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Information Use in Decision Making By Parliamentarians in Ghana

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Background Information

The legislative representation in Ghana dates back to 1850, when the country was known as Gold Coast under the British colony. During this time the legislative council was purely an advisory body since the governor exercised all legislative and Executive powers. A new constitution was introduced in 1946 which allowed for an unofficial member of the legislative council to become its president while the governor became the ex-officio president of the body. This system continued until 1951 when a new constitution was drawn, which gave power to the legislature to elect its own speaker. The first speaker elected was Sir Emmanuel Charles Quist.

The parliament of Ghana was established by article 93 clauses 2 of the 1992 constitution of Ghana. To qualify as a member of parliament one has to be a citizen of Ghana, twenty one (21) years and above, a registered voter and a resident of a constituency for which he want to stand as a candidate. Or prior to the election, he must have resided in the constituency for at least five years and must have honoured his tax obligations (The Constitution of Ghana, 1992).

Parliamentarians are members of the legislature. The legislature is that body of people in the political system which is either elected by the people or appointed by the executive (Bluwey, 2002). Bluwey (2002) again outlines the following as functions performed by parliamentarians. The parliamentarians make laws and regulations, authorize the raising and spending of public money, inform the executive about the impact of specific policies on the people, and generally oversee the actions of public officials. Parliamentarians may also be required to assist in the screening of individuals for higher offices of the state and may be vested with the authority to impeach and remove the president from the office. Most parliamentarians also share power concurrently with the executive over the declaration of war and conclusion of peace and making of treaties and other international agreements. The parliamentarians of Ghana perform the same functions as enumerated by Bluwey.

Decision making is a course of action or procedure that results in a formal judgment or choice being reached. For this to be possible, choices or options must be provided from which selection can be made. The ability to evaluate or choose from a range of options is underpinned by access to accurate, reliable and comprehensive information about choices available. It is essential that decision makers have access to information that is free of bias and/ or reflect the full range of

opinion existing. The transformation of information about these options into knowledge or intelligence is central to the effectiveness of the decision-making process (Marcella et al, 1999). The need for accurate and timely information to support decision-making has grown with democratic governance and with the increasing complexity of government locally, nationally and supranational (Marcella et al., 1999). As more aspects of society become subject to legislation and forms of decentralization, the more knowledge assembly members and for that matter all law makers require in order to take decisions in areas in which they have little prior knowledge (Alemna and Skouby, 2000). Zawislak (1992) contends that the quality of decision relies upon the quality of information available. Information is very important to every aspect of society. In the case of legislators, it is even more important because elected officials risk making costly, or even dangerous decisions for a whole nation if they are not provided with adequate information (Alemna and Skouby, 2000). It is therefore essential that decision makers have information that is free of bias, and reflect the full range of existing opinions.”

Problem statement

The members of Parliament of Ghana are busy people who spend most of their time discussing; debating and attending meetings to enable them pass bills. This notwithstanding, they have to visit their constituencies to deliberate on issues that bothers on development and other social matters. This tight schedule of the parliamentarians makes it quite impossible for them to seek for necessary and relevant information which will be useful in the decision making process on the floor of parliament.

Parliamentarians are not information professionals and most of them are not sufficiently aware of the different sources of information and how to look for information to help them in their work during parliamentary sessions. In situations where they manage to get some form of information to help in future decision making, storage becomes difficult for them due to the absence of offices and their little knowledge in processing and storing information. In addition, the absence of offices creates problems of internet connectivity resulting in inaccessibility.

The remedy to the aforementioned problems may seem to rest in research assistants who will search, package and store information for them to satisfy their needs. Unfortunately, to a large

extent, even the research assistants cannot provide the services expected of them since they have no professional training. Taking the above into consideration the researcher can confidently say that members of the current Ghanaian parliament find it difficult to source for and store information that is crucially needed in the decision making process of the house.

The purpose of the study

The purpose of study is to examine how members of parliament source for and use information in the decision making process as parliamentarians, with a view to identifying problems and making suggestions for their resolution.

Objectives of the study

The following are the specific objectives

1. To determine the type of information needed by parliamentarians.
2. To determine how parliamentarians get information
3. To examine the sources of information.
4. To find out if there are any problems encountered in sourcing for information.
5. To make recommendations for rectifying identified problems.

Research questions

The study will address the following questions:

1. What type of information do parliamentarians need?
2. How do parliamentarians get information for decision making process in parliament?
3. What are the sources of information available to parliamentarians?
4. How information is acquired factored in decision making?
5. What kind of problems parliamentarians face in their quest for information.

Theoretical framework

According to Hannabus (1995) research work should be based on some theoretical framework. Theory provides the starting point for research. A number of information and communication theories have been developed. The Wilson's (1996) Global Model of Information Behavior was selected as the conceptual framework to study the information needs and use behavior of parliamentarians. It forms the framework within which the research was executed

Literature Review

A thorough reviewing of related literature is one of the most important steps in conducting a research because it helps the researcher to understand and infer from basic concepts relating to the present study. Literatures relating to "Information Needs and Utilization", "Use of Information Sources/Systems", "Information Sources", "Assistance Received in Searching for Information", "Accessibility of Information", "Frequency of Gathering Adequate Information", "Accessibility of relevant Information in Parliament", "Problems Encountered When Seeking Information for Decision Making".

METHODOLOGY

People undertake research in order to find out things in a systematic manner, thereby increasing their knowledge. According to Busha and Harter (1986) research in a scientific community is undertaken to solve problems of significance or to increase theoretical knowledge. Social research therefore seeks to understand the attitude of people about whom facts are collected and to account for the resultant opinions. The research is survey that investigated how members of parliament source for and use information in decision making. Questionnaires were the main instrument used in collecting data. The population for the study is the entire parliamentarians of Ghana (275 members). Simple random sampling techniques were used to select the sample size of 50% (137.5) for the purpose of this study. This size was handy and manageable in terms of data collection.

According to Goodwin (1995), the simple random sampling is often an effective practical way to create a representative sample.

Information Needs and Utilization

In an attempt to understand the information need and utilization of the respondents' the researcher asked a question relating to how and why parliamentarians look for information. 89% of the respondents said they needed information to equip them for parliamentary debate. 74% of MPs needed information to gain insight on issues that were being discussed on the floor of parliament so that they could contribute effectively to the debate. 86% of the MPs on the other hand needed information to broaden their knowledge on critical issues of interest. Again, 75% needed information to clarify concept of bill under discussion. While 38% needed information in preparation for budgetary debate. 41% of the MPs needed information to participate on TV/radio discussion. It is therefore clear that, MPs needed information for a myriad of issues.

Use of Information Sources/Systems

Members of parliament need information from various sources to enable them carry out their role as policy makers and constituency representatives. Information comes in different formats, to get the understanding of information sources used in decision making, respondents were asked to indicate sources of information that they use for official decision making. For the mere fact that they performed the role of law making, they definitely needed information from various sources and in various formats for decision making. Respondents were presented with a list of information sources to choose from as many as applicable.

Information Sources

The study reveals that majority of MPs resort to model standing orders, minutes of committees, official memoranda, government publications, newspapers, radio/television, books and journals, libraries/information centres, personal contacts, computer database, professional administrative and technical staff, opinion leaders and internal publications as sources of information to guide them in decision making processes on the floor of parliament.

Newspapers and radios/television were the highest on the ranking as the major sources of information for decision making. They also formed the basis for further debate on the floor of parliament since they were often referred to on the floor. Government publications are also among the high ranked, since they informed and directed individual's efforts towards national aspirations and goals.

The Standing Orders of parliament also regulated the conduct of the MPs and governed them in their work as MPs. Books and journals as well as libraries and information centres were also cited as very important sources of information for MPs. 58%, 71%, and 70% of MPs resorted to books, journals/magazine, library and information centres respectively as a guide for information for decision making. This finding does not agree with Lester and Waler (1989) who conclude in their study that, planners often find traditional sources such as libraries tedious, time consuming and frustrating to use.

However there is a similarity between this finding and Omagbemi et al (2005) who concluded in their research that Ijebu-North Local Government's lack of functional libraries and information centres hampers timely access to information that would have aided policy decision making. According to Fiankor (2009) a person's access to information affects how various information needs can be satisfied.

The direct interaction between people and informal exchange of information is often considered one of the important sources of information. The study shows that 70% of respondents used personal contacts. 58% of them use information they get from opinion leaders. 38% on the other hand resorted to the use of information from professional, administrative and technical staff in decision making.

Assistance Received in Searching for Information

Information is important for decision making. Members of parliament as decision makers need to seek, acquire and analyse relevant information before policy decisions are made. Members of parliament are not information professionals and therefore find it difficult to access information sometimes. They will need assistance to access and package the information for them to use. The researcher in an attempt to find out if the MPs had any form of assistance posed relevant questions

to them. Most of the parliamentarians confirmed they received assistance of a kind. To be precise, 46% indicated that they received assistance from librarians. 80% indicated that they received assistance from National Service Persons. This is not surprising since the government has introduced a policy of providing the MPs with assistants by allocating National Service persons to help them in their parliamentary work. However 39% had special assistants.

Accessibility of Information

Accessibility and availability of information determine the extent to which an institution is empowered to make decision. Parliamentarians rely on relevant information to make decision. The accessibility of information therefore will help them take a better decision.

The study revealed that information is accessible to MPs through the library, emails, television, radio, newspapers, and gazette. Access to computers and other technologies for work was not impressive. The study brought to light that only 10% of the MPs use computer to access information. This notwithstanding, out of the 10% only 7% said they found computer with databases more accessible. From the analyses of the data collected, the MPs lack of interest can be attributed to the lack of offices for housing the technology for use.

Frequency of Gathering Adequate Information

Before any sound decision can be made there is the need for one to obtain adequate and relevant information. MPs responded positively when asked whether they get adequate information before taking decision. 43% of the MPs claimed they had adequate information very often. 46% of them indicated they had information often, while 10% said they had information occasionally before making official decision. It is therefore encouraging to note that more than 80% indicated how important information is to them.

Accessibility of relevant Information in Parliament

The availability or otherwise of information determines the extent to which an institution is empowered to make decisions. Policymakers need reliable information. Failure to obtain relevant information in policy making will lead to inadequacies (Fiankor, 2009).

To make reliable decision, there is the need to have access to reliable information. Members of parliament of Ghana reacted differently when asked how accessible the information sources are. 7% said they were very satisfied with the information accessibility rate 32% thought the sources were good while 61% say it is fairly good. The study therefore revealed a big gap in information accessibility of MPs.

Problems Encountered When Seeking Information for Decision Making

In their bid to obtain relevant information, MPs are faced with myriad of problem ranging from lack of computers, inadequate access to internet facilities, fear of being victimized, and hoarding of information by the executive to outdated information materials in the library.

This notwithstanding, most MPs lack both information literacy skills and information technology to surf the net for adequate and relevant information. To make matters worse MPs have to deal with unskilled assistants who do not have skills in information literacy skills therefore cannot help the MPs much.

Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to examine how members of parliament source for and used information in the decision making process with a view to identifying problems and making suggestions for their resolution. There is no doubt that relevant and good quality information is needed in any decision making process. Parliamentary decision making process is no exception. According to Lynch (1998) the confines of information needed in governance goes beyond published literature and encompasses a wide range of information created as a by-product of organizational operations.

Wilson's (1996) Global Model of Information Behavior was used as a conceptual framework to study the information needs and problems encountered by the MPs as they source and use

information for decision-making in parliamentary processes. The analysis of data revealed a number of findings, some of the major findings are summarized as follows, firstly, through the analysis of data it came to light that, the information needs and utilization of MPs are related to the work they perform as law makers. And also the oversight responsibility they over the executive determine the kind of information they required. Parliamentarians source for information to take part in complex issues such as discussion; debates and voting in parliament to pass bills into law, and during committee meetings.

It was also established that parliamentarians resorted to various information sources in order to satisfy their information needs. The most outstanding sources MPs consulted were; newspapers; radio and television, internet and email, model standing orders, internal publication, minutes of committee meetings, books and journals, and official memoranda. Other information sources used were information gathered by professionals, administrative and technical staff and opinions expressed by other members on the floor of parliament.

Also, it was revealed that the professional, technical and administrative staff were important and regular sources of information for official decision making. Members of parliament may not have the ability to understand all the information that may come their way. They need the expertise of the professional, administrative and technical staff to explain and interpret some of the complex technical, social, legal, economic, political and environmental issues.

Again, it was also found out that the parliamentary library contained mostly old and outdated materials which have little relevance in today's parliamentary work. Parliamentarians therefore seldom visit the library to look for information. However most respondents agreed that they needed functional library and information centre fully equipped with the latest information technology facilities.

Information communication technologies are technologies offering new ways for communicating and exchanging information and knowledge. ICT, the internet and the World Wide Web (WWW) have become very important sources of information. However the study has found out that the use of the technologies was not very common among the MPs due the lack of offices to house equipment and information communication technology infrastructure.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study no doubt re-enforced the importance of information as a support to law making and other oversight responsibilities performed by parliamentarian. Due to their roles, MPs need access to a wide range of information sources that can provide a variety of information for the performance of their duties. However parliamentarians' main concern when seeking information has been the scarcity of information, and the inadequacy of access to relevant and quality information. These created barriers in acquiring various information needed for decision making. The following recommendations are made to improve access and use of information by parliamentarians.

The study revealed that information, though generated in large quantities by different organizations both in the public and private sectors, access to it is sometimes very difficult. This situation can be remedied if information specialist get to know that the purpose of their work is to serve the needs of the user. They must therefore identify the needs of their clients and market their resources by creating awareness through programmes and education to let the them (MPs) see and feel the sources of information that are available to them. (Daniels, 1993). This way, MPs will know where to go for ready and relevant information for decision making.

Even though a library exists in the parliament of Ghana, the materials in the library are not the best. Most of the materials are in print and are outmoded. The parliamentary library therefore must be re-equipped with modern materials, which must come in different formats. Management of the library must be in the hands of professionals who will bring their professionalism to bear in sourcing for relevant information. This is because, relevant and accurate information is the backbone of every policy decision making. Improvement of the library must also come in the form of changing the objective of the library with a view to making it perform a more proactive role in the collection, processing and dissemination of information to MPs.

As representatives of constituencies, MPs do not have time and the patience to search for information. They again most of them do not have the knowledge of the numerous information sources and systems. Accurate and reliable information therefore has to be provided for them to

enable them make informed decision. It is therefore recommended that professionals must be hired to perform the role of sourcing for information and packaging it for the use of the MPs. The researcher also recommends that where national service persons are to be assigned to the MPs, they must have information management background. This way, they can perform the role of acquiring, analyzing, synthesizing and disseminating relevant information from different sources and packaging it for the use of the parliamentarians.

Laws made by parliamentarians affect every citizen of Ghana. Laws made must be of benefit to the citizenry. To make better laws, MPs need relevant and current information. Most of this information can be found online and in electronic formats. The electronic resources are expensive. The parliamentary service must make the necessary budgetary allocation to ensure regular subscription to the electronic resources as well as government publications that are relevant to their work.

Creating and dissemination of information has been revolutionarised through the introduction of information communication technology. The computer has the ability to store and disseminate large volumes of information. The computer also has great speed and accuracy. According to Danziger and Dunkle (2008), the introduction of the internet has sharpened the modes of communication, resources of information and the research capabilities of decision makers. Parliamentarians turn to the internet as a source of information that can assist them in the various stages of law making. The ability to use information communication technology effectively comes with the provision of equipment such as computers, internet and connectivity, and the training of personnel on how to use the facilities. It is recommended that members of parliament must be provided with offices which should be equipped with computers and their accessories and must be connected to the internet. The computers in the various offices must also be connected by local area network (LAN) so that information can be shared among MPs. Beyond this, the MPs should be given basic training in the use of information communication technology. Finally, there is the need for the parliamentary service of Ghana to strengthen its information provision structures to enable parliamentarians to have fast and easy access to relevant and pertinent information to enable them performs their duties creditably. This was established by the results of the current study.

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