

THE AFRICAN LEGISLATURES PROJECT (ALP)

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

What Is ALP?

The purpose of ALP is to learn *everything* important there is to know about how African legislatures function. As such, ALP is an exercise that straddles the realms of academic research and practice – in this case, research into the operations of the legislature and what its findings suggest for African parliaments, organisations working for legislative and democratic reform and supportive donor agencies. ALP seeks to answer three basic questions:

- How and why do African legislatures function as they do? Why are some African legislatures developing into significant institutions that play a measurable role in democratic governance while others are not?
- What conditions and changes are required to develop and transform African legislatures into institutions that will sustain Africa’s fragile democracies?
- What constitutes “best practice” for the purpose of strengthening African institutions which are an essential component of democratisation on the continent?

To answer these questions, ALP has developed a range of quantitative and qualitative measures of legislative performance so that scholars and practitioners have a method for assessing and comparing the development of individual legislatures in relation to one another and over time.

To achieve its purpose, we have identified more than 400 items (variables) that might explain the development and performance of legislatures, and in turn, their contribution to the broader processes of democratization and poverty reduction. ALP collects data about these items in 20 identified countries where the prospects for democratisation and democratic consolidation are high or promising.¹ The variables about which we seek information can be grouped into seven broad clusters.

1. *National Background*: conditions external to the legislature that shape the nature and operation of the political system generally and the legislature specifically.
2. *National Political Institutions*: the formal powers of the executive and legislature, executive-legislative relations, and the type of electoral system.
3. *Formal Rules and Organisational Structure of Legislatures*: the internal structure and procedures of the legislature that govern the selection of presiding officers, the structure of the committee system, control over internal finances, and the complement of staff.
4. *Financial Resources*: MP salaries, size and expertise of legislative staff and physical infrastructure like office space, committee rooms and computers.

¹ Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe

5. *Political Dynamics*: competitiveness of elections, party systems, party discipline, balance of power between ruling and opposition parties, and leadership style.
6. *Individual Attributes of MPs*: the norms, skills and preferences that individual legislators bring to their jobs including educational, professional and experiential background.
7. *Public Opinion*: the values, expectations, preferences and evaluations of the electorate that shape may shape the behavior of legislators.

Finally, we measure the actual *performance of the legislature* through the three basic functions that are common to all democratic legislatures – *making laws* (the extent to which the legislature participates in the making of public policy by initiating or amending laws), *overseeing the executive* (the extent to which they oversee the implementation of the national budget and ensure financial accountability of public funds), and *representation* (the extent of civil society input into the legislative process, and the degree to which MPs represent and serve their constituents). Furthermore, across these three functions, we focus on legislative performance on poverty reduction, gender and public health, especially HIV/AIDS.

ALP Research Plan

We collect data for the variables just reviewed through four different modules of work.

Module 1 collects data about *national background* and *national political institutions* in all sub-Saharan African countries with functioning legislatures, based on publicly available sources such as national constitutions and parliamentary Standing Orders.

Module 2 collects data about *formal rules and organisational structure of legislatures, financial and other resources, and political dynamics* as well as *legislative performance*. We do this through in-country research by national research partners consisting of key informant interviews and observation of parliamentary proceedings in identified legislatures.

Module 3 collects data about the *individual attributes of MPs* through interviews with a representative sample of members in each country using a structured questionnaire in the identified countries.

Module 4 collects data about *public opinion* about legislators and legislatures. We do this, first, by utilising existing data about citizen attitudes collected in 18 countries by past Afrobarometer surveys. In addition, a specially designed set of question items on the Fourth Round of the Afrobarometer was conducted in our identified countries.

How Is ALP Relevant to Legislative Reformers?

ALP is relevant to African parliaments, organisations implementing legislative and democratic reform projects, and supportive donor agencies for three reasons.

First, the development of the legislature into a viable institution that performs the three basic functions associated with legislatures worldwide is essential to the development and consolidation of democracy. As demonstrated by recent research: *no viable legislature, no consolidated democracy!*

Second, we will fill a void by providing useful measures of the overall performance of individual legislatures. Comparison of these indicators across legislatures and/or over time will contribute to a broad-based understanding of the factors that drive the development of legislatures.

Third, this information is vital to enable donors and implementers to raise the quality and impact of their legislative strengthening programs in emerging democracies in Africa. The lessons drawn from these data will provide a deeper understanding of why some legislatures develop and others do not and a complete “toolkit” to design programs in particular countries. ALP will also help improve and systematize monitoring and evaluation components of parliamentary reform projects to understand better which interventions work and are most cost effective and which are not.

What Has ALP Accomplished to Date? And What Remains To Be Done?

ALP field research has been funded by UK Department for International Development (DFID), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the World Bank, the Heinrich Böll Foundation, and the University of Cape Town Vice Chancellor’s Fund. We plan to complete research for all 20 countries by the end of 2010. We are also willing to work in additional countries, such as the post-conflict countries like Sierra Leone or Angola.

Where is ALP Located and Who is Involved?

ALP is based at the University of Cape Town in collaboration with the Center for Legislative Studies at Bridgewater State College in Massachusetts, USA. ALP’s “home” at the University of Cape Town is the Democracy in Africa Research Unit (DARU) in the Centre for Social Science Research (CSSR).

DARU is directed by **Professor Robert Mattes**, one of three principal investigators for the project. The other two principal investigators are **Professor Shaheen Mozaffar**, Department of Political Science at Bridgewater State College and **Professor Joel D. Barkan**, Senior Associate, Center for International and Strategic Studies, Washington, DC and Professor Emeritus of Political Science at the University of Iowa. Field research is carried out by teams of research associates based in each country. **Elizabeth Welsh** is the Project Manager for ALP and is supported by a number of post graduate research assistants. Additional research management and analytic services are provided by Senior Research Associates **Kimberly Smiddy** and **Shana Warren**.

For more information, please go to www.africanlegislaturesproject.org or contact us at Elizabeth.Welsh@uct.ac.za.