
International Support to Parliaments: A UN Perspective

by Kevin Deveau

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is the largest United Nations agency providing more than \$5 billion annually in support to member nations of the UN. This support primarily comes in the form of technical advice, knowledge transfer and capacity building. The mandate of UNDP is to provide the necessary assistance to over 166 countries and governments throughout the world so they can create sustainable programmes that reduce poverty, respect human rights, promote a key role for women in society and protect the environment. This article looks specifically at the UNDP's support of parliamentary institutions.

The presence of an effective parliamentary institution is strongly correlated with the existence of a viable democracy and an open society. Such institutions are critical to the establishment and consolidation of democracy because they empower ordinary people to participate in the policies that shape their lives. Parliaments are fundamental to establishing the rule of law, protecting human rights, overseeing transparent governance processes, and ensuring national compliance with international obligations.

Among the support provided to countries, the largest sector of support is democratic governance, making up approximately 40% of all expenditures by UNDP annually. Democratic governance includes the promotion of the participation of all citizens in the functioning of their government, the establishment of accountable and responsive government institutions and ensuring democratic governance is based on international principles.

Since the mid 1990s, support for parliamentary development has become an important and

growing area of support for the United Nations Development Programme, as a mechanism to increase the representation and accountability to the poor and disadvantaged groups. UNDP supports parliaments by providing long-term technical advice to parliamentarians and parliamentary staff. This technical advice can take many forms, from basic training seminars and study tours at one end of the spectrum to full time technical advisers that work with parliamentary committees and staff to support public hearings, high quality legislation and effective oversight of the executive branch.

In 1995, UNDP had five parliamentary development programmes active at any one time; currently there are over 60 parliamentary development programmes, from Algeria to Mozambique and Timor Leste to Zambia. UNDP is now supporting parliaments all over the world and is a recognized leader in this important pillar of democratic governance.

The key to UNDP's support to parliaments is its national, regional and global infrastructure. Only UNDP, amongst international organizations, has a permanent presence in over 160 countries while maintaining regional bureaus and global expertise that supports the work at the country level. This support comes in the form of (i) Technical Advice and Knowledge Products¹; (ii) Global Programme on

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Parliamentary Strengthening; and (iii) Multi-lateral Web-based Knowledge Platforms.

UNDP has a Parliamentary Development Team based in New York and Brussels that provides technical advice to UNDP Country Offices and regional bureaus on a demand-driven basis. Where a national parliament is interested in support from UNDP, the respective UNDP Country Office can call on the team to help design projects, organize specific activities, identify short and long-term technical advisers, evaluate the results of ongoing projects and ensure quality assurance. The team also supports the development of knowledge products that draw on UNDP and broader lessons learned in the field of parliamentary development and encapsulates these in formats that are accessible to parliamentarians, parliamentary staff and other actors.

UNDP has had a global programme related to parliamentary development for ten years. Now in its third phase, the Global Programme on Parliamentary Strengthening (GPPS) works at the global, regional and national levels. At the global level, GPPS activities help UNDP to continue to play a leadership and advocacy role in the field of parliamentary strengthening through a soon to be created bi-annual consensus-building and agenda-setting Parliamentary Development Report, through continued efforts towards the establishment of benchmarks and standards for democratic parliaments, and various Parliament and Government Effectiveness initiatives. At the regional level, GPPS focuses on the exchange of good practices and knowledge creation and dissemination in the Arab States and West and Central Africa. The activities implemented at the regional level also facilitate the piloting of sensitive issues that cannot easily and immediately be tackled at the national level, such as parliamentary oversight of the security sector, political party legislation and implementation of the UN Convention on Anti-Corruption. At the national level, GPPS interventions are focused on Algeria, Lebanon, Mauritania, and Niger. The national support efforts reinforce parliament's engagement in achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)², to build budget oversight and fiscal and economic analysis capacity, to support parliaments' contribution towards the implementation of the UN Convention Against Corruption and to reinforce women's political participation and gender sensitive policy making.

In order to ensure greater access to the knowledge developed by UNDP and other parliamentary development partners, UNDP has supported two multi-lateral web-based platforms: iKNOW Politics and Agora. iKNOW Politics³ is a network established

in 2007 and supported by five global partners and provides a virtual venue for those that support a greater role for women in politics to seek knowledge, advice and information. Agora is a network to be established in 2010 and supported by various partners in parliamentary development. Its objective is to provide a web-based venue for parliamentarians, staff, NGOs, media, donors and development practitioners to seek information from an online library, advice from experts and up-to-date information on best practices in the field.

UNDP is proud of its partnership with other international organizations working with and on behalf of parliaments. These include other multi-lateral organizations like the World Bank and UNICEF, international NGOs like the Parliamentary Centre, the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, networks of parliaments like the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, the Assemblée Parlementaire de la Francophonie and the Inter-Parliamentary Union and networks of parliamentarians such as Global Organization of Parliamentarians Against Corruption, Parliamentarians for Global Action.

An emerging trend in parliamentary development is the recognition that support for parliaments is inherently political work.

It is through these partnerships that parliaments receive the best advice and support. Each organization has its own strengths and by working together national and provincial parliaments can learn from experts from around the world who have been engaged in the challenges being faced by that parliament.

Where, in the past, technicians and academics provided much of the advice to parliaments, there is now a growing recognition of the benefit of peer-to-peer support. This means current and former MPs, MPPS, MLAs and MNAs and parliamentary staff are being asked to use the skills they have developed to support another parliament or group of MPs and to transfer their skills.

The Australian Branch of the CPA has gone one step further and has instituted a twinning programme with Pacific island nations. State legislatures such as New South Wales or Queensland have twinned with small

island states to build a long-term relationship between the two assemblies and to provide the technical support (and, in some cases, equipment) required by the island assemblies.

It is through these institutionalized relationships or less formal ones that parliaments in less mature democracies can receive the long-term support and advice they require to ensure the parliaments are addressing the tasks assigned to them, such as passing quality legislation, scrutinizing government actions or reflecting the opinions of voters in their work.

Examples of work supported by UNDP

In Benin UNDP has been actively involved in Benin in strengthening civil society organizations since the late 1990's through various initiatives – including supporting national forums against corruption and participatory monitoring of Millennium Development Goals. With no clear evidence on the impact of MDG programmes, in 2005, local civil society organizations including Sœurs Unies à l'Oeuvre, Centre Afrika Obota, and Women In Law and Development in Africa came together to establish the Social Watch coalition. The purpose of this coalition was to establish a true citizen scrutiny process targeting both the national budget and the country's poverty reduction strategy. Technical and financial assistance was provided to the Social Watch Coalition by Netherlands Development Organization and UNDP.

In addition, UNDP through its Support to the Beninese Press (2005–2007) project also targeted capacity building of media to cover and analyse parliamentary discussions on budget and poverty reduction policies (including the daily question period in the parliament). This project resulted in public debate on the freedom of expression and has highlighted the need for better rules of engagement between the press and government. The coverage by media also contributed to public understanding of fiscal issues and shaped public opinion. It also enabled the public to assess whether their elected representatives have been pro-active in advocating for pro-poor policies.

In the Middle East the Working Group on Parliament and Reform of Political Parties Legislation, launched by UNDP's Parliamentary Development Initiative in the Arab Region and GPPS in 2006, held three regional workshops (Rabat, 2006, Amman, 2006 and Casablanca, 2008) and a focus group meeting in Beirut

in 2007. More than 40 Members of Parliament from Jordan, Algeria, Palestine, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Egypt and Yemen, as well as experts and researchers in public issues, attended these meetings. From the discussions that took place during these meetings, a number of general principles were established and adopted. Such principles serve as a basis for future legislation concerning political parties in the Arab Region. They also contribute to the strengthening and institutional development of political parties in a functioning democratic system of government. They reinforce political participation as well as political pluralism. The principles address different aspects of a political party's life, including the formation of a political party, its by-laws, its financing, and its relations with the State and with society. In 2009, the principles were introduced at the national level at a conference in Jordan as a means of promoting their use in the national debate taking place in that country.

In Pakistan UNDP supported the Pakistan parliament and national Non Governmental Organizations, through its Strengthening Democracy through Parliamentary Development to produce a series of discussion documents on various topics that were of concern to citizens, including health, education and security. These publications were then presented to citizens in various provinces through town hall meetings where the documents were discussed and citizen's opinions were recorded. This culminated in the development of a report, drafted by the NGOs, that presented the views of citizens to the MPs and Senators and spurred much debate within Pakistani media.

UNDP will continue to provide long-term support to parliaments because it is only through these institutions that the will of people can be translated into the laws and policies that make a country democratic and a government open and accountable. UNDP will also continue to seek out partners who have the skills and knowledge necessary to ensure the technical advice UNDP provides is the best in the world.

Notes

1. E.g. – Manuals on the role of parliaments in addressing various issues (e.g. – HIV/AIDS, security sector oversight, anti-corruption), toolkits, guidance notes and web-based materials and trainings.
2. For more details on please see <http://undp.org/mdg>
3. www.iknowpolitics.org