



Behind The Scenes:  
**HOW MPS'  
RESEARCH ASSISTANTS  
SURVIVE IN THE JOB**

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A short report on the work conditions of  
MPs' Research Assistants

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Odekro PMO Foundation is a non-partisan, non-profit, Parliamentary monitoring organisation based in Tema, Ghana. Odekro was founded in 2015.

Odekro's vision is to inform and empower Ghanaian citizens on the work of Parliament and other institutions of government, through the analysis of open data.

The mission of Odekro is to promote transparency, accountability and good democratic governance through citizen action and engagement with the Parliament of Ghana and other government agencies.

Odekro's work enables scrutiny of government officials in a political climate in which it is a challenge for citizens to access public information and reach objective assessments of governance. Despite Ghana's reputation as a beacon of democracy in West Africa, the national political climate discourages citizen engagement with Parliament, and the pursuit of accountability.

Our work pushes the frontiers of Ghana's democracy beyond electioneering into institution-building and citizen participation.

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# Summary

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This brief report looks at the work conditions of MPs' Research Assistants in Ghana, in light of the fact that there is no globally or locally accepted model for regulating MPs' office and the activities that pertain therein including how MPs should treat their Research Assistants. A survey instrument was administered under anonymity to 26 MPs' Research Assistants (RAs) randomly selected from the entire cohort of RAs. The selected RAs had a month to complete the questionnaire and submit it. The questionnaire was administered in the first week of March 2018 and received by March 31, 2018.

The majority of the responses suggest that RAs are not working under satisfactory, safe and healthy work conditions, contrary to Article 24(1) of the 1992 Constitution.

# Introduction

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Unlike developed countries, it appears most Parliaments within the African region have not really given much thought to legitimizing and institutionalizing the role of Research Assistants. In Uganda's Parliament of 449 MPs, each MP has to act as his or her own personal assistant, research assistant and in some cases, own driver.<sup>1</sup> In Ghana, most MPs bring in Research Assistants (RAs) without any job description for the role whilst orientation programs for RAs are almost always botched or not followed through. This has been recurring throughout parliaments of the Fourth Republic, except in 2017 when the Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) conducted a research training programme for MPs' Research Assistants to improve their effectiveness.

There was an occasion in Parliament when the former Deputy Minister for the Interior, Captain Nkrabeah Effah-Dartey (Rtd), who served under Kufuor administration had to remind the House about the urgency of RAs upon noticing the ill-preparedness of MPs to contribute to debates on the floor.<sup>2</sup> This was subsequently underscored by other MPs.<sup>3</sup> But eventually when the leadership of Parliament made some provision for Research Assistants to support MPs in the discharge of their duties, corruption reared its ugly head. In 2007, the leadership of the Fourth Parliament budgeted GHS20,000 for 10 Research Assistants (RAs) to be employed to support MPs for the First Session. Whilst eight (8) Research Assistants were employed at a cost of GHS16,000, on paper, 10 people were employed at a cost of GHS20,000.<sup>4</sup>

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1 Simeo Nsubuga, Kassanda County South MP

2 Capt. Nkrabeah Effah-Dartey, Former Dep. Minister for the Interior, Hansard 5th July, 2005 "Every Member here would want to have a research assistant who would organize data, information for him so that when we are speaking on the floor of the House, our contributions can be informed views and opinions.

3 Stephen Amoanor Kwao (Former MP, NDC, Upper Manya). Hansard 6th June, 2006 "Members of Parliament need the services of research assistants, secretaries and personal assistants to help them in the discharge of official duties.

4 P.C Appiah-Ofori, Former MP, Asikuma/Odoben/Brakwa, Hansard 31 January, 2007

# Why MPs Need Research Assistants

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The primary function of Parliament is to make laws (Article 93(2) of 1992 Constitution). This includes consideration, review and passage of Bills, legislative, executive and constitutional instruments. Chapter 13 of the Constitution also vests in Parliament the power to protect the public purse and to ensure judicious spending of taxes. Parliament also has the added responsibility to oversee what the Executive does to ensure that decisions of the President and his (or her) cabinet are synchronous with parliamentary authorizations. Additionally, MPs have to represent the diverse interests of their constituents; a function that requires juggling constituent engagement with their core Parliamentary obligations.

The work of an MP is therefore very demanding and intellectually intense. To perform their law making, executive oversight and representative functions effectively, they need Research Assistants (RAs). Typically RAs help MPs<sup>1</sup>:

- Analyze, evaluate and interpret data to ensure the MP is accurately informed on key issues;
- Develop and maintain current knowledge of Bills, Motions, Legislation, Hansard, Debates;
- Ensure the MP is briefed on potential questions and motions to be put to the House;
- Work with the constituency team to respond to casework from constituents;
- Work with the constituency media to ensure the MP is briefed on relevant issues and his/her parliamentary work is conveyed back to the constituency;
- Undertake research on a range of local constituency and national issues;
- Provide generalist administrative support;
- Respond to routine correspondence and enquiries

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1 culled from a job description of a Parliamentary Assistant in the UK Parliament

# Work Conditions of MPS' Research Assistants

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The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) clearly states that “Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favorable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment”. This is further buttressed by Article 24(1) of the 1992 Constitution that “everyone has the right to work under satisfactory, safe and healthy conditions...”

In 2014, Ghana introduced the National Employment Policy (NEP) to create gainful and decent employment opportunities for the growing labour force to improve their living conditions and contribute to economic growth and national development within the framework of equity, fairness, security and dignity. The NEP is in compliance with the International Labour Convention on Employment Policy (number 122, 1964) that required member states to “declare and pursue, as a major goal, an active policy designed to promote full, productive and freely chosen employment”.

Parliament makes laws and policies that affect every aspect of our national life. By virtue of their legislative mandate, MPs are expected to regard highly the laws they make and to not break them. In the words of the Speaker of the Seventh Parliament, Professor Michael Oquaye, “a lawmaker cannot be a lawbreaker”. The issue of work conditions for Research Assistants has been on the table of the leadership of Parliament for quite some time now, specifically the Parliamentary Service Board (PSB).

The Parliamentary Service was established in 1993 by the Parliamentary Service Act (Act 460) pursuant to Article 124 of the 1992 Constitution. Its governing Board (PSB) comprises six (6) MPs with the Speaker of Parliament as the Chairperson. The Head of the Service is the Clerk to Parliament who is assisted by three (3) Deputies, Heads of Departments, Unit Heads and other specialized officer. The Board is primarily responsible for promoting the welfare of MPs and staff of the Service.

To have a thorough understanding of the work conditions of MPs' Research Assistants, a survey instrument was administered under anonymity to 26 MPs' Research Assistants (RAs) who were randomly selected from the entire cohort of RAs. The selected RAs had a month to complete the questionnaire and submit it. The questionnaire was administered in the first week of March 2018 and received by March 31, 2018.

During preliminary discussions with some Research Assistants (RAs), some respondents pointed to the Parliamentary Service Board (PSB) as the reason why a proposed budget for Research Assistants was not approved. In the absence of an approved budget, Parliament decided to increase the compensation of MPs so that they could take care of their RAs. Even with this, some MPs have dealt capriciously with their RAs, especially the men MPs according to respondents. There has been a sudden firing of some RAs only to be immediately replaced by personnel, who from all indications as claimed by some respondents, lacked basic competence to function in the capacity as Research Assistant.

# Survey Findings

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1. Nearly all respondents (n=25; 96.2%) were between 25-30 years. Only one respondent was between 31-40 years. 17 (65.4%) of the respondents were men whilst nine (34.6%) were women. 19 (73.1%) respondents had completed either undergraduate or Diploma levels of education; 3 (11.5%) were post-graduate/PhD student; one had completed his PhD; one respondent had reached HND level. Most of the respondents (n=19; 73.1%) started working as Research Assistants to MPs through national service; 2 (7.7%) through political party referrals. The others started work through a normal job application, community engagements and other means.
2. 16 of the 19 respondents who started work through national service said that they were no longer working as National Service Personnel. Two respondents were unsure about their status, that is, whether they were still working as National Service Personnel or full-time employees;
3. Though all respondents had been working for the MPs for over 3 years, the majority of them (n=23;88.5%) said they had not signed any employment contract their MPs;
4. 11 (42.3%) respondents said they earned a monthly income between GHS600-GHS1,000; eight (30.8%) respondents earned between GHS300-GHS500 and two respondents earn from GHS2000 and above. Also, two respondents worked on pro bono basis whilst one respondent earned random allowances;
5. 23 (88.5%) respondents said their MPs did not and had never paid their SSNIT contributions;
6. 18 respondents (69.2%) were dissatisfied with their work. Only 3 said they were satisfied with their job.

# Concluding Remarks

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Parliament can consider putting up a proper structure to recruit Research Assistants for MPs. It is important to acknowledge that the Parliamentary Service Board has already begun some work in this respect. Currently to qualify as an MPs' Research Assistant, one must have a minimum of a second degree and the Speaker has directed that appointment letters should only be issued to Research Assistants who meet this requirement. This baseline requirement might be extreme as there are experienced Research Assistants who might not meet the requirement but have been extremely helpful in enhancing the effectiveness of their MPs and even their electoral fortunes. A degree or a postgraduate certificate in the specialized fields of economics, history, law, politics and international relations, public administration and social policy may increase one's chances at securing the demanding role of an MP's research assistant. But these qualifications are insufficient to make one fit for and effective in the role. The Parliaments of advanced democracies (such as the UK Parliament) rate work experience and commitment to politics higher than all other considerations including academic qualifications for the job. One advertised vacancy says: the basic task is to do whatever behind-the-scenes work is necessary to enable Members to represent their constituents.

The Parliamentary Service Board can consider setting up competitive education grants for experienced Research Assistants who fall short of the current minimum requirement.

A standardized job description, employment contract, terms of engagement and working conditions for Research Assistants will also be helpful as pertains in other parliaments across the world.



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