

The Rhetoric and Reality on the Role and Effectiveness of Parliamentary Committees in Ensuring Executive Accountability

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This study seeks to analyse the role and effectiveness of parliamentary committees in Zimbabwe in ensuring executive accountability. The study is significant in that it may enable parliamentary committees to check the excesses of the executive which will result in the enactment of policies for the greater good of the people and the more efficient utilization of tax payers' money. From an academic standpoint, the research seeks to enrich existing theory on parliamentary committee effectiveness by focusing on the unchartered waters of Zimbabwe. Literature reviewed acknowledged that there is a general consensus that parliaments the world over are generally in decline, as political power is shifting to executives and as it leaks away from governments to other institutions such as economic actors and increasingly global forces. This framework is premised on the principles of interpretivism. A case study of parliament of Zimbabwe, encompassing a multiple case design focusing on 8 different parliamentary committees which were chosen to assess the effectiveness of parliamentary committees. Purposive expert sampling was employed due to the subjects' intimate knowledge of committee business and their frequent engagement with both committee chairpersons and committee members. Data was collected through the questionnaire and the structured interviews. The research findings confirmed that although measuring the 'effectiveness' of parliamentary committees is not easy, their ability to influence policy and administration is severely limited by resource constraints and lack of a legal instrument to guarantee co-operation by the executive. As a recommendation, there is an imperative need for capacity building in sector-specific areas.

Key words: Parliamentary committees, principles of interpretivism, oversight function, executive accountability, governance, Zimbabwe.

INTRODUCTION

The problem that prompted this study was the general feeling from the populace that parliamentary committees are letting the executive get away with murder. To support the above, there has been clear and lucid acknowledgement in various media that both portfolio and thematic committees have met with mixed fortunes in executing their oversight function, but ironically they have also been roundly condemned for pandering to the whims of the executive. The objectives were to evaluate the effectiveness of parliamentary committees in their oversight function, determine the impact of parliamentary

committees on the national governance system and to ascertain the challenges facing parliamentary committees in fulfilling their constitutional mandate.

Several researchers, chief among them: Safiullah (2006); Pelizzo and Staoenhurst (2006); Mutonga (2007); Yamamoto (2007); Thomas (2009) and Monk (2009) seem to agree that there can be no democratic system of government without transparency and accountability and that the primary responsibility in this field falls squarely on the shoulders of parliament. Parliament, which is usually referred to as the supreme legislative branch of government exists to represent the views and opinions of the people and to influence, constrain and demand justification for the actions of government and to give

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them legitimacy. It is clear therefore, that as the body that represents the people, parliament is called upon to see to it that the administration of public policy reflects and meets the people's needs. Parliament is also called upon to ensure that agreed policy is properly implemented and delivered to target citizens. Through its core oversight function, parliament holds the government to account on behalf of the people, ensuring that government policy and action are both efficient and commensurate with the needs of the public. Parliamentary oversight is also crucial in checking excesses on the part of the government (Yamamoto, 2007).

"The role of Parliament is to legislate; to scrutinize the policies and activities of the executive; to hold the executive to account for its actions; and to act as a forum for democratic participation by all members of society" (PRC 1999: p6). Couched in this definition and the preceding constitutional provision is the critical oversight role of parliament tailored towards strengthening the governance system by calling the executive to account for the manner it determines and executes public policy and programmes. Section 33 of the Zimbabwe constitution states that parliament shall consist of two Houses, namely: the Senate, also referred to as the Upper House, which is composed of 99 members and presided over by the President of the Senate, and; the House of Assembly or the Lower House comprising 216 Members of Parliament presided over by the Speaker of the House of Assembly- making Zimbabwe a bi-cameral Legislature.

Committees are universally found in parliaments across the world. In Zimbabwe, as in other countries, parliamentary committees are units within the legislative branch that allow parliamentarians to review policy issues and bills more rigorously than is possible by the entire parliament (Safiullah, 2006). Committees offer a setting which facilitates detailed scrutiny of draft legislation, oversight of government activities and interaction with the public and external actors. To this end, parliament of Zimbabwe has 19 Portfolio Committees, 6 Thematic Committees and one post-audit Committee making a total of 26 Committees which shadow government departments. Despite the growing prominence of committees in the oversight role of parliaments across the globe, the effectiveness of these committees remains a topic of intense public debate. The raging debate has spurred scholars in various countries to undertake research into the effectiveness of committees in their respective countries as committee work is serious business. However, in Zimbabwe, other than an attempt by the Parliamentary Reform Committee (PRC) to engage the public on the effectiveness of parliament as a whole, there has been no research focused specifically on parliamentary committees.

Levy (2009) conducted a study of the effectiveness of standing committees in the United Kingdom in scrutinizing government bills following a series of

changes recommended by its select committee on modernisation in 2006 that altered the procedures by which parliament scrutinizes government bills. These reforms had been prompted by public criticism of the role and effectiveness of parliamentary committees in their legislative function. Thomas (2009) adopted a comparative approach focusing on how the parliament of Australia and the Canadian parliament seek to hold responsible ministers directly, and senior public servants indirectly, accountable for the performance of departments and programs on the basis of published performance data and inquiries conducted by parliamentary committees. Safiullah (2006) examined the effectiveness of parliamentary committees in Bangladesh. Likewise his research had been prompted by growing public criticism of the impotence of parliamentary committees. In addition to these country-focused researches, a comparative study of 88 National Parliaments on "*Tools for Parliamentary Oversight*" commissioned by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) was also conducted in 2007. Notably, Zimbabwe was not included despite being a long-standing member of the IPU.

Closer to home, a recent post on the Kenyan website www.mzalendo.com reveals that Kenyans are sceptical of the ability of parliamentary committees or commissions of inquiry to yield results at least as far as the fight against corruption is concerned. The study observes that:

"Parliamentary committees or commissions of inquiry set up to investigate corruption scandals have sometimes been simply pacifist with no intention of addressing root causes or following through with findings. Parliamentary committees sometimes whitewash issues." <http://www.mzalendo.com/2012/07/16/parliamentary-committees-effective-or-not/>.

The aforementioned studies seem to point to the fact that there appears to be a significant gap between the theoretical intended purpose for parliamentary committees and what is actually happening on the ground. It was partly this negative perception of parliament which induced an investigation into the august institution's effectiveness in fulfilling its mandate. In addition to this, the committees themselves have met with varying degrees of success and prominence in their oversight function. While the reasons for this difference are not clear, it raises a pertinent point in that despite almost similar terms of reference some committees are perceivably excelling while some are not. It will be useful therefore to examine not only the effectiveness or lack of it, of these committees but also the factors accounting for this variance. With this background in mind, it is essential therefore to carefully examine the effectiveness of parliamentary committees in the national governance system, with particular focus on their oversight function especially in view of the fact that every committee

resolution has to be by consensus.

Research objectives

- . To evaluate the effectiveness of parliamentary committees in their oversight function.
- . To determine the impact of parliamentary committees on the national governance system
- . To ascertain the challenges facing parliamentary committees in fulfilling their constitutional mandate.
- . To proffer measures that can make parliamentary committees more effective in the discharge of their duties.

Significance of the study

- . The research may prove to be valuable to the political and administrative leadership of parliament by helping to identify gaps and thus provide a useful framework for the adoption of best practice in facilitating the work of committees.
- . The executive may benefit immensely from a more effective Committee system as this enhances democracy and ensures efficiency in the enactment of people-centered legislation as well as the allocation and use of national resources.
- . From an academic viewpoint, the research seeks to enrich existing theory on parliamentary committee effectiveness by focusing on the uncharted waters of Zimbabwe.

Definition of terms

Legislature: As defined by Section 32 of the Zimbabwe constitution, it consists of the President and Parliament. However, for the purposes of this research the term will be limited to parliament alone. Hence legislators refers to members of parliament.

Clerk of parliament: The administrative head and accounting officer of parliament akin to the Chief Executive Officer in the private sector or the permanent secretary in government ministries.

Development partners: Non-governmental organizations which fund parliamentary activities.

Chief whip: Every major political party appoints a whip who is responsible for the party's discipline and behaviour on the floor of the house, hence the term "whip." Usually, he/she directs the party members to stick to the party's stand on certain issues and directs them to vote as per the direction of senior party members.

Literature review

Parliament is the central institution of democracy and constitutes an expression of the very sovereignty of each nation. The universality of parliament's appeal and the fact that it remains the only institution which stands for

the interests of all and sundry, underlines its importance in the national governance system and, crucially, the importance of its effectiveness. Parliament is, in essence, a highly political institution. "It is a place for political and often confrontational debate," (Global Parliamentary Report, 2012; p3). Political ideologies, interests and persuasions undoubtedly often come into conflict with national aspirations. Party positions may not exactly mimic what is considered the 'public good.' Different political ideologies oft result in political polarization, none more so than in committees which are a blend of the political parties represented in parliament. As O'Keeffe (2009:3) pointed out, 'parliamentary committees are made up of politicians, behaving politically'. Geoff Skene, cited in Monk (2009; p3) observed that "in committees, bargains can be struck in small groups which would not be considered in open debate; repetitious partisan clashes can be short-circuited by covert committee maneuvering; as governments see fit [where the government controls the chamber], contentious policy proposals can be worked over with interest groups or quietly buried away from the public's gaze". Thus the political underpinning of parliament brings into question its ability to effectively represent the national interests. As Johnson (2012) observed, the challenge facing parliaments in all parts of the world is one of continual evolution, ensuring that they respond strategically and effectively to changing public demands for representation.

Oversight

While there is no clear and agreed statement of what oversight is for, the purpose of the oversight committees is often tacitly understood to be to "hold Ministers to account". A recent report by the House of Commons Liaison Committee (2012) posits that an important element of oversight is to require ministers and civil servants to explain and justify their actions and policies, to subject them to robust challenge; and to expose government both ministerial decision-making and departmental administration to the public gaze.

Other scholars have noted instead that oversight is not just a supervision of what the executive branch of government has done but is also supervision of the executive's legislative proposals, that is, what it intends to do (Maffio, 2002; Pelizzo and Staphenurst, 2006; Kaiser, 2006). Parliament is also called upon to ensure that agreed policy is properly implemented and delivered to target citizens. This is the role of parliamentary oversight (Yamamoto, 2007). Some would argue that scrutiny, and the openness it brings, are an end in itself; others that its ultimate purpose is to improve government. The political reality is that, individually, members' agendas will differ: some will be keener to improve the government's performance, others to expose its weaknesses. But, collectively, select committees should influence policy

and have an impact on government departments and the agencies to which their functions may be devolved. This should be the objective of oversight. For the purposes of this research, a more comprehensive definition of oversight is none other than the one postulated by the man many consider to be one of the founding fathers of parliamentary practice, John Stuart Mill (1861; p7) who said that: "the proper office of a representative assembly is to watch and control the government; to throw the light of publicity on its acts; to compel a full exposition and justification of all of them which anyone considers questionable; to censure them if found condemnable....." Effective oversight should seek to change executive decisions, policies, programs and actions where they are found to be either 'questionable' or 'condemnable.' The extent of this influence and impact is the primary measure of the effectiveness of select committees.

Effectiveness of parliamentary committees

Effectiveness is the degree to which objectives are achieved and the extent to which targeted problems are solved. The Global Parliamentary Report (2012) asserts that effective parliaments shape policies and laws which respond to the needs of citizens, and support sustainable and equitable development. While the impact and outcome of effective parliaments are clear, Ramlugun *et al.* (2011) noted that there is a general consensus that, not only are there wide variations in parliamentary performance standards, but that in many cases they are critically below par. The African Governance Report 'AGR' (2005; p127) states "in terms of enacting laws, debating issues, checking on the activities of the government and in general promoting the welfare of the people, these duties and obligations are rarely performed with efficiency and effectiveness in many African parliaments'. However, Pelizzo and Stapenhurst (2006) point out that in trying to assess the effectiveness of parliaments in the roles and functions referred to by the AGR, researchers have to come to grips with what is effective performance which is not an easy question. Whilst there is no single, commonly accepted criteria for assessing parliamentary committee effectiveness, the literature evaluating the impact and effectiveness of committee systems can be whittled down to three main branches:

The first, examines the effect of committees on public policy, including the attitude of governments and the related public debate. Monk (2009; p5) posits that in terms of effectiveness, the real question is not what type of report a committee produces, but whether it has the appropriate effect on government and the general debate. However, relying on committee impact alone is not without its own challenges. Njoroge (2010) observed that committee impact is complex, and may often be

indirect, making it difficult to assess. In addition to this, the executive arm of government may not always acknowledge the influence of the committee in its work thus making it problematic to determine the committee's impact on policy.

The second approach is to use information on the implementation of recommendations and their effect on debate as indicators of effectiveness. Monk (2009) avows that the most obviously measurable factor is the number of committee recommendations which are taken up by government. But applied too simplistically this measure can give misleading results, and committees can also have more subtle forms of influence. Holmes (2005) argues that the weakness of such an approach is that a response (or lack of a response) may not accurately reflect the government's actions. For instance, governments sometimes begin to respond to an issue that is being addressed by a committee while its inquiry is still under way, that is, before the committee has completed its report. He called this 'bureaucratic anticipation'.

The third, and smallest, branch of the literature, popularized by Monk (2009) and Pelizzo and Stapenhurst (2006) argues for a greater use of quantitative data. This inclination towards quantitative research originated from the realisation that there may be a significant gap between perceptions and common wisdom on the one hand and reality on the other. However, even they acknowledge the difficulty associated with attempting to attach numbers to parliamentary committee work given its flexible, subjective and unpredictable nature.

After all is said and done, it appears incongruous for commentators to argue against the analysis of committee recommendations to assess effectiveness when this is such a central part of what committees do. Odgers (2008; p395) notes that: 'The main purpose of a report is to make recommendations for future action'. It is equally inappropriate to argue against an analysis of committees' effect on public policy simply because some effects cannot be easily deciphered as this, again, is an integral part of what they set out to do. However, focusing on data grounded effects alone may be increasingly difficult not only in finding measurable data, but also in reducing such a subjective analysis to numbers. A more comprehensive analysis proposed in this paper, seeks to assess committee effectiveness based on verifiable assertions of its effects on public policy as well as the proportion of recommendations that the government has accepted in its responses. As Ramlugun *et al.* (2011) note, the effectiveness of any committee or group of committees must be considered in relation to the purpose for which that committee or group was established, that is, in relation to its terms of reference. In addition to this, committee effectiveness must also be assessed on their ability to raise issues in the public consciousness. This paper also propounds that in order for committees to achieve meaningful accountability performance,

penalty must flow from non-performance or from actions considered both 'questionable' and 'condemnable.'

Empirical studies on effectiveness of parliamentary committees

Levy (2009) conducted a study of the effectiveness of standing committees in the United Kingdom in scrutinizing government bills. These reforms had been prompted by public criticism of the role and effectiveness of parliamentary committees in their legislative function. The old standing committee system, though vital to the legislative process, was deemed ineffective by numerous commentators on parliament and had long faced pressure for reform. (Levy, 2009). Levy's report reviewed the experience of Public Bill Committees (PBCs) in the 2006-07 and 2007-08 parliamentary sessions, and concluded that though the reforms had been successful in adding value to the legislative process by increasing the quality and quantity of information available to committee members and enhancing the transparency of briefings by external organizations, a lot more needed to be done to ensure the effectiveness of the PBCs. She pointed to the insufficient time given to members to prepare for the committee stage, or to reflect on what is learnt through evidence-taking before moving to line-by-line scrutiny, lack of committee ownership over witness selection among other ills as significant weaknesses which hampered the committees' effectiveness.

Thomas (2009) adopted a comparative approach focusing on how the parliament of Australia and the Canadian parliament seek to hold responsible ministers directly, and senior public servants indirectly, accountable for the performance of departments and programs on the basis of published performance data and inquiries conducted by parliamentary committees. His research came to the conclusion that in comparison to Canada, Australia's parliament does a much better job than the elected House of Commons and the appointed Senate combined in holding governments accountable. He noted that in Canada, estimates receive almost no direct parliamentary attention, performance plans and performance reports from over 90 departments and agencies go unstudied in parliament and there is no system of annual reports which focus so intentionally on outputs and related outcomes as do the Australian documents. It will be interesting to see how Zimbabwe compares in this regard.

Closer to home, Burnell (2002) critically examined the contribution of parliamentary committees in Zambia to democratic government following reforms embarked on in 1999 which sought to refashion, expand and give additional powers to oversight committees. Burnell pointed to a worrying development, augmented, a decade later, by the Global Parliamentary Report (2012). He stated that there is a general consensus that parliaments the world over are generally in decline, as political power

is shifting to executives and as it leaks away from governments to other institutions such as economic actors and increasingly global forces. He acknowledges that scrutiny committees in Zambia have worked hard to make government more open and accountable. However, notwithstanding their hard work and the reform programme, he argues that they have minimal effect in making government accountable because:

The Zimbabwean legislature, like Zambia, embarked on a reform process in 1997 aimed at making Parliament more effective in the discharge of its constitutional mandate. Parliamentary committees likewise, were an integral part of this reform process, particularly with regards to the oversight function. It will be interesting to see whether there has been any significant change in the performance and impact of parliamentary committees since this much vaunted reform process, or, like Zambia, they have had minimal effect. Despite the proliferation of research in different countries, there has been very little research in Zimbabwe focused specifically on the effectiveness of parliamentary committees in their oversight function, save for an all encompassing research by the PRC, established on 10 October 1996, to take stock and evaluate how effectively Parliament and its members fulfilled their roles and served the people of Zimbabwe since independence.

Probably the most damning assessment of committees at the time came from the members of parliament themselves. "Nearly two thirds of them (62%) believed that the system was ineffective" (PRC Report, 1998; p39), while members of the public opined that committees were impotent and "should be given more teeth to bite" (1998; p37). There was a general feeling that parliaments and its committees existed simply to rubber-stamp executive decisions and were incapable of conducting effective oversight on the government. A background into the salient features of committees that existed then probably explains this dissatisfaction.

Leadership and committee effectiveness

A survey conducted by the World Bank (2004) on the effectiveness of committees in the United States Congress noted that the skills of the chairperson of the committee in managing activities and meetings of the committee have a tremendous impact on committee output. The committee chairperson plays a key role in the effectiveness of the committee as he is responsible, among other things, for presiding over committee meetings, and ruling on procedural and relevance issues, dealing with disorder among members and answering oral questions in the House on behalf of the committee. Ogle (2004) complemented this research by identifying the qualities of an effective congressional committee leader as follows: competence, flexibility and adaptability,

firmness and decisiveness, honesty and dependability, openness, fairness, tolerance, patience, humility and stamina.

Despite this pace-setting research on the impact of committee chairpersons' leadership style on the effectiveness of congressional committees, there is a stultifying paucity of follow-up research on the same in Africa in general, and, in Zimbabwe in particular. However, the United Nations Report on the Two Year Rolling Parliamentary Support Programme in Zimbabwe attributes the success of the portfolio committee on budget and finance to the assertiveness of the committee chairperson (De Vrieze and Murapa, 2012). In so doing, it becomes clear that committee chairpersons have a critical role to play in enhancing the effectiveness of their committees. That notwithstanding, Marshall and Ren (2011), in a distinct break from tradition suggest that there is no observable link between leadership style and the effectiveness of committees. Their research focused on three leadership styles, namely, autocratic, democratic and *laissez faire*. They posit that the behaviour of committees was generally quite similar irrespective of leadership style. They thus argue that results of their survey indicate that "there will always be more powerful situational determinants that drive leadership effectiveness" (p2). It is against this background that this paper seeks to establish whether at all the leadership styles as defined by Marshall and Ren (2011) and skill of parliamentary committee chairpersons as defined by Ogle (2004) has any perceivable impact on the effectiveness of these committees in carrying out their mandate.

METHODOLOGY

Research approach

A qualitative interpretive research approach was adopted for this study. This framework is premised on the principles of interpretivism illustrated by Schwandt (2007) and Creswell (2009) among others who assert that social meaning can be best understood by interpreting the meaning and motives on which it is based. The interpretive approach strongly advocates for the use of qualitative data because of its greater richness and depth in interpreting the meaning that lies behind social action (Haralambos, 2004). Creswell (2007; p8) holds that "the goal of qualitative research is to rely as much as possible on the participants' view of the situation being studied. To this end, interpretivism strives to interpret the world in terms of its actors, that is, those involved in the 'social action,' and uses the multiple views for theory generation. Accordingly, the study seeks to broadly assess the effectiveness of portfolio and thematic committees in the 7th Parliament from the perspective of the various 'actors' in committee operations, and in part, the link between the

effectiveness of these committees and the style and skills of their chairperson's relationship between variables" (Saunders *et al.*, 2007; p115).

Research design

According to Glathorn and Joyner. (2005), a research design is a plan outlining how information is to be gathered for an assessment or evaluation that includes identifying the data gathering methods, the instruments to be used or created, how the instruments will be administered, and how the information will be organized and analyzed. Pursuant to this, a case study of parliament of Zimbabwe encompassing a multiple case design focusing on 8 different parliamentary committees were chosen to assess the effectiveness of parliamentary committees. The multiple-case design can be adopted with real-life events that show numerous sources of evidence through replication rather than sampling logic (Zainal, 2007). Through case study methods, a researcher is able to go beyond the quantitative statistical results and understand the behavioural conditions through the actor's perspective.

Research population

Kumar (2005) explained that the term population denotes any group of individuals with one or more characteristics in common that are of interest to the researcher. Population in this research entails the group of people which the research will focus on. Parliament of Zimbabwe currently employs 197 employees but only 60 of these are sufficiently involved in Committee business enough to ensure profound knowledge of Committee operations. To ensure competent representation of this population, the researchers used a sample of 19 employees purposely selected for their in-depth knowledge of Committee business. This figure represents 31.7 percent of those with a direct involvement, hence an in-depth knowledge of Committee operations and it is statistically significant to enable generalisations of survey results. In addition to this, at least 8 of the 26 committee chairpersons were targeted, representing a figure of 30.76 percent of the total committee chairpersons. The study also took cognisance of the 6 development partners who have standing memoranda of understanding with the parliament of Zimbabwe. Of these, 3 were included in the sample representing 50 percent of those with formal co-operation agreements with parliament. Over and above the committee chairpersons, the political leadership was also represented by the 3 Chief Whips representing the 3 major political parties in the inclusive government at the time the study was done.

Sampling techniques

Saunders *et al.* (2007) observed that sampling

techniques provides a range of methods that enable the collection of data in a subgroup rather than all possible cases of elements. In the same vein, the Parliament of Zimbabwe, as has already been mentioned is a relatively large institution with a total of 197 employees. Accordingly, it was impracticable, in view of the time constraints to include every employee in the study and also the fact that other departments in the institution have very little, if any contact at all, with the work of committees. Consequently, for the purposes of this study, purposive expert sampling was employed. Palys (2007; p1) adds that "to say you will engage in purposive sampling signifies that you see sampling as a series of strategic choices about whom, where and how to do your research." These key personnel encompassed 15 Committee Clerks, the Assistant Clerk in charge of committees and house procedures, the Deputy Clerk, the Clerk of Parliament, the Parliamentary programme co-ordinator, 3 development partners, 8 committee chairpersons and the Chief Whips of the three major political parties who are signatories to the global political agreement. The purposive sampling is premised on the nature of their involvement with parliamentary committees which gives them an in-depth knowledge of committee business.

Research instruments

Best and Khan (2003) define research instruments as methods and procedures that have been developed or worked out to help with the acquisition of data. Khan (2003) further notes that instruments for data collection provide the researcher with information on how to obtain necessary data on which results and conclusions obtained at the end of the project are based. The researchers used two main instruments to collect data. These are the questionnaire and the structured interviews. Somekh and Lewin (2005) point out those questionnaires include all data collection techniques where each person is asked to answer the same set of questions in a predetermined order either as part of a structured interview or through self-completion. As part of this study, the researcher administered questionnaires which allowed respondents to respond freely and thus give objective answers. Questionnaires also have the added advantage of being cost-effective as they can be administered to a number of respondents at the same time (Bell 1999). Strauss and Corbin (1998) identified two types of questionnaires namely an open type questionnaire and closed type questionnaire and this study utilised both an open-ended and closed type of questionnaire.

Limitations

The researchers were aware, however, of the inherent limitations of questionnaires in the sense that there is no

provision for further clarification in the event that the researcher is not clear on the answers provided. To mitigate this challenge, the researchers provided more space on the questionnaire, to enable the respondents to further clarify their responses. In addition to this, questionnaires were also augmented by face-to-face interviews. According to Kahn (2003) interviews are a more structured version of the questionnaire which allow the interviewer to probe the respondents' answers so that they can elaborate and provide further clarification where necessary. Saunders and Lewin (2004) note that the success of the interview approach will largely depend on the formulation of appropriate questions to explore the study area. Accordingly, 8 personal interviews were conducted through face-to-face contact with some of the respondents to elicit information.

Research observation

Somekh and Lewin (2005; p138) observed that "observation is one of the most important methods of data collection. It entails being present in a situation and making a record of one's impression of what takes place." Though there are several types of observation techniques, this study employed non-participant observation of committee meetings. Firstly, the rules of committee meetings restrict participation to members of parliament and witnesses called before the committee. Secondly, the complexities of human beings entail that the committee chairpersons can put on a show if they are cognizant of the fact that they are being observed (Somekh and Lewin, 2005). Thus the research made use of shadow studies where the researcher attended only those meetings open to the public and blended in with the crowd while conducting research. The study also made use of the following public documents: committee reports, committee work plans, academic journals, parliamentary publications, relevant policy documents and parliament of Zimbabwe library sources, standing orders, baseline surveys, and the hansard among others.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Response rate

Of the 45 questionnaires were used for the study and only 29 were returned completely filled, representing a response rate of 64.4 %. Of the 11 scheduled interviews, 7 were successfully carried out which translates to 63.6%. The researchers were also able to observe 4 of the 8 committee meetings owing to the unanticipated early adjournment of committee business.

Demographic data

A gender analysis of the respondents revealed that 67%

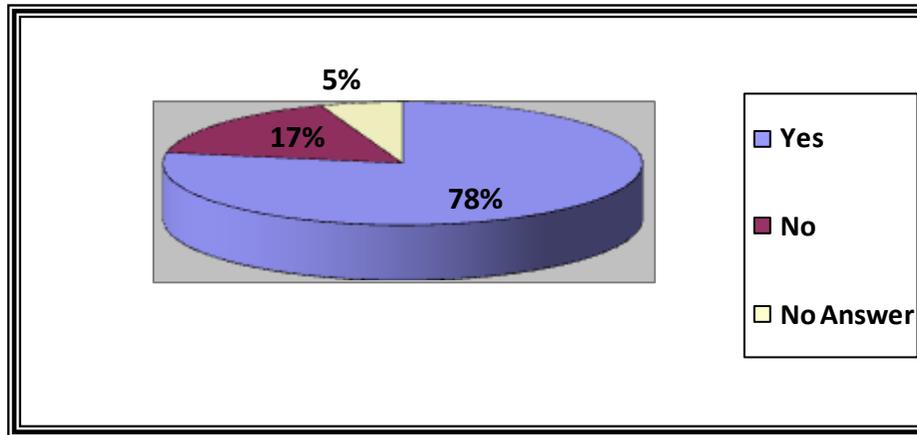


Figure 1. Tabling of Reports as a measure of effectiveness.

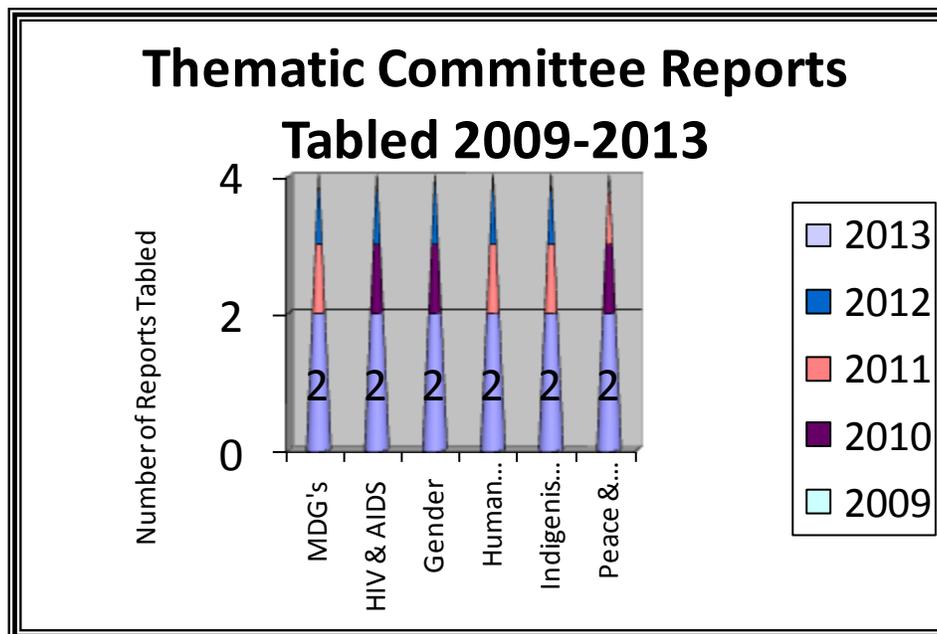


Figure 2. Thematic committee reports.

Source: Adapted from select committee reports register, Parliament of Zimbabwe (2013).

were males and 33% were females. In essence, there is no theoretical framework for generalising the gender responses. That notwithstanding, the researchers concluded that the findings accurately capture perceptions on the effectiveness of parliamentary committees by both female and males parliamentarians, staff and stakeholders.

Analysis of research findings

Figure 1 statistics mean that 77% of members, staff and stakeholders believe that the tabling of a committee report bears testimony to the effectiveness of both the chairperson and the committee in its oversight function.

The general argument, which is not without reason, is that the tabling of a committee report bears testimony to the chairperson's ability to build consensus around issues under investigation, while also attesting to the committee's ability to work towards a common goal regardless of political differences. However, the dissenting voices (17%) feel that other issues, notably availability of resources, may militate against the timeous conclusion of investigations and enquiries, and thus work against the committee's ability to table a report timeously. Be that as it may, a report provides an essential public record of the committees' activities over the year.

From Figure 2, it would appear that all committees have been able to table at least one report during the 7th

Parliament which, going by the respondents, is a sign of the ability of chairpersons to build consensus around issues and that of the committee to work together towards a common goal. However, ordinarily, committees are supposed to table a report at the end of each session or at the conclusion of an enquiry which entails that by now, all committees ought to have tabled at least 4 reports in the chambers. However, only 11.5% of the total expected reports were tabled in 2009, 54% in 2010 and 42% in 2011. There was a vast improvement with 25 reports tabled in 2012 which amounts to 96% of the total expected reports. However, these were not evenly spread across all Committees with about 5 Portfolio and 1 Thematic Committee not tabling a report at all while 5 Portfolio Committees tabled at least 2 or more reports which makes up for those which did not. In total, only 15% of the 26 Portfolio and Thematic committees have managed to table 4 or more reports from 2009 to present, which brings into question their effectiveness in this regard. Going by this criteria, it would appear that of the 8 committees under investigation, only the Public Accounts Committee and the Portfolio Committee on Education, Sport, Arts and Culture are the most effective in the oversight function as they have tabled at least 4 reports each, which equates to a report in every session. However, the tabling of a report alone cannot be sufficient evidence of committee effectiveness due, in part, to the resource constraints noted by other respondents which militate against the conclusion of investigations, and also the fact that tabling of a report does not, in fact, portray the quality of the report. To augment this, the researcher went further to assess the effectiveness of committees based on how many of the recommendations from these reports have been adopted by the ministry that committees shadow and whether the committees have brought up any verifiable issues for public debate. This is in line with the argument by Monk (2009) that in terms of effectiveness, the real question is not what type of report a committee produces, but whether it has the appropriate effect on government and the general debate. This criteria is assessed in another section of this research dealing specifically with committee effectiveness.

Challenges facing parliamentary committees in the oversight function

In responding to this objective, respondents were required, among other things, to identify two major challenges that have hampered the effectiveness of the committees in their oversight function. 90% pointed to resource constraints as a serious handicap in conducting site visits and public hearings crucial to the oversight function. 25% identified executive resistance or lack of co-operation by the executive arm of government, while 14% decried the limited number of meetings due to constant adjournments and the quality of support staff.

11% of the respondents pointed to poor leadership qualities of the committee chairperson, while 8% and 6% noted political polarization and the whipping system respectively. 3% of the respondents identified lack of understanding of issues under enquiry as a major challenge (Figure 3). In analyzing Figure 3, it must be borne in mind that the question specifically requested for "major challenges" that the committees faced. Other challenges may have been left out due to the framing of the question which focused on those challenges considered pivotal to the oversight function.

Mechanisms to enhance committee effectiveness

Induction training for committee member / chairperson / support staff

Despite the apparent lack of understanding of the rules governing select committee operations among the 8 committees, it must be noted that the majority of the respondents acknowledged that they had received induction training on the roles and functions of committees, their roles as committee members and/or chairpersons. 86% of MPs confirmed receiving training while 71% of the support staff confirmed receiving induction training and further training in report writing. However, 83% of the respondents felt that the training was inadequate and indicated that it should be given more time while 17% expressed satisfaction with the induction programme. In addition to this, all the respondents felt that training in leadership and management would be of immense benefit to committee chairpersons, in view of the fact that only 2 of the 8 committee chairpersons have ever chaired parliamentary committees before with the rest chairing for the first time.

Increase in the number of committees

While the majority of respondents (78%) feel that the increase in the number of committees has paved the way for a more focused oversight with all government Ministries being sufficiently covered, the dissenting voices though few (22%), all proffer the same reason, which is worrisome. The former contend that with the increase in the number of committees from 7 to 26 as part of parliamentary reforms and following the re-introduction of the Senate in 2005. Committees now shadow at most two Ministries each which is a big improvement from the 7 committees which would cover on average 6 Ministries each. As a result, some ministries and government departments would go for years without being subjected to any oversight (PRC, 1998; p18). But with the current scenario, there is better coverage of the Ministries. On the other hand, there is a tacit agreement among the negative respondents (22%) that there has been a recurrent tendency for Portfolio and Thematic Committees to duplicate functions. Desk review

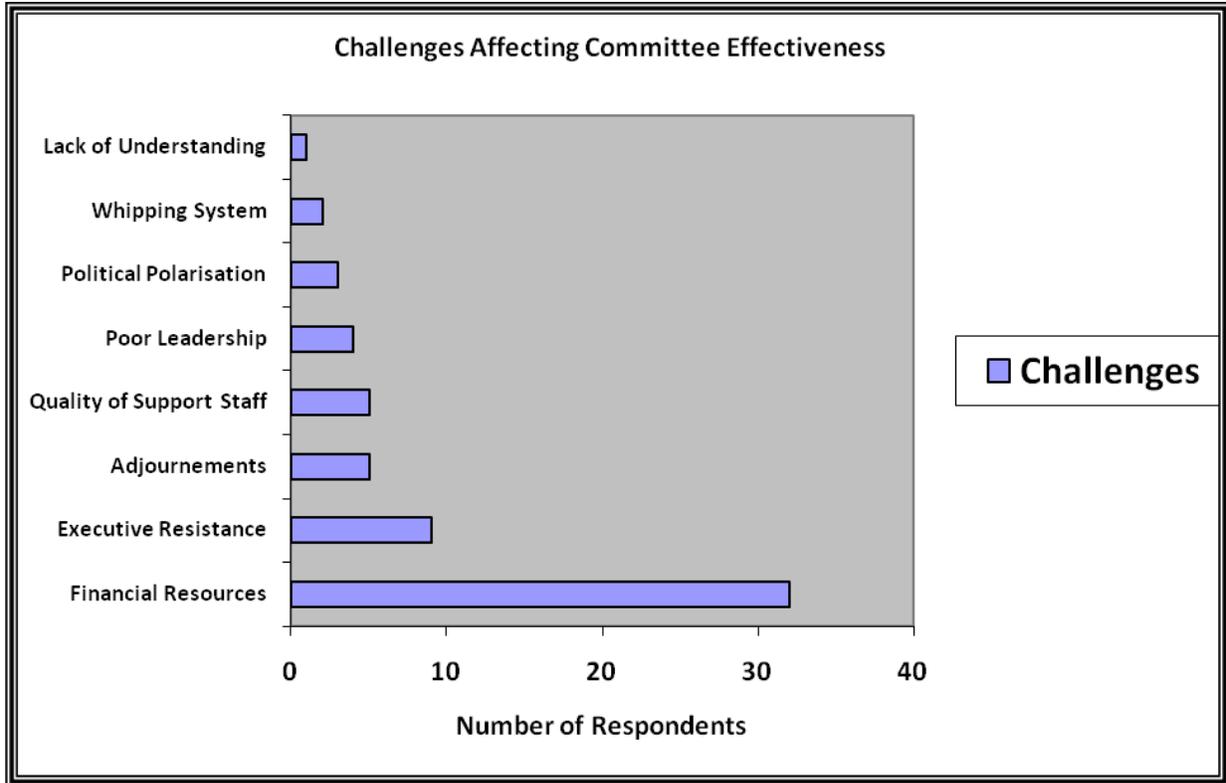


Figure 3. Challenges affecting committees.

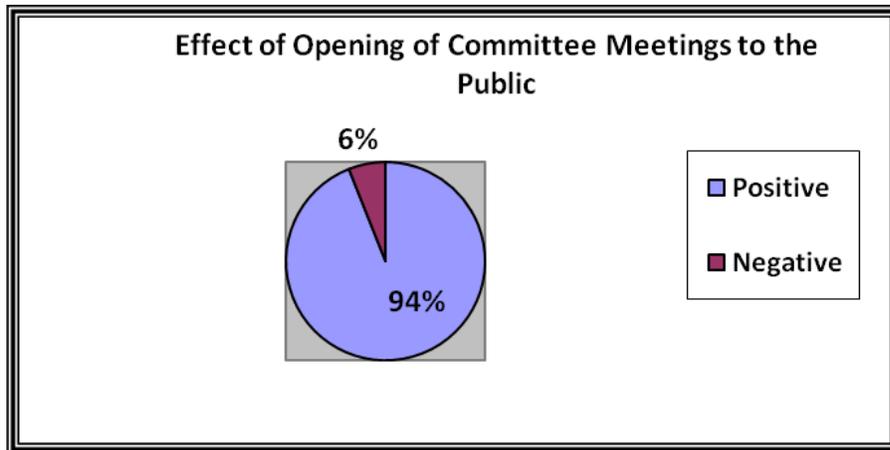


Figure 4. Effect of opening of committee meetings to the public.

also confirmed this observation.

Opening up of committee meetings to members of the public

94% of the respondents averred that the opening up of committee meetings to members of the public has enhanced the effectiveness of committees while 6% point to the nascent challenges that this has brought. The responses are depicted in Figure 4. It is clear that the

opening up of committee meetings to members of the public has been a positive development which has led to greater accountability to the electorate and has also opened up debate on issues before committees as they are reported in the press. Other respondents noted that the awareness that issues are going to be brought up for public scrutiny has also spurred officials and government ministers to ensure that they come prepared for oral evidence sessions otherwise their ineptitude will be in the spotlight. However, 6% of the respondents noted that the



Figure 5. Effects of leadership on committee effectiveness.

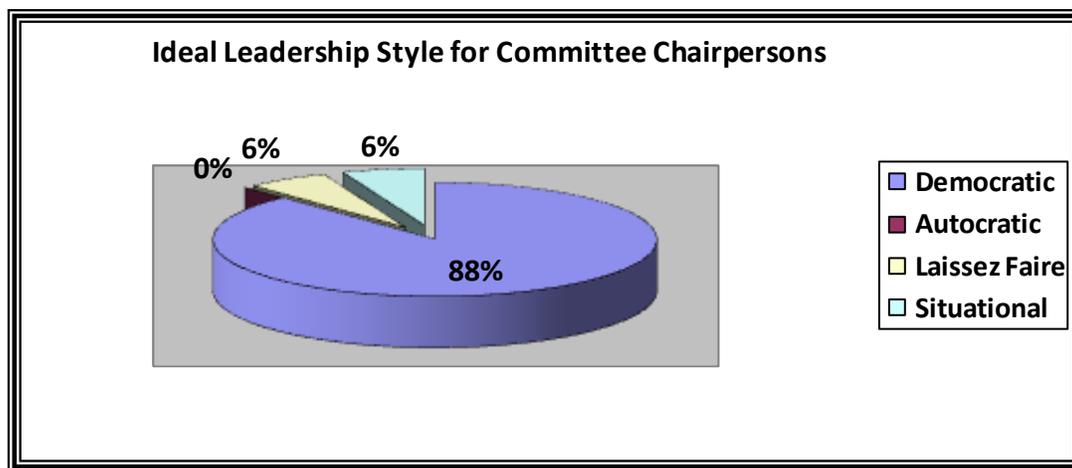


Figure 6. Ideal leadership style for committee chairpersons.

challenge has been to keep committee deliberations out of the public glare as some members will not give statements to the media before committees either conclude their investigations or produce a report in violation of Select Committee Rule Number 17(1) which makes it clear that deliberations or conclusions cannot be published before the report is tabled in the House. That notwithstanding, it is clear that the opening up of committee meetings has led to greater transparency and accountability of not only government, but also parliament itself, to the electorate who voted them into office.

Effect of leadership style on committee effectiveness

In view of the assertion by Marshall and Ren (2011) that the leadership style of the chairperson has no observable effect on the effectiveness of the committee, the research sought to establish whether this is applicable to parliamentary committees. The respondents were asked whether the leadership style and skills of the Committee chair had any impact on the effectiveness of the committee and the responses were almost overwhelmingly affirmative. 98% of the respondents

indicated that the leadership style of the committee chairperson definitely has an impact on the effectiveness of the committee while 2% felt that the leadership style has no impact at all as graphically presented in Figure 5.

With respect to the ideal leadership style for chairpersons, respondents were given the three alternatives employed in the study by Marshall and Ren (2011), that is democratic, autocratic and *laissez faire* and a fourth additional option, Situational leadership. 88% of the respondents indicated that the ideal leadership style for chairpersons is democratic leadership. None whatsoever cited autocratic leadership while 6% pointed to *laissez faire* leadership and 6% selected situational leadership as reflected in Figure 6.

Observation of committee meetings attested to that democratic leadership gives all committee members an opportunity to contribute to debate and resolutions in committee. It allows members a sense of ownership of committee resolutions and, is particularly important when it comes to drafting of committee reports which have to be by consensus. An autocratic leader runs the risk of having committee resolutions disowned by members of the committee while a *laissez faire* leader is a non-leader

Table 1: Nomination for Committees.

Criteria	Number of Respondents	Committee	Percentage Rating
1. Ability to expose issues to critical light & initiate debate	35	1. Mines and Energy	49%
		2. Budget, Finance & Investment Promotion	34%
2. Visibility of the Committee	36	1. Mines and Energy	52%
		2. Budget, Finance & Investment Promotion	38%
3. Adoption of Committee Recommendations	4	1. Budget, Finance & Investment Promotion	100%

at all and is easily usurped by other assertive members. *Laissez faire* leadership was observed in the Portfolio Committee on Natural Resources, Environment and Tourism, the Portfolio Committee on Agriculture, Lands and Water Development and the Portfolio Committee on Women's Affairs, Gender and Community Development where other assertive members ended up taking control of proceedings in the presence of the chairperson. The danger with situational leadership rests with how to determine when and where to employ autocracy or democracy due to the intricate political sensitivities in committees. Any autocratic attempt misconstrued by committee members may fracture the fragile relationship existing among the political parties and degenerate into open hostility and polarization in the committee. Therefore, the hypothesis by Marshall and Ren which stated that there was no link between leadership style and committee effectiveness was is not applicable to parliamentary committees in Zimbabwe.

Effective committees

In seeking to establish the criteria used by members, the secretariat and stakeholders to determine the effectiveness of committee, the respondents were asked, based on set criteria, to select two committees which they considered effective in the oversight function and give further explanation. The criteria included the ability to expose issues to critical light and initiate public debate, the visibility of the work of the committee and the adoption of recommendations made by the committee by the ministry it shadows. The responses that highlight the committees which received the most nominations are shown in the Table 1. Respondents pointed to the chairperson's leadership qualities and knowledge of the subject area as one of the critical factors to the committee's success. Even development partners confirmed funding the committee because of its effectiveness, premised on the chairperson's knowledge of issues. In essence, the Budget, Finance and Investment Promotion and the Mines and Energy

Committee were lauded for their chairpersons' knowledge of their subject area and observation also confirmed their grasp of issues, which has had a contagious effect on the committees. It is apparent therefore, that a chairperson who knows their subject area is certainly more effective than one thrown into the deep end without a sound grasp of issues.

To augment this finding, respondents were asked to rank, in order of priority, what they considered the most important quality of an effective committee chairperson from 7 different characteristics identified by Ogle (2004). 58% of the respondents regarded the chairperson's knowledge of the subject area as the most important quality; 19% cited the quality of openness, defined as being receptive to advice and willing to accommodate different opinions; 14% indicated fairness, that is, making objective decisions; while 3% identified decisiveness; 3% pointed to authoritativeness and another 3% cited persistence and patience. The responses are graphically depicted in Figure 7.

The import of this data is that the majority of respondents avow that an effective chairperson must, first and foremost, have a sound knowledge of the area in which the committee conducts oversight. This is evident in the committees which are considered the most effective. The findings conform to the observations by Lee (2008) who wrote on the 'Nine C's of Leadership.' He contends that among the most important leadership qualities are; expansiveness, that is, listening to a wide range of opinions, even from the contrarians; and, competence, that is, knowledge of the business. Fairness, which was also cited by 14% of the respondents, is linked to the chairperson's ability to make objective decisions regardless of political orientation.

Conclusion

. The effectiveness of parliamentary committees in the oversight function has been limited by resource constraints and lack of a legal instrument to guarantee co-operation by the executive. This situation appears

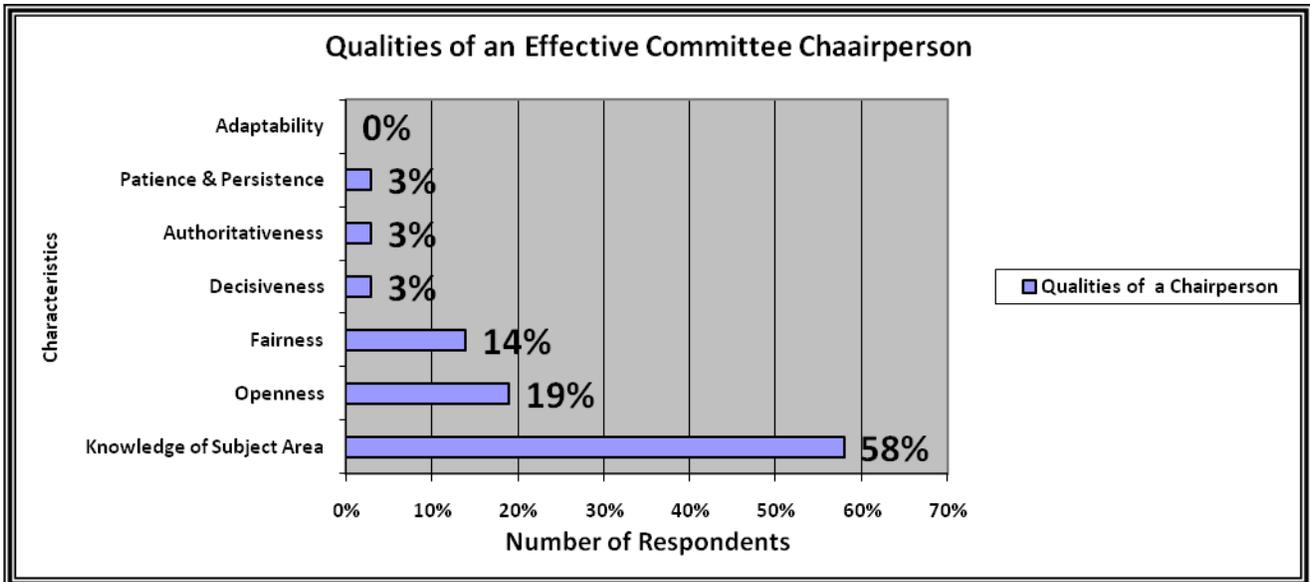


Figure 7. Qualities of effective committee chairperson.

unlikely to change unless there is a change in the institutional balance of power between the executive and the legislature.

. An effective committee chairperson must have a sound knowledge of the subject area coupled with a democratic leadership style which allows autonomy and enables subordinates to participate in decision making.

. An effective committee must be visible in its oversight function and there is an imperative need for capacity building in sector-specific areas

. Parliamentary committees in the 7th Parliament have had a limited, but, relevant effect in making government accountable. The lack of enforceability of committee recommendations as well as the lack of an enabling instrument to reduce Government responses to issues raised by committees attests to this conclusion. However, they have been greatly effective with respect to exposing the operations of government to a critical light.

Recommendations

. Members of parliament should consider reviewing the standing orders, particularly Standing Order Number 168 of the House of Assembly and 161 of the Senate to ensure that there is a timeframe for Ministers to respond to Committee reports in the respective chambers and a means of censure if that does not happen. The need for continued training of parliamentarians and support staff in targeted sector specific policy areas cannot be overemphasised, if parliamentary committees are to develop the sector-specific knowledge critical to their oversight function.

. There is need to ensure that committee chairpersons are appointed on merit, regardless of who is responsible for their appointment.

. The administration of parliament needs to seriously consider including training on leadership and leadership styles as part of its induction programme

. Parliament, through its various levels, needs to continuously engage the executive and foster the understanding that the role of parliament is complementary and not conflicting. An effective parliament entails an effective executive and is crucial to a functional democracy.

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