

Navigating Electoral Transitions in Ghana: Experience from the DAP project

About the series

This case study series reflects how the Data for Accountability Project (DAP) has engaged with and responded to critical elements of Ghana's governance and political economy context during its implementation period. The primary objective of the papers is to provide a nuanced understanding of the project's adaptive strategies and interactions within the complex and evolving landscape of Ghana's political and economic environment¹ through storytelling, showcasing practical reflections on project implementation.

These analyses are derived from reflective dialogues with project team members and a review of relevant project documents. They aim to capture experiential insights and practical lessons learned from the DAP project.

This case study is based on an interview with Dr Rasheed Draman, ACEPA's Executive Director.

Author

Racheal Makokha, with thanks to Emily Hayter (OTT), Agnes Titriku, Issifu Lampo, and Alfred Kumah (ACEPA) for their comments.

About DAP

The Data for Accountability Project, collaboratively implemented by the African Centre for Parliamentary Affairs (ACEPA), Ghana Statistical Service (GSS) supported by INASP (DAP I) and On

¹ Lampo, I & Hayter, E. (2022). Parliaments and the National Statistics System in Ghana: A critical relationship for evidence use

Think Tanks (OTT) (DAP II), aims to improve the Parliament of Ghana's capacity to use statistics to monitor progress towards the SDGs. The Government of Ghana has committed both globally and nationally to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Ghana is at the forefront of this initiative, with President Nana Akufo-Addo taking on a prominent global role as co-chair of the SDG Advocates, the UN high-level monitoring group for the SDGs. Accurate and comprehensive data is essential for monitoring the progress of SDG implementation. This data is crucial for enabling Parliament to effectively perform its oversight and representation roles, ensuring that no part of the country is left behind.

The Data for Accountability initiative is designed to empower Parliament to oversee the implementation of the SDGs in Ghana. By strengthening the capacity to use data, MPs can better monitor progress and advocate more effectively for their constituencies. This initiative supports MPs in utilizing administrative data to influence development planning and budgeting at the district level, thereby advancing progress towards the SDGs. Implemented over two election cycles, the DAP project exemplifies a unique case of navigating political transitions in a highly polarised environment.

The challenge: navigating electoral transitions when working with parliament

Ghana is set to hold elections on 7 December 2024, its ninth since the return of constitutional rule in 1992. This year presents a high-stakes election with an opposition determined not to be defeated for the third time and a ruling party determined to win a third term. The election results will certainly present different actors requiring new relationship-building. Like most African parliaments, Ghana's MP turnover rate remains at a high of 30%.² On average, the re-election rate of MPs in Africa is 32% compared to 93% in the United States.³ This has resulted in a pattern of losing experienced MPs and introducing new MPs each election cycle, significantly affecting parliament's work.

The DAP project started in 2019. Since then, it has navigated a hung parliament and two election cycles, which saw the entry of new actors and the loss of experienced MPs. Ghana experienced its first hung parliament in 2020 when the two main parties were split right in the middle. The hung parliament has presented an even bigger challenge of political neutrality to think tanks and civil society in the country. Think tanks operating in many growing democracies often struggle to remain neutral. However, the DAP project has successfully navigated these political dynamics and worked with Ghana's Parliament through these transitions.

² Asante, K., & Oduro, F. (2016). The Cost of Parliamentary Politics in Ghana. London: WFD, 8-9

³ Bowles, J., & Marx, B. (2022). Turnover and Accountability in Africa's Parliaments. Available at SSRN 4642554

Addressing the challenge: Enablers and barriers for DAP

Political Stability

Although DAP had to navigate election cycles, doing this in Ghana was comparatively easier than in other African countries because of the degree of democratic stability. Ghana's political landscape stands out in Africa for its stability and predictability unlike Kenya and Nigeria, where no single party has consistently participated in multiple election cycles. Political affiliations tend to be enduring; once an individual aligns with a party, they typically remain loyal. This consistency extends to party members and actors, making the political environment more predictable. When dealing with the New Patriotic Party (NPP) or National Democratic Congress (NDC) the two main parties in Ghana, stakeholders know exactly who they are engaging with, starkly contrasting to other countries where party dynamics shift significantly with each election.

Strong adherence to its constitution, which mandates a maximum of two terms for the president, further bolsters Ghana's political stability, ensures a regular power transfer and prevents attempts to extend presidential terms beyond the allowed limit. Additionally, Ghana has successfully alternated governing parties every eight years, similar to the cyclical power shifts between Republicans and Democrats in the United States. This predictability, where political parties expect to govern for four or eight years before potentially being voted out, contributes to the overall stability of the political system.

Political Economy Analysis (PEA)

Even though ACEPA has worked with the Parliament of Ghana for decades and knows the actors and issues, a comprehensive political economy analysis was conducted at the outset of the DAP project, as a scientific way of confirming what was already known. The PEA identified key entry points, issues, and gaps the project could address. This analysis scientifically validated existing knowledge and provided a robust framework to guide project activities. DAP treats the PEA as a "living document" that continues to inform the project's direction and help adapt to emerging political dynamics.

Long-term relationship building

Political transitions presented both challenges and opportunities for DAP. The change in parliamentary leadership and the high turnover of MPs necessitated repeating certain activities to re-establish relationships with new actors. DAP ensured that new MPs were introduced to the project through committee engagements, allowing them to understand its value and build relationships from the onset. This was done in collaboration with the old MPs, who already knew ACEPA's work and had close relationships with them. This proactive engagement helped in integrating new parliamentarians into the project's objectives seamlessly.

“Because turnover is averagely about 40-50%, we will still have some of the old actors coming back. We use the relationship with some of the old actors to get traction with the new actors.”

Rasheed Draman

The success of DAP in navigating political transitions can be attributed to maintaining a consistent presence in Parliament and building personal relationships with MPs⁴. While the eighth election cycle produced actors who were aware of and supportive of ACEPA’s work and facilitated smoother interactions for the project, ACEPA has built close personal relationships with MPs from both sides for a long time, maintaining a consistent presence in Parliament and ensuring that both sides of the political spectrum are equally engaged.

“...it takes years to build the relationship, you have to be there all the time. If you show up once and disappear, you can never build this trust.”

Rasheed Draman

DAP is, therefore, benefiting from ACEPA's work with Parliament over the past two decades. Initially intended to be a short-term (two-year) project, DAP already had a significant advantage due to this extensive history, which spanned multiple election cycles.

Proper Timing for Engagement with Parliament

Understanding MPs' schedules has helped DAP align their activities accordingly. Engaging with parliament at the right time is crucial to ensure your activities are conducted effectively and without the undue influence of electoral politics. DAP has avoided planning activities during electoral campaign periods that typically dominate the political landscape in the months leading up to an election. To ensure successful engagement, it is also important to avoid the time when MPs are preoccupied with budget discussions, high-profile debates, or other major legislative activities.

“You should target parliament at the beginning of their mandate. If you are not careful during election year, they want visibility; they can use your platform for campaign. We even avoid activities during elections.”

⁴ Hayter (2023). Parliament and GSS: A growing relationship for evidence use in Ghana. Available at https://acepa-africa.org/r3d_category/publications/

Rasheed Draman

Building and maintaining trust: Be neutral and be seen to be neutral

Another significant enabler of the project's success is the commitment to professional neutrality and transparency in all dealings. This has been instrumental in building and sustaining trust with policymakers. Over the years, ACEPA has built a reputation for providing unbiased advice and criticism to both ruling and opposition parties, a balanced approach that has been key to their sustained success, particularly during the hung parliament.

Maintaining neutrality despite the personal sympathies and political participation of its members is a challenge. DAP overcomes this by adopting a consistent approach to evaluating the actions of both the ruling party and the opposition. When the opposition is right, DAP praises them; when they are wrong, DAP criticizes them. The same approach is applied to the ruling party. This consistency demonstrates DAP's commitment to promoting an effective and strong parliament, irrespective of political affiliation.

"If you want to support political processes, support both sides. So, in the end, you can say you provided the same advice to both sides. So, it's not like one group needs you and you cannot avail yourself for the other. That betrays you. Maintaining that balance and walking that tightrope is important. Be neutral and be seen to be neutral."

Rasheed Draman

To maintain transparency, DAP ensures that all interactions with NDC and NPP are open and clear. This avoids any potential threats to ACEPA's credibility and assures both NDC and NPP that any potential bias would be exposed. This transparency helps build a foundation of trust. ACEPA also implements a strict policy of inviting both sides to its events. If only one side confirms attendance, the event is cancelled. For instance, a recent event was cancelled because only the opposition confirmed attendance. Despite already incurring organisational costs, ACEPA upheld its impartiality over potential bias, thereby protecting its reputation.

"...there was a group we partnered with to do a programme for parliament, and the opposition called me to say, if you are with these guys, count us out because they are biased against us. I had to tell the organisation this is what the opposition has said. Costs had already been incurred. We said to them give us the resources we will go and manage it

but they said they couldn't because the donor required them to administer the activity themselves. So, we proceeded with the event. When the opposition came and saw some of the staff of the organisation, they said we deceived them. So, I learned my lesson early enough."

Rasheed Draman

Most importantly, ACEPA staff remain vigilant about maintaining professional neutrality, even in private conversations. ACEPA's leadership in the partnership has ensured that the project adheres to this principle. They acknowledge the importance of being cautious about what is said, as private comments could be overheard and misinterpreted, potentially compromising their neutral stance.

Adaptability and flexibility of delivery (and re-delivery)

The unpredictability of parliamentary schedules meant that planned activities had to be cancelled or adapted at short notice due to unforeseen political events, requiring DAP to remain flexible and adaptive.

The high turnover of MPs necessitated repeated efforts to re-establish relationships and reintroduce the project to new parliamentarians. This constant need to rebuild relationships is both time-consuming and resource-intensive but essential for maintaining the project's momentum and relevance.

DAP has also had to navigate political transitions by repeating key activities such as training sessions and relationship-building meetings. This repetition has ensured that new members are integrated smoothly and that the project maintains continuity and effectiveness.

Lessons learned: advice for other initiatives

Several key lessons have emerged from DAP that can inform similar initiatives.

1. Building and maintaining relationships with parliaments is an ongoing process that requires sustained effort and resources. Ensuring that new MPs are introduced to the project through committee engagements helps integrate them into the project's objectives and build relationships from the onset.
2. Political environments in which projects are implemented are often unpredictable. Long-term commitment and flexibility from funders are crucial for the success of such projects. Flexibility allows projects to respond to changing priorities necessitated by political dynamics such as political transitions. It also allows for reallocating resources to emerging challenges during the project cycle.
3. Engaging parliament at the beginning of its mandate is essential to avoid politicizing activities during election years, which often bring heightened political tensions and pressures. Engaging

parliament early helps mitigate these pressures by ensuring that significant activities are well underway before election campaigns begin. This proactive approach reduces the risk of important issues being manipulated for political gain.

4. Working with parliaments through transitions may require repetition of work. In Ghana, parliamentary transitions are a regular occurrence due to the country's adherence to constitutional term limits and democratic processes.
5. Maintaining a reputation for professional neutrality and transparency is vital for building and sustaining trust with policymakers. ACEPA's balanced approach in providing unbiased advice and criticism to ruling and opposition parties has been instrumental in their success.

Conclusion

DAP exemplifies the importance of thinking and working politically. Through strategic navigation of political dynamics, building long-term relationships, engaging parliament at the right time, and building trust through consistent neutrality, ACEPA has successfully fostered a productive relationship with the Ghanaian Parliament amidst political transitions. This has been enabled by flexible funding from the donor and ACEPA's decades of experience and relationship-building with the Ghanaian parliament.

References

Asante, K., & Oduro, F. (2016). The Cost of Parliamentary Politics in Ghana. London: WFD, 8-9.

Bowles, J., & Marx, B. (2022). Turnover and Accountability in Africa's Parliaments. Available at SSRN 4642554.

Draman, R. et al. (2017) Evidence Use in African Parliaments, Oxford University Press, Oxford. Available at https://acepa-africa.org/r3d_category/publications/

Hayter (2023). Parliament and GSS: A growing relationship for evidence use in Ghana. Available at https://acepa-africa.org/r3d_category/publications/

Lampo, I & Hayter, E. (2022). Parliaments and the National Statistics System in Ghana: A critical relationship for evidence use. Available at https://acepa-africa.org/r3d_category/publications/

This case study was written by Racheal Makokha. It is based on an interview with Dr Rasheed Draman, with thanks for his time.

DAP Partners

