

PARLIAMENTARY STRENGTHENING

Parliament as a cornerstone of democracy

Parliaments are a core institution in any democratic society. Citizens elect their members of parliament to represent and translate their needs and aspirations in national policy and decision making. While free and fair elections are seen as the beacon of democracy, what happens between elections, i.e. elected representatives contributing to the formulation of equitable and sustainable policy, is vital for delivering on the intrinsic values of a democracy.

The importance of Parliaments is traditionally based on the three core functions they perform:

- **Representation:** the elected body reflects the society in its diversity, allowing different groups and communities to have a voice in all the issues that are translated into policy;
- **Lawmaking:** parliaments can introduce Bills and have the power to amend or reject government drafted Bills;
- **Oversight:** MPs monitor and hold the Executive accountable for its actions and push for the implementation of policies.

While international actors have put a lot of effort into enhancing the powers of Parliaments to perform these three main functions, in many instances a formal increase of these powers has not translated into better performance in practice. MPs and parliamentary staff often lack the specialized expertise needed for the formulation and scrutiny of legislation and public budgets. In addition, entrenched incentives structures may lead MPs to focus on their representative role, limiting their contribution to legislation and oversight of the executive.

The inability of Parliaments to meet the high expectations that come with their election make them increasingly mistrusted by the public, especially in developing countries. This, in turn, has made international partners shift their attention to supporting other stakeholders, such as civil society actors. As a result, a relatively small amount of resources is invested in parliamentary strengthening.

FACTS & FIGURES

Data from 2017, worldwide, IPU¹



Approximately 330m EUR is spent annually on parliamentary strengthening*



Average levels of public trust in Parliaments in Sub-Sahara Africa are lower than 50%**



A legislature with the ability to investigate the government is able to impose more constraints on the executive, helping to reduce corruption***

*Parliamentary Strengthening, House of Commons International Development Committee, 2015

**Global Mapping and Analysis of Parliamentary Strengthening, Democracy Reporting International, 2015

***Legislative Powers and Executive

A partner for international actors

Constitutionally, Parliaments are the only actor able to engage the government on every aspect of its mandate. For precisely this reason, Parliaments are an important partner in contributing to the goals of international development assistance programmes:

- Parliaments can serve as a platform for dialogue, playing a crucial role in **the resolution of conflicts and in peacebuilding**, especially in fragile and post-conflict contexts, where an arena of exchange is needed for an effective reconciliation process;
- Parliaments can ensure a more **sustainable governance of natural resources, equitable distribution of revenues and (gender) inclusive sector policies**, because they are made up of a diverse number of actors;
- Parliaments are able to influence the priorities of the government's expenditure through budget amendments and accountability oversight, thus playing a central role in **public financial management**.
- As influential opinion leaders, MPs can make an important contribution to socially difficult questions such as **female genital mutilation (FGM), climate change and corruption**.

Strengthening a Parliament: how does it work?

International actors have identified some best practices that make parliamentary strengthening more effective.

COMMON PRINCIPLES FOR SUPPORT TO PARLIAMENTS

Inspired by their experience, Parliaments and actors active in the sector drafted the 'Common Principles for Support to Parliaments', adopted by the Inter-Parliamentary Union Governing Council in October 2014.

These principles, widely endorsed by different organisations, insist specifically on the following practices:

1. Political aware programming

Parliaments are deeply political institutions and informal power relations can often be more important than formal rules. Moreover, every country has its own specificities and dynamics. In order to better tailor parliamentary strengthening programmes, a clear understanding of historical contingences, the political context and socio-economic issues is crucial.

2. Peer-to-peer learning

Trust and good relationships are likewise important in addressing Parliaments. South-South approaches are particularly effective, as Parliamentarians from the same regions, sharing similar challenges and weaknesses, can engage more easily together on sensitive issues that they can alone.

In the same way, parliamentary strengthening works well when implemented through peer-to-peer approaches: parliamentarians are able to understand mutual challenges and concerns, and are more willing to accept external pressure.

3. A long-term approach

In order to deal with the institutional complexity and differentiation of Parliaments, international actors have ditched one-size-fits-all solutions to adopt more tailored approaches to be implemented on longer-term perspectives. To counter the problem of the high turnover of MPs in many development countries, practitioners are including the permanent staff of Parliaments more frequently.

In general, the strengthening of a parliamentary institution has two dimensions which are interlinked:

Institutional support (direct support) aimed at supporting Parliaments for the purpose of democratization, checks and balances, and good governance. This can be obtained through investing in infrastructure (ICT, premises), institutional structures (such as the Administration, Committee system and internal regulations) and through developing knowledge and skills of MPs and parliamentary staff in legislation, oversight, the budgetary process and representation.

Thematic support (issue-based support) for the purpose of promoting specific policy goals, such as poverty reduction, HIV/AIDS prevention, environmental protection, anti-corruption, etc. The support targets the thematic knowledge of MPs, engages in consultation of societal stakeholders and works on legislative and parliamentary debate processes.

PARLIAMENTS AND POLITICAL PARTIES

Parliaments and political parties are inextricably linked. The effectiveness and efficiency of a Parliament is highly dependent on the political parties that make it up. Parties need to perform equally crucial functions within a democracy (fostering a pluralistic environment, aggregating citizen's interests and engaging them in the democratic process).

Parties are important in the decision-making process: they steer the content of discussions in the Parliament and serve as a point of reference on voting for Parliamentarians. A very disciplined ruling party may mean that the government dominates the Parliament, while a multitude of weakly cohesive parties might make parliament unpredictable and difficult to organise.

Parliaments also help MPs in their outreach function often providing human and financial resources to parties. As such, when Parliaments are weak (for example due to unequal rules and procedures, or lack of funds), the effectiveness of parties in fulfilling their democratic role can be hindered. Considering their interdependence and their essential role in democracy, democracy support programmes would be wise to engage Parliaments and political parties at the same time.

Further Reading

- [Common Principles for Support to Parliaments](#), Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2014
- [Mind the Gap: Lessons Learnt and Remaining Challenges in Parliamentary Development Assistance](#), Swedish International Development Agency, 2012
- [Democracy: Cornerstone for Development](#), AWEPA, 2013
- [Global Mapping and Analysis of Parliamentary Strengthening](#), Democracy Reporting International, 2015
- [Parliamentary Strengthening](#), House of Commons International Development Committee, 2015
- [Parliament and Democracy in the 21st Century](#), Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2005
- [Safeguarding the Interests of the People: Parliaments and Aid Effectiveness](#), AWEPA, 2009
- [The Politics of Parliamentary Strengthening](#), Westminster Foundation for Democracy and Global Partners Governance, 2011
- [Legislative Powers and Executive Corruption](#), V-Dem Institute, 2015