

# Data Use in Parliament

## Insights from Ghana Statistical Service on Communicating Data to MPs

The Data for Accountability Project (DAP) is the first formal partnership between Ghana Statistical Service (GSS) and the Parliament of Ghana. These two institutions each play critical roles in Ghana's governance system, but before the project, they had rarely had the chance to interact, and many of their staff met each other for the first time on the project.

User engagement is a priority for GSS under the current [National Strategy for the Development of Statistics](#), and the organisation has been working to increase awareness of the importance of its products through advocacy and communication with state and non-state actors and the general public. However, before DAP, GSS had never specifically targeted Parliament in its user-advocacy: *"[in the past] we made the products for everybody—Parliamentarians can use it, the executive can use it, other researchers can use it. But these ones were made with the MPs in mind, and that's what makes [them] unique"*. Evidence and data are key to the effectiveness of parliaments in general in the execution of their law-making, representation and oversight mandate. The nature of parliamentary work and the peculiarities of the environment require that data and information supplied to MPs consider a multiplicity of factors such as format and time. The DAP project saw GSS partnering with the parliamentary research department, the main provider of evidence to MPs, as well as some committees.

DAP has facilitated key activities with GSS and Parliament, respectively and jointly. These include Data Fairs at Parliament, training for statisticians, parliamentary staff and MPs, a monitoring field visit by the Poverty Reduction Strategy Committee accompanied by GSS, and the pilot of Ghana's first constituency data profiles (see boxes 1 to 3). As the relationship has grown, GSS has also increasingly responded to specific ad hoc requests from MPs, researchers, and committees.

In this piece, GSS statisticians share tips from what they've learned about communicating data to parliamentary audiences. As one GSS officer noted, this requires a targeted approach: *"putting it [data] out to the general public and expecting them [MPs] to go there and use it won't work"*.

## Communicating statistics to parliamentary audiences: seven tips from GSS

The importance of using statistics in parliaments is gaining increasing recognition globally. Parliaments are now identified as a key user group in the World Bank's new [Statistical Performance Indicators](#), used to assess the performance of statistical systems. As [UNDP](#) and others have noted, parliaments have critical roles to play in both ensuring adequate legislation and resourcing to support statistics systems and using statistics to monitor the performance of governments towards national and global development targets such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Against this backdrop, GSS embarked on its partnership with Parliament of Ghana and started to explore how to communicate statistics effectively to parliamentary audiences.

### 1. Get to know parliamentary audiences

The first step in any strategic approach to communications is getting to know the audience so that messages and formats can be appropriately tailored to meet their needs. DAP has built a multifaceted relationship between Parliament and GSS, of which communication is a key element. Through the project, GSS has become familiar with the internal parliamentary structures that provide MPs and committees with evidence (mainly the research department, library, and new budget and fiscal analysis office, but also the MPs' researchers in their

constituencies) as well as MPs themselves and the committee structures they work through. As part of DAP's training programmes, GSS benefited from workshops delivered by the

#### Box 1. DAP's Data Fair Initiative

DAP partners – African Centre for Parliamentary Affairs (ACEPA), GSS and INASP – in collaboration with the Inter-Departmental Research and Information Group (IDRIG) of the Parliament of Ghana, organised a Data Fair, hosted by Parliament, to showcase GSS and other data producers, and demonstrate the kinds of data and evidence available to MPs. The Fair also helped to build trust and collaboration between GSS, producers and parliamentarians, with parliamentary staff playing an important role in organising the event, showcasing products from Parliament's own departments, with high-level leadership contributing to its success.

#### Box 2. Field visits with the Committee on Poverty Reduction Strategy

The project supported the Committee on Poverty Reduction Strategy to undertake a monitoring visit to six districts in the Upper East Region of Ghana and was a major highlight of the first phase of DAP. The visit investigated local-level action towards SDG targets – the first time field monitoring explicitly focused on SDG progress – and relied on GSS-coordinated data collected at the district level. The visits demonstrated challenges to local-level data collection and found gaps in district-level planning and budgeting processes.

parliamentary research department, which were described as eye-opening in helping them understand Parliament and its evidence needs<sup>1</sup>. One statistician described their key learning points as follows:

*“Activities or interventions that are needed to drive development and to ensure that the livelihood of the individual is improved is really in the hands of Parliament [...] all the bills, all the programmes are sent to Parliament, and various committees sit and decide even how to appropriate funding for those programmes and projects...some MPs, for example, the majority and minority leaders, have such powers to ensure that policies are passed or not. I was surprised that Parliament has that much power.”*

## 2. Understand parliamentary timing

**GSS statisticians found that communicating data to Parliament needs to take into account different and overlapping timing dynamics.** Parliament’s three main functions are representation (of constituencies), legislation (making laws), and exercising oversight over the executive branch of government. The ongoing cycle of each of these functions and the evidence produced by the parliamentary research department to support them provide specific opportunities for the use of data. In his training session for statisticians, a member of the parliamentary research department outlined how this looks for the budget process, the different stages of evidence production from medium-term projections to pre-budget reports (long-term economic and fiscal policy objectives), and monthly, midyear and year-end reports.

Another example is in the legislative process. Some statisticians were unaware that the research department needs data on salaries, prices and allowances to support the fiscal impact analysis for legislation and other proposals submitted to Parliament as required by the Public Financial Management Act, 2016 (Act 921).

In addition to these regular and ongoing cycles of proactive evidence production, the nature of parliamentary business means that evidence is very often needed on a reactive basis, typically within a very short time frame of hours or days.

### Box 3. Constituency profiles

Five constituency profiles were developed on a pilot basis targeting MPs from both major parties in Parliament. The profiles aimed to provide a holistic picture of what is happening at the local level across a range of areas, including education, healthcare, and land use. The project intended for this data to be used by MPs to enhance their advocacy and represent their constituent’s most pressing issues and priorities. [See the Constituency Profiles on the ACEPA resources page.](#)

<sup>1</sup> For others in the African region, useful profiles of parliamentary evidence systems in different countries can be found in this new edited volume from CLEAR-AA: <https://doi.org/10.52779/9781991201539/04>

### 3. Link to action MPs can take

Most GSS statisticians involved in DAP had never worked with Parliament before the project. Having learned more about how Parliament works and the roles of MPs in scrutinising and approving legislative proposals and funding as well as overseeing the Executive, **several interviewees underlined the importance of ensuring that communication to MPs was framed with this mandate and potential actions in mind:** *“We need to go straight to the point and link the results and whatever analysis we have done to [...] policies needed to ensure that that particular activity is dealt with”*. Constituency profiles, therefore, aimed to refer to specific policies and potential actions where possible, painting a picture of the overall policy issues at stake.

*“I pledge to make use of this very important data in my lobbying arrangements and contact of development and government institutions to pull development to the area. Based on my exchanges with Mr. Omar [Head, Demographic Statistics & SDGs Coordinator] and data from the [GSS] website and other statistics, I realised that proposals that I write to development partners etc., are treated with a lot of respect. Recently, there was flooding in the area, and most farmlands of smallholder farmers have been swept off by the floods. Most houses constructed with mud have collapsed, and so most families are left stranded. As we go into the harvest season, most households do not know where the next year’s meals will be coming from. So, I took it upon myself to contact development partners and organisations. I wrote a very comprehensive proposal to CRS, for example, and within three days, the country representative got back to me and told me, ‘this is what we need – we want data to be able to make a compelling case’ and yesterday I received a letter from them, informing me there will be a package of what they call ‘emergency rapid response funding project’ where 311 households in Wa East are targeted to be supported with some cash amount to be able to eke out some livelihood. So, I can assure you that these profiles, and the data therein, will be used, and I will serve as an ambassador to let my district assemblies and the regional authorities appreciate that this has to be the basis for development data intervention.”*

Godfred Seidu Jasaw, MP, Wa East Constituency, at the launch of the [constituency profiles](#), described how using data supported his proposal for flood-response support.

There is also an important role for Parliament to play in ensuring adequate resourcing and appropriate legislation to support the statistics system itself. After personally engaging MPs around the census at the Data Fair and familiarising them with the publicity campaigns GSS was promoting at the time, one GSS statistician found that an MP went on to get involved in publicising the census at district level.

#### 4. Simple, clear and engaging

As with other public audiences, **simplicity and clarity are critical aspects of communicating data to Parliament**. Parliamentarians come from a wide variety of professional and academic backgrounds, so GSS statisticians had to adapt their communication style accordingly. As one statistician explained, *"Parliamentarians are not used to our usual kind of very descriptive reports. They require very brief but simple reports. More diagrams, less descriptions. Infographics rather than very long narratives"*. Another added, *"They are busy people...it should not be voluminous"*. In their preparation of the constituency profiles, GSS drew on a communications specialist for the layout and graphs, as well as the expertise of [Digital Earth Africa](#) to provide satellite image data (see example in Figure 1). Such data can be particularly impactful in showing landscape changes and the effects of climate change on water and forestry, as well as the effects of urbanisation. As part of DAP, GSS also launched an infographic competition to showcase how GSS data can be packaged in different ways and to encourage intermediaries, both the parliamentary research department staff and the general public, to engage more with GSS data.

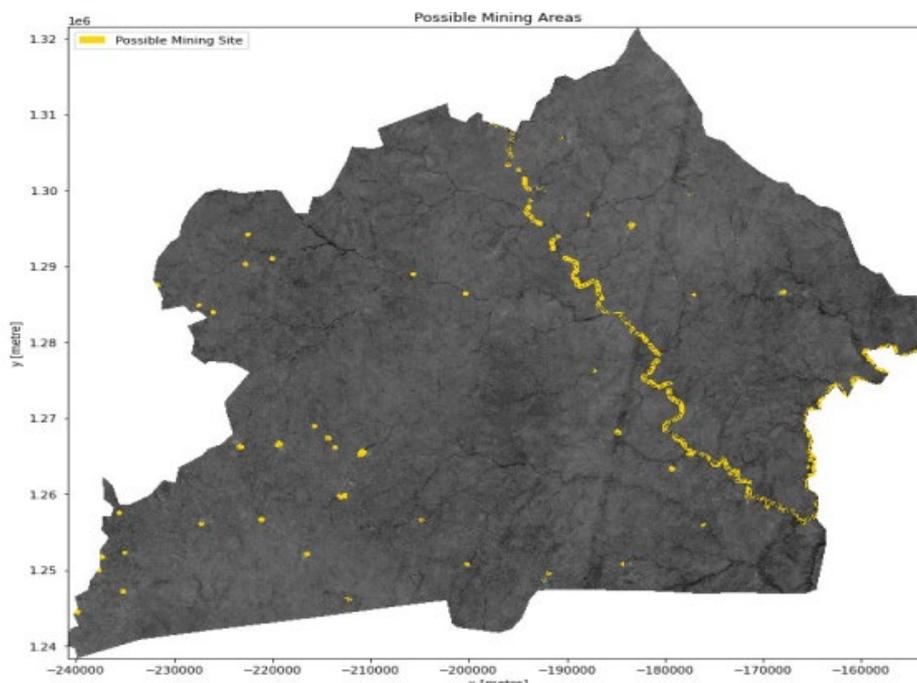


Figure 1. Satellite imagery showing locations mined for gold from 2017 to 2020. Source: Wa East Constituency Profile, page 39 (2021)

## 5. Use administrative data

GSS statisticians found through their engagement with Parliament that **administrative data<sup>2</sup> is often more useful for parliamentary researchers and MPs in their day-to-day work than census data**. Administrative data is collected routinely on an ongoing basis from implementing public services – for example, the number of road traffic accidents, number of hospital admissions, and educational outcomes. As one parliamentary researcher explained, *“We all know of census data; when census is done we are quoting the data – even when it’s eight years old, we still quote it. But we didn’t know there is other data GSS collect in between, which may be even more useful for us, especially when census data is getting old.”*

A colleague from GSS concurs: *“I realised that administrative data from their constituency would rather help MPs more than relying on survey and census data [...] census and surveys are conducted maybe every three years or five years, it means the MPs will have to rely on projected figures, but administrative data will continue to work.”*

Regional aggregates can be misleading, and to properly support MPs’ representation of their constituencies, **it’s important to provide this data at district level**. However, it’s difficult for parliamentary researchers to provide this level of data *“because they are in Accra, and the data is in the districts”*— often in hard copy. In DAP, GSS statisticians from head office in Accra worked with regional statisticians to piece together district level data to compile the constituency profiles. This was a time-consuming and complicated task due to district level resource and capacity constraints and resulting data gaps and inconsistencies.

In the profiles, GSS statisticians worked to provide a **cross-cutting picture of issues in each constituency over time**. This was different from their usual presentation of data which tends to report on one moment in time (e.g., a survey) and one issue—and it took significant coordination: *“the project brought the different pieces of data across different offices together”*. Statisticians found that the frequency of data needed by Parliament is different to GSS’ usual data collection cycles. Ideally, parliamentarians need data more frequently than it’s currently collected, which could enable, for instance, an annual update of constituency profiles.

## 6. ...and use data gaps as a conversation starter

Sometimes, the data requested by MPs or committees from GSS is unavailable. GSS found that being open about data gaps and discussing options to address them has spurred productive discussions with MPs and parliamentary researchers about how the statistics system works and its resource and capacity constraints.

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<sup>2</sup> Statistical Service Act, 2019 (Act 1003), Section 56: In this Act, unless the context otherwise requires, “administrative data” means an official record collected for purposes of registration, transaction and record keeping which is originally not meant to provide statistics for development purpose but can be enhanced to inform planning and guide developmental processes and is a variety of big data.

*“...we could not provide the local level poverty data they [the committee] were expecting, and we could also not provide the annual poverty estimates because GSS only compiles those data once every five years, and we do not usually disaggregate it to the local government level because of the cost involved in compiling that data which is usually based on sample surveys.”*

DAP has provided an opportunity for those within the statistics system who have long been advocating for improved capacity of administrative data systems at district level to illustrate this need.

## 7. Iterate—keep improving continuously

GSS statisticians point out that it is only through **ongoing engagement with parliamentary audiences that they can improve their communication techniques** and continue to refine their approach through feedback and mutual understanding. *“Ideally, there should be a continuous working relationship and engagement between GSS and Parliament to the extent that GSS is able to better understand the needs of Parliament—the immediate and the future needs—and then respond adequately by providing the kind of evidence needed,”* said one statistician. The DAP project only worked with two parliamentary committees and five MPs for the pilots of the constituency profiles. If GSS engagement expands, there will be much more to learn. GSS statisticians emphasise that the onus is on them: *“Parliament has become a major user stakeholder, so we need to try to meet their expectations”.*

## Conclusion

In the second phase of DAP, GSS is continuing to engage parliamentary audiences—widening both the numbers of MPs targeted and the GSS staff involved in the collaboration, particularly at district level. One statistician summed up a motivating sentiment that was shared by many others: *“GSS stands to benefit a lot because, at the end of the day, we produce statistics, data and publications, and we don’t have enough users to debate, critique it, or use those publications, so then why are we producing it?”* DAP partners hope that the new collaborations forged through the project can, with strategic and targeted communication, help to pave the way towards a diverse and robust use of statistical data in Parliament.

This Brief was written by Emily Hayter with Agnes Titriku and Rasheed Draman. It was based on interviews with six serving statisticians from GSS, with thanks to all for their time.

DAP Partners

