

Original Article

# The Place of Research Officers in the County Assemblies: Factors that can help Research Officers spur quality work in the Committees of the County Assemblies

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**Abstract** - In any democratic legislature Research Services are crucial components that enable the legislators to make informed decisions so as not to remain static entities but keep developing in accordance with societal and technological advancements. In Kenya Devolved system of governance, County Assemblies transacts their businesses through a Committee System, where most of the work is executed before being ratified by the County Assembly. The study looked at the place of Research officers in the Committee setups and how their output can be further enhanced. The objective was to determine how the institutionalization of the functions and roles of research units, funding of research services units, adoption and use of new technology, and the staffing level will help spur the quality of work coming out from the Committees of the County Assembly. The study adopted a descriptive research design. The study was conducted in the County Assembly of Bungoma. The target population was purposively sampled, comprising of 8 Committee Chairpersons, 8 Members of the County Assembly, 8 Departmental Heads, and 8 Members of Staff. Primary data was collected using questionnaires and was analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively. From this study, it was concluded that the institutionalization of research services and increased funding would positively affect the quality of business being churned out at the Committees level. The study recommends increased funding to aid in the hiring of more staff at Research units across legislatures and deployment of modern technology to better improve research work at the legislature.

**Keywords** - Research units, Legislation, Scrutiny, staff, Committee, Technology, Effectiveness

## I. INTRODUCTION

Research officers within legislative bodies are officers tasked with the duty of ensuring information is availed to legislators in a timely manner to enable the legislators to make an informed decision on the

matter being interrogated. Many legislatures have adopted a model where business is mostly transacted in the Committees. In the County Assembly of Bungoma, and indeed in all the County Assemblies in Kenya, there are Standing Committee and Departmental Committee that directly oversees the various County Departments. The core personnel providing technical services consist of Clerks, Research Officers, Legal Officers, Hansard officers, and Sergeant-At-Arms, each with a distinct role. While the roles of the other four officers are easy to factor, it is the role of the research officer that is sometimes brought to question largely because as officers who are there merely to provide information when needed, several questions arise; what if there is no such need for information? The other assumption is that with the advancement of technology, information is easy to be obtained by anyone with an internet-accessible device. Thus more often than not, you will find the argument on the need of having a research officer, yet the very source that needs to be referenced can be accessed by anyone, including the legislators. It is often argued that a policymaker's hierarchy of evidence tends to place research evidence at the bottom of the hierarchy, coming behind media reports, lay evidence, urban myths, and conventional wisdom (Davies P, 2014).

This paper does not seek to dispute all these assumptions, but it tries to critically evaluate ways that can make research officers relevant in the Committees set up of legislative organs.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. Institutionalizing of research services

It is expected that research officers perform such duties as dissecting policy papers, analysis of the pros and cons of legislative proposals, help members in researching motions that are likely to be brought for debate, among other tasks (Oronje N et al., 2016). To ensure that the data or facts being produced or referenced by a legislator are factual, there is a need for the information to be obtained and counterchecked by technical personnel, who in this



case are research officers. To ensure that the research officers perform their duties in a conducive environment, there is a need framework anchored in operational regulations on their roles. This is done by having provisions in the rule, guideline, or standing orders that provide for the use of information services. Some of the countries that are already doing this are such as Hungary, which has provisions in its Standing Orders stating their roles and expectations of officers providing the Parliament with information services related to the library and the professional literature, i.e., research work (Resolution 46/1994 (ix.30)).

Article 27 of the Rules and Procedures of the Parliament of Slovenia establishes the office of legislative and legal service with a mandate enumerated therein; which includes delivering opinions on the conformity of draft laws, other acts, and amendments with the Constitution and the legal system, and on legislative and technical aspects of drafts. In the United States of America, section 203 of the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1946 establishes the Congress Reference Service as a unit that provides research work for both Houses of Congress.

It, therefore, follows that legislative bodies can include, in their Standing Orders or Rules and Guidelines, provisions for the services of Research Officers roles in the legislative process and include what is expected of them as deliverables in the Committees. If the role of research officers is legislated well within the Rules and Guidelines of Legislative bodies, legislators will make use of them properly, and the output will be better appreciated.

### **B. Funding of research services**

Legislative research services entail more than just sitting behind a desk with access to the internet. Research officers are usually called upon to get out of the office environment and collect data from elsewhere. For the successful execution of such activities, funds are required, which in most cases is not sufficient to allow for all the field research work to be undertaken. In the case of Bungoma, such funds are set aside in the administrative budget. The challenge with this provision is that funds can easily be re-allocated to other needs leaving the operations of research activity handicapped. It is therefore vital to have these funds not only set aside in the organization's budget but to be secured against reallocations. In the United States of America, the allocation is anchored in law (Legislative reorganization Act of 1946), thus ring-fencing it against being used for other activities. The main purpose of this fund is to ensure that research officers go out and collect data when needed and be able to come up with reliable information that can be published and be referenced by other legislatures.

### **C. Staffing level**

One of the reasons why outputs from research officers are put into question has to do with the staffing level. This core unit is usually understaffed to the point that the few cannot fully deliver. For instance, in Bungoma County Assembly, there is 3 research officer serving 24 different Committees. It becomes practically impossible for these officers to timely offer relevant information to all these committees considering their different mandates. It is generally expected that the number of staff performing research duties in Committees be commensurate to the number of Committees in a legislative body, with each officer serving in a committee that he or she has a background academic knowledge on (Papazoski Z & Bedy S, 2013). Of course, the reason for this shortfall can be because of limited funding. Parliaments in other jurisdictions have a better ratio. For example, the United States Congress has over 650 research officers serving under the congressional research services (Brudnick I, 2011). In Kenya, the number of research officers in the Parliament of Kenya stood at 30 in 2017 (Parliamentary Research Services – Factsheet No.15, 2017).

### **D. Deployment of technology**

Parliaments are bodies that are steeped in traditions (IPU, 2005). The traditions and customs of the ancient days are not only adhered to but revered and conserved with verve. While this is happening, technological advancements are happening so fast (Woensel L and Vrščaj D, 2015). Initially, these technological advancements appeared to be complementary to the traditional models offering consumers an option of adopting or ignoring them but have lately become disruptive to the extent that it is impossible to put the genie back to the bottle (Evans G, 2017). Legislatures are a bit slower in adopting them, and it is only recently that a set of parliaments has invested energy and resources in the adoption of breakthrough technologies in core parliamentary functions, such as legislation and parliamentary oversight and their related processes (Scheffbeck, 2011).

In this technological era, it is very easy to get information from the internet. More often than not, you will hear someone being told, "just google it," when asking for something. At the County Assembly of Bungoma, the three research officers are each equipped with internet-enabled desktop computers and a tablet so that they can access information from the internet easily. The flipside of it is that not all information found on the internet is factual; there are droves of inaccurate information out there that can be misleading to many people. It is not just enough to reference something on the internet. Parliaments have

to be credible at all times (Miller R et al., 2004). To remedy this, there is a credible online database that comes at a premium. A good research unit should have access to such a database. The research officers in Poland, for instance, have access to a number of databases (Papazoski Z &Bedy S, 2013). The congressional research services of the United States of America have access to most databases of most countries legislatures while its own reports, which were hitherto available to the congress members alone, are now available to the public through its website (Brudnick I, 2011).

The Hungarian parliament has deployed software in the form of an integrated Task management system called KERD that is used to collect quantitative data provided to Members of Parliament (Papazoski Z &Bedy S, 2013). Having such a tool will be beneficial to research officers as it will enable ease of access to information by the consumers. Whereas committees transact business out of the plenary, the ultimate point where legislative decisions are made is inside the debate chambers. It is therefore appropriate that Research officers can be able to follow live proceedings from the plenary. By commonwealth practices, research officers are not admissible inside the chambers of debate as they do not fall under the purview of chamber officials. To overcome this, technology is deployed to have a link to stream live the debate so that research officers can follow from their office. The benefit of this is to allow research officers to pick possible points of research from the debate and, if possible, provide immediate feedback on a debate that sought some clarification. In the USA, a total of 24 states were broadcasting live their legislatures by the turn of the century (Chi S, 2000).

**E. Objective of study**

The main objective of the study is to determine how Institutionalization of the functions and roles of research units, funding of research services units, staffing level, and adoption and use of technology have an effect on the service rendered by research officers in the Committees of the County Assembly of Bungoma.

**F. Conceptual Framework**

The study was guided by a conceptual framework in a diagrammatic representation containing all variables and indicators. The independent variables of this study were: Institutionalization of the functions and roles, funding of research services units, staffing level, and deployment of technology, while the dependent variable was the quality of output work by the Committees in the County Assembly of Bungoma.

- Place of research in the Committee setups**

  - Institutionalization of the functions and roles
  - Funding of research services units,
  - Deployment of technology
  - Staffing level

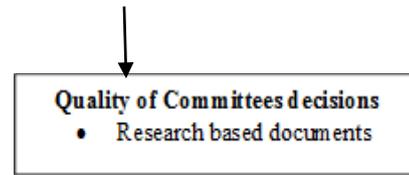


Fig. 1 Conceptual Framework

**III. METHODOLOGY**

The study was conducted in Bungoma County Assembly in Western Kenya. For the purposes of this study, the researchers employed a descriptive survey design. The target population included 8 Committee Chairpersons, 8 Members of the County Assembly, 8 Departmental Heads, and 8 members of staff. The data collection instrument in this study was a questionnaire. The research instrument was conveyed to the respondents through the drop and pick technique with the help of the Human Resource Management Department in the organization. A letter was attached to the questionnaire and forwarded to all participants notifying them of the questionnaire and the intended research. In this letter, participants were informed that the questionnaire is confidential and that no employee identification data will be stored, and that confidentiality was guaranteed. A total of 32 questionnaires were distributed while only 30 were returned, representing 93.75% of the response rate, which was coded and used in the analysis. Collected data were analyzed with the help of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics and inferential statistical techniques were used for data analysis.

**IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

**A.Descriptive statistics for staffing level**

To determine whether the staffing level had any effect on the output of research officers in the county Assembly of Bungoma, respondents were required to state their level of agreement with four statements relating to Staffing Level in the County Assembly of Bungoma where; 1= Strongly Disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= Neutral, 4= Agree, 5= Strongly Agree. The Relevant results are as shown in Table 1 below.

ITEM	SD (%)	D (%)	N (%)	A (%)	SA (%)
The research unit is well institutionalized in the organizational structure of the County Assembly of Bungoma	4 (13.3)	3 (10.0)	6 (20.0)	0 (0.0)	17 (56.7)
The use and deployment of the latest technology will improve the output of the research unit.	1 (3.3)	1 (3.3)	5 (16.5)	1 (3.3)	22 (73.3)

There is sufficient staffing level at the research unit of the County Assembly of Bungoma	20 (66.7)	6 (20.0)	0 (0.0)	3 (10.0)	1 (3.3)
The research unit is adequately funded by the County Assembly of Bungoma	10 (33.3)	7 (23.3)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	13 (43.3)

From Table 1, 4(13.3%), of the respondents strongly disagreed, 3(10.0%) of the respondents disagreed, 6(20.0%) of the respondents were neutral, and 17(56.7%) of the respondents strongly agreed that the Research Services unit is well institutionalized within the organizational structure of the County Assembly of Bungoma (Mean=3.7667, SD=1.54659). Further, 1(3.3%) strongly disagreed, 1(3.3%) disagreed, 5(16.5%) were neutral, 1(3.3%) agreed, and 22(73.3%) strongly agreed that the deployment and use of the latest technology would further spur the output of research work in the Committee setup of the County Assembly of Bungoma (Mean=4.4000, SD=1.10172).

The findings also revealed that 20(66.7%) of the respondents strongly disagreed, 6(20.0%) disagreed, 0(0.0%) were neutral, 3(10.0%) agreed, and 1(3.3%) of the respondents strongly agreed that there is sufficient staffing level at the research unit of the County Assembly of Bungoma (Mean=1.6333, SD=1.1290).

Finally, the findings revealed that 10(33.3%) of the respondents strongly disagreed, 7(23.3%) disagreed, and 13(43.3%) of the respondents strongly agreed that the research unit is adequately funded by the organization (Mean=2.9667, SD=1.84733).

**B. The factors that can help research officers help committees churn out quality documents.**

The study used the correlation r (beta,  $\beta$ ) to test the research hypothesis. The test criteria were set such that there is either a positive or negative effect if the value of beta,  $\beta \neq 0$ . The mean of aids to the outputs of research officers in the County Assembly of Bungoma was correlated with the mean of quality of Committee output, and the results were as shown in Table 2 below.

Model summary						
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. The error of the Estimate		
1	.598a	.357	.334	3.18901		
a. Predictors: (Constant), aids to output from research officers						
ANOVA a						
Model.		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	158.212	1	158.212	15.557	.000b
	Residual	284.754	28	10.170		
	Total	442.967	29			
a. Dependent Variable: Quality of output from Committee's work						
b. Predictors: (Constant), factors to spur research officers output						

Coefficients a						
Models		Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	9.647	1.865		5.174	.000
	Factors to spur research officers output	.539	.137	.598	3.944	.000
a. Dependent Variable: Quality of output from Committees work						

From Table 2 above, the correlation of the mean of factors that can aid the output from research officers and mean of quality of Committee's output in terms of the document had a beta term  $\beta = 0.598$ ,  $P=0.01$ . This implies that the value of beta is positive and significant. Basing on this value, it, therefore, implies that there exists a statistically significant positive

effect of institutionalization of research services, increasing funding to research units, increasing the staffing level at the research units, and deploying more technology to the research unit on the quality of output in terms of reports and bills processed by the Committees of the County Assembly of Bungoma.

The study is in agreement with past studies which revealed that the need for reforms in order to strengthen not only the functions of Research Units but also to facilitate operations and services of the Parliament in the digital era could not be disputed (Fitsilis, 2017)

According to Oronje et al. (2016), It is widely acknowledged that research evidence is an important ingredient of decision-making in development efforts, be it policy, program, or practice decisions. Parliament is arguably a context where research evidence has to compete with many factors to inform decisions made by Members of Parliament (MPs) in this case, Members of the County Assembly (MCA), top of these being politics and individual interests. It is therefore expected that Research officers be deployed with the best tools at their disposal to enable them adequately serve legislators.

Further, these results corroborate with a study conducted by Papazoski Z & Bedy S, (2013) in Central Europe countries of Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovenia & Slovak Republic and the West Balkan Countries of Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia which concluded that increased funding to Parliamentary Research services, increased staffing levels and deployment of modern technology will strengthen the output work of Research officers which will have a positive effect on the output of legislators in terms of decision making.

## V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study concluded that there exists a statistically significant positive effect of institutionalization of research services, increasing funding to research units, increasing the staffing level at the research units, and deploying more technology to the research unit on the quality of output in terms of reports and bills processed by the Committees of the County Assembly of Bungoma.

The study recommends that legislatures in Africa should invest more in funding research units within their jurisdictions and ensure that there are sufficient research officers to perform the important task of collating information for legislators. Furthermore, if legislatures can firmly institutionalize research services in their organizational structure and embrace modern innovative technology in their operations, the quality of legislation will greatly improve.

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