



International Conference on Benchmarking and Self-Assessment for Democratic Parliaments

2-4 March 2010

Orientation

The World Bank Institute (WBI), in cooperation with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), hosted the International Conference on Benchmarking and Self-Assessment for Democratic Parliaments on March 2-4, 2010 in Paris.

The goal of the conference was to discuss existing legislative standards and to potentially agree on a common set to be applied internationally, taking into consideration the individuality of Parliaments. Such standards can encourage parliamentary self-assessment and can guide parliamentary development practitioners and donors in designing more appropriate support programmes.

The conference opened with the official launch of the online AGORA Portal for Parliamentary Development, a multilateral initiative that seeks to consolidate knowledge and learning for parliamentarians, donors, practitioners, academics, civil society and media, among others. AGORA will also play an important role in promoting parliamentary institutions as potential drivers of change in development policies.

Assessment Framework for Democratic Parliaments

Throughout the conference, participants reiterated the key role of Parliaments as law-makers, scrutinizers of the executive and in providing information to citizens. Strengthening Parliaments is central to the mission of human development and in expanding people's choices in all realms of life, according to Olav Kjørven, Assistant Secretary-General and Director of the Bureau for Development Policy, UNDP. Development often culminates in political decision making as issues such as access to health or education are brought up in Parliament. In an increasingly interconnected world facing challenges such as financial, food and climate crises, supporting development means supporting parliamentary development.

Parliamentary organisations such as the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA), the Assemblée Parlementaire de la Francophonie (APF) and the International Parliamentary Union (IPU) presented their tools for benchmarking and self-assessment. Dr. William F. Shija, Secretary-General, CPA, explained that part of the rationale for CPA's *Recommended Benchmarks for Asia, India and South-East Asia Region's Democratic Legislatures* came from the fact that Parliaments are institutions often scrutinised by the outside world, for example, by the media. Parliaments have to take every opportunity to become more efficient and assessment benchmarks can help. However, it must be recognised that there is strength in diversity and that diversity can be a stimulus for innovation.

Canadian Senator and Chair of the APF, Pierre de Bané, agreed in his presentation that it would be difficult to produce a text in which everyone can recognise himself. What is important is to filter out

issues that are essential across the globe, such as transparency in elections, ethics, etc., and to create common standards around them.

During the discussion period, conference participants raised issues such as whether the standards considered the inclusion of minority groups in the policy-making process; who would be the judge of the assessment process; and whether it is not more important to enhance parliamentary capacity in developing countries before judging their performance. They also questioned the sustainability of such evaluation programmes.

Despite the many challenges of such an assessment process, participants generally agreed that it was necessary. Panelists indicated that a parliamentary reform process can also be an opportunity for capacity building by bringing to light areas of performance that are lacking. By diffusing results of benchmarking to the public, civil society can also act as a judge in the process.

Most participants agreed on a plural approach to benchmarks and that some competitive dynamics can be advantageous to the process. However, there remain several 'clusters of communality', according to Scott Hubli, Director of Governance Programs, National Democratic Institute (NDI). These are linked to:

- institutional independence,
- procedural fairness and democratic legitimacy,
- basic parliamentary organisation, and
- core legislative and oversight functions.

Participants considered that despite commonalities, one has to distinguish between the evaluation of developing and developed country standards and that there is a need for a judge of standards, other than Parliaments themselves.

National Case Studies- Pakistan and Rwanda

Hon. Faisal Karim Kundi, Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly of Pakistan, presented the results of a case study organised by the Pakistani Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency (PILDAT) and the National Assembly of Pakistan using the IPU toolkit. The exercise was generally regarded as useful, but there must be an improvement process following the recommendations.

The pilot project in Rwanda, presented by Greg Power, Director of Global Partners and Associates, showed limitations such as few definitive quantitative outcomes, limited scope for cross-country comparisons and a dependence of the quality of results on the willingness of Parliamentarians to assess themselves.

Case studies show that capacity of Parliamentarians to carry out their tasks (legislative scrutiny, initiation of legislation, etc.) does play into the results of assessment, as does political will. Another important point raised was that, generally, there is a tendency to seek rule-based solutions.

Participants discussed the difficulty in quantifying aspects of parliamentary work such as time allocation on different tasks. Additionally, it was noted that these results should be disseminated to a wider audience of Parliamentarians and other actors.

What role for donors

Benchmarking and self-assessment of Parliaments directly implicates the donor community, therefore, it is important that donor support for parliamentary strengthening is based on a shared international consensus of what constitutes a democratic Parliament.

Different legislative standards can present a challenge for donors. According to Keith Schulz, Legislative Strengthening Advisor at the US Agency for International Development (USAID), there should be one single set of standards. This would facilitate buy-in from donors for legislative strengthening programmes. He also considers it important to publically release assessment results to encourage transparency and accountability.

Thomas Huyghebaert, Advisor for Democracy Support at the European Commission, reported that the results of the EC's review of its Parliamentary Support Programme have been rather mixed. He stated that among the 30 countries reviewed, there had been evidence of minimalistic and ad-hoc support. He suggested a three-phase process for assessment: formal framework and practice, indication of parliamentary performance and research into the underlying causes explaining performance. He encouraged Parliaments seeking donor support to undergo self-assessment.

Rasheed Draman, Director for Africa Programmes at the Parliamentary Centre, insisted that diversity of Parliaments has to be taken into account when establishing legislative standards. He raised the point that, especially in Africa, parliamentary support is donor-driven and donors sometimes have a tendency to fragment the field when it comes to parliamentary assistance. He indicated that ownership, capacity alignment and priority harmonisation are prerequisites for parliamentary strengthening.

PNoWB and Parliamentary Strengthening

Strong parliaments with increased capacity can better carry out their tasks as law-makers and scrutinizers of the executive, which is an important requirement in promoting development. PNoWB has, therefore, a direct interest in parliamentary strengthening and can play a central role in diffusing information on legislative standards and encouraging self-assessment in the Parliaments of its members.

AGORA, the new online portal, could potentially become the prime source for knowledge sharing on parliamentary development. PNoWB can also carry out research into best practices of parliamentary self-assessment and promote them to its members across the globe.



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