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Open Parliaments in Africa: Case studies of Ghana, Kenya, South Africa, and the Pan-African Parliament

A Review

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December 2025

Knowles. I. (2025). Open Parliaments in Africa: Case studies of Ghana, Kenya, South Africa, and the Pan-African Parliament. Accountability Working Paper.

A Review by Sammy Obeng

Prepared for the TWP Community of Practice Newsletter

When Idah and I met on the sidelines of the 2025 Open Government Partnership (OGP) Global Summit in Spain in October, we reflected on the interesting coincidence of her Accountability Working Paper focusing on the three countries that came tops in the latest edition of the Open Parliament Index (OPI) – South Africa, Ghana and Kenya - even before the OPI results was released. As leader of the team that worked on OPI, I was eager to read her paper. When I did, I was impressed with the relevance and originality of the work, the clarity with which she laid out her arguments, and the volume of information that she provided on the open parliament ecosystems in the three countries, including the Pan-African Parliament (PAP), which was one of the case studies used.

Looking at Ghana, Kenya, South Africa, and the PAP, the Working Paper, which was published under the auspices of the Accountability Research Center based in the School of International Service at American University, explores whether open parliament reforms have resulted in institutional uptake and shifts in power dynamics, and where they have fallen short. It asks whether civic voice leads to reform, not only through the formal adoption of transparency and participation measures within parliamentary processes, but also through their active use by legislators, committees, and other political actors to inform decisions and shape action. The paper further considers whether openness can alter the power balance between branches of government and promote greater accountability by first getting parliaments to listen and respond to citizens, and then compelling the Executive to listen and respond to parliaments.

The Paper defines Open Parliaments as those "that make legislative work transparent, participatory, and accountable, fostering a two-way relationship between citizens and their representatives". It points to advances made since the release of the Declaration of Parliamentary Openness in 2012, which has helped to make the concept a buzzword in many legislatures across Africa. Yet the question of "what difference this concept has brought in practice" has remained underexplored, and it is the focus of this Working Paper. It queries whether open parliaments can add up to more than dashboards, consultations, scorecards, and the creation of illusion of participation and harness meaningful change in actual practice. In other words, while not ends in and of themselves, can dashboards, consultations and scorecards be pathways towards bringing about the change we desire?

The author seeks to address three sets of questions: i) who uses open parliament civic tech innovations and tools, and who is excluded; ii) whether civic tech innovations and tools lead to

changes in institutional behaviour, or they merely create new rituals of visibility; and iii) whether openness can move beyond information disclosure to catalyse meaningful accountability in the contexts of legislative weakness.

Choosing two bicameral parliaments in Eastern and Southern Africa (Kenya and South Africa), a unicameral parliament in West Africa (Ghana), and the Continent's 'legislative branch' – the PAP –, made for an interesting blend, albeit tilted towards parliaments that are considered to be doing well in the area of openness. Idah pegged these four case studies along a six-part comparative framework, while she analysed the PAP through a continental lens. In all cases, the author arranged her arguments under the following sub-themes:

- Context and reform trajectory, situating open parliament reforms within each country's constitutional and political evolution, and tracing legacies of executive dominance, transitions to multiparty democracy, donor influence, and regional norm uptake;
- Key actors and civic tech innovations, distinguishing between performative gestures and participatory co-creation;
- Uptake and use of these civic tech innovations, focusing on their frequency, durability and influence over just visibility or reach;
- Inclusion of women, youth, and marginalised groups, keeping an eye on who gains access to decision-making spaces and whose voices are legitimised or sidelined by institutional gatekeepers;
- Power and accountability dynamics, diagnosing the structural forces that enable or constrain reform, including among other things executive control, Westminster-style limits, partisan committee capture, and shrinking civic space; and
- Outcomes and constraints, assessing whether reforms generate institutional learning, behavioural change, and/or improved oversight.

Demonstrating a good understanding of the contexts of the various case studies, Idah appears to have leveraged her broad contacts-base in these countries and institutions, as well as a wide range of reference materials, to to buttress the various arguments she develops in the Paper. She begins her reflections on each country with a caption that is intended to sum up her propositions on them. For example, she summarises the Ghana case as reflection of "civic intermediaries in a constrained reform space", while describing Kenya as the nexus "between innovation and executive dominance". Her synthesis for South Africa is "civic engagement and parliamentary paralysis in a transparent State", while the caption for the PAP is "regionalism, legislative representation, and the limits of integration in Africa".

Idah uses two models extensively throughout the Paper to assess the country cases. The first is Jonathan Fox's "low accountability trap" proposition as espoused in his 2015 "Social Accountability: What Does the Evidence Really Say?" manuscript, where he describes situations where opportunities for participation exist (voice), but there is a lack of enforcement mechanisms (teeth). The second model is the National Democratic Institute (NDI)'s Listen-Respond-Report model, which advocates for clear, repeatable processes that connect citizen inputs to institutional decisions and back again as part of a feedback loop. The author argues that, for all four cases, visible gains in "voice" and procedural openness have been achieved, but whether these are consistently matched by institutional 'teeth' or accountability responsiveness remains an open question. This is a conclusion I largely agree with, based on my own work at Parliamentary Network Africa and our working knowledge of all four Parliaments.

Idah's assessment through the lens of the NDI model reflects on Ghana as performing relatively well in the Listen phase, while the Respond and Report phases are "far less developed". She describes Kenya as excelling in the Listen phase too, but argies that "action in the Respond and Report phases remains limited". In South Africa, the Listen phase is well developed, but the Respond and Report phases remain "weakly institutionalized". Idah reminds readers of NDI's warning that feedback loops that do not close risk deepening civic fatigue and mistrust.

In the case of Ghana, the paper finds that open parliament reforms, championed by an impressive collaboration between civil society and Parliament - through its current Speaker and some reformist Members of Parliament (MPs) on their OGP Caucus - produce visibility of parliamentary proceedings, civic tech platforms, and participatory channels. On the other hand, the mechanisms to translate citizen input into sustained legislative action remains fragile, is inconsistently applied, and is often dependent on individual champions rather than on systemic integration. This is a situation that highlights the tensions between expanding civic voice and uneven institutional responsiveness. Idah concludes that, while Ghana's open parliament reforms have delivered visible gains in transparency and civic engagement, the leap from access to accountability remains incomplete. The challenge ahead is to close compliance gaps, guard against elite rollback, broaden inclusive access, and invest in the institutional and civic capacity needed for sustained progress.

In the case of Kenya, the paper suggests that open parliament reforms illustrate the tensions between constitutional ambition and political constraint, as well as those between a high-functioning civic tech ecosystem and a low-responsiveness institutional environment. Idah, who is a citizen of Kenya, minced no words in positing that the country's "parliamentary autonomy remains contingent on political friction, assertive in moments of intra-coalition tension, compliant under executive–legislative alignment". Although she concedes that Kenya's open parliament agenda has delivered visible gains in transparency and civic voice, she argues that institutional accountability remains constrained by entrenched power asymmetries, symbolic compliance, and weak enforcement. Throwing in frosty

parliament-citizens relations that peaked during the 2024 protests against Parliament and its Members, the author takes a deep dive into the role that the tech ecosystem played in bringing citizens together on those protest, and uses that to illustrate how Kenya's civic tech ecosystem has become an "instrument of political struggle and not mere tech fix". Idah suggests that these developments reflect growing civic expectations that Parliament should not only be seen, but heard too, while it should also be responsive. The challenge now is not openness for its own sake, but traction: institutionalising co-governance, redistributing decision-making authority, and building accountability ecosystems resilient to executive domination. For Parliament to meet the demands of a restless civic generation, it must move beyond procedural openness toward durable responsiveness.

Similarly, Idah suggests that South Africa's open parliament trajectory reveals a core paradox: one of the continent's strongest transparency infrastructures coexisting with systemic parliamentary weakness. Although the open parliament agenda has delivered robust gains in transparency progress in institutional accountability has been considerably more limited and uneven. While on paper South Africa's transparency infrastructure is among the most developed in the continent, entrenched political dynamics, bureaucratic inertia, and asymmetrical power relations have done much to constrain openness in practice. So the main challenge in South Africa is not transparency, but traction: can Parliament in fact respond, recalibrate, and re-earn public trust? According to the author, this requires redistributing oversight power, protecting dissent, institutionalising civic feedback, and embedding inclusion not as a supplement, but as a foundation.

As for the PAP, Idah argues that the institution sits uneasily between aspiration and enforcement, between giving voice and succumbing to institutional inertia. The author posits that, although the PAP could remain trapped in its current status of advisory marginality, it could also emerge as a turning point in Africa's search for participatory regionalism. Hence, she advocates that for the open parliament agenda to deepen across the continent, the PAP's symbolic legitimacy must be more than safeguarded - it must be reclaimed, repurposed, and reimagined from below as part of Africa's broader struggle to embed accountability in integration efforts.

The paper concludes with 19 recommendations for strengthening openness in African Parliaments. These have been arranged under six categories of what national parliaments, the PAP, OGP Support Unit, civil society organisations, private sector actors, and international development partners can do in this regard.

Across cases, two conclusions stand out in particular: Transparency has clearly expanded, and in some moments these tools have enabled civic actors to expose wrongdoing or shape reforms. At the same time, responsiveness is uneven, and executive dominance, partisan discipline, and structural exclusion continue to blunt accountability. This analysis and Idah's conclusions are in line with the results of the Open Parliament Index that I have been involved in across 33 countries in Africa. As she has put it, "open parliament in Africa is less a finished reform than a contested process: progress is

real but partial, and the challenge ahead is to link visibility to responsiveness so that citizens are not only seen and heard but also heeded".

About the author

Sammy is the founding Executive Director of Parliamentary Network Africa (PNAfrica), leading the Organisation's work across the Continent. He has coordinated the planning and execution of programs for legislators, parliamentary staff, civil society organisations, as well as parliamentary journalists in more than 30 countries in Africa and beyond. He previously served as Editor-in-Chief of the Parliamentary Newspaper, and worked with the Parliament of Ghana and Development Gateway International before joining PNAfrica. Recently, Sammy was nominated as Co-chair of Ghana's Open Parliament Steering Committee.

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The TWP CoP is funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office and hosted by the International Development Department at University of Birmingham.

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