Visioning the role of a continental legislative library and research service: case of the Pan African Parliament

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Abstract

Research and information services are crucial to the operations of information intensive legislative bodies. The Pan African Parliament (PAP) was established as a legislative organ of the African Union. The PAP has been in operation for six years and is currently developing its systems including research and information services. A strategic plan clearly articulates the need for research and information service. The paper gives a brief background of the PAP to provide contextual framework under which the planned service is to function and deliver information.

Visioning the role of the research and information service for this continental legislative organ entails wide consultations with key stakeholders. The process which started with two information needs assessments conducted to inform the development of the service. A core collection of resources is taking shape. A number of challenges such as staffing levels, financial resources, technology and lack of a research agenda and information strategy need to be addressed.

The future scenario of the research and information service that emerges is that of a gateway to various resources that can be accessed 24/7 by the Members and African citizens from any geographical point of the continent in collaboration with regional and national legislative systems. Therefore, information and communication technologies would be quite significant in the management, access, delivery and exchange of knowledge and information.

Introduction

Legislatures are information intensive institutions. The quality of their deliberations, decision/policy making, oversight and advisory functions depend on the information they receive. As people's representatives, Members of Parliament are open to receiving information from different interest groups, institutions, as well as individuals.

The need for quality impartial information cannot be overemphasized. Here we see the role of a research and information service to provide quality and value-added information; factual, well researched, analysed and balanced information (perception). At continental level it becomes imperative to have such a service in place to equip the Members with relevant knowledge of the many pressing issues.

The envisioned role of a research and information service at the Pan African Parliament (PAP) is the focus of this paper's discussion. In this knowledge era, the PAP cannot continue to operate without the support of a research and information delivery service if its role and significance is to be felt on the continent and within the African Union (AU) system, as well as meeting the aspirations of the African citizen.

Background

The African continent continues to look for solutions to bring about peace, alleviate poverty and better the lives of its diverse population. Institutions have been formed to pursue unity, political and economic integration. The African Union (AU) transformed from the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), and its organs are such institutions working towards a peaceful, integrated and prosperous continent.

There are 46 member states that belong to the African Union, as indicated in the map below. Current members are shown in deep green, member states on suspension are in light green and non-members like Morocco in colour grey. The AU is composed of the Assembly (Heads of State); the Executive Council (representative Ministers); The Pan African Parliament; the Court of Justice; The Commission (AU Secretariat); the Permanent Representative Committee (Ambassadors); Specialised Technical Committees; the Economic, Social and Cultural Council; and Financial Institutions.

Map of the African Union with suspended states highlighted in light green.

The Pan African Parliament (PAP) as a legislative organ of the African Union (AU) was established under Article 17 of the "Constitutive Act of the African Union" in July 2001 to represent all the peoples of Africa. The formation of the Parliament was received with high expectations. Mutume (2004) quotes some voices across Africa that expressed their expectations at the time of the launch of the Parliament:

> Then President of Mozambique Joachim Chissano and reigning chair of the AU said: "*There is great hope and expectation pinned on the establishment of the Pan-African Parliament. The whole world shall be watching to see what added value this organ is going to contribute to our plan of building a strong and prosperous African Union.*"

> The former Malian President Alpha Oumar Konaré, then chairperson of the Africa Union Commission (AU Secretariat) commented that PAP has a "*vital role to play in protecting human rights, consolidating democratic institutions and popularizing and promoting good governance.*"

> South Africa's Business Day newspaper commented that "*... the Parliament offers hope for a new era of transparency and accountability in African politics. For the first time, opposition parties have been given official space in continental politics...*"

> Mr. Irungu Houghton of the non-governmental organization Oxfam described the Parliament's establishment as "*significant ... next challenge is to enable it to pass laws, monitor compliance of African states to agreed standards and intervene decisively to protect human rights in member states ... credibility of the parliamentarians ... rest on the issues they espouse, the causes they champion and the changes they bring to the lives of ordinary people across Africa.*"

PAP Vision, Aim and Objectives

The establishment of the Pan-African Parliament is informed by a vision to provide a common platform for African peoples and their grass-roots organizations to be more involved in discussions and decision-making on the problems and challenges facing the continent. The vision of the Parliament therefore is to be '*a continental institution harnessing "One Africa, One Voice*"'.

The main aim of establishing the PAP is to "*ensure the full participation of the African peoples in the development and economic integration of the African continent*" and currently exercises consultative and advisory powers only. The objectives of the PAP are to:

- facilitate the implementation of the policies, objectives, and programmes of the African Union by the various AU Organs;
- promote principles of human rights and democracy;

- encourage good governance, transparency and accountability in Member States;
- familiarize the peoples of Africa with the objectives of and policies aimed at integrating the African continent within the framework of the establishment of the African Union;
- promote peace, security and stability;
- contribute to a more prosperous future for the peoples of Africa by promoting collective self-reliance and economic recovery;
- facilitate cooperation and development in Africa;
- strengthen continental solidarity and build a sense of common destiny among the peoples of Africa; and
- facilitate cooperation among Regional Economic Communities (RECs) and their parliamentary fora.

No doubt the Parliament has a mammoth task which demands high level knowledge, analytical understanding and political skill to achieve its objectives as well as meet the expectations of the African citizen. This calls for a service that equips the Members with knowledge and information to be able to make informed policies/ decisions, and hold informed discussions,

Composition of the PAP

Membership to the PAP is open to national Parliaments of member states of the African Union. At the moment, PAP membership is composed of 46 national Parliaments (excluding states that are currently on suspension), who each elects and sends five Members of Parliament. The Parliament started operations in 2004 and is hosted by the Republic of South Africa in Midrand, Johannesburg.

The Parliament consists of the Plenary, the Bureau, the ten Permanent Committees and the Secretariat. MPs are based in their respective countries and do travel to Midrand to attend and participate in the Plenary sessions and Committee sittings.

The Bureau of the Pan African Parliament is responsible for the management and administration of the affairs and facilities of Parliament as an institution, assisted by the Secretariat. The Bureau is composed of the President and four Vice-Presidents representing the five African regions.

The Committees are responsible for preliminary work on issues in their respective subject areas. The following are the ten Permanent Committees on:
2. Rural Economy, Agriculture, Natural Resources and Environment;
3. Monetary and Financial Affairs;
4. Trade, Customs and Immigration Matters;
5. Cooperation, International Relations and Conflict Resolution;
6. Transport, Industry, Communication, Energy, Science and Technology;
7. Health, Labour and Social Matters;
8. Education, Culture, Tourism and Human Resources;
9. Gender, Family, Youth and People with Disability;
10. Justice and Human Rights; and
11. Rules, Privileges and Discipline.

The Secretariat is headed by the Clerk who is assisted by two Deputy Clerks and other support staff in the discharge of the day to day functions of the Parliament.

PAP Strategic Planning

To guide the operations and achievement of its objectives, the PAP developed a strategic plan (2006-2010) outlining institutional and political objectives. Below are some of the institutional strategic objectives that relate directly to the need for research and information services:

- "Upgrade and deepen the knowledge and skills of the Members of Parliament through provision of access to training and knowledge resources … by building knowledge repositories, and providing access to online specialized information.

- Develop value-added information and research services through generation and dissemination of information … creating repositories and directory of resources on development issues relevant for the African Agenda …

- Develop and strengthen research capacity through … professional library and documentation unit, research … databases and internet …

- Represent voices of the peoples of Africa and advocate for the peoples' popularisation of the PAP through [information] collection, collating, analysis and … instituting a two-way information flow from people to PAP and from PAP to the people in order to mobilize awareness, encourage participation in PAP deliberations and to promote people's ownership of the decision-making process."

The current strategic plan is under review and most of the objectives may be retained as they are in process of implementation or not yet implemented.

Parliamentary Sessions

The PAP has two annual Plenary Sessions around April/May and October/November lasting two weeks each. The Permanent Committees have two annual sittings around March and August for a period of two weeks per sitting. In between the Sessions, the Members get invited to represent the PAP in regional/continental and international meetings, conferences, symposiums and many other activities. In all these activities, the members need information to prepare and assist them contribute effectively.

Development of Research and Information service

The need and intent to develop research and information services is clearly embedded in the objectives of the PAP institutional strategic objectives (Strategic Plan 2006-2010) mentioned in the previous section. Nevertheless, evidence informed development of such a service has been a practice of librarians and information professionals. Two information needs assessments were conducted among the Members of the PAP and research staff to ensure a strong foundation for the service.

The assessment of Members' needs was done by internal staff while that of research staff was conducted by a consultant. The information audit was supported by AWEPA.

Information Needs of Members and Researchers

Summarised information needs of the Members and research staff is presented below. The Members' key needs as expressed in the questionnaire included:

- Access to information:
    - related to Committee activities,
    - updates on activities of the PAP accessed on the website, and
    - electronic access, delivery/receipt of information.
- The majority of the Members expressed the need to have basic computer literacy training; and use of computerised systems and internet for purposes of searching for information (Simui, 2008).
- Some Members also observed that there was need to engage with Committee Members via e-conferencing or chat rooms, outside Sessions to keep Members active with PAP work.

The research staff listed the following needs that they wish to be addressed:
- Improvement of the collections of the Library
    - Laws of member states.
    - Policy documents of member states.
    - General information on each member state.
    - General information resources whose subject areas should mirror the ten Committees.
- The development of an Intranet and a Virtual Library with electronic full text documents.
- Studies that are carried out by other research units of the African Union – as well as 'centres of excellence' e.g. universities, research institutes, etc.) on African issues related to the work of the Parliament.
- Periodicals/journals, foreign press materials, news etc.
- The development of a database of research expertise based on subject and discipline (AWEPA, 2010).

Current situation

Despite the clear elaboration of institutional strategic objectives on the need for research and information services, very little has been done on the ground. Currently, only one library staff was recruited in 2007 on a relatively longer contract; and working on developing library and information delivery services. Research Assistants engaged in December 2009 on a one year contract under the support of development Partners have had their contracts suspended after eight months.

The development of the library collection started with acquisition of materials using the institutional and Partner resources. However, the development of digital and library management system has been put on hold due to the suspension of support by Partners. The institutional budget is quite limited, and depends heavily on supplementation from Partners. Reliance on Partner support is unsustainable as recently witnessed; most funding Partners suspended their support to the institution during the first quarter of 2010. The dependence on Partner support has affected the retention and contracts of research staff.

The Secretariat embarked on redesigning the organisational structure to better and efficiently support the work of the Parliament in May 2010. The Research and Information Division (RID) is one support unit that has been proposed in the structure presented to the AU Assembly at their July 2010 Summit in Kampala, Uganda. The proposed division would encompass knowledge generation, policy analysis, and information acquisition, management and delivery.

Visioning the role of Research and Information service

Visioning is defined as a process by which a community, regardless of type, defines the future it wants (Haines, 2001). While Wikipedia states that visioning is simply the process of developing a vision. For a continental institution, this entails involvement of key stakeholders like the Members, and national and regional Parliamentary bodies. The process started with needs assessments of the Members and research staff and is continuing.

In visioning, we tend to have a mental picture of the future. This is referred to as scenario building or creation. Therefore, as we picture the future of the research and information service for the PAP, we cannot but pose to ask ourselves the following questions:

- What does a research and information service mean to continental legislature?

- Who would access the service?

- What products and services would it offer?

- When and how would the service be used or deliver information?

- How will it operate?

Answers to these and more questions would help guide in the development of the vision and mission statement; and provide clear understanding of the direction the service should take. In trying to answer the questions let's visualize and present two possible scenarios in the table below:

Table 1: Scenarios presentation

Questions	Scenario One	Scenario Two
What does a research and information service mean to continental legislature?	A nice place to consult and check-out information resources.	A gateway to the world of information.
Who would access the service/ information?	Immediate target customers, MPs and Secretariat staff.	Users.
What products and services does it offer?	Physical collections and in-house/ e-databases.	Information and resources in a variety of formats, services, and programmes .
When and how would the service be used or deliver information to users?	Circulate/ consult materials during posted hours that reflect user convenience.	24/7 electronically and offline.
How will it operate?	Independent service.	In collaboration with other institutions.

Source: Adapted from Weingand (1998).

Envisioned functions

Looking at the two scenarios in table above, scenario two seem to be a preferred picture. With that then, we note that like any other such service supporting a legislative body, it would perform similar functions which may include:

- Knowledge generation through research to enrich house deliberations and policy/ decision making;
- analysis of policies of the African Union, Regional Economic Communities (RECs), and member states for harmonization as stipulated in the Constitutive Act;
- Information management functions;
- Identify research priorities and develop research agenda.
- Information delivery in formats and languages suitable for the Members;
- Development of digital repositories/databases and paper collections,
- Delivery and circulation of information in relevant media;
- Processing by cataloguing, classifying, indexing, abstracting, consolidating and repackaging information; and
- Preservation and archiving materials.

As a support service of a continental legislature, it is assumed the RID would also carry out the following functions:

- Share and exchange information with other AU Organs, research institutes and civil society organisations for purposes of popularising the policies and activities of the Parliament and AU system.
- Collaborate with national legislative library and research services, as well as other institutions for better service to the common customer, the Parliamentarian.
- In instituting a two-way information flow from people to PAP and from PAP to the people; the research and information service has a role to play using the many tools including social networking at disposal in order to mobilize awareness, encourage participation in PAP deliberations and to promote people's ownership of the decision-making process.

Therefore, the bulk of the information and knowledge resources would be managed, accessed and delivered electronically. Collaboration with national/regional legislative bodies would be an integral aspect of the service. As a service existing mainly in virtual space, the African citizens would have access to assist them get acquainted with the happenings at, and contribute to the process of decision/policy making as provided for by the PAP Protocol.

Conclusion

The PAP is a new organization that is in the process of developing systems and building capacity of its established units. Visioning is therefore an appropriate tool to use for planning, establishing, and refocusing the vision and mandate of the continental Parliament and its organs.

The planned research and information service need to be developed on a strong foundation based on broad consultations. Its vision, mission and operations would be formulated with

input from key stakeholders which include the Members, regional and national legislative bodies and other interested institutions.

There is need to seriously look into the staffing levels with a view to engaging highly qualified and sufficient numbers to support the work of the Parliament. Budget is another area of concern, which should be considered to avoid situation where only salaries are paid while work programmes lie dormant. A mechanism for sustainable financing of programmes and services should be worked on.

There is a lot that the PAP could work on to assure the grumbling voices that it can add value to the agenda of the African continent. The research and information service has a crucial role to play in delivering policy analysis for harmonization, value-added information to ensure informed decision/ policy making and evidence-based deliberations.

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