
Emerging Library and Research Services for Legislatures in Africa: The Case of the Parliament of Uganda

INNOCENT RUGAMBWA

ABSTRACT

When a parliament establishes a library and research service or enhances the capacity and scope of an existing service, there is much to be learned from the experience of international counterparts and partnerships with relevant stakeholders. Each segment of society has a specific role to play and resources to share. After presenting a brief background on the Parliament of Uganda and the recent establishment of library and research services therein, this paper discusses the factors that have led to expediting the growth of parliamentary library and research services, despite many challenges. Experiences are reported in regard to the role and reporting mechanism of the Uganda Parliamentary Library, its clientele, information requests from Members of Parliament, the impact of information technology, and other issues affecting the Legislative Library and Information Service. The paper highlights an overview of parliamentary library and research services in Africa and explores opportunities for building effective partnerships between parliamentary library and research services and relevant stakeholders with a view to achieving best practices. Examples of partnerships are cited with reference to the Parliament of Uganda.

INTRODUCTION

In a parliamentary democratic system, the representatives of the people need objective, factual, and timely information with a view to making informed decisions and ensuring executive accountability to the legislature. This presupposes that parliament should have its own information reservoir and information management system, away from the control of the executive branch. Almost all organizations now use some form of resource

sharing through networks and partnerships as a way to participate in the global society. There is a need for access to information sources other than those found in one's establishment, region, or country. One also needs to reach out and communicate with other colleagues in a faster and more efficient manner.

The phenomenal growth in the range and dimensions of the government sphere has made it impossible for the modern legislator to be self-reliant in gathering the information he needs in the discharge of his duties as an effective representative. The situation has necessitated the establishment of not merely a well-stocked library but also an efficient research and reference service to which Members of Parliament (MPs) can always turn for help and assistance (*Building Information and Research*, 1999).

UGANDA: AN OVERVIEW

Uganda is a country located in East Africa bordering Kenya in the east, Tanzania and Rwanda in the south, Sudan in the north, and the Democratic Republic of Congo in the west. It is a typical example of developing countries, with a population of thirty-two million people. Agriculture is overwhelmingly the most important sector of the economy, accounting for about 96 percent of the country's export earnings, 57 percent of the gross domestic product, and a livelihood for some 88 percent of Uganda's labor force.

Uganda obtained independence from British colonial rule in 1962. This was a landmark in the history of Uganda characterized by promulgation of a constitution and formation of the first Parliament of Uganda, among other things. The Uganda Parliament (<http://www.parliament.go.ug/>) is unicameral and is currently composed of 332 members.

PARLIAMENTARY LIBRARY AND RESEARCH SERVICES IN AFRICA: AN OVERVIEW

Parliamentarians' need for independent information is even greater in developing democracies and economies where the government may be the gatekeeper of information relevant to policy making and where few nongovernmental alternatives exist (*Informing Democracy*, 2008). While parliaments have existed in Africa for more than three decades, library and research services in many parliaments are in infancy (as reported at the recent Heads of Parliamentary Libraries Workshop held in Rome, Italy, in December 2009). With the exception of South Africa and Egypt, many parliaments are primarily concerned with establishing and furnishing space, finding a budget to build a library collection, and employing appropriate qualified staff. Access to Internet and online resources is still limited, and library collections are small, in some cases as low as 1,000 titles. Research services are just being introduced in legislatures. The

number of library staff ranges from two to twenty, and building a functional library structure is still a dream to many.

THE UGANDA PARLIAMENTARY LIBRARY

While the independent Parliament of Uganda has been in existence since 1962, library and research services were not introduced until 1999. With support from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the Uganda Parliamentary Technical Assistance Project (UPTAP) was launched and implemented by the State University of New York (SUNY). This project fast tracked the establishment of library and research services in the Parliament of Uganda to provide nonpartisan, objective analysis and well-researched information to committees, members, and senior staff on issues related to Parliament business. The Library and Research Service was created as two sections under the department of Library, Research and Information Services. To that effect, eighteen staff members were recruited comprising five librarians, ten research officers (in different disciplines), two information technology specialists, and a secretary. Because staff did not have experience in legislative work, interfacing with politicians was an uphill task. Since its inception, the library has been committed to providing committees and MPs with comprehensive, reliable, and authentic information to enable them to make informed legislative decisions.

During the restructuring of the Parliamentary Service in 2004, the library and research sections were elevated to divisions under the Department of Library and Research. Currently, the Department of Library and Research Service employs thirty staff as follows: the director; two assistant directors; three principal research officers (PROs); six senior research officers (SROs); a multidisciplinary team of ten research officers (ROs) in the following areas: political science, social work, sociology, law, engineering, science (agriculture), statistics, economics, and accounting; four librarians; one senior librarian; one assistant librarian; a secretary; and an office attendant.

THE ROLE AND REPORTING RELATIONSHIP OF THE LEGISLATIVE LIBRARY

The director (Department of Library and Research) reports to the deputy clerk (Legislative Services) who subsequently reports to the clerk to parliament. The role of the Parliamentary Library in Uganda is to provide access to information services, sources, and products and to disseminate information to parliamentarians in an objective and nonpartisan manner. The library ensures that the range of reading materials is adequate and relevant to MPs and their staff. The tasks that library staff is able to perform is a function of the resources available. Various efforts have been made to retrieve relevant documents from the offices of the Speaker, the

Clerk, and staff to process and add them to the library collection. Such publications include committee reports, documents laid at table, and conference proceedings.

There are other agencies that offer information services to Members of Parliament, such as government ministries and departments, statutory bodies, civil society organizations, other parliaments, the American Information Centre, the British Council, the Inter-Parliamentary Union, and private sector organizations. These organizations (when contacted or visited) offer information services to our clients as part of their mandate to provide information to the public.

Besides the parliamentarians and their staff, the library provides services to researchers from universities, the press, and other members of the public. These services are available only when information requests focus on the work of Parliament, that is, parliamentary proceedings, committee reports, commission of inquiry reports, and bills. Such information may not be readily available elsewhere. Members of the public interested in general reading are not allowed because of limited space, privacy entitlement to MPs, and security concerns.

INFORMATION REQUESTS FROM MPs

Parliaments are information-intensive and information-demanding organizations (Global Centre for Information and Communication Technologies in Parliament, 2008). The range of information parliamentarians ask the library to provide is vast. Many of them come to refer to the laws of Uganda, the verbatim reports of Parliament (Hansard), literature on parliamentary practice, rules and procedures, reports to Parliament from different sectors, researched information on any subject, court judgments, statistical information, online resources for research, books on different subjects, newspapers, magazines, and journals. Others need services such as photocopying, scanning, printing, and typing.

Developments in the digital world have changed the nature, timing, and frequency of the information requests of our clients. Increasingly, MPs are more frequently using the Internet for routine searches and less frequently coming to the library staff for information. Some of our users are now more inclined to look for information online than in books. MPs often access question and answer information services via cell phones, short message service, and e-mails. This means that we have to diversify our roles as librarians.

On the other hand, however, there are clients who are not familiar with using information technology. Substantial man-hours for staff are spent on acquainting such clients with skills to send e-mails, surf the Internet, and access online databases. There is still the challenge of optimum utilization of information resources due a poor reading culture among our clients.

LEGISLATORS' INTEREST IN INTERNATIONAL EVENTS AND INFORMATION

Legislators have an ongoing interest in international events and information (Beetham, 2006; *A guide to parliamentary practice*, 2003; *A guide to parliamentary practice*, 2009). The world is becoming a global village, and MPs cannot afford to ignore international events as they impact and affect what happens in Uganda. MPs travel extensively to benchmark best practices from different countries. International events are co-organized and celebrated by MPs at national and constituency levels, for example, World Food Day, Women's Day, Labor Day, and HIV/AIDS Day. MPs have also spearheaded such events through the formation of the following fora:

- Parliamentary Food Security Forum
- Standing Committee on HIV/AIDS
- Parliamentary Millennium Development Goals Forum
- Regional Forum of Parliamentarians from the Great Lakes Region (AMANI)
- African Parliamentarians Network Against Corruption (APNAC)
- The Parliamentary Network on the World Bank Uganda Chapter
- Uganda Parliamentary Forum for Children
- Uganda Women's Parliamentary Association (UWOPA)

The various roles of parliamentarians in their chambers, in committees, and with constituencies are enhanced by information. Members are called upon to analyze reports tabled in Parliament and those referred to in committees. The library assists members in accessing information resources for use in debates at the plenary and committee levels. The library provides ready answers and reading materials in print or electronic form. More in-depth analysis is done by the research division. Research officers of various disciplines then approach the library for information needed to do analysis for Members of Parliament.

IMPACT OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

The library currently makes use of the Internet and intranet to provide up-to-date and in-depth information to clients. Since 1999 the number of personal computers available in the Resource Centers has increased from zero to at least twenty, and all MPs and senior staff have computers that are connected to the Internet in their individual offices. An integrated software package (Koha) is used for the online catalog. Members can access the Internet, online databases, and information on CD-ROM. The quality of information available from the Internet for parliamentary institutions depends on the source. Some websites have reliable, quality information on parliamentary procedure and other issues related to what is happening in the world of parliaments. The greatest opportunity brought by technology has been the ease with which information can be found through the

click of a mouse. Dissemination and sharing of large amounts of information have also been made possible. Remote sharing of information that would otherwise be too expensive is now possible through online databases, e-mails, and other online media (Coleman, Taylor, & van de Donk, 1999). Furthermore, Parliamentary debates in Uganda are broadcast live on television and the proceedings are posted on the Internet.

LIBRARY SURVEYS AND RELATIONS WITH MPs

An attempt has been made to implement a survey to compile user profiles of clients who frequently use the library. It would be informative and useful to do a structured survey to understand the expectations of our clients. MPs are oriented in the use of Parliament resources, including the library, at the beginning of the life of a particular Parliament. Otherwise, we orient and train MPs on the use of our library resources when they come into the library. Challenges in understanding our clients include dealing with difficult clients. Since our clients are VIPs and we live in world that is perhaps accentuated by power reins operating over a distance, relations with some of our clients are like walking a tightrope. Sometimes MPs ask us to perform duties outside our roles and jurisdiction, but refusing them causes tension and taints working relations. The library offers services in English as the official language. The selection of English as the official language governs our collection development policy.

FACTORS THAT HAVE FAST TRACKED GROWTH OF THE PARLIAMENTARY LIBRARY AND RESEARCH SERVICES

International organizations and parliamentary associations have become important instruments for the dissemination of information and good practices. For example, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (<http://www.ipu.org>) and Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (<http://www.cpahq.org/>) produce a lot of literature (conference proceedings, worldwide elections reports, and directory of parliaments) that has enriched the information resource base of the Parliament of Uganda.

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) is the preeminent international library body that provides an opportunity for staff from parliamentary library and research services from around the world to meet annually (<http://www.ifla.org>). The Library and Research Services Section of IFLA offers an invaluable opportunity for sharing vast experiences and best practices to participants.

The Association of European Parliamentarians for Africa (AWEPA) works for democratization and respect for human rights through supporting the functioning of African Parliaments (<http://awepa.org>). Several workshops facilitated by AWEPA-Uganda, such as Monitoring and Evaluation of Government Programs, Research Methods, Analysis of Bills and Policies, Parliamentary HIV/AIDS Toolkit, and Development of a

Research Information Management System, have enabled parliamentary library and research staff to enhance their knowledge and skills.

The World Bank has made efforts to enhance access to information as a key component of good governance (World Bank, n.d.). Since 2000 the Parliamentary Library has benefited from the World Bank Regional Depository Library Program. World Bank Publications on the Africa Region are deposited in the Parliamentary Library free of charge.

Under the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) Project the Parliamentary Library has acquired ten computers to enable MPs to access the Internet, among other things. An additional ten computers have been installed outside the library to ease MPs' access. An integrated library software package (Koha) has been installed to expedite information management and generate reports.

Meetings of the Committee on Development Information (CODI) of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) are held every two years in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. These meetings have been used as fora to discuss the major issues affecting libraries and information services in Africa. The director of the Department of Library and Research has participated and has also obtained many publications through free subscriptions. UNECA has forged close collaboration with organizations that have known interests in development information and institutional networking (n.d.).

Since its inception in 1994, the Association of Parliamentary Libraries in Eastern and Southern Africa (APLESA) has enabled networking and information resource sharing for member parliaments. Individual member parliaments facilitate the ability of their staff to participate in APLESA activities. APLESA, in partnership with the House of Commons-UK, SABINET, and the Finnish Parliament, organized a workshop on information management and an annual conference in July 1999 in Windhoek, Namibia. In partnership with the Parliamentary Centre of Canada, the APLESA website was developed and hosted, and the APLESA Strategic Planning Workshop (attended by fourteen library and research officers from thirteen member parliaments) was held in Kampala, Uganda, July 30–August 3, 2001. Recently, in May 2009, the Parliament of Uganda hosted the 10th APLESA meeting in Kampala.

A partnership with the House of Commons Library-UK enabled the Parliamentary Librarian to attend the IFLA preconference in London as well as the main conference in Glasgow in August 2002. Additionally, the director of the Department of Library and Research presented a paper at the IFLA preconference and participated in the main conference in Seoul, South Korea, in August 2006. Internships for the staff have also been organized so that library and research officers can learn from the extensive experience of the House of Commons.

The Parliamentary Library and Research staff are members of the British Council Management Centre (Uganda). This has enabled staff to

access a wide range of current information resources within and abroad. In addition, the Management Forum, a discussion group under the aegis of the British Council, presents an opportunity for professionals to share work experiences and best practices as well as to network for professional enrichment.

Through working relations with the U.S. Information Centre (Uganda), the library has acquired numerous current journal articles in a bid to enhance good governance in Uganda. Library and research staff members have free access to the Lexus Nexis database as well as other online resources offered by the Centre. In May 2002 the Department of State made it possible for the Parliament librarian to participate in an International Visitor Project (IVP) focusing on how legislative and information research is carried out in Washington DC, Louisiana, Wisconsin, California, and Pennsylvania. In August 2009 the parliamentary library and research staff interfaced with the Congressional Research Service through video conferencing and discussed work-related experiences.

There is a need for Parliament to enhance its working relations with academic and research institutions with the intent toward developing partnerships in the areas of research, consultancy, sensitization, and capacity building. This would bridge gaps in skills, knowledge, expertise (such as think tanks), logistics, and information resource sharing. It would also minimize undesired duplication of resources. The Parliamentary Library has joined the Consortium of University Libraries, thereby subscribing to online resources at discounted rates.

With a good understanding of communities and groups as well as substantial funding, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) conduct many research activities and generate a lot of information relevant to the mandate of Parliament. They serve as interfaces between donors, governments, and citizens to promote sustainable development. Partnering with CSOs has strategically positioned the Parliamentary Library and Research Service to address issues at the grassroots level of society. Publications generated by CSOs have enriched the information sources of Parliament. Such publications are freely donated to the Parliamentary Library with a view to building a multiplier effect as they are accessed by MPs who broadcast the existence of the publications and their contents.

The Africa Parliamentary Knowledge Network (APKN) is a network of African Parliaments that supports capacity building activities, common services, and sharing experiences and best practices among African Parliaments. It is based on the founding principles of the Pan African Parliament (PAP) and the African Union, which underline the need for better coordination and collaboration among African Parliaments to meet the multiple challenges posed by economic and social integration and the need to harmonize legislation in member countries. APKN builds on the success of long-established parliamentary networks. Such networks have

made apparent the benefits of sharing experiences and learning from best practices. Not only do they allow exploiting regional and continental dimensions to create synergies, but they also provide the critical mass necessary to deliver quality, sustainable, capacity-building activities and common information services for all parliaments (<http://www.apkn.org>).

Library and Research Services for Parliament would perform better if strategically positioned at the institutional level. There is a need to build synergies with the Committee Secretariat, the Budget Office, ICT specialists, and other Parliament staff. Disputes among staff about roles are detrimental to best practices. Collaboration with government departments enhances information sharing. To that effect, research officers are assigned to work with parliamentary committees. Direct interface between the library and research staff and committee chairpersons has enhanced information flow and streamlined working relations. The task at hand is for library and research staff to ably position their services toward enabling Parliament to achieve its mandate.

CONCLUSION

Establishing effective parliamentary library and research services require staff and management with good interpersonal skills, project planning and management skills, managerial and leadership qualities, marketing, lobbying, negotiation skills, and the ability to follow-up on action plans. Staff should employ a team approach, build an environment of mutual respect and trust, communicate effectively, seek out challenges, and capitalize on new opportunities. Best practices result from a committed workforce operating in an enabling environment enriched by relevant stakeholders.

Understanding user needs is core to effective library service. Parliament, throughout the legislative process, requires comprehensive and reliable library and information services that are timely, objective, and nonpartisan to make informed decisions. This could be achieved through relevant training, impartial service delivery, effective team building within and across departments, accompanying MPs on legislative business whenever and wherever it is taking place, and substantially allocating the necessary working tools. Adequate institutional support and funding is required to enhance Parliamentary Library and Research Services. The Information Age has dawned on us. Application of emerging information and communication technologies' (ICTs) potential in the Parliamentary Library and Research Services is not a matter of choice, but a visa to the twenty-first century and beyond.

REFERENCES

- Beetham, D. (2006). *Parliament and democracy in the twenty-first century*. Geneva, Switzerland: Inter-Parliamentary Union.

- Building information and research capacity in emerging legislatures: A parliamentary reference guide.* (1999). Ottawa, Canada: Parliamentary Centre/CIDA.
- Coleman, S., Taylor, J., & van de Donk, W. (1999). *Parliament in the age of the Internet*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Global Centre for Information and Communication Technologies in Parliament. (2008). *World e-parliament report* (Report of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs and the Inter-Parliamentary Union through the Global Centre for ICT in Parliament).
- A guide to parliamentary practice: A handbook.* (2003). Geneva, Switzerland: Inter-Parliamentary Union.
- A guide to parliamentary practice: Mobilizing parliamentary support for the Brussels programme of action for the least developed countries.* (2009). Geneva, Switzerland: Inter-Parliamentary Union.
- Henderson, K. (2005). *Global best practices: A model annual state of the parliament report. A strategic monitoring and reporting tool for promoting democratic parliaments worldwide*. International Foundation for Electoral Systems.
- Informing democracy: Building capacity to meet parliamentarians' information and knowledge needs* (Reports and documents no. 59). (2008, October). Geneva, Switzerland: Inter-Parliamentary Union. Retrieved November 4, 2009, from http://www.ipu.org/PDF/publications/inform_dem_en.pdf
- Laundy, P. (1989). *Parliaments in the modern world*. Aldershot: Dartmouth.
- United Nations Economic Commission of Africa. (n.d.). *AVLIN*. Retrieved March 15, 2010, from <http://www.uneca.org/disd/library/AVLIN/about.htm>
- World Bank. (n.d.). *Governance & anti-corruption. Topic: Parliament*. Retrieved March 15, 2010, from <http://worldbank.org/wbi/governance/parliament>

Innocent Rugambwa joined Parliament of Uganda as a legislative librarian in February 1999. His main assignment was to establish a library for members of Parliament and staff. In November 2004, he was elevated to the position of director, Library and Research Services, Parliament of Uganda. Previously, he worked as a librarian with the National Agricultural Research Organisation (NARO) and the judiciary. He is an active member of the International Federation of Library and Information Associations and Institutions (IFLA). He is currently a member of the Standing Committee for IFLA Library and Research Services for Parliaments; the Association of Parliamentary Libraries of Eastern and Southern Africa (APLESA); and founder member and member of the steering committee of the British Council-Management Forum, Uganda. He holds a Bachelor of Library and Information Science Degree; and Master of Science in Information Science. He has attended and presented papers in conferences at national, regional, and international levels. Innocent has also published two articles in the *International Information and Library Review*. Innocent was a lead consultant in developing a modern Library and Resource Centre, Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS) DFID Grant.