

PRESENTATION ON '**PARLIAMENTARY KNOWLEDGE-BASE, AN EFFECTIVE RESOURCE FOR EVIDENCE-INFORMED POLICY MAKING**' BY MR. SAMUEL ZAN AKOLOGO<sup>i</sup> AT A SENSITIZATION MEETING WITH PARLIAMENT OF GHANA ORGANIZED BY GINKS<sup>ii</sup> ON 7<sup>TH</sup> FEBRUARY, 2015.

## **Introduction**

At the beginning of this Millennium, Africa was referred to as the '21<sup>st</sup> century's development challenge at best and a hopeless continent at worst'. Such notions emanated as a result of our historical experience of failed democratic governance, weak public institutions and disastrous policy failures; albeit not our making entirely. The reality 15 years later is that there is glimpse of hope! Now we hear about 'AFRICA RISING' in discourses at the same platforms that painted a bleak future earlier. This positive reality has emerged and still potentially emerging or 'RISING' largely due to our resolve to champion tolerant, accountable, democratic and inclusive social and economic development. The role of Parliaments has been at the core of this achievement. Essentially, this rests with Parliaments' policy-making role.

## **The Foundation of Public Policy**

The foundation of public policy is composed of national constitutional laws and regulations. Strong public policies should solve problems efficiently and effectively, serve justice, support governmental institutions and encourage active citizenship. Public policy is always a proposition to address a public issue by instituting laws, regulations, decisions or actions pertinent to the problem at hand. This central and critical role of policy-making to eliminating the causes of misery and enhancing opportunities for wellbeing requires new knowledge to confront new challenges now and in the future. The international community is currently negotiating what is popularly called the Post 2015 Development Agenda or Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs represent a framework that is both inspirational and ambitious in tackling the root causes of poverty, exclusion, inequality and post-conflict and fragility. The SDGs will rely on sound public policies to deliver the intended outcomes. The Common Africa Position (CAP) and the fiftieth anniversary resolution – AGENDA 2063 of the Africa Union are remarkable regional governance initiatives. However, they will remain meaningless unless they are consciously and purposefully domesticated in the respective national policies. The recalcitrant energy crises in Ghana, aka DUMSO-DUMSO, the burgeoning national debt, perverse corruption and threat of the Ebola viral disease (EVD); to mention a few, require public policy actions based on sound knowledge, experience and strategic thinking. This brings us to the realm of the subject matter of EVIDENCE-INFORMED POLICY MAKING or also called EVIDENCE-BASED POLICY MAKING.

## **Evidence-Based Policy Making**

The literature suggest that Evidence-Based Policy making was practiced several centuries ago from about the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Permit me to simply rest this statement of historical antecedent here as our task is not necessarily an academic discourse.

Evidence-Informed Policy making or Evidence-Based Policy Making is public policy informed by rigorous established objective evidence of what works and has desirable impact. It is an extension of evidence-based medicine to all areas of public policy. This notion emphasizes use of scientifically rigorous studies.

Another notion of Evidence-Based Policy making emanates from the 1999 'Modernizing Government Paper' by the UK Government. It proposed to end the ideological led-based decision making for policy making. The paper set an agenda to 'produce policies that really deal with problems, that are forward-looking and shaped by evidence rather than a response to short-term pressures; that tackle causes NOT symptoms'.

Other notions place emphasizes on constrains imposed by budgets and alternative choices in policy making. So for instance, the Pew-MacArthur Results First Initiative suggest that Governments can reduce wasteful spending, expand innovative programmes and strengthen accountability through evidence-based policy making. The key components are:

- Programme assessment to determine effectiveness of public programmes.
- Budget development based on funding priorities
- Implementation oversight to ensure faithfulness to intended design
- Outcome monitoring – measuring and reporting outcome data against results
- Targeted evaluation that is rigorous.

## **Parliamentary Knowledge-Base**

Long tenure as MP and stability of parliamentary practice are solid Parliamentary knowledge-base. Ghana's Parliament still have individuals who have been MPs since 1993 consistently. We have sustained parliamentary democracy in Ghana since 1993. Surely Parliament of Ghana can do a lot of introspection on how they have fared in the light of Evidence-Based Policy Making. What challenges have been encountered by Parliament in their effort to aspire to the ideals of Evidence-Based Policy Making? Let me randomly mention the following policy initiatives for us to put on our new lens of Evidence-Based Policy Making and view them from conceptualization to implementation and draw up our own cost-benefit maps and matrices:

- The Single-Spine Pay Policy and its implications on our wage bill

- Savannah Accelerated Development Authority (SADA) implementation versus Act 805
- Now discarded One-Time Premium for the National Health Insurance Scheme (NHIS)
- The Plant Breeders' Bill (PBB)
- New Regulations on Driving License requiring computer test in an illiterate population
- Biofuels programme in Ghana cutting down and replacing our economic Shea trees

### **Critique and Concerns with Evidence-Informed Policy Making**

1. Evidence versus propaganda: Sometimes propaganda messages can become the basis for policy or programme interventions. This is common with humanitarian policies and interventions in Africa. Take for instance the view of Africa in 'DIRE NEED'. Bob Geldof and his team of BAND AID 30 is convincing most unsuspecting youth in Europe that in Africa people do not even know it is Christmas! They appeal to Europeans that 'There's a world outside your window and it's a world of dread and fear'! How can EBOLA in four countries, out of the 54 countries in Africa, make the entire continent one of 'DOOM'?
2. Context and History can make a difference. The idea of transplanting models for the simple reason that they have worked elsewhere is preposterous. In fact context should even influence the framing of policy! Chinua Achebe says 'English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings'. In Germany, 'Don't put your head out on a moving train' is enough warning for compliance! In Italy, it has to be 'If you put your head out in a moving train, you will die' to ensure compliance! Unless history and context is taken into consideration in policy making and framing, there will always arise what I call 'Blaming the Victim'!
3. Inaction and Apologetic: Too much emphasis on evidence-informed decision making can lead to inaction and diffidence. Common sense is good sense in some matters requiring action! What further evidence do Ghanaian Policy-makers need to act on corruption when the manifestations are all over the place and biting the poor very hard and mercilessly
4. Whose evidence counts? Evidence is not neutral all the time. They are simply 'Hunters' tales' that ignore the evidence of the animals that were stalked. There is also sometimes the evidence based on the 'fallacy of Economics' like GDP growth and single-digit inflation! These can lead to policy decisions that ignore the real plight of the poor and indigents.
5. Autopsy Report: Policy response too late as a result of procrastination is what I call 'Autopsy Report'! One calls to mind the admissions now being made by the protagonists themselves of the earlier Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP) on so-called Developing Countries. How can

they undo the harm and the disgraceful failings of those policies now? Safe for the admonition that the 'memory of the dead is a warning to the living'!

6. Risk of one-size fit all prescriptions. Evidence-Based Policy Making has the tendency to have fixed prescriptions for all.
7. Risk of repudiating indigenous knowledge: Some framing of Evidence-Based Policy making focus much on scientific knowledge. This risk consciously or unconsciously repudiating 'native sense'! Marcus Garvey spoke such wisdom years ago, when he said that 'a people without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots'. Not all knowledge or evidence needs to fit the parochial conditions of scientific knowledge in its entirety.
8. Endless Policy Experimentation: Evidence-Based Policy making risk being endless policy experimentation. Policy experimentation is good sometimes but over reliance can reduce emerging democracies to 'Guinea-pigs of policy making'.

## Conclusion

I conclude on the note that Evidence-Based Policy Making has already received much impetus from the glory of its proposition and the rigour of intellectual support. However, it should not be taken hook, line and sinker in its application. Existing notions have to be unpacked and interpreted in local context. Moreover, the sense of urgency may necessitate short-term and provisional policy decision-making to save lives. Whatever policy choices we make need to be in full awareness and respect the common good at all times.

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<sup>ii</sup> **GINKS** - The Ghana Information Network for Knowledge Sharing. It is a network of individuals and organizations sharing information and knowledge that facilitates capacity building for ICT use and evidence-informed policy making in Ghana.