



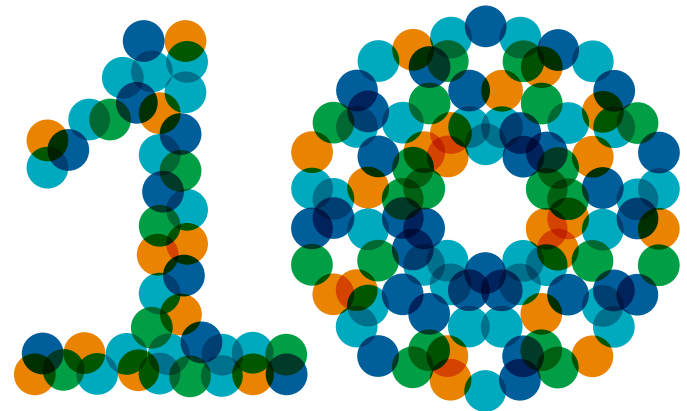
Inter-Parliamentary Union  
For democracy. For everyone.

# Celebrating 10 years of the Common Principles for Support to Parliaments

Why they are important and how they have been used



Effective parliaments  
are essential for  
stronger democracies



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# Foreword

In too many countries, democracy has failed to deliver fast or fairly enough. Progress against the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has slowed, or even gone into reverse. Under such circumstances, citizens lose faith in democratic institutions, and in the ability of democracy to deliver. They are persuaded by the siren calls of populists, extremists, and authoritarians too.

For parliaments, this democratic backsliding is a serious challenge. Parliaments rely on democratic norms and processes to function effectively. And when these norms are eroded, parliaments lose their ability to provide oversight, represent all their citizens, and even legislate effectively. This blocks socioeconomic development and further weakens public trust, creating a spiral of mistrust and failure to deliver.



We – the world’s parliamentary community – must find ways to support our parliaments, strengthen their ability to deliver, and set them back on a virtuous cycle of trust and delivery. To be sure, we already have a powerful model to do so. For a decade, the Common Principles for Support to Parliaments – better known as the “Common Principles” – have provided a pragmatic framework to guide this parliamentary development.

This short brochure outlines some of the benefits that the Common Principles have provided over the years. However, we should not be self-congratulatory in any way. Today’s challenges are such that we do not have time to rest on our laurels. Rather, we should be intensifying our efforts to support and protect our precious parliamentary democracies, providing more support, more effectively, and helping them to deliver for their peoples. After 10 years, the Common Principles still show us how.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Martin Chungong".

Martin Chungong  
Secretary General

[Sign-up sheet for the Common Principles © IPU](#)

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# Section 1 – Introduction

If democracies are going to stand the test of time, then we need parliaments to function effectively. Even as the world changes fast around us and new challenges continue to emerge, we need parliaments to keep building and shaping our societies to be inclusive, fair and prosperous.

As countries gained independence and set up their own parliaments, they often benefitted from the advice and support of other legislatures. But as the importance of parliaments for democracy, peace and sustainable development became clear, the international community began to invest in parliamentary development too. This support grew substantially until questions surfaced about coordination, coherence and quality. What were the common themes that connected effective support for parliaments? How could outside partners better support their parliamentary colleagues?

By October 2013, many were agreeing that the time had come for a framework to guide parliamentary support. Led by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), five partners – the IPU, the European Parliament, the French National Assembly, the National Democratic

Institute, and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) – began writing the Common Principles for Support to Parliaments. They received input from parliaments, and through the Association of Secretaries General of Parliaments.

A year later, in October 2014, participants at the 131st IPU Assembly in Geneva, Switzerland, adopted the Principles, which – 10 years later – have now been endorsed by some 149 national parliaments (77% of parliaments) together with 32 parliamentary assemblies and partner organizations.

Most of these parliaments and their support partners are using the Common Principles. Therefore, for those who are interested in supporting parliamentary development and resilience, the Common Principles remain as relevant as ever. Whether you are a parliamentarian or a parliamentary support organization, or you are simply interested in the future of democracy, this brochure is written for you.



Consultation for the Common Principles in the Philippines © IPU

# Section 2 – What are the Common Principles?

The Common Principles comprise one overarching General Principle and nine specific Principles. Collectively, they shape a widely shared approach to parliamentary support, making it more relevant, tailored and effective.

## General principle

The General Principle is that effective parliaments are essential to democracy, the rule of law, human rights, gender equality, and economic and social development. Parliaments perform a range of legislative, oversight and representative functions. They provide additional legitimacy for government action and activities, and – by making laws – they help the translation of policy into social reality.

The main purpose of parliamentary support is to assist parliaments in fully developing their capacity to perform their basic legislative, oversight and representative roles. But parliaments are complex organizations with distinct political, procedural and administrative aspects. And the variety between legislatures is significant. Critically, democratic parliaments also provide an opportunity for all sectors of

society to be heard through their representatives. Disputes and disagreements over policy direction and other issues of national importance can be debated. Sustainable solutions within the framework of the rule of law can be found.

But parliaments need support. To contribute fully, and to perform to maximum effect, they require access to excellent technical support. The nine Principles establish guidelines on how to provide that support.



## Principle 1: Parliamentary support partners are guided by the needs of parliament

The most effective support will be appropriately structured, ensuring that it is free of any external political agenda and focused on meeting the recipient parliament's needs. These needs are best articulated by the parliament itself, based on a process that takes into account the diverse needs of parliamentary members, political parties, and other public interests.

Germany's Bundestag, and parliamentary training institutes in Kenya and Thailand, have been successfully applying this principle.

For example, the German Bundestag identifies its needs before planning any activity, and so ensures that the activities add strategic value. The needs can be identified in several different ways, including seminars, workshops or any other discussion. Once identified, they are written into a strategic plan and used as a reference point for subsequent evaluations.

Kenya and Thailand have both formalized their in-house training by setting up parliamentary training institutes, thus ensuring that support is guided by the parliaments. The institutes are in-house or independent organizations dedicated to training and building capacity among MPs and staff.

Kenya's Centre for Parliamentary Studies and Training (CPST) builds understanding within parliament and the wider public, spearheading national, county and regional programmes. Since its establishment in 2008, the CPST has built a reputation for capacity-building and research. Its work fits within the Parliamentary Service Commission strategy, and serves the parliament's needs.

[IPU Advisory Group on Health mission in Rwanda](#) © Lucien Gatete

In Thailand, King Prajadhipok's Institute is an independent public organization, supervised by the President of the National Assembly. Its work includes research, training, seminars, and the dissemination of information about democracy and governance. It also advises MPs, parliamentary staff and the public on national and local good governance.

"I am very much impressed by the [Common Principles] approach which was used to finalize our ICT policy, because we own this policy. In most cases, resource persons/consultants keep information to themselves; but in our case, parliament owns every word in our policy."

- Participant at an ICT policy workshop at the Parliament of Namibia





These examples show how long-term parliamentary support is most effective when embedded within an overall strategic or development plan that is owned by a parliament. Implementation requires a trustful, open and inclusive relationship between parliament and its partners, as well as the open and inclusive management of activities.



## **Principle 2: Parliamentary support partners are attentive to the multiple, overlapping social, economic and political contexts in which parliaments operate**

However complex parliaments may appear, one of their fundamental *raison d'être* is to transform the political, economic and social aspirations of citizens into legal and social realities, using legislation, oversight and representation.

Therefore, when a parliament is embedded in a society's fabric, and sensitive to the country's multiple realities, it is better able to resolve the country's challenges with peaceful and politically acceptable solutions. Principle 2 highlights the importance of

support, so that parliaments and MPs can better engage with all their citizens and the public, whatever the social and political contexts.

Uruguay and Zambia both highlight the benefits of such context-sensitive support.

With technical assistance from the UNDP, the parliament of Uruguay has strengthened its dialogue with society. It has enabled non-State actors to contribute to decision-making processes, and improved the parliament's capacity to perform its functions more openly and accountably. The project's activities promoted parliamentary outreach, encouraging citizens to relate to their parliament, and enhancing MPs' responsiveness to society's demands.

In 2019, Zambia's National Assembly adapted IPU self-assessment tools to their local context, and then used them to assess their institutional strengths and weaknesses. Taking the wider social, economic and political issues into account, the evaluations focused attention on the needs of Zambia's citizens, rather than those of the governing party or any specific individuals. The parliament has since pledged to conduct the assessments on a more regular basis, constantly looking for ways to improve their service to Zambian citizens.



IPU Advisory Group on Health mission in Viet Nam © IPU



### **Principle 3: Parliamentary support aims for sustainable outcomes**

For parliamentary support to be sustainable, external assistance will continue to benefit the institution even when the assistance has come to an end. Examples

of sustainable outcomes include the development of a strategy, or even an investment in parliamentary staff, especially in senior secretariat positions.

Solomon Islands has a strategy that highlights this principle. Finland's Committee for the Future also offers an interesting example.

Established in 1993, the Committee for the Future is a parliamentary standing committee, which consists of 17 MPs and reports directly to the prime minister. Setting its own agenda, its mission is to generate dialogue with the government on major problems and opportunities, including technology, sustainability and climate change. It thus enables the government and parliament to identify important political themes at an early stage, and to keep all policy options open.

The Committee for the Future looks at a broad set of issues and takes a long-term perspective. One of its latest initiatives has been to join forces with other committees focused on the future. In October 2022, the first World Summit of the Committees of the Future took place in the Finnish Parliament.

In Solomon Islands, the National Parliament uses an annual cycle to develop its strategic plan, including formal inputs from partners. The cycle incorporates

implementation for the current year, and also includes the development of objectives for the following year. Key to the process is the Strategy Support Unit. It includes a secretariat and staff that report monthly to the parliamentary Speaker and clerk. The strategic plan is subject to regular reviews and adjustment, including individual performance appraisals.



#### **Principle 4: Parliamentary support is inclusive of all political tendencies**

While parliamentary support must inevitably focus on parliament as a whole, parliamentary support partners will need to be aware of the political context and the full range of tendencies in society. Ideally, parliament will reflect the make-up of society, offering opportunities for every political tendency.

However, this is not to say that assistance is identical for each political group. On the contrary, the needs and priorities of these groups may differ substantially. In some cases, parliamentary support partners will need to engage with groups that are not in parliament because, for example, they did not meet the electoral threshold for parliamentary representation.

In Uruguay, the parliament opened a new dialogue with younger MPs from various political parties, enabling different generations to exchange information and opinions. The initiative showed the young MPs that they were being heard, and offered them an opportunity to learn from their older colleagues. This had special resonance, because many of the older MPs had played a leading role in restoring Uruguay's democracy in the 1980s. By respecting the presence of democracy among this second generation of parliamentarians, Uruguay's parliament helped to cement democracy into the country's political culture.

Meanwhile, Zambia's National Assembly has established robust mechanisms to promote the inclusion of diverse political tendencies in parliamentary business. The House Business Committee, which determines the parliamentary agenda, includes presiding officers and party whips from the ruling and opposition parties, as well as independent MPs. By promoting inclusiveness and transparency, Zambia's parliament protects the principles of parliamentary democracy and good governance.

Zambia's parliamentary committees are also required to have equal representation from the different political parties and independent members. This supports

inclusiveness and guarantees balanced, fair and issue-based business.



## **Principle 5: Parliamentary support is grounded in emerging international democratic parliamentary standards**

National parliaments are unique, shaped by their histories, political cultures, and procedures. However, there are also some commonalities. Parliamentary support partners therefore recognize the unique character of each parliament, but also aim to connect the recipient parliaments with emerging international standards.

In 2023, the IPU launched the Indicators for Democratic Parliaments. The final 25 Indicators align closely with SDG targets 16.6 and 16.7, enabling parliaments to evaluate their effectiveness, accountability, transparency, responsiveness, inclusivity, participation and representation.

In Albania, a 2020 survey revealed differing perceptions of parliament among MPs, parliamentary staff, journalists and civil society leaders. This produced an initiative to establish standards on transparency and citizen engagement. Together with the National Democratic Institute and using the Indicators for Democratic Parliaments, the Albanian Parliament set up a joint working group to develop a framework of standards and indicators. The group included representatives from civil society and 14 from the media. Parliament endorsed the new standards in March 2024. An independent assessment is scheduled soon, and will be a crucial step in drafting an Open Parliament Action Plan.



Activity using the Indicators for Democratic Parliaments in Albania  
© NDI

Pakistan's Senate also self-assessed, using the 25 Indicators to identify 14 specific actions for improvement. Supported by the Senate's leadership and members, the assessment took about three months from decision to completion.

In May 2023, Japan's House of Councillors also surveyed its members and political parties, assessing their gender awareness by using an adapted version of the IPU self-assessment toolkit.



### **Principle 6: Parliamentary support addresses the needs and potential of women and men equally in the structure, operation, methods and work of parliament**

The political enfranchisement of women has been one of the 20th century's greatest democratic advances. For parliaments, the change enhances parliamentary legitimacy, and increases the capacity to address the needs of about half the population. Gender equality is crucial for sustainable development, economic growth and poverty reduction. But achieving the appropriate parliamentary responses often requires continued support.

Assessing a parliament's gender sensitivity is a useful first step, establishing the facts and identifying actions to boost women's participation. The Plan of Action for Gender-sensitive Parliaments, adopted by IPU Member Parliaments in 2012, is a useful reference.

Costa Rica's commitment to gender equality in its parliament has led to broader gender equality in the country's daily life. Electoral quotas ensure fair representation in parliament. For example, the Law on the Promotion of Social Equality for Women requires alternating male and female candidates on party lists. Many parties have also adopted internal policies to encourage women's participation and leadership. This commitment is reflected in more recent statutes, such as Laws 8322 and 8765, which require more women in decision-making roles at the national bank and other financial institutions. Costa Rica's support for the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women has also been influential.

In Austria, budget laws stipulate that at least one of the five main budget performance goals must focus on gender equality. The Parliament thus ensures that its work addresses equally the needs and potential of women and men. The President of the National Council has implemented specific measures to support women in the administration.



Uses local and regional expertise

## Principle 7: Parliamentary support utilizes local and regional expertise

Effective external support to any parliament requires guidance and practical assistance from the local environment. Long-term partner engagement must involve national staff and resources, to complement

international expertise and enhance understanding of the local context. Working with national expertise – including civil society – provides richer support than relying solely on international experts. Thus, successful parliamentary support cannot be effective without a genuine local–international partnership, regardless of whether it is ad hoc, project-based, or part of a broader programme.



In Sierra Leone, parliamentary staff came together for a one-day workshop on bipartisanship, neutrality and impartiality, which aimed to enhance levels of parliamentary professionalism. The workshop produced a set of recommendations, including on the importance of neutrality and impartiality among parliamentary staff. Translating these recommendations into practical actions will be an important next step. The workshop clearly demonstrated the power of combining international expertise with local knowledge and insight.

Costa Rica has created an Open Parliament Commission, which aims to increase citizen participation in parliamentary business. The Commission includes deputies, officials and civil society organizations.

Activity with parliamentarians on gender equality in Mali © IPU



## **Principle 8: Parliamentary support partners and parliaments commit to effective coordination and communication**

Using aid resources well is an ongoing international priority. Aid provided for parliamentary support is no different, and good coordination pays dividends in terms of results. The interests of parliaments are clearly served by cooperation, not competition, among support partners from different organizations. Parliamentary support partners should therefore cooperate closely to avoid duplication or working at cross-purposes.

In South Africa, parliamentary development support is coordinated nationally. The evolution from international to locally based management showcases the progress made in coordination. Following the establishment of democracy in the country in 1994, the European Union (EU) managed funding for parliamentary support. However, in 2009, the South African Parliament integrated EU funding into its own budget, with parliamentary staff now managing the funding. This integration further aligned capacity-building with the electoral cycle.

Timor-Leste's National Parliament designed a coordination mechanism for aid effectiveness to enhance communication within parliament and with external partners. The Common Principles, together with the 2005 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, and the 2011 Busan principles, were instrumental in creating the mechanism. According to the 2021 annual report by Timor-Leste's Compact Development Team, active coordination between parliamentary committees is central to the country's national and international development.



## **Principle 9: Parliamentary support partners act in an ethical and responsible manner**

Ethical support ensures that assistance respects the sovereignty and autonomy of the recipient parliament, avoiding undue influence or interference that could undermine the parliament's legitimacy. Such support initiatives foster trust between the supporting entities and the parliaments they aid, promoting a collaborative, respectful, and ultimately democratic partnership.

By upholding democratic values and human rights, this ethical and responsible support contributes to the development of robust legislative bodies that are accountable to their citizens. It enables a political environment where laws and policies are created through fair, transparent processes, and where the voices of all segments of society are represented.

The parliament of North Macedonia receives assistance through a parliamentary support programme, in which a parliamentary steering committee ensures that financial assistance is based exclusively on projected needs and priorities, as outlined in the parliament's multi-year strategic plan. By including the details in a larger public procurement plan adopted by the parliament, the steering committee ensures financial probity.

In terms of parliamentary support partners, the IPU, the National Democratic Institute, and UNDP all

have policies that set out their expectations for staff members, partners and contractors. UNDP's 36-page Code of Ethics covers topics such as independence and impartiality, conflicts of interest, protecting UNDP resources, and behaviour towards others, as well as obligations and consequences. The National Democratic Institute offers mechanisms so that suspected wrongdoing within the organization can be reported in good faith without fear of any retaliation. Meanwhile, the IPU has codes of conduct for IPU officials and personnel, as well as policies to prevent harassment, fraud and more.

A code of conduct creates a safe, respectful and professional work environment for all employees. It serves as a framework for ethical decision-making, and helps ensure that employees understand the expectations upon them and the consequences of their actions.



# Section 3 – Challenges and the way ahead

Ten years after the Common Principles were first adopted, many challenges remain or have emerged.

The most salient is democratic backsliding – the gradual erosion of democratic institutions and norms. When contemporary leaders manipulate the democratic system to achieve their own ends, they often undermine the country’s institutional foundations, appointing senior judges, pressuring civil society organizations, shutting down independent media, and attacking political opponents. As a result, parliaments become less able to fulfil their legislative and representative functions and to serve their constituents.

MPs and parliaments have a crucial responsibility to uphold democratic standards, representing the people and discussing major issues of the day. This requires a commitment to safeguarding and strengthening institutional checks and balances, ensuring the independence of other State institutions, and supporting the passage of legislation that upholds democratic values.

Technology also plays a significant role in shaping democracy. Sometimes this is positive: it enables citizen engagement, internal communications, improved data collection and analysis, better voting systems, and more efficient services. Technology allows MPs and policymakers to make informed, evidence-based decisions.

However, the misuse of technology can also be destructive. For example, many parliaments have suffered hacking, data breaches, and ransomware attacks. When data is exploited, the consequences can be dire. Disinformation spreads rapidly on social media, and extreme viewpoints can easily infiltrate mainstream discourse. Deepfakes spread uncertainty and mistrust in both systems and leaders. In many ways, technology is advancing faster than the policies designed to regulate it.

Now, more than ever, parliaments must protect themselves from these and other threats that jeopardize our democracies. Building resilience involves reinforcing institutional checks and balances,

promoting transparency and accountability, educating citizens, supporting civil society, and doing whatever is required to promote a culture of democracy. Parliaments must also robustly devise regulatory frameworks that encourage beneficial use of new technologies and rein in negative use thereof. International partners are eager to support parliaments around the world in these efforts, and along with parliaments, they are increasingly using the Common

Principles as a guide for development initiatives. Tools such as self-assessments and the Indicators for Democratic Parliaments are empowering parliaments to take the lead in enhancing their performance and resilience.

Ultimately, parliaments exist to serve the people, who aspire to live in peace and prosperity, coexist harmoniously with their neighbours, and enjoy basic freedoms. Parliaments that effectively meet these needs offer a powerful counternarrative to those who question the value of democracy and its capacity to address future challenges. The next decade will be critical for the future of democracy. The Common Principles will continue to unite parliaments and partners by providing a framework that empowers them to meet the needs and aspirations of the people, and to slow, or even reverse, democratic backsliding.



Global Conference of Young Parliamentarians in Paraguay  
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