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ASSOCIATION OF SECRETARIES
GENERAL OF PARLIAMENTS

Evaluating parliament: objectives, methods, results and impact
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***National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) Survey on the Gaps
between Parliamentary Power and Practice***
Experiences in Colombia, Guatemala, Peru and Serbia

1. Purpose of the evaluation

The **National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI)** survey tool is not an evaluation, but simply a method of collecting perspectives on perceived parliamentary powers and perceptions on the use of these powers in practice. The size of the gap between parliamentary power and practice differs depending on the specific issue under review and across different aspects of parliamentary work, such as representation, law-making, oversight, budget review, and institutional capacity. If the power-practice gap is small on a particular issue and if the parliament's power is constrained relative to peer parliaments, legislative strengthening efforts might focus on constitutional and legal reform. If the gap between power-practice is large, the focus of legislative strengthening needs to be on helping the parliament make more effective use of its existing formal authority in a particular area. The areas where power-practice gaps are the largest suggest a higher priority in legislative modernization efforts.

The survey has generally supported some of the hypotheses implicit in the design of the survey instrument. One hypothesis implicit in the survey design is that civil society organisations (CSO) representatives tend to see a larger gap between power and practice than do MPs. Results from the survey in four countries support this hypothesis, and suggest that parliamentary staff generally tend to fall in between MPs and civil society in terms of their responses.

2. Participants

Differences among MPs, staff and CSOs can be instructive in improving relations between parliament and civil society or improving relationships between members and parliamentary staff. NDI has generally administered the same survey to each of these three groups and then compared the differences in perceptions among them. With WBI support, NDI has administered the survey in four countries.

3. Choice of method

The survey method draws upon the emerging set of benchmarks for democratic parliaments. Although there have been a number of initiatives to codify benchmarks or norms for democratic parliaments, there is significant overlap and consensus among these various approaches. NDI took 25 issues that often are included in benchmarks for democratic parliaments or in parliamentary self-assessment tools. For each of these 25 issues, NDI crafted two related statements – a Part A statement that has to do with the formal powers of the legislature and a related Part B statement that relates to whether that power is used in practice. Participants in the survey respond to each statement by indicating whether they strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree with each of the 25 two-part statements. For each statement, survey participants can alternatively indicate that they are not aware of the issue, or that the issue is not applicable to their parliament. In many cases, NDI has disaggregated survey responses by gender and by other factors such as length of service in parliament, as parliamentary staff or in working for the CSO.

4. Practical use of the evaluation method

Several uses of the survey have been identified:

- The survey has been used as a **diagnostic tool** to help identify priorities for legislative strengthening work, useful to parliamentary modernization or parliamentary reform committees. It is also useful to donors to support parliamentary development assistance. Many donors are seeking to strengthen the analytic rigor with which choices are made in allocating development assistance; and the survey provides useful data in justifying and targeting development assistance.
- The survey data can be useful in **advocacy**. Survey data can also be helpful in supporting parliamentary reform, when survey data suggests a consensus on a particularly wide gap between power and practice in a particular substantive area. It may be easier, for example, to justify greater resources to support parliamentary operations if it is backed up with survey data that demonstrates broad support for this, from both MPs and CSOs.
- The survey has also been useful in providing a **basis for dialogue** between MPs and CSO representatives. NDI has administered the survey as part of multi-day training sessions, with the surveys being collected on the first day of the workshop, and a preliminary analysis of the results being presented on the second or third day of a session. While this approach may not result in a scientific or statistically significant sample, participants have generally found the anecdotal data from the surveys very useful; it has served as a very useful method for launching a discussion regarding the explanations for the survey results.

5. Collecting results

The survey generally requires only a minimal investment by parliament. Surveys typically take each participant 15-20 minutes to complete. In some cases, NDI has used a guided interview methodology to administer the surveys, to increase the response rate. Analysis of the data has been conducted by NDI staff.

6. Use of the responses

As noted in greater detail above, the survey results have been used by NDI to inform program design and to stimulate discussion, particularly on issues of parliamentary-CSO relations. Results from similar surveys have been used in publications intended to build or strengthen consensus on specific parliamentary reform issues.

7. Follow-up

As indicated, the results have been useful in informing and prioritizing activities in ongoing legislative strengthening support programs.

8. Lessons learned and challenges

NDI and its partners have found the basic approach to be sound—and that there is value of looking at the gap between power and practice among a variety of aspects of legislative operations, as well as in examining the differences in perceptions of this gap by members, staff and CSO representatives. At this point, NDI continues to look at refining the survey tool and its methodology by:

- Strengthening the statistical analysis of the survey results.
- Re-evaluating whether the 25 issues examined in the survey tool are the most useful.
- Retaining the general approach and methodology, but refining the issues examined in the survey to meet the specific needs and issues facing a specific parliament.