

Parliamentary Function of Representation

In democratic parliaments, MPs are elected by the citizens. Through the electoral system, parliamentary seats are distributed to render MPs accountable to a specific constituency within a particular geographic, ethnic, religious, or other grouping or of a particular interest or political view. This link to citizens is the basis of parliaments' representative function.

The parliament, as the total sum of these differences, represents the beliefs and ideas of a nation. The composition of the assembly should therefore adequately reflect the entire population in all its diversity, including women and minorities.

The representative function of parliament is indeed characterized by its role as venue for the expression and debate of issues of local, national and international importance, and the translation of those debates into policies.

How citizens view their interactions with their parliamentarians may dictate the effectiveness of these MPs in fulfilling their representative role. In many countries, weakness in the representative capacity of the parliament poses a significant threat to democratic advancement. It is clear that there is a growing lack of confidence in

representative institutions. The relative lack of confidence in the political institutions that act as intermediaries between citizens' concerns and government policy – parliament and political parties – suggests a strong disconnect between representative institutions and their constituents.

Furthermore, the legal and political context can either encourage or constrain parliamentary representation. New democracies emerging from authoritarian regimes often inherit a legal structure that was not designed to encourage public involvement or participation in the legislative process. It is important to consider this framework and its implications for strategies that seek to increase the representative capacity of the parliament. Governance and electoral systems clearly affect the mechanics of representation. Finally, even if a well-conceived legal and political framework can encourage effective representation, parliaments also need the human and financial resources necessary to support the representative function.

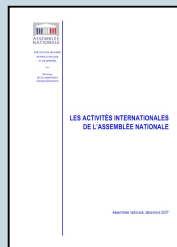
Context and Framework

The social context is also crucial. Actors outside the



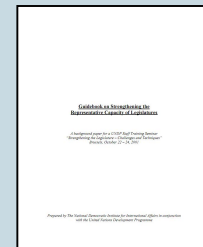
UNDP - The Legislature and Constituency Relations

This document of UNDP focuses on the relationship between the legislature and the constituency. First of all, the focus goes to the importance of legislative-constituency relations and interaction. Secondly, key issues and challenges for legislatures in developing countries are examined. Thirdly, activities and structures to enhance legislative constituency relations are tackled.



l'Assemblée Nationale (France) - Les activités internationales de l'Assemblée Nationale

This document mainly consists of several fact sheets from the book "The International Activities from the National Assembly." It is supplemented by new developments in the field of external relations, on the observation of elections and on interparliamentary organizations.



NDI & UNDP - Guidebook on Strengthening the Representative Capacity of Legislatures

This paper was prepared as by NDI and UNP and is intended as a practical guide for those designing programs to strengthen the representative capacity of legislatures in emerging democracies. Some program options are listed and several implementation issues are examined.

parliament should indeed have sufficient information about how they can provide input and about how to advocate and monitor the parliament. Weak civil society's capacity for parliamentary representation can be an issue even in countries with a vibrant civil society and press. In emerging democracies, civil society may have had years of experience in acting as a watchdog or critic of an authoritarian regime, but may lack the capacity to effectively advocate for changes in policy through the parliament and their capacity to effectively advocate for changes in policy through the parliament and their representatives. Moreover, the mechanisms by which civil society and the press exercise a watchdog role also change with the emergence of a more democratic regime. Civic education is then crucial to inform the public about the structure, roles and functions of parliament and citizen's rights and responsibilities in a democratic nation.

Communication and Outreach

It is particularly important for parliaments and parliamentarians to be equipped with the institutional and political capacities to facilitate the function of representation.

Many parliaments have outreach offices that seek to facilitate the flow of information in and out of parliament. They may

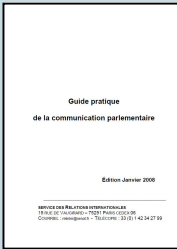
also contain special services designed to assist the capacity of MPs to communicate with civil society organizations, the government, and other stakeholders.

Some elementary factors can guarantee a minimum of publicity for the parliamentary work as the publicity of debates in plenary and in committee meetings and the access to the parliamentary documents, namely via the official parliament's website.

The development of a parliamentary website constitutes a powerful tool for information and exchanges which allows bringing closer the citizens and their representatives and strengthening transparency of the parliamentary activities.

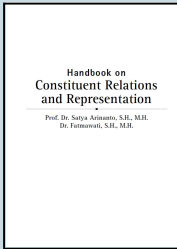
Due to the importance today played by the audiovisual media in the constitution of the public opinion, the important tools can be the diffusion of the parliamentary activities. So democratic parliaments may also have television or radio stations, websites, and publications designed to help include citizens in the policy process.

Contact, information and communication between parliament and the media are also key elements allowing a good understanding of the parliamentary activities by the citizens and constituting the roots a constructive dialogue.



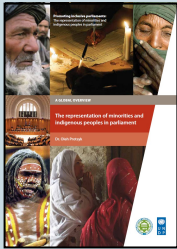
Senat (France) – Guide Pratique de la Communication Parlementaire

Communication is a democratic and institutional imperative for all contemporary parliaments. Parliaments are faced with a common challenge: the deficit between the preeminent place they occupy in the institutions and their lack of



UNDP – Handbook on Constituent Relations and Representation

The book illustrates the importance of building relations with constituents and provides information about how to build an effective communication strategy. The book provides ideas on how to best follow-up the input from constituents, the advantages a constituent office, and how to support the constituent relations of members.



IPU & UNDP – The Representation of Minorities and Indigenous People in Parliament

This publication provides an overview of the state of minority representation in national legislatures. The publication is the result of a Survey conducted in 2009 by IPU and UNDP, focusing on national-level rules, parliamentary group-level norms and regulations and opinions of individual parliamentarians.

Legislatures and the Subversion of Representation

Given the representative role that legislatures play in democracies, undemocratic regimes often use the legislative form to cloak undemocratic practices. The appearance of collective decision-making and voting lends an air of legitimacy, even if the parliament may be relegated to “rubber stamping” government policy with no real debate or review.

Dialogue

A parliament, to play its role as key representative institution in the democratic system should also ensure the dialogue with all the actors of the public life, to listen to the needs and social tensions, in their entire diversity, in order to complete in the best manner its oversight and lawmaking functions. The effectiveness and the efficacy of the law and the oversight of the government’s policies are closely linked to that.

For parliaments and their MPs, effective representation requires engaging the citizens in dialogue in order to understand their views and perspectives, with the aim to utilize the powers vested in their office (i.e. legislating, participating in debates, authoring questions, etc.) to voice the resulting ideas.

To ensure this dialogue, several mechanisms can be established. Public hearings and field committee visits for example, can provide opportunities for legislators to hear the views of experts and citizens on public policy issues which they can then express accordingly.

Because citizens cannot know how they are being represented if the parliament is opaque and MPs are uncommunicative, transparency has an important bearing on the representative function. The presence of the representatives in their constituencies is also an essential point. In some countries, parliaments may even provide funding to assist MPs in setting up offices in their constituencies and to offset the costs of travel.

In addition, citizens in new democracies often wish to actively exercise democratic freedoms by engaging with elected

representatives to improve the quality of life in their country. When opportunities for this engagement do not exist or are ineffective in changing government policy, support for democracy is eroded.

In some countries, MPs may be expected to lobby on behalf of their constituencies for specific projects or financial considerations. The representative role of MPs requires that they return to their constituencies and demonstrate their accomplishments. Aside from re-engaging constituents in dialogue, sometimes MPs may also provide other types of constituency services, including casework (i.e. helping to solve constituents’ problems). The establishment of “local parliamentary offices” (e.g. in Laos, Vietnam, China) or “parliamentary conferences” which essentially entail “transporting” the parliament or committee to the provinces, the creation of information centers for the parliament’s visitors and the organization of ‘youth parliaments’ are other examples of this active dialogue between citizens and parliaments.

It is also common for parliaments to have bureaus specifically designed to engage with other parliaments and institutions from foreign countries. Indeed under the parliamentary function of representation, the establishment and maintenance of relations with other parliaments should also be mentioned; this can range from the simple exchange of information to formal visits conducted on a reciprocal basis. These “parliamentary exchanges” enhance ties with other countries and facilitate the sharing of ideas, values, knowledge and experience. The international relations of the parliaments and their members can also take place thanks to the parliamentary associations and inter-parliamentary groups.