Embracing innovative policy analysis to inspire the public to force politicians and political parties to increase accountability and promote limited government policy proposals in Ghana.
OVERVIEW

In Ghana, the cost, practicality, and viability of political candidates’ policy platforms has long been ignored. Instead, candidates have been elected based on unrealistic promises, ethnicity, or attractiveness, rather than on the soundness and feasibility of their campaign promises.

In order to develop a structure to vet the cost and practicality of campaign promises and empower voters to make more informed decisions, the IMANI Center for Policy and Education (IMANI), an Atlas Network partner think tank based in Accra, Ghana, performed the following measures to make information available to voters, garner attention from the media, attract public interest, and put pressure on candidates to justify their campaign platforms:

1. Develop a resource that is valuable to the media, but that media outlets cannot generate independently because of a lack of time, skills, or resources.

2. Provide research that is novel, broadly appealing, offers the public needed information, shines a light evenly on all candidates and political parties, and can be updated regularly to garner a constant stream of attention.

3. Work directly with politicians and political parties to offer constructive public policy solutions after pointing out issues and problems with their campaign proposals.

4. Illustrate the outrageous nature of unrealistic campaign proposals in a way that builds a public outcry against big-government policy proposals and creates allies among the media, social media users, voters, and the public at large.

Because these steps encouraged policy proposals that were more reasonable, less expensive, and better for the future of Ghana, IMANI was one of the six finalists for the prestigious Templeton Freedom Award in 2017.

ABOUT IMANI

Based in Accra, Ghana, IMANI Center for Policy and Education stimulates public discussion of the promotion of economic prosperity rights, the rule of law, open and unconditional trade, free speech, and decentralization of power and resources. IMANI educates individuals on the value of free markets, entrepreneurship, and human initiative. It continues to affect public policy and improve Ghana’s economy through forums, conferences, and published articles.

The think tank has carved a niche in Ghana’s policy environment for releasing objective, independent analysis and critiques on public policy issues using tried and tested techniques across different disciplines.

IMANI has been consistently ranked among the top 10 most influential policy think tanks in Africa for the past five years, and was named the most influential think tank in Ghana and the second most influential think tank in Sub-Saharan Africa. The Lauder Institute of the University of Pennsylvania recognized IMANI as having the “the Most Innovative Policy Ideas/Proposals” of all think tanks in Africa.
Unrealistic campaign promises are a staple in elections across the world, and nowhere has that been truer than in Ghana—until now. In 2016, IMANI launched its 2016 IMANIFesto Campaign, which estimated the costs and rated the feasibility of all campaign promises. For the first time, this forced the country’s political parties to justify many of their unrealistic plans to the public. Each IMANIFesto publication was followed by a formal press conference to discuss the organization’s findings with the political parties vying for elections, which resulted in these parties reforming their promises. Supplementing this initiative was near-constant attention in the national media and IMANI’s savvy use of social media, which stirred the public debate by reaching over 2 million Facebook users and nearly 1 million Twitter users from August to November of 2016.

“IMANIFesto became a reference point that benchmarked political promises along quantifiable metrics that the common man could relate to and is now the blueprint for political communication along the lines of policy promises,” said Franklin Cudjoe, founding president and CEO of IMANI.

IMANI tried to rein in the rampant promise making of those campaigning for public office in Ghana by introducing a three-pronged quantitative assessment framework allowing Ghanaian citizens to determine the viability of each campaign promise made by political parties. Those three prongs were financial viability of each promise, its potential impact on private sector development, and overall policy implications of its implementation.

Another example was when the New Patriotic Party (NPP) promised “one district, one factory,” a pledge to build one factory in each of Ghana’s 216 administrative districts. IMANI found that such a promise had no measurable indicators and argued that the only feasible way to accomplish such a task was through a public-private partnership model, but NPP doubled down on its official response to IMANI’s criticism.

IMANI also determined that several candidates’ policy proposals would cost more than the entire GDP of the country of Ghana.

IMANIFesto stirred public debate and pressured political parties to reform several of their previously unrealistic promises. Near-constant attention in the national media and IMANI’s savvy use of social media made IMANIFesto a household name in Ghana. The project reminded the people of Ghana that the power to hold the government accountable is in their hands.
In order to determine the cost and viability of campaign promises, IMANI developed a quantitative assessment framework that determines the “quality” of a campaign promise, notably its financial viability, its impact on private sector development, and the overall policy implications of implementing such a promise.

Evidence from available political parties' manifestos in Ghana show that campaign promises are oftentimes vague. This presents two major difficulties; (1) it makes it hard to hold politicians accountable, and (2) voters have less information on what they are actually voting for.

To eliminate this problem in the Ghanaian political context, IMANI identified all the promises made by the six leading political parties as of August 2016, and sorted them into three categories: quantifiable, semi-quantifiable, and non-quantifiable.

In doing so, IMANI shed light on how well political parties were doing in terms of making financially measurable promises.

A total of 247 promises were identified, out of which 18 were quantifiable, 43 were semi-quantifiable, and 186 were non-quantifiable. So, the data show that the vast majority of the promises that the parties presented were not assessable and are “empty promises.”

The specifics about the analytical framework IMANI used to sort and categorize campaign proposals are outlined in a publication titled “2016
IMANI Pre-election Report: Critical Analysis of Political Promises in Ghana.”

As part of the project, IMANI published four major research reports and six election briefs. The research reports include:

- Whoever Wants to Win Election Must Pay Attention (A 2016 Pre-Election Report)
- Aligning the Promises of Political Parties with the Expectations of the Ghanaian Voter (The Results of a 2016 Pre-Election Survey)
- Final Output-based Assessment of the 2012 NDC Manifesto (A Review of One Party’s 2012 Campaign Platform)

The release of each major IMANIifesto report was followed by an open forum or media conference that targeted political parties and their candidates, the executive arm of government, government agencies, and members of parliament. In all, IMANI organized four open forums which recorded high levels of participation.

The project received extensive media coverage that contributed to influencing the promises made by many political parties. The four events were covered live by three of the most popular radio stations in the country. The country’s most influential media houses including the state-owned Ghana Broadcasting Corporation and Daily Graphic featured in-depth reports on IMANIifesto.

“IMANIifesto became a reference point that benchmarked political promises along quantifiable metrics that the common man could relate to and is now the blueprint for political communication along the lines of policy promises,”

- FRANKLIN CUDJOE
  FOUNDING PRESIDENT AND CEO OF IMANI
OUTCOMES

POLITICAL

IMANIFesto forced the country’s political parties to attempt to justify many of their unrealistic campaign promises to the public by determining and publicizing the financial viability of each promise, its potential impact on private sector development, and overall policy implications of its implementation.

More specifically, when Ghana’s Finance Minister presented the government’s Budget Statement and Economic Policy on March 2, 2017, he announced a number of policy measures which occurred directly because of issues exposed by IMANIFesto. These reforms include the abolishment of a 17.5 percent VAT on financial services, a 17.5 percent VAT on selected imported medicines, a 17.5 percent VAT on domestic airline tickets, a 5 percent VAT on real estate sales, and a 1 percent Special Import Levy. The government also reduced the corporate income tax from 25 percent to 20 percent.

SOCIAL

Through effective communication skills and the ability to work with public-spirited media and civil society, IMANI is shaping national, regional, and global agenda in order to close the “citizen participation gap” in the governance process. IMANIFesto’s success has even inspired other think tanks in West Africa to visit IMANI in hopes of replicating the project in their respective countries.

ORGANIZATIONAL

IMANIFesto’s successful online communications greatly expanded IMANI’s social media reach. Additionally, the think tank’s budget more than doubled, and the number of employees increased from three to nine as a result of the IMANIFesto project.

IMANI has also reinforced its status as one of the leading think tanks in Africa, making it easier to work with legislators, fundraise, and impact public policy decisions.
OBSTACLES & FACTORS FOR SUCCESS

Factor for Success: **TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE PUBLIC’S FRUSTRATION ABOUT CORRUPTION AND WASTEFUL SPENDING**

Much of IMANIFesto’s success is rooted in the public’s disenchantment with the government’s frequent hollow promises about expanding social welfare programs without any consideration about how such a project would be financed.

*Take Away*

- A good think tank project is amplified when it solves or gives voice to public frustration.

Factor for Success: **EXPLOIT THE SKEPTICAL NATURE OF SOCIAL MEDIA**

IMANI used social media to stir up public debate on the feasibility of campaign promises in Ghana. When many political parties took to social media to defend their parties’ promises, IMANI provided voters with information that questioned each promise’s feasibility. Between August 2016 and November of the same year, IMANIFesto reached more than 2 million Facebook users and close to 1 million Twitter users.

*Take Away*

- Providing social media users with information to challenging statements by political parties broadened public engagement regarding public policy issues.
Obstacle: LACK OF INTERACTION BETWEEN THINK TANKS AND CANDIDATES

The absence of a properly structured platform by which think tanks can engage politicians to influence their thought process proved a challenge for the success of the project.

Take Away

- Each major IMANIFesto publication was followed by a formal engagement forum to discuss the findings from the organization’s research with the political parties vying for election. Engagement forums with the parties helped change those parties campaign promises.

Obstacle: BUILDING CREDIBILITY NEEDED TO BECOME THE LEADING SOURCE ABOUT CAMPAIGN PROPOSALS IS DIFFICULT

It is challenging to develop trust from voters and the media – especially since both groups are used to being lied to about policy issues and campaign promises.

Take Away

- IMANI managed to gain trust and credibility for the IMANIFesto project because the think tank’s other projects are carefully chosen, not driven by business interests or a particular political party. In addition, the work published by IMANI is rigorously researched in order to prevent errors and retractions.

- IMANIFesto relied on a technology that helped to collect and analyze data in a much faster and more reliable way.
IMANIFesto transformed the 2016 Parliamentary Election into one based not on political promises but on policy issues, and its engagement of millions of Ghanaians reminded the people of Ghana that the power to hold their government accountable is in their own hands. In the end, IMANIFesto was a huge success: it forced Ghanaian politicians to defend or reform many of their unrealistic campaign promises.

The impact of the IMANIFesto project is undeniable. It provided a country easy-to-consume information about the issues of the election and the viability of the various political promises from each party and, according to Kenneth Ashigbey (former editor-in-chief and managing director of the Daily Graphic), it functioned as “a barometer of legitimacy for the masses.” This allowed the 2016 election to transcend its usual partisan, religious, and tribal lines. IMANI’s work also forced party leaders to revise their party manifestos to increase their feasibility and thus their attractiveness to the electorate. IMANI is even working with think tanks in Nigeria to duplicate this work for upcoming Nigerian elections. The campaign on the whole had a dual effect: first, it educated an electorate that previously lacked access to information about the various campaign promises of political parties that preyed upon such a lack of access, and second, it induced those parties to revise their poorly formulated platforms or risk being punished by voters at the ballot box.
FOR FURTHER READING:

- Imani Center for Policy and Education. http://www.imaniafrica.org/about/

To read more Think Tank Impact case studies, visit:
ATLASNETWORK.ORG/CASE-STUDIES