

Institutionalizing Evidence Use in Ghana's Parliament

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 environment 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 Omar Seidu, Director of Social Statistics and SDGs Coordinator at the Ghana Statistical Service. It explores the significant achievements of the DAP project and how it facilitated an evidence-driven approach to policy, particularly during and post-COVID-19 pandemic and 2020 elections, by leveraging non-traditional data sources and strengthening parliamentary engagement.

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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 Think Tanks (OTT) (DAP II), aims to improve the Parliament of Ghana's capacity to use statistics to monitor progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Government of Ghana has committed both globally and nationally to achieving the 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 SDG monitoring group. 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 statistics 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 polarized environment.

The Challenge: Building Consensus in a Hung Parliament

Ghana's 2020 general election resulted in one of the most closely contested parliamentary outcomes in the country's history, with neither the ruling New Patriotic Party (NPP) nor the opposition National Democratic Congress (NDC) securing an outright majority. This led to a 'hung Parliament', a rare occurrence in Ghanaian politics, where the balance of power was more evenly distributed across political lines. This political scenario profoundly impacted the use of evidence and data in governance. In such a divided Parliament, MPs needed solid, fact-based evidence to build consensus and win support for policies across the aisle.

"The use of evidence became more important because, in such a close Parliament, you need facts to convince the other side to support your argument."

This heightened the demand for real-time and reliable data, and GSS's role in providing that data became more critical. The creation of the Stats Bank—an online platform that allowed MPs to access data on-demand—was a direct response to the growing need for evidence-based policymaking. This system empowered MPs to use data in parliamentary debates, policy formulation, and oversight.

The shift in parliamentary engagement was a key success of the DAP project, and it can be largely attributed to the political dynamics brought about by these electoral transitions. Parliament's lack of an absolute majority also fostered a more open, inclusive environment where data and evidence took center stage in decision-making processes. MPs from both parties increasingly relied on GSS data to strengthen their arguments and to advocate for their constituencies, irrespective of political affiliation.

The Context: Statistical and Governance Transformation

DAP was launched during a critical period of transformation for Ghana's statistical and governance landscape. This context was shaped by three key developments: the passing of the 2019 Statistics Act, the evolving role of Parliament in evidence-informed decision-making, and the challenges and opportunities presented by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The 2019 Statistics Act

Ghana passed the **Statistical Service Act 2019 (Act 1033)**, which expanded GSS's mandate. Before this, GSS's mandate was primarily around the production of statistics such as traditional national surveys and censuses. However, the new law empowered GSS to explore non-traditional data sources and assume a broader role in coordinating the national statistical system. The Act provided GSS with the legal framework to coordinate across ministries and government agencies, ensuring a more integrated approach to data production.

As Seidu explained:

"The new mandate provided by the law in 2019 strengthened our ability to work closely with partners and explore the use of non-traditional sources. It also gave us the legal basis to coordinate the national statistical system more effectively."

This change came at a time when global and national demands for data were growing, driven in part by Ghana's commitment to international frameworks like the SDGs. The 2019 Act positioned GSS to not only produce traditional census and survey data but also leverage new technologies and methodologies to provide real-time, actionable insights for the government.

Political Dynamics and Renewed Demand for Evidence

Simultaneously, the political landscape in Ghana was undergoing significant shifts. The 2020 hung parliament created a heightened need for evidence-informed policymaking, as MPs from both the NDC and NPP needed evidence to support their positions and negotiate across party lines.

In this context, GSS's ability to provide timely and reliable data became more critical than ever. The close elections meant that decisions based on facts and evidence were necessary for both political divides. As Seidu reflected,

"If you have to get the other side to support your argument, you need to provide facts... The use of evidence became more important because the population is getting more and more enlightened."

Parliament's interest in data was further fueled by the recognition that effective governance in a democracy depends on evidence. Before the DAP project, GSS's engagement with Parliament was limited to formal submissions upon request. However, DAP provided a new opportunity for GSS to build a more proactive and systemic relationship with MPs and parliamentary committees.¹

The COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic added another layer of urgency to the need for reliable data. Like many other countries, Ghana faced significant challenges in containing the virus, managing public health, and addressing the socio-economic fallout. The pandemic disrupted traditional methods of data collection, as lockdowns and social distancing measures made it impossible for GSS to carry out household surveys and census as planned.

Yet, this crisis also presented an opportunity for GSS to innovate and demonstrate its relevance. Despite lockdowns and social distancing restrictions, GSS faced the challenge of continuing its work. The team quickly pivoted, employing innovative approaches such as mobile phone-based surveys and rapid assessments. Reflecting on this, Seidu recounted,

"During COVID-19, we had to use telephone interviews to churn out several statistics rapidly, providing government and Parliament with much-needed data."

The use of mobile network operators' Call Details Records (CDRs) and the rapid COVID tracker surveys allowed GSS to provide critical data on mobility patterns, overcrowding, and access to essential services within days of the first lockdowns. Seidu noted that:

"Ghana was one of the few countries where the national statistical office continued to operate during COVID-19, and we were able to produce critical reports, such as a mobility

¹ 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/

analysis just three days into the lockdown, to inform government policies."

The pandemic also underscored the importance of real-time data in managing crises. GSS quickly developed dashboards to track COVID-19 cases, monitor socio-economic conditions, and generate insights into how different regions of the country were affected by the pandemic. Despite the pandemic's disruptions, GSS successfully conducted the 2021 Population and Housing Census, an unprecedented achievement given the global context. Many countries postponed their censuses due to COVID-19, but Ghana became a trailblazer by releasing census results within 45 days, a record for Africa. The first report, a mobility analysis, was produced just three days after the lockdown began. The census results provided critical data that fed into parliamentary debates and policy planning, further embedding GSS in Ghana's governance processes.

Enablers of Success: Lessons Learned

Alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals

Ghana's national development framework has been closely aligned with the SDGs since their adoption by the United Nations in 2015. This alignment has driven a strong focus on data to measure progress on SDG targets, such as poverty reduction, education, and health. The electoral transitions did not disrupt Ghana's progress toward the SDGs because Ghana had strategically aligned its national development framework with them from the outset. The SDGs were not viewed as separate from the country's broader development agenda, and this ensured continuity in their implementation despite changes in political leadership. In fact, in 2019, the Ministry of Finance issued a directive that no government entity could draw funds from the national budget unless their expenditures were linked to specific SDG targets. This ensured that even during electoral transitions, SDG-related projects and policies continued to receive funding and support.

GSS played a crucial role in tracking progress on the SDGs, producing reports and indicators to inform policy. One significant achievement was the development of the **Multi-Dimensional Poverty Index (MPI)**. GSS developed the MPI covering all 261 districts in Ghana and, with support from the DAP project, disseminated this to members of Parliament. The MPI measured poverty beyond income, considering factors such as education, health, and living conditions. This data allowed Parliament and local governments to tailor policies to the specific needs of each district. It equipped MPs with the tools they needed to hold the government accountable for SDG-related policies and projects. For instance, MPs used the MPI to track SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being), and SDG 4 (Quality Education) in their districts. The ability to monitor progress at the **constituency level** gave MPs a more granular understanding of how their regions were performing, allowing them to advocate for better resource allocation or targeted interventions. Seidu noted that this work had a profound impact on Parliament's approach to poverty reduction:

“The MPI has been an important tool for Parliament and local governments to tailor their interventions. Every MP now has data on poverty in their district, allowing them to make informed decisions.”

Building a Relationship with Parliament

Before DAP, GSS had limited direct interaction with Parliament, and data-sharing often occurred only through formal channels. However, the project facilitated a significant shift, enabling GSS to engage Parliament more proactively and systematically.

They built and maintained the relationship in several ways:

1. Building Trust and maintaining a non-partisan approach

One of the key factors that allowed GSS to maintain its relationship with Parliament, even through electoral transitions, was the establishment of trust. By providing objective, politically neutral data, GSS has become a trusted partner for MPs on both sides of the political spectrum. This neutrality was crucial during the 2020 election. During the electoral transition, the neutrality of GSS became an even more important factor in maintaining its credibility. Any perception of bias toward one political side could undermine MPs, policymakers, and the public's trust in GSS's work. Recognizing this, GSS worked hard to remain politically neutral, ensuring that the data it produced was perceived as objective and reliable. Seidu explained:

“We had to remain neutral, do our technical work, and provide evidence to whoever needed it, irrespective of their position in Parliament. This has been crucial in building trust during these political transitions.”

GSS's ability to continue producing independent, high-quality data during two different electoral cycles ensured that the national statistical system retained its integrity, even as the composition of Parliament changed. This neutrality helped to institutionalize the use of evidence across the political spectrum, making it a vital tool for all sides of the political divide.

2. Institutionalizing Engagement

GSS also took deliberate steps to institutionalize its engagement with Parliament. Rather than relying on informal or ad-hoc interactions, they worked to make data-sharing mechanisms more formal and structured. This included the creation of the Stats Bank, which allowed MPs to retrieve data quickly and use it in real time for debates and policy development. MPs could access data on their smartphones, even from within Parliament, which represented a major leap forward in the accessibility and utility of data for legislative decision-making. By training MPs, their research

staff, and the Parliamentary Service staff on how to use the platform, GSS ensured that evidence-informed decision-making became a routine part of parliamentary work, regardless of who was in power.

“Some MPs now reach out to GSS directly. This was not a regular feature before the DAP project.”

This shows how the relationship became more embedded and consistent, reducing the impact of the political composition of the House.

3. Capacity Building

GSS played a proactive role in building capacity within Parliament, which was essential for maintaining the relationship through transitions. This involved training MPs and Committees, their research assistants, and parliamentary staff on how to access, interpret, and use data. GSS's commitment to long-term engagement helped Parliament institutionalize the use of evidence in its decision-making processes. The parliamentary engagement fostered by DAP was particularly transformative.

As the relationship between GSS and Parliament grew, the demand for real-time data from MPs and other stakeholders increased significantly. GSS faced the challenge of scaling its operations to meet this demand, especially in producing district-level data on poverty, health, and education. The development of tools like the Stats Bank helped alleviate some of this pressure, but staffing and resource constraints remain an ongoing challenge.

Flexibility and Adaptability

The DAP project's flexibility was a key reason why GSS was able to navigate political transitions smoothly. As priorities shifted during the electoral transitions, GSS was able to adjust the sequencing of activities to align with the evolving needs of Parliament and other stakeholders. For example, the timing of parliamentary engagements was carefully planned to avoid clashing with election periods, ensuring that GSS could continue its work without being drawn into the political fray. This flexibility also ensured that GSS remained relevant to Parliament's needs, even as new MPs entered the legislature. Seidu noted how this flexibility was crucial in maintaining the project's relevance:

“The flexibility of the DAP project allowed us to adapt our activities around the electoral cycle, ensuring that we remained focused on our goals without getting caught up in the politics of the moment.”

The DAP project was uniquely positioned to support GSS as it navigated these shifts. By focusing on flexibility and responsiveness, the project allowed GSS to meet the changing needs of Parliament, the government, and the broader public. The DAP project not only helped GSS respond to immediate challenges, such as COVID-19 and electoral transitions, but also laid the groundwork for a long-term shift toward evidence-informed policymaking in Ghana.

Evolving Needs: GSS's Expanding Scope

DAP's approach supported GSS in evolving to the needs of Parliament and the broader political landscape, particularly during and after the 2020 elections, and extended its work beyond what was initially planned.

Parliament's Oversight Role in SDG Financing

One of the critical aspects of Parliament's engagement with the SDGs has been its oversight role in financing SDG initiatives. The 2019 directive from the Ministry of Finance, which tied government spending to SDG targets, gave Parliament the mandate to scrutinize how resources were allocated to achieve the goals. Through engagement with Committees of Parliament on SDG budget data, Parliament was able to assess whether government expenditures were aligned with the SDGs, particularly in areas like health, education, and poverty alleviation. MPs were able to use evidence from GSS to question ministers and government officials about the progress being made on SDGs and the effectiveness of spending in key areas.

Voluntary National Reviews

Ghana's commitment to Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) has kept Parliament engaged in SDG monitoring. The VNR process involves presenting progress on SDG targets to the United Nations. Parliament has played a role in ensuring that the reports reflect the realities on the ground. Parliament's role in VNRs has increased in recent years, partly due to the data and insights provided by GSS. MPs are now more involved in reviewing district-level data on SDG progress and using that data to contribute to the national review process. This is likely to continue, with Parliament expected to play a larger role in the upcoming 2025 VNR.

Continuity Across Government Agencies

Even with changes in Parliament, there was a strong institutional commitment to the SDGs across government agencies, including the National Development Planning Commission (NDPC) and GSS. The close alignment of the SDGs with Ghana's national development goals meant that regardless of which party was in power, the overall commitment to achieving them remained consistent. GSS played a critical role in providing data and evidence to ensure that the SDGs were continuously monitored and integrated into national policies, even between political changes.

Extending Constituency Profiles

Initially, GSS planned to produce constituency profiles for four to six constituencies as part of the second phase of the DAP project. However, due to increased demand from MPs based on the interest generated by the profiles produced in the first phase, GSS extended this to cover eight constituencies. These profiles provide detailed data on poverty, education, and health in each constituency, giving MPs the tools they need to advocate for better resource allocation and targeted interventions.

“We had originally anticipated preparing profiles for a few constituencies, but demand grew, and we were able to extend it to eight.”

This success highlighted DAP's ability to scale its activities in response to stakeholder needs.

Conclusion

The DAP project has significantly enhanced the use of data and evidence in Ghana's governance processes. GSS's relationship with Parliament, initially facilitated by the DAP project, has become an integral part of Parliament's evidence-informed debates. The key to maintaining this relationship through parliamentary transitions has been neutrality, trust, and a commitment to building institutional capacity. By empowering MPs with real-time data and ensuring continuity in training and engagement, GSS has ensured that its relationship with Parliament is not tied to any specific political party or electoral cycle.

Parliament, in turn, has leveraged GSS's data to monitor progress and ensure accountability. Through its oversight role, Parliament has become a more active player in tracking SDG financing and outcomes, particularly at the district level, ensuring that national development priorities continue to align with global sustainability goals.

The DAP project helped institutionalize the use of data in Parliament, ensuring that MPs from both sides of the political spectrum could rely on statistical evidence to inform their work. The political dynamics, particularly after the 2020 election, created an environment where evidence-informed decision-making became more critical, and GSS's role in providing reliable data was elevated. At the same time, the SDG structures in Ghana remained resilient, largely because of their integration with the national development framework. This alignment and the training provided to Parliament ensured that the SDGs continued to be prioritized through electoral transitions.

The flexibility of the DAP project allowed GSS to navigate these transitions smoothly, adapting to new priorities while maintaining its neutrality and independence. In the end, the project's success has shown the importance of evidence in supporting democratic governance, especially during political change.

References

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/

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DAP Partners

