



Use of Science and Technological Evidence in the Parliament of Uganda

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A report into how Uganda's parliament handles scientific issues, published this week, is shedding new light on the challenges faced by Members of Parliament (MPs) in developing countries, who frequently have to grapple with complex subjects with far fewer resources than their counterparts in the developed world.

To help understand some of the problems Ugandan MPs face when handling scientific issues, a team from the UK and Uganda conducted a detailed study between 2008 and 2010. The team conducted surveys, interviews and focus groups with MPs and their staff, as well as reviewing parliamentary briefing papers and debates on science.

The team found widespread enthusiasm for science. Over 90% of 121 surveyed MPs said were interested in science. Indeed, a pairing scheme between MPs and scientists, introduced in 2008 by the UK Parliamentary Office of Science and Technologyⁱ and the Uganda National Academy of Sciences,ⁱⁱ was so oversubscribed that many MPs had to be turned away.

Two thirds of surveyed MPs said there were not enough parliamentary debates on science, and those that do take place need to be more evidence based. Low levels of scientific literacy amongst MPs, and weak links with Uganda's scientific community, are among the reasons that informed debate on scientific issues is often lacking.

However MPs also pointed to underlying problems – such as not always having enough advance warning of debates - which are not specifically related to science.

The team also found that staff in parliament play a crucial role in providing MPs with scientific information. They are usually not scientists and are juggling science related tasks with many other responsibilities. Identifying reliable scientific evidence on the World Wide Web and being able to communicate it succinctly to MPs were identified as key areas for staff development.

The full report, entitled "*Use of Scientific and Technological Evidence in the Parliament of Uganda*" is available via www.inasp.info/use-of-scientific-and-technological-evidence. The study was carried out by staff from the UK Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, the Parliament of Uganda,ⁱⁱⁱ and the Ugandan National of Sciences with editorial support from the International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications.^{iv}

The study was originally conceived as part of a capacity building programme in the Parliament of Uganda initiated by the UK Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology.

Dr Chandrika Nath, of the UK Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology says that *“although there is widespread interest in evidence based policy making, there is a lack of detailed research into how “evidence based” the policy making process is in developing countries, and into what constraints policymakers face in a parliamentary context. We hope that this study will be useful to parliaments across the world as well as other organisations working in this area”*

Franklin Muyonjo, of the Uganda National Academy of Sciences, says *“As the National Academy for Uganda whose main goal is to support excellence in sciences and to provide independent, evidence-based policy advice to Government and the public, UNAS supports the study because of the detailed research it contains.”*

Martin Belcher, of the International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications, says *“this research provides some important insights and hard data into the realities of scientific evidence handling within the Ugandan Parliament. That is of great interest in the Ugandan context but it is also relevant to those working in similar areas in the wider region. It provides interesting data, conclusions and recommendations for those interested in evidence informed policy making in African legislative bodies. There is a great deal to be learnt from this report.”*

Further information:

1. The Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) is an office of both Houses of Parliament whose primary role is to provide UK parliamentarians with objective advice on a range of public policy issues relating to science and technology. For more information on POST's work in Uganda or to arrange interviews with the study team, please contact nathc@parliament.uk

ⁱ www.parliament.uk/post

ⁱⁱ www.ugandanationalacademy.org

ⁱⁱⁱ www.parliament.go.ug

^{iv} www.inasp.info