

Building an Evidence-Use Culture Within 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 beneficiaries of the project. The aim is to capture experiential insights and practical lessons learned from the DAP project.

This case study is based on an interview with Hon. Suleman Sanid, Member of Parliament (MP) for Ahafo Ano North in the 7th (2017-2020) and 8th (2021-2024) Parliament of Ghana. During his term, he was a member of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Committee and the Local Government and Rural Development Committee. Hon. Sanid benefited from several DAP capacity-strengthening activities, including training on using Multi-Dimensional Poverty Index (MPI) reports and the Ghana Statistical Service's Statsbank as data sources for oversight and representation. He also benefited from training on how to review audit committee reports of Metropolitan, Municipal and District Assemblies (MMDAs) and training on Annual Progress Reports, understanding how progress reports of MMDAs inform the development and implementation of programmes and projects in the medium-term development plans.

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Racheal Makokha (OTT), with thanks to Agnes Titriku, Issifu Lampo (ACEPA) and Emmeline Henderson (OTT) 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 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 former 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 their 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 promoting an evidence culture among MPs.

Introduction: The Role of Data in Governance

In parliamentary settings, especially in developing countries, decisions that affect the lives of millions often rely on anecdotal evidence, political pressures, or the influence of vested interests. This can lead to policies that are not grounded in reality or that disproportionately benefit certain areas or groups. For Ghana, where issues such as poverty, education, and sustainable development are key focal points, it becomes critical for MPs to base their decisions on reliable evidence.

The DAP initiative, designed to empower MPs with the tools and knowledge to use data effectively in their legislative duties, has gradually transformed the way decisions are made in Parliament. This case study reflects on the experiences of one MP who actively engaged with the DAP initiative, highlighting the ways in which it has influenced the understanding of data, its application in parliamentary debates, and its potential for improving policy outcomes, and reflects more broadly on the impact of DAP in Ghana's Parliament and examines how data-driven policymaking has helped shift the approach to critical governance issues.

The Initial Challenge: Data Gaps in Parliamentary Work

DAP has significantly influenced parliamentary work, particularly in areas such as poverty reduction, local governance, and education. As highlighted by Hon. Sanid, the initiative has "reduced guesswork and improved fact-checking" within parliamentary discussions. DAP has ensured that MPs base their comments on factual data rather than unverified claims, thereby making debates more grounded and evidence-informed. He further emphasized the necessity of using data to discuss critical indicators such as education and poverty, noting,

"We now know we are discussing real facts, not assumptions...Before this initiative, there was a lot of guesswork in our discussions. People would make claims or assertions, but we had no reliable data to fact-check or support those claims."

This lack of evidence meant that decisions were frequently made without a clear understanding of the real challenges facing communities or the effectiveness of existing policies.

The introduction of the DAP initiative, which aims to embed data into parliamentary processes, marked a significant turning point. The project focused on equipping MPs¹ with access to reliable data sources and fostering a culture of evidence-informed policymaking. This approach has shifted parliamentary discussions from anecdotal assertions to more informed, fact-based dialogue.

Key Benefits of the DAP Initiative

DAP has brought several significant benefits to parliamentary work. One of the most notable advantages is the reduction of guesswork and the improvement of fact-checking in parliamentary discussions. By ensuring that MPs base their contributions on reliable, factual data, DAP has minimized reliance on unverified claims, leading to more informed debates. Hon. Sanid observed,

"Before the DAP initiative, there was a lot of guesswork in our discussions. People would make claims or assertions, but we had no reliable data to fact-check or support those claims. Now, with the DAP initiative, MPs are encouraged to

¹ DAP supported three Committees in the 8th Parliament namely: Education Committee, Poverty reduction strategy Committee and Local Government and Rural Development Committee

ground their comments in facts. This has helped us to critically examine the basis of our analysis, ensuring that we are not just making speculative comments. If our analysis is weak, it's important to recognize it and correct it."

This shift toward data-driven discussions has also empowered more informed decision-making, particularly in guiding specific policy recommendations. For instance, data from GSS played a crucial role in shaping recommendations for the proper targeting of poverty reduction interventions, ensuring that benefits or compensations are based on poverty levels rather than material losses or individual claims. Benefits paid under the Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty (LEAP) Programme for instance used to be based on interviews and claims made by individuals regarding their poverty status. However, data allows for such claims to be verified and also helps Parliament to make recommendations on what reliefs people should get. Without being able to validate accounts from citizens and communities in need, communities could end up with interventions or allocations that do not address their real problems and needs.

At the committee level, the availability of data has made discussions more productive and focused. Hon. Sanid pointed out that in committee meetings, "data helps guide the conversation," allowing members to address issues effectively and develop informed recommendations. Moreover, the project has promoted a significant cultural shift in how data is used, with committee leaders, like Hon. BT Baba², consistently emphasizing the importance of data in discussions. As Hon. Sanid explained,

"He ensures that we use data to back up our arguments, asking, 'Are you speaking from data, or just conjecturing?' This has been very helpful."

DAP helped raise awareness about the value of evidence-informed policymaking among parliamentary committees, which in turn inspired new forms of collaboration. For example, after engaging with DAP, the Local Government and Rural Development Committee took the initiative to collaborate with the Waste Management Committee to address challenges related to data-driven decision-making. One of the issues identified by the Waste Management Committee was the inability of many residents to afford waste collection services, partly due to pricing policies that were not based on data. As Hon. Sanid explained, policies should be informed by data that maps communities according to their purchasing power, allowing for

² Hon. BT Baba was the Chair of the Committee on Poverty Reduction Strategy in the 7th and 8th Parliament of Ghana

tiered pricing – where those who can afford to pay do so, and those who cannot are subsidized. Through the influence of DAP, committee members recognized the importance of grounding waste management policies in evidence to better serve diverse community needs.

A key benefit of DAP has been its contribution to a broader shift towards evidence-informed policymaking. Hon. Sanid noted that exposure to data has made MPs more cautious and informed in discussing policy matters, which eventually strengthens the decision-making process. This data-driven approach is particularly impactful in critical areas such as poverty and education. As Hon. Sanid stated,

"Through the DAP program, I have learned the importance of using data to understand key issues like poverty and education, which are critical indicators of economic growth. For example, when a committee visited communities in the northern regions of Ghana, they used data from the Ghana Statistical Service to assess local poverty levels. We suggested involving the Statistical Service to ensure that compensation was aligned with the needs of the community and would help lift people out of poverty, rather than just giving them a one-off payment."

Another area where data has proven beneficial is in advocating for a fairer distribution of resources across the country. For example, the Common Fund, a key resource allocated to districts for development projects, is distributed using a formula that does not always reflect the actual needs of the communities. In some cases, districts that are more economically disadvantaged receive fewer resources, while those with fewer needs receive more. Hon. Sanid emphasized:

"We need to use data to push for more equitable allocation of resources based on actual needs, rather than just political calculations."

This example underscores how data can play a crucial role in advocating for more equitable policy outcomes. When data is systematically used to evaluate the needs of districts based on factors like poverty rates, education levels, and access to healthcare, it becomes easier to make the case for a more balanced distribution of resources.

Lastly, Hon. Sanid emphasized the long-term potential of DAP to transform governance. The program has made MPs more adept at using data to guide their decisions, which, in turn, enhances parliamentary work and improves overall governance. As he put it,

"The more MPs use data to guide their decisions, the more it will enhance parliamentary work and improve the country's situation."

Through these benefits, DAP has helped create a more informed, data-driven parliamentary process, leading to more effective governance.

Barriers to Effective Data Use in Parliamentary Debates

Despite the successes at the committee level, Hon. Sanid highlighted a significant challenge that still affects data use in broader parliamentary debates: real-time access to data during plenary sessions. In committee discussions, there is more time to prepare and access relevant data, and MPs are often guided by committee leaders who emphasize the importance of basing arguments on evidence. However, during plenary debates, MPs face the challenge of responding to debates in real time without easy access to up-to-date, reliable data.

"As we engage in plenary, we often react to comments made by others without having easy access to relevant data. I would like to see a system where MPs can quickly access data during plenary sessions. This would allow us to quote reliable sources, making our contributions more informed and reducing challenges from other MPs who may question the source of the data."

One of the key frustrations in this process is the lack of a centralized platform that provides MPs with immediate access to the most relevant, up-to-date statistics, especially during live debates when rapid decision-making is crucial. Currently, without such a system in place, MPs may resort to using outdated or unreliable sources of information, sometimes using online searches during debates, which can undermine the credibility of their arguments. There is a need for a more user-friendly platform to improve data accessibility. Hon. Sanid emphasized the importance of creating a "platform where MPs can access data quickly and easily," which would help overcome the challenges MPs face when trying to use data during discussions.

Additionally, the current use of data in resource allocation remains limited. Data has not yet been fully integrated into the decision-making process for budgeting and allocation, leaving

room for improvement. While the availability of data has made committee discussions more focused, Hon. Sanid acknowledged that not all committees are using data to its fullest potential, especially when it comes to advocating for budget allocations or policy changes.

"Despite recognizing the importance of data, committees have not effectively used it to guide their discussions on budget allocations and policy reforms."

Another challenge is the slow progress in fostering greater collaboration among committees. Although there have been successful joint efforts on specific issues, most committees tend to operate within their individual mandates, limiting the potential for cross-committee collaboration. Hon. Sanid noted,

"The challenges of committee collaboration are acknowledged, with most committees staying within their mandates."

This siloed approach makes it harder to tackle complex, overlapping issues effectively.

Furthermore, despite the growing recognition of data's importance, Hon. Sanid observed that not all MPs are fully engaging with the available data. "There has not been a significant shift in referencing data in discussions," he noted, pointing to a reluctance among some MPs to consistently use evidence in their contributions. This lack of widespread buy-in means that data-driven decision-making is still not universally practiced across all MPs.

Recommendations for Sustaining Evidence Use within Parliament

To ensure that the impact of data use within Parliament is sustained and scaled, Hon. Sanid offered several key recommendations:

- 1. Integrate Data into Parliament's Electronic Platform:** The MP emphasized the need for an integrated data platform within Parliament's electronic systems. Such a platform would allow MPs to access real-time data during debates, ensuring that discussions are based on facts and not just opinions. A centralized system would make it easier to reference and validate data during parliamentary proceedings.
- 2. Promote Data-Driven Advocacy for Resource Allocation:** There is a need to promote the use of data in advocating for more equitable resource allocation. Hon. Sanid highlighted that the formula for distributing funds, like the Common Fund, should be guided by data, ensuring that allocations are based on the actual needs of communities rather than political considerations.

- 3. Encourage Cross-Committee Collaboration:** The MP pointed out that while committees occasionally collaborate, there is room for greater cooperation, particularly when addressing issues that overlap, such as local governance, waste management, and health. Using shared data resources could foster collaboration between committees, leading to more holistic and informed policy solutions.
- 4. Strengthen Partnerships with Data Providers:** A key recommendation was to foster stronger relationships between Parliament and data-producing institutions like the Ghana Statistical Service. Ensuring that MPs can rely on these sources for accurate, up-to-date information will strengthen the quality of their decision-making. By building this partnership, Parliament can reduce its dependence on unreliable or incomplete data sources.

Conclusion

The DAP initiative has had an undeniable impact on Ghana's Parliament, especially in terms of how data is used to inform decisions on critical issues like poverty reduction, local governance, and education. Although challenges remain – particularly with real-time access to data during plenary sessions – the initiative has paved the way for a more evidence-informed approach to policymaking.

Data is now playing an increasingly important role in parliamentary discussions, with MPs beginning to recognize the value of grounding their arguments in factual evidence. While there is still much to be done to fully integrate data into the decision-making process, the steps taken so far represent a positive shift toward more transparent, accountable, and informed governance.

In the coming years, as more systems are put in place to ensure MPs have easy access to real-time data, Ghana's Parliament has the potential to lead the way in evidence-informed policymaking in Africa. By fully embracing the use of data, the legislature can make more informed decisions that lead to better outcomes for all Ghanaians.

This case study was written by Racheal Makokha. It is based on an interview with Hon. Suleman Sanid, with thanks for his time.

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