



THE ROLE OF PARLIAMENTARY PORTFOLIO AND THEMATIC COMMITTEES

- Mines and Energy
- Higher Education, Science and Technology
- Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare
- Finance and Economic Planning
- Communication Technology, Postal and Courier Services
- Justice, Legal Affairs, and Parliamentary Affairs
- Health and Child Care
- Foreign Affairs
- Women Affairs Gender and Community Development
- Lands, Agriculture, Mechanisation and Irrigation
- Local Government, Rural and Urban Development
- Industry and Commerce
- Media, Information and Broadcasting Services
- Small and Medium Enterprises and Cooperative Development
- Youth, Indigenisation and Economic Empowerment
- Education, Sport, Arts and Culture

There is also a post-audit Public Accounts Committee which is housed in the National Assembly.



Thematic Committees

There are six Senate Thematic Committees as follows–

- HIV/AIDS
- Millennium Development Goals
- Indigenisation and Empowerment
- Peace and Security
- Gender and Development
- Human Rights

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Picture Source: The Mail & Guardian/6 September 2013



What are they and what is their purpose?

Parliamentary Portfolio and Thematic Committees are small specialist committees established by Parliament to investigate specific issues and report back to the larger forum. They operate on the basis of delegated authority from their respective Houses of Parliament. These committees enable Parliament to operate more effectively by giving members access to more detailed information. Most of the work of Parliament is carried out by and generated in Portfolio and Thematic Committees.

The purpose of such committees is to perform functions which the Houses of Parliament may well not be suited to perform owing to their size. Such functions include carrying out inquiries, hearing witnesses, sifting evidence, discussing matters in detail and formulating reasoned conclusions. This kind of professional and non-partisan work is more effectively carried out by small groups of Members of Parliament (MPs). Parliament, through its committee system, monitors all government policies, administration, expenditures and programmes to ensure efficient use and allocation of national resources.



What powers do they have?

The powers of parliamentary committees are derived from Parliamentary Standing Order 159. Committees are given power by the Constitution and Standing Orders to consider and deal with all bills and statutory instruments. They monitor, investigate, inquire into and make recommendations relating to any aspect of the legislative programme, budget, policy or any other matter they may consider relevant to the government department falling within the category of affairs assigned to it. They also consider or deal with all international treaties, conventions and agreements relevant to them, which are from time to time negotiated, entered into or agreed upon. The committees also have the power "to summon any person to appear before them to give evidence on oath or affirmation and to produce any documents required by it". Committees can hold public meetings and call and question witnesses. They can also receive representation or explanations from interested parties. Committees should be reactive by attending to issues that arise from time to time and proactive by attending to issues not anticipated, as well as initiating inquiries.



What are the benefits of parliamentary committees?

Parliamentary committees help create a strong and active committee system, which is an asset in any functioning constitutional democracy. A comprehensive system of parliamentary committees provides greater accountability by making the policy and administrative functions of government more open and accountable. This is done by giving the people more and better access to parliamentary processes such as public outreaches and by ensuring that MPs have more involvement in and oversight of decision making by holding the government to account. Committees enhance participatory and representative democracy. They provide a forum for the investigation of matters of public importance and give parliamentarians the opportunity to enhance their knowledge of such issues.

- Committees provide Parliament with a greater opportunity to scrutinise the actions of the executive and the public service through "public scrutiny committees" such as public accounts committees, public works committees and estimates committees.

- Committees permit Parliament to conduct detailed investigations of topics that Parliament as a whole would otherwise never be able to properly consider. Committees, by calling for submissions, holding public hearings, and tabling reports are able to encourage debate on issues and allow members of the public to express their opinion in a direct manner. Committees are able to access expert advice from staff and consultants as well as submissions from stakeholders, which would not normally be available to individual MPs.
- Committees afford an opportunity to utilise and develop the skills of MPs. On the one hand, committees allow Parliament to utilise MPs with particular skills and knowledge. On the other hand, MPs who serve on committees are likely to develop skills and gain knowledge of issues which they may not otherwise obtain.
- Committees promote consensus building in the decision making process as they are bi-partisan in nature.
- A further advantage of committees is that several of them can operate at the same time, which enables better scrutiny of several issues at the same time.



Can the public take part in their work?

Yes. The Constitution compels Parliament and its committees to involve the public in various parliamentary processes. Members of the public can attend committee meetings and public hearings of their choice, as long as these are not closed meetings. The public can also submit written submissions on matters of interest to them.



What are the current Portfolio Committees of Parliament?

There are 19 Portfolio Committees which are fully operational in Parliament and these are:

- Defence and Home Affairs
- Transport and Infrastructure Development
- Environment, Water, Tourism and Hospitality Industry