

# Background Note 2



## All Africa Parliamentary Conference on the MDGs

22<sup>nd</sup> to 24<sup>th</sup> of May 2012  
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

## Accountability for Achieving the MDGs: The Role of Parliaments



The Conference organisers are grateful to Mr. Dyfan Jones, International Expert on Parliamentary Development for the production of this paper.

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# **Accountability for Achieving the MDGs: The Role of Parliaments**

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# Accountability for Achieving the MDGs: The Role of Parliaments

## 1.0 Introduction

The world is now well beyond the mid-point between adoption of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the target date of 2015. Despite progress towards achievement of some of the targets in Africa, numerous goals and targets are likely to be missed unless additional, strengthened or corrective action is taken urgently.

Recognising the central role of Parliaments in achieving the MDGs is an important step in accelerating progress. In 2010, the United Nations Millennium Campaign (UN MC) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) produced a manual on Parliamentary Engagement with the MDGs outlining crucial interventions that Parliaments can undertake in this field. This manual, which is available on the UN MC and UNDP websites ([www.endpoverty.org](http://www.endpoverty.org) and [www.undp.org](http://www.undp.org)), has been distributed to Parliaments across the world and is being used in order to assist in developing the capacity of Parliaments to engage with the MDGs.

In 2011, the UNDP Regional Service Centre for Eastern and Southern Africa rolled out an initiative to work with regional bodies, national Parliaments and sub-national legislatures to increase their capacity to engage with the MDGs. This paper builds on the 2010 manual and the content of the training workshops held with Parliaments and furthermore provides a rationale for increased Parliamentary engagement with the MDGs in Africa, a summary of the challenges faced by African Parliaments when engaging with the MDGs and an outline of possible solutions to those challenges.

## 2.0 The MDGs and the Role of Parliaments

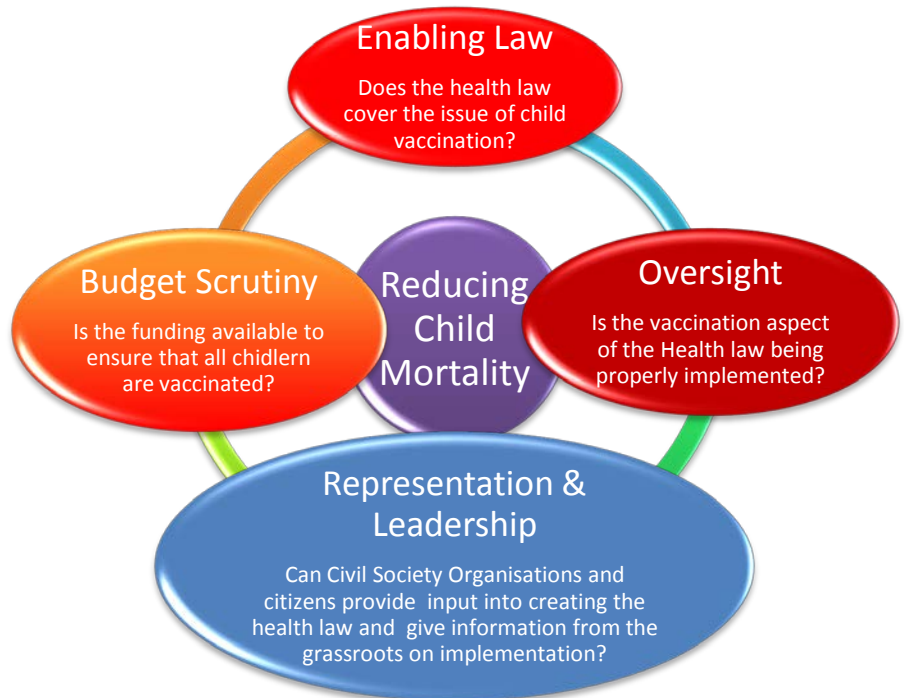
Whilst it was Governments who signed up to the MDGs on behalf of their respective countries and ultimately have the responsibility to deliver the targets, Parliaments in Africa have a central role to play in pursuit of reaching the agreed goals. The central role that Parliaments can play in reducing poverty in respective African countries and attaining the MDGs has been further reinforced in international agreements such as the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness in 2005 and the Accra Agenda for Action in 2008.

Parliaments have many functions and responsibilities but the main functions of the vast majority if not all of Parliaments in Africa include legislation, oversight, budget scrutiny and representation. There is overlap and clear links between these four functions and the delivery of MDGs in the African continent as a whole.

As national legislatures, Parliaments in Africa are key bodies in the law making process. Although the exact powers of Parliaments with regards to developing, amending or approving laws will be different from country to country, Parliaments in most African countries are the central bodies with regards to the passing laws.

The legislative role of a Parliament can ensure that the necessary enabling legislation to make progress towards the MDG targets is in place (for example, with regards to reaching the target on MDG 4, making sure that a health law addresses the issue of vaccinations).

The oversight role is a central responsibility in Parliaments and the MDGs provide a unique reference point to allow Parliaments to analyse whether the targets are on track to being met and whether poverty is being reduced in their respective country. If Parliaments do not take the lead in ensuring oversight of progress towards the MDGs it is unlikely that any other national body will step in to fulfil this vital role. The oversight role of Parliaments allows them to hold to account the Government and other stakeholders with regards to MDG related policy implementation (for example, with regards to reaching the target on MDG 4, overseeing whether the Government is effectively implementing a new law on vaccinations).



In addition, scrutinising and approving the national budget is the responsibility of national Parliaments that are in a position to assess whether financial resources are being prioritised in the most effective way to make progress towards the MDGs (for example, with regards to reaching the target on MDG 4, making sure there is enough funding available to vaccinate all children).

Most Parliaments are able to raise issues or concerns with the Government on behalf of citizens in order to adjust MDG related policies to make them more effective and better address the needs of citizens. It should be the role of every Parliament in Africa to oversee and scrutinise whether the country is reaching these targets and the role of every Parliamentarian to raise issues of concern relating to the MDGs on behalf of their constituents. The exact representation role of MPs and of Parliaments can take many forms in different countries depending on a number of factors such as the electoral system used to elect or select Members of the legislatures. It will however usually include ensuring that citizens, different stakeholders and civil society groups have a voice at the national level and are involved in national governance issues and the MDGs. It also includes providing feedback to citizens on MDG issues (for example, with regards to reaching the target on MDG 4, checking what citizens think about the issue of vaccination and the implementation of the law, using their opinions to make changes to the law or the

way in which the law is being implemented and giving citizens feedback on how progress being made on this issue).

Therefore, Parliaments are key actors in African countries and are in the unique position of being bodies that usually encompass representation from different geographical areas, different social or ethnic groups and different political groups and traditions. Ensuring that Parliaments engage with the MDGs not only increases a sense of national ownership but can also lead to improved progress on the road towards delivering the MDGs. Parliaments are therefore the key institutions that can provide the accountability for achieving the MDGs. Without fully engaging Parliaments with the MDGs, it will be even more challenging for the African continent to reach the ambitious targets set in the MDGs by 2015.

### **3.0 Challenges faced by Parliaments in Ensuring Accountability for Achieving the MDGs**

Parliamentary engagement with the MDGs can take many forms and will differ from Parliament to Parliament within Africa depending on the political and constitutional circumstance in each country. In general terms, engaging with the MDGs means Parliaments getting more involved with the MDGs and MDG related issues and being the national institutions that provide the necessary national accountability for achieving the MDGs.

Therefore, effective Parliamentary engagement with the MDGs means increasing Parliamentary involvement or focus on the MDGs, assessing whether a country is making progress towards achieving the MDGs and playing a role in accelerating progress towards achieving the MDGs. This involvement or 'engagement' will revolve around some of the main functions of the Parliament; legislation, oversight, budget scrutiny and representation. There are also some areas of importance that cut across all functions and there are ways in which Parliaments can make the MDGs central to their work. In addition, it is important that Parliaments not only engage with the MDGs, but that Parliaments are *seen* to be engaging with the MDGs in order to demonstrate to citizens, the Executive and the wider world, the support of the Parliament for the MDGs.

However, despite general recognition of the central role of Parliaments, it should be noted that to date many Parliaments have faced significant challenges in effectively engaging with the MDGs. The challenges broadly fall into two main categories; Firstly, the difficulty in accessing information on the MDGs or progress being made towards the MDGs in specific countries, and secondly ensuring that the Parliament is able to utilise existing structures, or create new internal structures or processes, in order for the legislature to fully engage with the MDGs.

In order for Parliaments and Parliamentarians to be effective in providing accountability for progress made in achieving the MDGs they must receive accurate

and up to date information on the MDGs and progress being made towards achieving the MDGs in their respective country.

To ensure that Parliaments are in a position to provide effective accountability for the MDGs, it is crucial that Parliaments regularly and automatically receives Government reports and other formal reports on the MDGs. Although continent wide research on the current engagement of African Parliaments with the MDGs is lacking, recent surveys highlight that Parliaments in many African countries are being sidelined and do not, for example, debate MDG country reports or receive regular national updates on the MDGs.

It is equally important for Parliaments to be aware of which stakeholders are involved in implementing policies and projects which aim to make progress towards achieving the MDGs. In most countries, National Governments, Local Governments, Non-Government State Bodies, International Development Partners and Civil Society Organisations all contribute to the achievement of the MDGs. For a Parliament to fully engage with MDG related issues, it is important that information is shared and interaction occurs between the Parliament and all of the relevant stakeholders. This information and interaction can come in the form of formal documentation as well as in workshops or briefing sessions for Parliamentarians. As will be expanded upon later in this paper, whilst receiving information from Governments is crucial, these events can be more sustainable and successful if there is also involvement from Civil Society Organisations (CSOs).

Although one-off information gathering events such as breakfast meetings and MDG workshops or conferences can be useful in themselves, incorporating these events into a continuous process of Parliamentary engagement by ensuring that such events become regular fixtures in the Parliamentary calendar is a more effective way for Parliaments to engage with the MDGs. For example, these one-off events can become more permanent by holding annual briefing sessions for Parliamentarians on the MDGs and the progress being made towards achieving the MDGs either informally through workshops or formally through a Parliamentary debate.

Furthermore, ensuring that Parliamentarians understand the breadth and depth of such a wide range of constantly evolving policy issues as those incorporated in the MDGs is a challenge in all Parliaments. Parliamentarians are usually overburdened with many issues and responsibilities, and therefore ensuring that the MDGs remain at the forefront of their minds and central to the Parliamentary agenda can be challenging. There are many different formal and informal mechanisms that Parliaments can use to ensure that Parliamentarians remain well informed on the MDGs.

Another important way in which Parliamentarians can become better aware of the MDGs and the role that Parliaments can play in achieving progress towards the

MDGs is through engaging with regional or international parliamentary networks. Events such as the All Africa Parliamentarians Conference on the MDGs 2012, and other similar events organised by International organisations such as the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) or the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) and regional networks such as the Pan African Parliament, the East Africa Legislative Assembly (EALA) and Southern African Development Community Parliamentary Forum (SADC PF) can be useful forums for Parliamentarians to discuss the MDGs and share good practice about ways in which national Parliaments have engaged with the MDGs.

Finally, one of the challenges that many Parliaments also face is the high turnover of Parliamentarians after national elections. Whilst one-off events may have informed Parliamentarians of the MDGs, some of these Parliamentarians may be replaced following national elections by new Parliamentarians whose knowledge of the MDGs may be limited. Therefore, in order for a new Parliament to be able to engage with the MDGs from the very outset, policy briefings on the MDGs can be incorporated into any induction or orientation programme that a Parliament arranges for newly elected Parliamentarians.

#### **4.0 Structures and Mechanisms used by Parliaments to increase engagement with the MDGs and provide more effective accountability to achieve the MDGs**

In addition to the lack of up to date and accurate information on progress towards attaining the MDGs, the second significant challenge faced by Parliaments in Africa has been ensuring that within the Parliament itself there are structures in place to provide effective accountability for the MDGs.

There are a number of arenas being used by Parliaments worldwide in order to provide the effective accountability needed for the MDGs. The full plenary session of Parliament offers a number of opportunities for Parliamentarians to engage with the MDGs in terms of legislation, oversight and representation. Questioning the Government or the proposer of MDG related legislation on the purpose of the legislation and the likely impact of the draft legislation on progress towards attaining the MDGs focuses debate on the MDGs and ensures that an MDG focussed justification of the legislation is given both to Parliament and the country as a whole. Furthermore, holding MDG related debates or questioning relevant Government Ministers is part of the oversight process and can also provide an effective springboard for Parliamentary engagement with the MDGs.

Whilst raising the MDGs or MDG related topics in full plenary legislative sessions can prove useful, especially in terms of raising the profile of the MDGs and highlighting political commitment to achieving the MDGs, many Parliaments have



seen increased use of Parliamentary Committees as effective mechanisms to improve the legislative process and provide increased accountability and oversight for achieving the MDGs.

Using Parliamentary Committees to engage with the MDGs both during the legislative process and to provide oversight, there are two options open to Parliaments in Africa. Firstly, Parliaments can use existing Committees which cover MDG related subject areas such as Health Committees, Education Committees, Environment Committees and so forth. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this has been the case in most African countries, and as will be outlined later in this paper, a recent survey has shown this to be the preferred option of most Parliaments in the SADC region. The benefits of working through existing Subject or Portfolio Committees is that they are usually well established, have built up expertise in their specific fields and often have some resources to facilitate the work of the Committee. They are more likely to be able to scrutinise MDG related legislation or policies in depth and may have a lighter workload compared to more general MDG Committees or Poverty Reduction Committees that are responsible for the whole spectrum of the MDGs.

Secondly, Parliaments can create an MDG Committee within the Parliament to scrutinise legislation related to the MDGs or to provide oversight of the progress made in achieving the MDGs. Some Parliaments in Africa, such as Nigeria and Zimbabwe, have moved to create a specific MDG Committee in order to provide additional accountability for the MDGs in Parliament. Some of the benefits of creating a specific MDG Committee in the Parliament include creating greater awareness of the MDGs amongst both the Parliament and the Government, ensuring that legislation is scrutinised according to its impact on the MDGs and creating a central focus for MDG issues within the Parliamentary structure.

Finally, some Parliaments have opted to create complementary structures to either existing Portfolio Committees or specific MDG Committees. One way of ensuring a continuous focus within Parliament on the MDGs is the creation of a MDG Parliamentary caucus or group. A cross-party caucus or interest group in the Parliament can become a focal point for MDG related activities, can provide coordination amongst Parliamentary Committee and can also complement the work of MDG Committees, especially in bicameral Parliaments.

Although MDG caucuses or groups may not have the same formal powers as MDG Parliamentary Committees, they can be a useful mechanism to bring MPs together to discuss MDG related issues and provide coordination between different Committees and between two Houses in a bicameral Parliament. In addition, MDG Parliamentary caucuses or groups can be a statement of intent by the Parliament and highlight the importance that Parliamentarians attach to the MDGs; they can

become a liaison point for Government and International donors on MDG issues and can ensure that MDGs remain central to the Parliamentary agenda.

## **The benefits of the different structures for Parliamentary engagement with the MDGs**

### **Using Existing Subject Committees**

- Committees are usually well established;
- Subject expertise built up within the Committee Membership;
- No need to change the Rules of Procedure to create a new Committee and therefore Parliament can move more quickly on MDG issues;
- Often more time to scrutinise legislation or provide oversight than MDG Committees that consider all MDG related laws and policies.

### **Creating a new MDG Committee**

- Creates greater awareness of the MDGs amongst all Parliamentarians in the Parliament;
- Makes a clear public statement of the importance that Parliament attaches to the MDGs;
- Ensures that draft legislation is justified with an MDG focus and makes tracking MDG related legislation easier;
- Dedicates more time to oversight of MDG related policies and programmes;
- Creates a central MDG focus within the Parliament as an Institution.

### **Creating an MDG Caucus or Cross-Party Group in Parliament**

- Easier to establish and more flexible than creating a formal Parliamentary Committee;
- Forum for discussion on the MDGs in a less formal setting compared to a Parliamentary Committee.
- Provides for regular interaction between Members of Parliament, CSOs and International Development Partners.

Provides coordination between existing Parliamentary Committee and between the two Houses in a bicameral Parliament.

## **5.0 Working with CSOs to provide increased accountability for achieving the MDGs**

As outlined earlier in this paper, one of the major challenges faced by Parliaments in Africa is that of receiving relevant and recent data and information relating to the MDGs. Whilst Government, and often the Bureau of Statistics, will be the main provider of such information, Members of Parliament and Parliamentary Committees are in a position to gather relevant information from Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and other Civil Society Organisations (CSOs).

Interaction between Parliaments and CSOs is usually most effective through Parliamentary Committees. Scrutinising MDG related legislation in Subject or Portfolio Committees or specific MDG Committees often allows Parliaments the opportunity to gather the views of citizens and groups who may be affected by MDG related policies or laws. The ability of Parliamentary Committees to invite different stakeholders before Committees will depend on the internal rules of procedure of the Parliament, but hearing from representatives of CSOs increases the access of Parliamentarians to information on important issues such as the MDGs. Although Government Ministers can outline Government policy with different sectors, there is clear benefit for Parliamentarians to hear the views of CSOs on the reality on the ground in the country and their constituencies.

For example, if a law relating to HIV and AIDS is before Parliament or a Parliamentary Committee is undertaking an investigation into the effectiveness of HIV policy, the Parliamentary Committee may want to hear directly the opinions of CSOs and citizens representing people living with HIV and AIDS, health professionals and other groups who may be directly affected by the new proposed law or the existing policy. Gathering the views of these stakeholders will assist Parliaments in assessing the likely impact of the legislation, whether the proposed law will help to halt and reverse the spread of HIV and AIDS in the country [MDG 6] or the effectiveness of current policy.

In addition to interacting with CSOs during the legislative process, to improve oversight and provide more effective accountability for achieving the MDGs, examples from Parliaments have also highlighted the effectiveness of Parliaments working with CSOs during the budget process in order to receive a gender analysis or pro-poor analysis of national budgets and in working with CSOs to raise the profile of the MDGs in the country as a whole.

## **6.0 A Snapshot of the Role of Parliaments in the SADC Region in providing Accountability for achieving the MDGs**

In a SADC Parliamentary Forum Workshop on Parliamentary Engagement with the MDGs held in Johannesburg on 31<sup>st</sup> August – 1<sup>st</sup> September 2011, participants from eight SADC Parliaments completed a brief questionnaire outlining current engagement with the MDGs in their respective Parliaments. Although not a detailed or rigorous survey, the results do provide a snapshot of current engagement efforts and outline some of the challenges faced by SADC Parliaments, and possibly Parliaments throughout Africa, in engaging with the MDGs and providing increased accountability for achieving the MDGs.

Although the majority of SADC Parliaments had held workshops or meetings on the MDGs in the past (85% of those responding to the questionnaire) only 15% of Parliaments had a programme in place for regular briefings sessions on the MDGs and progress being made in achieving the MDGs. In addition in 2011, most SADC Parliaments (71%) did not automatically and regularly receive MDG related documents from the Government and International Development Partners. These findings highlight the challenges faced by SADC Parliaments in receiving relevant and up to date information on the MDGs in order to allow them to fulfil their legislative, oversight and representation functions effectively. Without relevant, reliable and accurate data and information, providing accountability for achieving the MDGs has been challenging for the Parliaments.

In addition, turnover of Members of Parliament following elections can cause challenges for Parliaments in terms of ensuring continuity of engagement with the MDGs over a long period of time. MDG or MDG related policy briefings were part of induction and orientation programmes for new Parliamentarians in only 29% of the SADC Parliaments that responded to the questionnaire.

In terms of internal Parliamentary mechanisms utilised to provide increased accountability for achieving the MDGs, the vast majority of SADC Parliaments (85%) have opted to engage with the MDGs through existing Subject or Portfolio Committees rather than create a specific MDG Committee in the Parliament. However, in most SADC Parliaments (71%), the MDG Committee or the relevant subject have initiated investigations into progress made in attaining one or more of the MDGs. In 71% of SADC Parliaments these Committees have also been on field visits to see firsthand the impact of MDG related policies on communities.

One area that warrants particular attention is the fact that whilst there seems to be regular interaction between SADC Parliaments and Governments on the MDGs and MDG related issues there is relatively little interaction between Parliaments and International Development Partners or, in particular, with CSOs. According to this snapshot of current Parliamentary engagement with the MDGs in the SADC region, only 43% of Parliaments have invited International Development Partners and other key stakeholders to meetings to give evidence on their input to MDG projects and only 29% of SADC Parliaments have asked CSOs to come to meetings to give their opinions on MDG related issues. As highlighted earlier in this paper, CSOs can work closely with MPs and provide Parliaments with much needed information and expertise on MDG related issues. Moreover, if this snapshot from the SADC region is reflective of the broader situation in Africa, this resource seems at present to be significantly under-utilised in the majority of SADC parliaments.

## **7.0 Conclusion: The way forward for Parliaments**

African Parliaments must intensify their engagement with the MDGs in order to be catalysts to achieve progress in reaching the MDGs. This background paper has highlighted the crucial legislative, oversight, budget scrutiny and representative roles that Parliaments in Africa can, and must, play if Parliaments are to provide effective accountability for achieving the MDGs.

There are a number of capacity building measures that Parliaments can introduce in order to fully equip Parliamentarians to provide increasingly effective oversight of the Executive and other stakeholders tasked with implementing policies relating to the MDGs. Workshops, conferences, training sessions for Parliament staff and MPs and regular policy briefings by Ministries and Civil Society Organisations can all play a role in providing increased Parliamentary engagement with the MDGs.

Ensuring that Parliaments have effective internal structures in place to provide accountability for achieving the MDGs is a crucial step for all parliaments. Whether Parliaments move towards creating MDG Committees, Caucuses or Groups or decide to mainstream accountability for achieving the MDGs within existing Parliamentary Committees, ensuring that the right structures are put in place can be seen a pivotal to the success of Parliaments on issues related to the MDGs.

In addition to the work of national Parliaments in providing accountability for achieving the MDGs the important role that Regional Networks and Parliaments can provide should not be underestimated. The creation of Regional or continent wide MDG Committees or MDG groups can provide a focus for MDG Parliamentary activities throughout Africa and can be used to develop benchmarks and guidelines for African Parliaments on best practice in engagement with the MDGs. Through increased interaction between Parliaments at a regional and global level, Parliaments in Africa will be capacitated to play an increasingly central role with the MDGs.

With only three years to go until the 2015 deadline for achieving the MDGs, some may question the relevance of Parliaments playing a role in engaging with the MDGs and providing the accountability needed to achieve the MDGs. However, development will not stop in 2015 and the post 2015 development agenda will be central to the continuing growth and prosperity of countries in Africa. Parliaments that can effectively provide accountability for achieving the MDGs will be in pole position in shaping, influencing and providing accountability and oversight for not only the MDGs but also the post 2015 development agenda.

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