, 2006).

CONCLUSION

There was overwhelming evidence from the cross-section of opinion shapers and decision-makers in East African society interviewed for this study to support the logic of using networking activities as one of the key capacity building instruments. 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 mechanism for exchanging and sharing information, knowledge and best practices. Equally importantly, the promotion of properly planned and organised networking initiatives for professional parliamentary staff was rated by almost all persons 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 has widened not only the research scope of parliaments, but it has also expanded knowledge and information sharing with the private sector and civil society organisations. The latter are now able to participate in the policy and legislation process of national and sub-regional parliaments. By learning from the best practices from around the world, all three national parliaments passed the Administration of Parliament acts that re-instituted parliamentary power vis-à-vis the executive. The newly acquired institutional power, though far from being adequate, has significantly enhanced parliament's 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 top decision-making in their respective countries.

It was noted that effective knowledge borrowing, adaptation and use tend to be 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 production, use and distribution

are essentially about the difficulties of their transferability. Every fragment of an 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 link the global North 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 endeavour to fully uncover the underlying assumptions, rules of its orderly production and belief systems before recommending wholesale adoption. The best way to replicate foreign-generated best practices is to ground them in the history, cultural, tradition, social and economic realities of the respective countries. Parliaments would, therefore, be required to assemble a critical mass of knowledge workers who would participate in borrowing, organising, learning and processing the information, and then integrate these invisible processes into their daily routines until they become fully institutionalised.

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