

Strengthening Institutional Capacity to Use Evidence within Ghana's Parliament Research Department

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 and a review of relevant project documents. They aim to capture experiential insights and practical lessons learned from the DAP project.

Author

Racheal Makokha (OTT), with thanks to Agnes Titriku (ACEPA), Benedicta Ablateye (ACEPA), Freeman Dagadu (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 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 the 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 Project is designed to empower Parliament to oversee the implementation of the SDGs in Ghana. By strengthening the capacity to use data, members of parliament (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.

Introduction

Effective legislative representation, oversight and informed policymaking are intrinsically linked to the availability and utilization of credible data and evidence. Within the Parliament of Ghana, the Research Department is pivotal in supporting MPs by furnishing the information essential for their diverse functions. The Parliament also recently created the Data Management Department, which does constituency profiling based on DAP's constituency profile initiative. There have been ongoing discussions on how GSS can support the Data Management Department to effectively come up with these profiles.

Prior to the implementation of DAP, the Department encountered systemic impediments concerning data access, analytical capacity, and effective dissemination. This case study explores how the DAP project addressed these constraints, thereby transforming the Department's capability to integrate evidence into parliamentary processes. Drawing on the perspectives of four officers from the Research Department and one from the Data Management Department of the Parliament of Ghana – Isaac Appiah, Sandra Awuah, Samuel Dukpo, Muftaw Abdulai, and Juliana Kesewa – this case study looks at the mechanisms of change, the observed impacts on research outputs and parliamentary engagement, persistent challenges, and strategic recommendations for embedding a robust evidence-use culture within the Parliament of Ghana.

The Initial Challenge: Pre-DAP Data Landscape – Constraints on Evidence Use

Before the start of DAP, the parliamentary research environment was characterized by significant limitations that impeded the systematic use of evidence.

Access to Data

A primary constraint was the difficulty in acquiring reliable and timely data. Researchers frequently resorted to general online searches, a method acknowledged by Sandra Awuah as potentially yielding unverified information. She noted,

"Previously, we relied on Google searches; however, it became apparent that verifiable evidence was often required."

This reliance on unauthenticated sources introduced a degree of uncertainty into the research process, potentially compromising the credibility of the information provided to MPs. Juliana Kesewa further underscored this challenge, stating,

"The use of evidence has improved significantly. One of the trainings involved collaboration with the Ghana Statistical Service. I now rely more on authentic sources such as GSS and the World Bank. Instead of searching on Google — where the credibility of information can be questionable — I prefer using these verified sources to ensure that MPs are equipped with accurate and credible data for debates."

Data-sharing Constraints

Related to limited access to data is the critical systemic barrier in acquiring administrative data from government ministries and agencies. Isaac Appiah articulated this difficulty, observing,

"Accessing administrative data poses a substantial challenge. Governments frequently exhibit reluctance to share data that might present them unfavorably."

Muftaw Abdulai corroborated this, citing delays and bureaucratic hurdles:

"The most significant challenge is the delay in data access. Many of our assignments are time-sensitive, and sometimes institutions are slow to respond or necessitate

formal correspondence, which impedes our work. For instance, we once required data on the School Feeding Program and had to navigate several bureaucratic layers before obtaining the information."

This resistance or administrative delay in data sharing created substantial informational gaps for Parliament, necessitating reliance on less current or specific data sources, thereby limiting the granularity and timeliness of research outputs.

Technical Capacity

Technical capacity for handling and interpreting complex datasets was inconsistent. Interviews with the staff reveal a baseline where advanced data manipulation and analysis skills were not widely prevalent. Juliana Kesewa's reflection on her prior Excel proficiency – "Before, I only understood basic functions such as summation" – illustrates a common limitation in converting raw data into actionable insights. Muftaw Abdulai also highlighted the initial difficulty in accessing reliable data, stating,

"Initially, obtaining reliable data was a significant challenge, but through the training, we acquired the skills to access and effectively utilize GSS data. This fundamentally enhanced my ability to support MPs."

This skills deficit meant that even when data was obtained, its potential for informing detailed analysis, such as trend identification or disaggregated impacts, remained largely unfulfilled.

These interconnected challenges, limited access to credible data, limited capacity, and systemic data-sharing impediments collectively constrained the Research Department's capacity to function as a primary source of robust evidence for Parliament.

DAP's Strategic Interventions and Impact

Capacity building: Training on Data Analysis

DAP's methodology was multifaceted, strategically addressing the identified constraints through skills enhancement, tool provision, and institutional relationship building. The training in advanced Microsoft Excel functionalities directly confronted the analytical skills gap. By concentrating on techniques such as data cleaning, processing, and applying pivot tables and charts, the training equipped researchers like Samuel Dukpo to derive more profound insights from data. He stated,

"We received training on how to extract, clean, and process data, and how to present it using charts and pivot tables."

Juliana Kesewa also specifically mentioned,

"I learned how to handle large datasets, clean data for analysis, and present it effectively through DAP's Excel training."

This enhancement in data manipulation capacity was foundational, enabling more sophisticated analysis of quantitative information, such as budget allocations and expenditure trends.

The introduction and training on data visualization tools, including Datawrapper and Canva, provided a crucial mechanism for enhancing the accessibility and impact of research findings. Recognizing that MPs may not have time to read long reports, these tools facilitated the transformation of complex data into visually intuitive formats. Muftaw Abdulai's enthusiastic adoption of Datawrapper underscores its perceived value and utility in generating compelling infographics.

"Since learning about Datawrapper, I use it frequently to visualize data for MPs. I humorously state that I 'abuse' it because it has become an indispensable component of my workflow."

Juliana Kesewa also said,

"I acquired skills in using infographics and pivot tables to create charts and graphs that MPs can rapidly interpret."

This visual communication strategy directly addressed the need to present information concisely, as highlighted by Isaac Appiah:

"MPs prefer simple, easily digestible content. They do not have the luxury of time for complex reports."

The ability to quickly comprehend key data points through visuals significantly increased the likelihood of MPs using research findings in debates and other parliamentary activities.

Building a relationship with GSS

Arguably, one of the most impactful interventions was the facilitated collaboration with GSS. By directly connecting parliamentary researchers with the national statistical agency and providing training on accessing the GSS StatsBank, DAP established a critical pathway to credible, verifiable national data. Sandra Awuah noted the direct benefit:

"We learned how to engage with GSS data and how to search for evidence-based information pertaining to the SDG goals."

Muftaw Abdulai also emphasized the transformative impact on his data access, stating,

"Before the DAP training, I was unaware of the extensive data holdings at GSS. Through our collaboration, we learned how to utilize platforms like the StatsBank."

Juliana Kesewa confirmed establishing personal relationships with GSS staff, enabling direct contact for clarification or data not available in the StatsBank.

"Owing to previous collaborations and workshops, I have forged personal relationships with some GSS staff. When I require clarification on variables or specific datasets from the StatsBank, I can contact them directly. This level of access has proven very beneficial."

This relationship building, including ongoing efforts towards a formal Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), reduced reliance on less authoritative sources and ensured that the evidence base for parliamentary work was grounded in official national statistics, thereby enhancing the credibility and authority of the Research Department.

Impact: Enhanced Outputs and Parliamentary Engagement

The strengthened capacity and improved data access fostered by DAP led to demonstrable changes in the Research Department's outputs and their utilization by MPs. The ability to conduct more detailed data analysis, particularly using Excel for budget tracking, directly improved the quality and relevance of budget briefs. Juliana Kesewa's description of analyzing budget allocations and expenditure to identify over/underspending illustrates how enhanced skills translated into concrete analytical products that supported MPs' oversight roles:

"We prepare budget briefs using Excel, which allows us to analyze allocations—such as compensation, goods and services, and capital expenditure—and assess whether ministries have overspent or underspent."

This analytical depth empowered MPs to pose more targeted questions during budget hearings, as noted by Samuel Dukpo:

"We analyze trends over the past 4–5 years using Excel, which assists us in determining budget allocations relative to total government expenditure. This empowers MPs to advocate effectively for their respective sectors."

The adoption of data visualization tools clearly impacted how MPs consumed and utilized research findings. The shift towards infographics and visual summaries rendered complex information more accessible and appealing. Muftaw Abdulai's experience of a committee ranking member being highly impressed by a data visualization, leading to closer collaboration, exemplifies how improved presentation can directly enhance the engagement and partnership between researchers and MPs and improve evidence uptake:

"For instance, I created a visualization for the ranking member of the Youth and Sports Committee, and he was profoundly impressed. We subsequently became close collaborators."

Isaac Appiah's account of providing infographics for specific awareness days¹, enabling MPs to speak authoritatively during debates, further highlights how visually presented evidence directly facilitated MPs' participation in parliamentary discourse.

The improved relationship with GSS and access to the StatsBank fundamentally altered the data sourcing process, leading to the utilization of more accurate and verifiable information. Sandra Awuah noted that:

"DAP has improved my current ability to consult GSS for evidence now...Our information can now be easily verified"

¹ Awareness days are the global commemorative days, e.g., Breast Cancer Awareness Month, World Tobacco Day, etc.

Muftaw Abdulai also noted the responsiveness of GSS contacts when data is required:

"Now, when we need data, we can directly reach out to GSS contacts, and they are highly responsive. This collaboration has proven very valuable."

This enhanced access to authentic data directly supported the Department's mandate to provide reliable information, increasing researchers' confidence in their outputs and, by extension, the trust of MPs in the research provided.

The constituency profiling initiative, while encountering implementation challenges, represented a strategic endeavour to localize evidence and make it pertinent to MPs' representational duties. Isaac Appiah observed that,

"...these profiles assist MPs in understanding the drivers of poverty in their constituencies, using 13 key indicators... These profiles provide MPs with clearer direction and support their oversight work"

This highlights the potential of this data in informing localized interventions and oversight. Samuel Dukpo noted that:

"These profiles enable MPs to track the progress of projects and hold ministries accountable, using data as a basis for follow-up."

Muftaw Abdulai regarded the initiative as brilliant, fostering "healthy competition among MPs as many desired to see how their constituencies were performing," but also noted the need for revamping and enhanced advocacy. Juliana Kesewa, however, mentioned she had not extensively utilized the profiles as MPs often rely on personal research assistants for this purpose. "Unfortunately, no. MPs typically rely on their personal research assistants for such tasks. Consequently, I have not had the opportunity to directly support MPs in that regard." This indicates that while the concept is sound, challenges in dissemination and integration into existing workflows necessitate attention.

Persistent Challenges

Accessibility of Data

Despite the significant progress achieved, the interviews reveal persistent challenges that continue to affect the full integration of evidence into parliamentary work. Timely access to administrative data remains a critical bottleneck. Isaac Appiah's concern about the outdated nature of survey data and the delays in obtaining current administrative data underscores a systemic issue requiring ongoing attention:

"Survey data like the Demographic and Health Survey is only conducted every four to five years. Therefore, although reliable, it is not always current. Without formal agreements (such as MoUs), it can take weeks to acquire data – or we may have to use outdated statistics."

Samuel Dukpo's mention of subscription barriers to certain databases also highlights an access issue that limits the scope of available information. Muftaw Abdulai corroborated the issue of slow responses and inadequate record-keeping from some institutions:

"The most significant challenge is the delay in accessing data... Another issue is poor record-keeping by some institutions. Sometimes the data we receive is incomplete or not in the required format."

Juliana Kesewa also noted accessibility challenges with subscriptions and data not being disaggregated as needed:

"A major challenge is data accessibility. Some institutions require subscriptions – like ResearchGate – and regrettably, our department has not subscribed. That limits access... Occasionally, the data is outdated or not disaggregated as I require – for instance, by gender or level, which hinders my ability to analyze effectively."

Addressing these data supply-side challenges is crucial for ensuring the research department has access to the most current and relevant information.

Political challenges

The subtle, yet impactful, influence of political dynamics on the use of evidence presents another complex challenge. Muftaw Abdulai's observation that MPs may seek data to support pre-existing political narratives, and Juliana Kesewa's experience of critical findings being disregarded if they do not align with party positions, highlight the inherent tension between objective research and political expediency. Sandra Awuah, while affirming the Department's neutrality, acknowledged that:

"MPs might embellish the data with their political rhetoric – we do not become involved in that. Our neutrality is essential so that both parties can utilize our products."

The researchers' strategy is to maintain neutrality and adhere strictly to facts, as described by Muftaw Abdulai,

"Our director consistently advises us to adhere to the facts... MPs sometimes introduce their political perspective using their personal research assistants, but our role is to maintain credibility and neutrality. This ensures all MPs – irrespective of party affiliation – continue to rely on the Research Department."

This is necessary to preserve the Department's integrity and ensure it remains a trusted resource for all MPs. However, this does not guarantee the use of evidence when it conflicts with political agendas.

Recommendations

Based on the analysis of DAP's challenges and successes, several strategic recommendations emerge for further strengthening the evidence-informed decision-making in the Parliament of Ghana.

Continuous Capacity Building

There is a clear need for continuous and targeted skills development. Samuel Dukpo's call for regular refresher courses and Juliana Kesewa's specific suggestions for training in analytical tools like SPSS, post-legislative scrutiny, and fiscal impact analysis indicate the need for a structured, ongoing professional development program that evolves with the demands of

parliamentary research and technological advancements. Muftaw Abdulai also emphasized the necessity for continuous training as technology evolves:

"I would not suggest they end, but I recommend they persist in offering regular training. Refresher courses in Excel, infographics, Datawrapper, and other tools should be conducted annually. As technology progresses, new tools emerge, and we require continuous training to remain updated and effective in our roles."

Strengthening and Building Institutional Relationships

Strengthening institutional relationships and improving data access mechanisms are also paramount. Muftaw Abdulai's emphasis on cultivating robust relationships with data-producing institutions and advocating for improved data-sharing systems, such as automated portals, points to the need for a more proactive and formalized approach to data acquisition beyond the GSS:

"I would underscore the importance of building strong relationships with data-producing institutions. Access to data should not be a struggle. Many institutions do not readily make their reports available online, which is frustrating. We require superior systems for data access – such as automated request portals and regularly updated websites."

Isaac Appiah advocates establishing relationships with a broader range of institutions reinforces this.

"The continued formalization of partnerships through MoUs, as is being pursued with GSS, can help mitigate bureaucratic delays and ensure more reliable data flows."

Creating Awareness of the Research Department within Parliament

Finally, enhancing the visibility and understanding of the Research Department's capabilities and outputs among MPs is crucial. While data visualization has improved accessibility,

ongoing efforts are needed to ensure that all MPs, particularly new members, are aware of the available resources and the value of evidence-based information. Muftaw Abdulai suggested enhanced advocacy and training for new MPs regarding resources like constituency profiles. Juliana Kesewa recommended proactive "selective dissemination of information" to MPs based on their specific needs. The challenges faced by the constituency profiling initiative highlight the need for sustained advocacy and user training to ensure that valuable data resources are actively utilized.

Conclusion

The Data for Accountability Project has catalyzed significant positive change within the Research Department of the Parliament of Ghana. By strategically addressing data access and capacity limitations, DAP has demonstrably enhanced the department's capacity to provide credible and impactful evidence-informed support to Members of Parliament. The exploration of the researchers' experiences reveals a transformation marked by improved data sourcing, more sophisticated analysis, and more accessible communication of findings, as evidenced by the widespread adoption of tools like Excel, Datawrapper, and the increased utilization of GSS data.

While challenges related to data availability from external institutions and the influence of political considerations on evidence use persist, the foundation established by DAP provides a strong basis for future progress. The insights from the interviews underscore the critical need for sustained investment in continuous professional development, the formalization of data access agreements, and ongoing efforts to promote the value and utilization of parliamentary research outputs among legislators. The journey of the Research Department, as illuminated by the voices of those directly involved – Isaac Appiah, Sandra Awuah, Samuel Dukpo, Muftaw Abdulai, and Juliana Kesewa – highlights the indispensable role of targeted interventions like DAP in strengthening the evidence-to-policy ecosystem and fostering greater accountability within democratic governance.

This case study was written by Racheal Makokha. It is based on interviews with Isaac Appiah, Sandra Awuah, Samuel Dukpo, Muftaw Abdulai, and Juliana Kesewa, with thanks for their time.

DAP Partners

