

STUDY GROUP ON THE ROLE OF PARLIAMENT IN CONFLICT-AFFECTED COUNTRIES
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STUDY GROUP OBSERVATIONS

1. PARTICIPATION, REPRESENTATION AND RECONCILIATION

- Parliament has a role to play in transforming potentially violent conflict into a non-violent policy dialogue aimed at creating a national consensus, thereby contributing to the peace-building process.
- The electoral system adopted by a nation will determine the nature of representation and the framework by which divergent groups can participate in decision-making. It is imperative that minority groups are adequately represented in Parliament as their inclusion in decision-making will assist conflict management and increase the chance for peace. As such, electoral systems should be designed to ensure Parliament is as representative of the population as possible.
- Parliament has an opportunity to participate in international initiatives and processes, such as the country-driven Poverty Reduction Strategy Process, in addition to the Millennium Development Goals. Such initiatives provide a good opportunity for Parliaments to engage more effectively in mitigating conflict situations within countries by monitoring the implementation of poverty reduction strategies. Parliaments are able to achieve this by representing stakeholders effectively, listening to their concerns and by providing recommendations to decision makers on policy adjustments in line with budget constraints. Furthermore, Parliamentarians can help prevent conflict by ensuring the inclusion of socially vulnerable and marginalized groups – who are often more likely to be affected by conflict.
- Adversarial politics can impede reconciliation and, where possible, more consensus-based decision-making should be encouraged in an attempt to build bridges between parties with conflicting interests.

2. LEGISLATION AND OVERSIGHT

- Parliament has a vital oversight and accountability function, and should be resourced adequately to ensure that it can perform this important function.
- The best means of providing oversight and facilitating participation is by strengthening the Parliamentary committee system.
- There is no single model for the conduct of Parliamentary committees; with some countries having the committee structure entrenched in their constitutions, whilst others have sectoral committees and other countries have provision to instigate specialized public interest committees. Irrespective of the form of the committee structure it was generally agreed that Parliament, as the representative of the people, should be free to question anyone from the government agencies.
- Whilst respecting that every Parliament has the right to establish the committees of their choosing, there are committees that are essential if Parliament is to fulfil its oversight function and encourage peace and stability. The committees are the *Public Accounts Committee* or equivalent, in order to provide oversight of the budgetary process, and a committee or committees that provide oversight of the security sector so as to strengthen civilian control of the military, police services and intelligence sector.
- In addition to the committee structure, Parliament can provide effective oversight by facilitating the establishment of accountability institutions such as the office of the Auditor-General and Ombudsman, Anti-Corruption Commissions, Freedom of Information Officers and Human Rights Commissions.

3. DIALOGUING WITH CIVIL SOCIETY AND A FREE MEDIA

- Civil society makes an important contribution to conflict prevention. Although, unlike Parliament, civil society groups are not elected they nevertheless derive their membership from the public and are a reservoir of knowledge.
- Parliament should be prepared to engage more readily with civil society to encourage a two-way flow of information and should support efforts to ensure civil society participation.
- A free, fair and responsible media plays an important role in disseminating information, providing accountability and assisting Parliament build a dialogue with the community.
- It is a matter of concern that, in some countries, state media enjoyed a monopoly on the flow of information. State funded media agencies should not be an extension of the ministry of information, rather should be administered with a public service charter. Furthermore, a diverse and responsible media sector should also be encouraged.
- In recognition of the special role the media plays in a democracy and in the peace-building process, Parliaments should endeavour to facilitate the media's work by encouraging the introduction of right to information legislation, ensuring freedom of speech and freeing up restrictions on public service broadcasting.

4. THE ROLE OF POLITICAL PARTIES AND THE OPPOSITION

- The opportunities for opposition parties to contribute to peace building differ widely depending on the circumstances.
- In situations where a country is affected by violent conflict, Parliamentarians have the potential to act as a bridge between the conflicting parties and the government. In this way opposition Parliamentarians may be able to instigate confidence-building measures, which are an essential pre-condition to bringing conflicting parties to the negotiating table.
- Both government and the opposition could contribute to ending violent conflict by working together to develop an approach to resolving the violent conflict across party lines.
- Opposition Parliamentarians could contribute to peace-building in situations where there is not violent conflict. Opposition Parliamentarians are able to reach out and speak to people in their districts directly and where appropriate forgo acrimonial politics in an attempt to develop a national consensus and reconciliation.
- Opposition parties have an essential part in the Parliamentary process.

5. PROMOTING SOCIO-ECONOMIC EQUALITY

- Conflict can arise out of competition for scarce resources or when the proceeds of good governance are not allocated in an equitable fashion. To this end, Parliamentarians should encourage policies that address unequal social investments in order to achieve equality of opportunity and take affirmative action in favour of disadvantaged groups.
- Parliament can seek to mitigate conflict over resources by promoting a dialogue and facilitating third party mediated talks between stakeholders whose interests' conflict.
- Demand for resources often exceeds supply. In such circumstances Parliamentarians can seek to ameliorate the concerns of those adversely affected by promoting a dialogue with their constituencies to explain the reasons behind the allocation of resources.

6. RULE OF LAW

- Parliament, to be effective in conflict resolution, must give full effect to its status as a rule of law institution central to the constitutional order. In all of its activities, including discharging its oversight and legislative functions, it must strengthen the rule of law by strengthening judicial independence and ensuring executive accountability.

7. DECENTRALISATION

- There have to be clear reasons for commencing a decentralization process and these reasons should be kept in mind when developing a decentralization strategy.
- Decentralization, whether in the form of federalism, devolution or administrative decentralization, can contribute to promoting participation, accountability and responsiveness, whilst aiding conflict resolution.

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- Fiscal relations are at the core of any decentralization process and these issues need to be clarified in order facilitate successful implementation and reduce the potential for conflict.

8. REGIONAL PARLIAMENTARY PEACE-BUILDING

- Parliamentarians are urged to forge regional relationships, either by developing informal networks, joining inter-Parliamentary associations or participating in regional institutions.
- There are some challenges with developing regional relationships, in particular duplicating efforts and diverting scarce resources away from other priority areas. Those challenges should be taken into account, but should not hinder the development of regional relationships.

Follow-Up

The Study Group recognizes the importance of capacity building of Parliamentarians. Members acknowledge the importance of professional development programs and request the CPA and WBI include a focus on the subject matter of this Study Group in future professional development programs.

CPA and WBI will keep Study Group members informed a bout deliberations at the global conference at Wilton Park, which will be organized jointly by CPA and WBI.