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Introduction

Central to the new democratic South Africa are policy makers who have responsibility for facilitating a legislative environment conducive to bring about the needed change within our health system.


Interviews were carried out with twelve legislators from both provincial and national parliaments. Legislators interviewed were from the Portfolio Committee on Health of the National Assembly, the Select Committees on Social Services and Finance of the National Council of Provinces (NCOP) and Provincial Health Standing Committees. This chapter reflects the voices of these legislators and describes some of their experiences, beliefs and frustrations in both their professional and personal lives. Councillors in Local Government Health structures were not included.



General



There is an overwhelming feeling, from all those interviewed, of excitement and appreciation of the new democratic order. Often acknowledging that they are part of a country in transition, they emphasise their role as elected representatives, accountable to and responsible for their constituencies. This is underpinned by the desire to have direct communication with their constituents and to play a central role in improving their lives. Throughout the interviews parliamentarians make reference to the responsibilities of their position resulting from serving constituencies who depend upon them.



Legislators are under no illusions as to the challenging as well as the rewarding nature of their work. They have a strong commitment to the realisation of the vision of quality health care for all, coupled with awareness of their key oversight functions in achieving this. However, the enormous and daunting demands coupled with the slow process of implementation often lead to frustrations.



Legislators seem to give priority to their parliamentary work, frequently serving on more than one committee. The demands appear to affect every aspect of their lives including family life. However their dedication and commitment go some way to making up for any personal sacrifice required by their legislative duties.

Lack of support, especially research support, negatively affects their work.



The Task

Health Policies

All interviewees believed that their central task is the improvement of health care for all, which involves not just the delivery of health care, but delivering quality care.

The most known and popular policies mentioned were Primary Health Care (PHC) and the District Health System (DHS). Free health services to children and pregnant mothers, home based care, training, and production and distribution of personnel were all mentioned in this context.

Other policies mentioned were the National Drug Policy, TB, maternal and child health, school nutrition and issues of equity, looking at standardisation of conditions of service and increasing the number of black doctors. Interestingly, AIDS policies were not mentioned by most members.



Specific Roles and Responsibilities

Committee meetings, public hearings, constituency meetings and party work appear to comprise the bulk of parliamentarians work. Their main responsibilities include:

- ◆ Scrutinising legislation
- ◆ Liaising with stakeholders
- ◆ Oversight work with the Department of Health and setting up meetings with other departments
- ◆ Monitoring site visits to local clinics and hospitals
- ◆ Holding public hearings
- ◆ Overseeing committee meetings and agendas
- ◆ Passing and facilitating legislation
- ◆ Attending scheduled and caucus meetings
- ◆ Attending public functions and ceremonies
- ◆ Carrying out party assignments.





Demands and Priorities

Legislators' workload brings huge pressures, demands and constraints on their lives. Being based in Cape Town is, in itself, a difficulty for many:

"There are all sorts of concerns and problems and many a time you are here in Cape Town and your constituency demands that you be there attend to this, that or other."

Time pressures were common for all respondents:

"Saturdays and Sundays we work but that is the nature of the job."

Although it was felt to be a positive thing that members of democratically elected bodies are respected, actually being a member of the legislature creates its own demands:


"I think there's a weakness of the legislature ... people see you as the answer to their problems. But sometimes they see you as a cause of their problems. Take this thing in our country where there is so much joblessness, you know people will always say, you must be able to solve this problem of jobs, or in fact you are the creators of joblessness, the privatisation debate for instance is the case in point."

Space for a private life is curtailed and all agreed that it had been affected adversely:

"One doesn't really have a personal life, that is the bottom line and its not just for me but I think it goes for everybody ... even if you have a family it becomes difficult to spend time with the family because of all the demands that are made by your constituency, by this institution, by your organisation ... its quite demanding."

"... You leave (home) early, spend time in meetings, you come and go away so the family life is being affected. Even with yourself you don't have time to take time off to yourself and relax because there's so much shuttling from one place to the other."

With endless demands on their time, it is, for many, hard to find ways of prioritising the various tasks. There appears to be a fine balance between responding to work that is 'urgent' and getting on with tasks 'according to need'.





The Need for Improvements

A number of members are clear that shortcomings are not just due to the huge demands on their time. Greater effectiveness, it was thought, would be possible with a stronger commitment from members, as well as from some legislatures increasing the number of members serving:

“Sometimes I feel that we are not effective because we are just too few ... You know our legislature size is thirty, out of the thirty take out fourteen people who are your executive, so you are left with sixteen and those sixteen about eight of them are chairpersons of the committees, the other one is a whip and so on ... the work is just too hard and overwhelming.”

There is also a need for capacity building for support staff, especially with regard to IT and research skills.



Parliamentary Structures and Culture

The Committees

Given that the government structures at all levels are still in transition, there appear to have been relatively few changes of committee membership, with only one drastic committee reshuffling where the entire seven out of eight members were changed. In the majority of provinces very minor changes affecting no more than two members have taken place in the last twelve months.

Members often serve on more than one committee. Membership represents all political parties in both national and provincial committees. In the provinces they range from nine to thirteen members, while there are seventeen members of the National Assembly Health Portfolio Committee. Parliamentary committees are accountable to communities through constituency offices.



Transition/Transformation

There are still signs of a system in transition as roles and links with other structures within government are being defined. There are currently no formal linkages between local government and other legislative spheres of government, and only a minority of interviewees specifically mentioned councillors or local government as a legislative structure with which they connect.

“There is no formal interaction with councillors, so there is no link besides ... through organised local government.”^a

^a SA Local Government Association (SALGA) is the structure referred to as the ‘organised local government’.





"We are supposed to link up with local government but at this point there is no formal mechanism for actually linking up with local government and that goes for the whole of the NCOP."

A more permanent base as the seat of the legislature, in the case of KwaZulu-Natal (Pietermaritzburg or Ulundi) and Cape Town or Pretoria at national level, would improve efficiency. Two capitals seem to create huge practical problems for members.



Culture of the legislatures

The legislative environment, for all those interviewed, is one which is considered to be both open and discursive. Tensions are apparent but given that majority and minority parties are represented in committees, tensions based on political ideology are, perhaps, inevitable.

This tension was not only acknowledged, it was felt to be healthy and an inherent part of multi-party interaction by some. For one respondent it was even described as 'creative'.

In contrast, some interviewees believe that the tension just does not exist:



"Well, I have not discovered it, especially not in my area, it might be in other people's area ... I work very well with my counterparts in the area ..."

Being a member of the majority party might also mean that it remains unnoticed:



"I belong to the majority party so probably that is why I don't feel the constraint, a member of the opposition party would answer that question better than me ..."

Tension was felt by some to be more a question of lack of respect for others' beliefs and a lack of trust:



"Just lack of respect and undermining one another."

For the majority, such tensions were not thought to affect their work to any great extent:

"Personally for me it doesn't affect my work."

However a minority disagreed:



"They do affect your work because they will delay doing things because to agree one issue takes so much time, which also delays implementing decisions or policies, you waste so much time fighting over an issue because I see it differently to you. At the end it affects progress in the work."



Respondents were more specific, however, on the question of race. A general issue, that is running below the surface of the corridors of power, it is not always manifest and it seems there is a reluctance to acknowledge and confront it.

"It is there but it is like an underlying thing because of the sensitivity of it – very few would acknowledge that."



"From my own observation, race issue is very subtle."

"No, a race issue here I don't think its much ... And between members of parliament, I don't think there is any of the racial things, I don't know, probably it is covert."

The extent to which it was thought to play a part varied considerably among respondents.



"As a member of the legislature I don't think we have a very serious problem in terms of race, we have gone a long way."

"In the committee that I work with the race thing is a fact because black people were not exposed ... were not trained to become economists so this is a predominantly white type of thing as a field."



Although, in some cases the reaction reflects the individual experience of a person, rather than the environment, race was felt to affect progress and slow down the pace of taking and implementing decisions.

Rarely, however, are language or tribalism cited as reasons for tension. The language policy under the Constitution is very clear, with everyone being free to express themselves in any language of their choice, with translation being provided. However, English, partly for convenience, tends to be used more than other language.



The role of women and their needs within the legislature

While it was acknowledged by most of those interviewed that great progress had been made in accommodating women both in ideology and in the day-to-day reality, it appears that some issues remain unresolved:

"It has improved - almost everything had to be adjusted to accommodate women ... and women in parliament are making their views heard very clearly."



For some, it was felt that women's needs were moving towards the centre of the agenda.

For others the legislature was merely a microcosm of broader society where women are seen as 'caretakers of the family'. This automatically presented a

dilemma for female parliamentarians based in Cape Town when their families were in another province.

“There is nothing that the legislature is doing for women, in terms of caring for them and children.”

“I don’t think it really does (anything) at all ... no creche, you have to hunt to find the ladies’ toilet.”

Accountability and the Media

Communication and Community Involvement

Communication with constituents is of paramount importance to those interviewed. Not only do parliamentarians have a statutory responsibility to those who give them a mandate, they themselves believe this relationship to be fundamental in terms of their responsibilities. A number of those interviewed report directly to ratepayer bodies or branch committees, but a more direct form of communication is visiting constituencies or carrying out site visits.

“We go on site visits, members are delegated ... what we do is what we call provincial visits, where delegates are tasked or deployed to the various provinces ...”

Public hearings are a further and seemingly common form of informing the public about pending legislation as well as a means for eliciting public opinion.

“You must remember that when we do public hearings it involves communities, public hearings mean (we) go into communities (and) tell them that this is what the minister is planning and are you satisfied with it, and they would make their input.”

“We have public hearings from time to time ... and we then go and talk to the different stakeholders and the communities.”

The use of parliamentary publications was cited as a means of communication but more common was the use of the electronic media. Some national parliamentary discussions and debates are captured live on TV, in particular the NCOP.

“We just recently had a programme on SABC whereby a chairperson, on behalf of the committee, will go and give a report on the committee and the public can ask questions on the spot.”



However, for some, a feeling of frustration remains. Although there is a commitment and an enthusiasm to be part of their constituents' reality, they are separated from it by virtue of their position.

The Media



The majority of the respondents regard the media as playing only a limited role in setting the agenda for meetings. One parliamentarian estimated that the media influence on their agenda is no more than ten percent of the discussion time:

"The press plays a small role ..."

"... It doesn't play a role ... but journalists attend our meetings from time to time, and write reports based on those meetings."



Some had great reservations with respect to the media playing any role in setting the health committee's agenda:

"We don't let media set the agenda for us ..."

Reports in the media are normally referred to the relevant departments or MECs for further discussion or explanation.

The role of the media was seen as being both positive and negative. For some, their role is important in highlighting issues which had not previously come to their attention.



"Media helps raise sensitive issues and sometimes we take up the matter with the respective MEC."

For others, there is a belief that reporting is often biased and keeping the media in check is seen as an important responsibility for both chairpersons and legislative committees in order to protect the public:



"Some of their media statements are distorted, ... we are vigilant on what the media has to write so that the public is not misinformed."

A number of legislators do make use of the media as a channel for communicating with the public.





The Parliamentary Experience

Becoming a Legislator

The majority of legislators interviewed were elected by their parties to be members of parliament. Therefore being a parliamentarian is seen as part of the 'struggle', inspired by a background of 'activism' and the desire to play a role in creating a better life for all South Africans. But interestingly when it comes to leaving, only one acknowledged that it would be a party decision and that it would be the party who would 're-deploy' them.



Skills, Competencies and Experience

The history of South Africa and its previous years of turbulence resulted in parliamentarians' training and work experience being exceptionally rich and varied.

Formal qualifications mentioned include:

- ◆ Degree in social work
- ◆ Teaching
- ◆ Photography diploma
- ◆ Trained/professional nurse
- ◆ Nurse educator/trainer
- ◆ Qualified general nurse and midwifery
- ◆ Public health nurse with Masters in Primary Health Education.



There is a need for greater training opportunities, particularly for those who feel their training is inadequate as a result of years of political struggle. Specifically, there is a need for a greater understanding of the law, in terms of reading and interpretation, use of legal terminology and understanding the legal framework for legislation. Others cited economics and finance as an area for further education. Many feel the need for greater IT training including the use of internet and e-mail.



Commitment, Visions and Dreams

There appears to be a shared and collective dream of equity and the delivery of services for all:

"The delivery of health services and effective and efficient delivery, that was my vision and my dream getting into the legislature to ensure that we really achieve the optimal health for the people of the province, that is my vision to see that every citizen or person ... gets that optimal health."





“... To see firstly doing away with discrimination that was there in the health services, the inequities that were there. And secondly what goes on with integration of the services which was very fragmented and very unequal in all aspects.”



“At the end of the day to build a non-racial non-sexist society, where everybody has access to services not just a few privileged people, that was basically our vision I mean in a nutshell, not looking at particular areas, that goes throughout the spectrum. And basically just to better the lives of people and the majority of people are black people in this country – one was hoping you could work that out between people.”

As part of the dream and their commitment an expression like ‘to go to bed each day knowing I had made a difference’, just captures it all.

Challenges and Rewards



Being a legislator at provincial or national level evidently has its challenges, rewards and frustrations. There is widespread acknowledgement that the challenges are daunting.

“When we go to the rural areas we are exposed to the worst conditions so that has actually given me the experience of getting to know how far we still have to go in terms of health service delivery.”



“I think there is a huge backlog in terms of providing services in general to our people ... and that actually won't be an overnight exercise ... those are the challenges that many of us face, and that is the challenge of actually delivering the quality of service to people not just delivering, it must also be a quality service.”

There are tremendous challenges in the actual process of passing legislation, assessing whether it meets objectives, following it up, ensuring it is being implemented, reviewing what constraints there are, dealing with these and ensuring the legislation reaches its objectives.

And equally frustrating:

“The most negative experience for me is that you find that sometimes the legislature does not have the power over the executive, all you can do is recommend what they must do ... the best experience is working with people, in the legislature you tend to work with and help communities more than defending your own department ...”



“The legislature is very challenging the main problem is that, sometimes you feel that your administration is not doing what you really want them to do.”





The rewards:

“Well, I mean it puts one in touch with actual reality which in some instances one is not aware of, you know when you visit constituencies in your area you are told about the bad conditions in the informal settlements or in some housing settlements and so on. But when you actually go there you appreciate the problem more and it drives you to actually speed up the process of changing the lives of people. And that has been rewarding for me personally to be able to do something not necessarily just for people also with people.”



Personal gains and rewards:

“It has enhanced my knowledge in the political sphere, and also in health – I have had the opportunity of growing through legislation that we have been doing. I not only saw legislation on paper but I have been part of it.”



“I want to use the knowledge that I have gained here, to upgrade my dissertation ... parliament is a very nice place to work in, for me it has been a very good experience a very good opportunity which I think it just comes once in a lifetime to be able to serve one’s people ... not only that, it has also led me to grow in my knowledge and experience.”

Conclusion



This chapter encompasses the views of only a small number of parliamentarians. Clearly evident is their commitment to their work, driven by a strong vision and enthusiasm. But these are dampened by a lack of the necessary infrastructure, inadequate support staff, and time constraints. Legislators face endless demands not only on their time but also from what is expected of them by the public. Time constraints are accentuated by the dual demands of legislative and constituency duties often coupled with arduous travel schedules. The ability to focus and specialise is also compromised by the fact that many legislators are serving on more than one committee.



Legislators are working in a state of transition both within the legislature and outside, where there is a great expectation for tangible change to take place. This environment serves to highlight both the rewards and frustrations of their job. The reward of contributing to improved service provision on the one hand is sometimes felt to be offset by anxiety and frustrations stemming from delays in the implementation process.



Party ideology serves both to intensify debates but can also hamper urgent progress. While remnants of the apartheid legacy can still be felt, issues such as race, religion and gender seem to play a relatively small role in tensions experienced within the legislative environment.



Despite having a wealth of varied experiences and skills, there is a pressing need for parliamentarians to have the opportunity to further their legal and IT skills. However, the overwhelming sentiment is that regardless of the undoubtable challenges parliamentarians remain committed to 'making a difference'.

