

A Science Council engagement model with the South African Parliament

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Abstract

The practice-based submission outlines a model of engagement that has been developed over approximately ten years at the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) in South Africa (SA). The objective is to articulate an approach of communicating science with South African politicians and policy makers via a dedicated science council/parliamentary office and to share how various opportunities are created and utilised. In order to demonstrate CSIR value during legislative debate and other engagements, and in order to ensure sustained/increased parliamentary funding, it is becoming increasingly important to communicate to Parliament how the CSIR contributes to and enables delivery on national priorities. The Parliamentary Liaison office (PLO) facilitates dual communication opportunities between scientists and politicians. The depth of learning gleaned from both Parliament and the CSIR over a sustained period and the close working relationships developed with internal and external stakeholders enabled the development of different levels of engagement opportunities. Though interrelated, four broad categories where the PLO supports colleagues with parliamentary engagements have been identified. They are: (1) communicating legislative and policy developments at government department and parliamentary level, (2) communicating accountability and oversight activity, (3) arranging pro-active engagements with key parliamentary portfolio committees (4) engaging parliamentary- and portfolio committee support staff. The PLO also supports colleagues by relaying parliamentary information. This information is customised and is differentiated for recipient groups within the CSIR - namely for the Executive, the Operating Units and

Centres and the Interest Group layer. Each layer, in turn also has a customised communications approach.

Introduction

This practice-based perspective presents a model of engagement and communication between a science council (CSIR) and Parliament in South Africa. The goal is to share a focussed approach to engaging/communicating science between South African politicians and members of a science council via a dedicated parliamentary office. The layers of dual communication and a description of how various opportunities are created and utilised, will be briefly outlined. The point is also made that science communication is ultimately central to all these engagements. Due to length restrictions, it is intended that further detail will be communicated in the presentation and that examples will be shared.

Context – the CSIR and communicating its mandate-driven role

The Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) is one of the leading scientific and technology research, development and implementation organisations in South Africa and the African continent. Constituted by an Act of Parliament in 1945 as a science council, the CSIR undertakes directed and multidisciplinary research, technological innovation as well as industrial and scientific development to improve the quality of life of the country's people. The generation and application of knowledge reside at the core of the CSIR. This takes place in domains such as biosciences; the built environment; defence, peace, safety and security; materials science and manufacturing; and natural resources and the environment. **The CSIR is thus able to engage on/communicate science broadly and at multiple levels to parliament and every opportunity is taken to bear this in mind, and to do so as effectively as possible.**

The CSIR is cognizant of its mandate driven role and being recognized within the system as the provider of technology solutions and an enabler of service delivery. In order to achieve this, the CSIR supports stakeholder engagement models that facilitate agility and that progress to strategic relationships, where appropriate. It therefore engages

Parliament and the National Executive as key stakeholders, and endeavours to communicate its role as optimally as possible.

The CSIR Parliamentary Office – CSIR/Parliament Communication Nexus

To the end of engaging a very important stakeholder and communicating at every available opportunity, the CSIR commits to a dedicated Parliamentary Office (PO), based near parliament. The PO, which has been in existence for almost twenty years, has evolved over the last ten years into a dynamic communication model which supports the CSIR in achieving its mandate and strategic objectives by establishing and maintaining long term relationships with key portfolios at Parliament and National Executive. The PO forms part of the Strategic Alliances and Communications executive portfolio and is part of a strategically co-ordinated team effort tasked with the identification, initiation and maintenance of strategic stakeholder engagement initiatives.

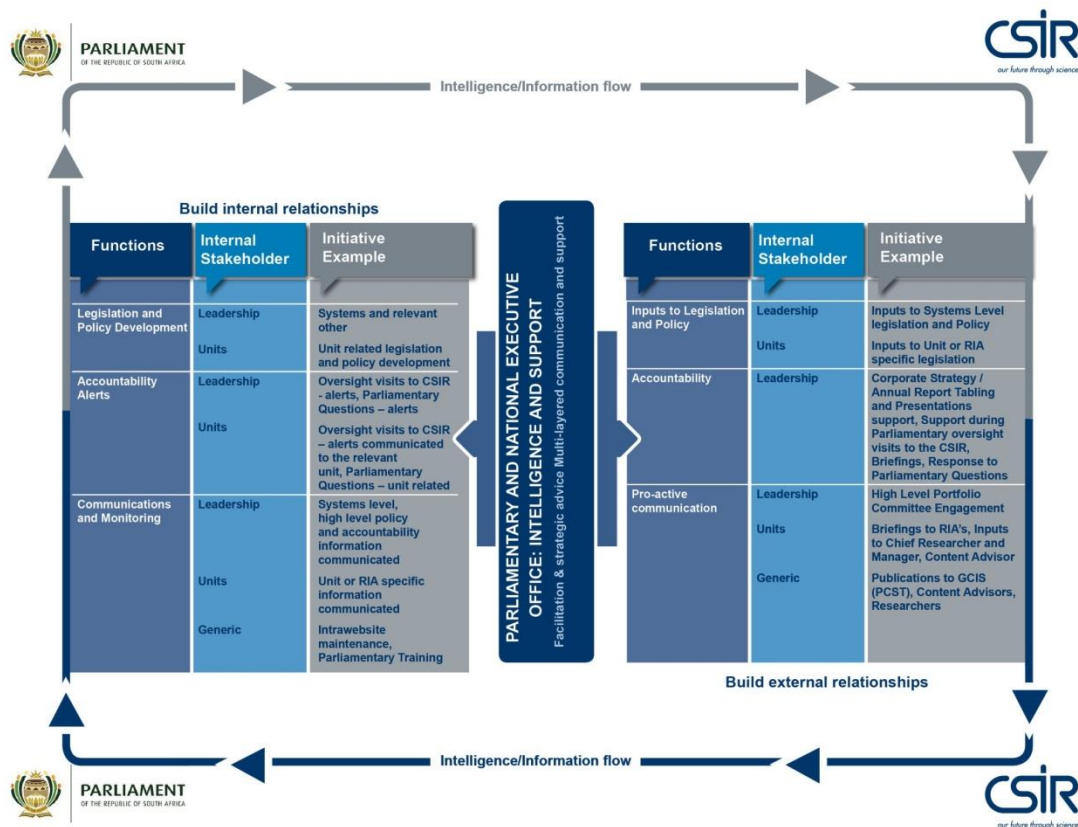
Supporting Parliament through high level CSIR advisory input and enabling understanding of certain key S&T issues, members of Parliament (MP's) are possibly in a better position to effect their oversight role and provide strategic guidance to the Executive and organs of state. Facilitating optimal communication also allows scientists to benefit from an enhanced understanding of parliament - the space where their 'outputs' are accounted for - and an understanding of the work of the legislator, namely – legislation, holding government departments and organs of state 'accountable', and oversight of public spending and government priorities. The PO plays a central role in facilitating this exchange.

Modus Operandi - The CSIR's Parliamentary Engagement Model

The Parliamentary office (PO) facilitates dual communication opportunities between CSIR Executives/scientists and politicians. The depth of learning gleaned from both Parliament and the CSIR (as organisations) over a sustained period and the close working relationships developed with internal and external stakeholders enabled the development of different levels of engagement opportunities and contributed to various outputs and successes.

The key role of the PO is to provide thought leadership, intelligence and information support on Parliament and the National Executive as stakeholder grouping and to pro-actively communicate legislative and policy matters to our internal stakeholders. It also facilitates engagement, provides support and multi-layered communication to colleagues at all layers of the organisation. High level alerts on relevant legislative and policy developments are to be provided at the earliest opportunity. Communicating the relevant/ 'filtered' aspects from parliamentary interactions and documents and the broad areas of differentiated communication within the CSIR, are what constitute the daily operations of the PO.

A graphic depiction of the model is outlined in Figure 1 below:



Dual Communication flow – essential to building internal and external relationships

Fundamental to the engagement, is the dual communication flow and engagement/ exchanges between the two 'organisations':

Information flow from Parliament to CSIR

The PO facilitates **timeous**, information flow from Parliament to CSIR in the following broad, though interrelated categories:

- Legislation and Policy Development,
- Accountability Alerts and
- Focussed Monitoring and Communications

Legislation and Policy Development:

Relevant information is (internally) communicated on legislative and policy developments to the leadership of the organisation and specialists in the Operating Units OUs/ Research Impact Areas (RIAs). The leadership layer is specifically alerted to system (National System of Innovation) related issues e.g. Science and Technology Laws Amendment Bill (2014) and e.g. developments in the National Science Review (2013). The CSIR would then be in a position to comment at national government departmental level and/or make a submission at a Public Hearing at Parliament. OU heads and senior representatives would be informed of legislative developments pertaining to them and also engage as above.

Accountability Alerts

These alerts from parliament are specifically aimed at the Leadership layer with the intent of giving the CSIR a headstart for planning and preparation. Alerts include possible oversight visits by Portfolio Committees (PC) to CSIR and alerts to parliamentary questions of relevance to CSIR. The same applies to OUs when the PC is one other than PC on S&T, namely Human Settlements, Energy, Co-operative Governance and Traditional Affairs, etc. (Note: PCs (groupings of MPs) hold national government departments accountable and have oversight over them and their reporting entities; they correspond with the national government departments e.g. PC on Science and Technology has oversight over the Department of Science and Technology).

Communications and Monitoring

In addition to the above, all pertinent matters parliament are communicated to three demarcated layers in the organisation:

Leadership is informed as early as possible of dates for annual plan presentations to PC, tabling of annual plans and annual reports, etc as well as on pertinent information from Cabinet Statements including approval of senior appointments.

OUs are informed of all matters pertaining to their units e.g. questions in parliament, presentations to PCs, policy updates, senior appointments, etc

At a **Generic level**, important information is organised on an intrawebsite for access by all colleagues. Orientation to/training on the website is offered at regular intervals to support staff of senior colleagues.

The communication **from parliament to CSIR** is very detailed. The above intends to provide a high-level overview. Much detail and discussion around communication/ engagement customisation lies below the surface. What is key is that **strong and positive internal relationships** are built through communicating the relevant, **customised** content timeously. This, as well as an improved understanding of the organisation, is an important requirement in dealing with the demands of parliamentary communication.

Information flow from CSIR to Parliament

These inputs are those originating at the CSIR and often, though not always, are in response to parliamentary information that has been communicated to CSIR.

Inputs to Legislation and Policy

Leadership and Units, for example make inputs to public hearings on legislation at a systems and departmental level to the relevant PCs.

Accountability

Leadership accounts to PCs and Select Committees (SCs) on annual plans, annual reports, provide the submissions for tablings by Minister. This is primarily done by actual presentations at the Parliamentary precinct and written submissions and responses to Parliamentary Questions.

Pro-active communication

This engagement takes place at all three layers within the CSIR. Leadership will deal with pro-active high level engagements with PCs, OUs will engage with relevant PCs on key issues (water, energy, housing, etc) as well as provide relevant information to parliamentary- content advisors (who advise and support PCs) and researchers (support staff to PCs) e.g. presentations and briefing notes. At a generic level, CSIR publications (CSIR general brochure, Sciencescope), career information and briefing notes are distributed through the Government Communications Information Systems (GCIS) office at Parliament.

These ongoing engagements originating from and communicated by CSIR **build quality external relationships** and a positive view of the CSIR. This then creates opportunities for further quality engagement and also occasionally positions the CSIR as a trusted ‘advisor’ on pertinent scientific matters.

Key challenges and opportunities

Key challenge / opportunity	Response
Opportunities	
Track record of managing key stakeholders in government and parliament	Continued engagement and consolidation of gains, leverage positive relationships
Alignment of CSIR organisational and Parliamentary /Executive processes/timing and planning frameworks.	Pro-active approach to gleaning early knowledge of planning processes/frameworks and to synchronise where possible
Frequent changes in political environment and mobility of politicians (particularly pertinent in 2014)	Agility in the stakeholder management setting (strategic input) and developing the appropriate response and strategy in preparation (planned) for change or when the time arises (unplanned)
National Executive as stakeholder grouping integrated into the portfolio	Apply generic/ and portfolio stakeholder management principles to build the portfolio; work from positions of strength
Part of an integrated portfolio – competitive advantage	More efficient co-ordination, optimisation of resources and commitment of moving from transactional to strategic at team level
Challenges	
CSIR not necessarily viewed as prime and trusted advisor on relevant scientific and technical issues by some Portfolio Committees (PCs)	Promote deeper understanding of and confidence in CSIR's knowledge base and capabilities. Promote and facilitate more presentations and tours for specific PCs.
CSIR senior staff do not necessarily see the value of making inputs into	Undertake internal education emphasising that departmental and parliamentary

parliamentary processes (e.g. comments on legislation) – budgetary constraints	processes are fundamentally different but are of equal value.
MPs are not necessarily aware of the critical role CSIR plays in delivery through support of and in collaboration with government departments and other public entities	Structured programme of engagement with the Content Advisors and proactive engagement with the PCs.
MPs have unrealistic or inappropriate expectations as to what CSIR can deliver.	Promote an understanding of the CSIR's role as adding research value and technical support to the public entities tasked with on-the-ground service delivery. Manage the expectations of the stakeholder while still growing the relationship.
Lack of alignment between CSIR processes and partner and client processes and planning frameworks	Continued discussions/negotiations with key players
Frequent changes in political environment and mobility of senior officials	Development of relationships at multiple levels

Finally

Within the political space, the portfolio is cognizant of the constant changes that are effected in this environment, For example, the National Elections takes place on 7 May 2014. The outcome of the elections will effect new dynamics, leadership and approaches in the political landscape. Although these are important to understand, the role of this portfolio is/has always been effected through communication of CSIR's mandate driven role and the organisations's contribution within the South African context.

For the PO, changes are likely to manifest in areas such as changes in Portfolio Committee leadership and overall membership signifying a change in the types of issues and concerns addressed and possibly in terms of priorities of committee business.

Changes in Cabinet, Ministers and Deputy Ministers are also inevitable and with these will be concomitant changes to (support and senior) staff in ministerial and deputy ministerial offices. Again, this will necessitate the building and maintaining of new relationships with key staff members.

An external challenge, as always, as an outcome of this engagement is the expectations that some MPs may have of what (unrelated) products and services CSIR can deliver in their constituencies or to other entities. This underlines the importance of building an understanding and an appreciation of the CSIR as a research-based institution and its role in providing critical scientific and technical support to a range of agencies tasked with delivering services and infrastructure.

References

<http://www.csir.co.za/>