

**UNDP Regional parliamentary working group**  
***Parliaments and Crisis Prevention and Recovery in West Africa***

**BRIEF REPORT**



**Barcelona, Spain (30 November – 03 December 2010)**

**Key Points:**

- ✓ Effective and empowered parliaments and political parties can act as actors in crisis prevention and post-conflict recovery through mediation, the promotion of dialogue, the adoption of conflict sensitive laws which address the very sources of violence, a better representation of the population by increasing the political participation of women and minority groups.
- ✓ Effective and empowered local parliaments and transitional councils also play a role in crisis prevention and recovery: diverse local identities are better taken into account by local parliaments, where as transitional councils contribute to the establishment of consensual constitutional, organic and electoral laws; the setting up of political institutions to manage and monitor the transition process; the implementation of national reconciliation mechanisms and promotion of national unity and social dialogue.
- ✓ Parliaments need to better organize, define, and regulate the relation and division of work with CSOs. They also need to ensure the enforcement and oversight of laws after they are voted.

The United Nations Development Programme (**UNDP**), in collaboration with the Barcelona International Peace Resource Center, with the financial support of the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, organized a Regional Parliamentary Working Group entitled '*Parliaments and Crisis Prevention and Recovery in West Africa*' in Barcelona (**Spain**), on 30 November - 03 December, 2010. The working group was a direct follow up to the regional seminar focusing on the same theme and was also hosted by UNDP in Accra (**Ghana**) on June 27-29, 2010. Its purpose lies within the framework of UNDP's initiative and strategy which aims to empower parliaments as actors in peacebuilding and post-conflict recovery, as stipulated in '*UNDP's Guidelines for the International Community on Parliaments, Crisis Prevention and Recovery*'. The working group brought together around 30 selected participants including members of national parliaments, transitional councils

and parliamentary staff from West Africa, as well as representatives from the Secretariat of the Economic Community of West African States Parliament (**ECOWAS**), the Parliamentary Centre, and UNDP colleagues.

The working group provided an opportunity to foster sub-regional parliamentary coordination and collaboration as well as facilitate south-south solutions and sharing of experiences related to crisis prevention and recovery in West Africa by offering reform-minded parliamentarians the adequate space and time to actively engage in discussions and more specifically: reflect on armed violence and political parties in crisis prevention and recovery on the basis of background research papers commissioned by UNDP; identify mediation and dialogue opportunities for parliamentarians; review the UNDP self-assessment tool on parliaments and crisis prevention by discussing the two national case studies where the tool was piloted in 2010 (Togo and Guinea-Bissau); consolidate the sub-regional parliamentary network on crisis prevention and recovery; identify and approve general principles (benchmarks) and key activities for the 2011 work plan, to be carried out in collaboration with the ECOWAS Parliament and partner organizations.

Participants underlined that democratic societies do not and should not suppress conflicts (since they are only an expression of diverse opinions which is the basis of democracy) but establish *effective* political institutions such as parliaments that can regulate and channel conflicts to avoid the outbreak and escalation of violence. **The role of parliaments** in managing violence includes the adoption of conflict sensitive laws which address the very sources of violence (poverty, availability of arms, unemployment of youth, political contestation, etc.) by voting laws which ensure for instance the equal distribution of resources, the equal access to education and employment opportunities, the restriction of the fabrication of arms, etc. Participants mentioned the benefits of having structured dialogues in the sub region to push for the harmonisation of these laws. That being said, participants noted that the normative force alone of parliaments wasn't enough to guarantee crisis prevention and insisted on the importance of '*law enforcement*' and oversight - mainly achieved through the establishment of mechanisms which ensure the effective implementation of laws once they are voted.



When it comes to **mediation**, the working group identified multiple areas where national parliaments can play an active role (electoral disputes; post-conflict/peace building initiatives; chieftaincy disputes; land and border disputes, etc.) by providing a **venue for dialogue** between various belligerent groups. Participants put forward the different tools and mechanisms at the disposal of parliaments to carry out their mediation role in terms of promoting **dialogue**, interactions, and negotiations through plenary debates, reconciliation commissions, committee work and cross-party caucuses, constituency/field visits, cooperation with the ECOWAS Parliament, etc. Through *effective* parliaments, governments and civil society are able to interface. Although participants recognized the undeniable role played by civil society organizations (CSOs) as '*democracy supporting institutions*' in terms of all the assistance, facilitation and complementarity they provide, they also expressed their frustration as they consider the role of parliaments is being overlooked and minimized by the proliferation of CSOs and many donors choose to support CSOs rather than strengthen the parliamentary institution directly. Some participants also questioned the legitimacy of certain CSOs referring to their affiliation to political parties. In this regard, the working group agreed on the importance to better organize, define, and regulate the relation and division of work between parliaments and CSOs.

**Political parties** were also recognized by the working group as relevant actors in the peacebuilding / statebuilding process. When it comes to preventing electoral and political violence for example, in theory –

*effective* political parties can help ensure a trustworthy electoral process through inter-party dialogue to ensure more responsible campaigning of political actors, and civic and voter education of their militants. In post-conflict and fragile states, comprehensive dialogue between parties, political leaders can make informed decisions to ensure an efficient, peaceful and responsive state. However, in practice, poor inter-party relations make it difficult for parties to effectively represent the population; most of them suffer from weak internal structures and are ethnically or religiously ingrained. In this regard, there were a number of suggestions and examples on how political parties and parliaments can **increase the political participation of women**. Better representing the population through the diversification of its members (including women and representatives of minority groups), was seen as a way political parties and parliaments can prevent conflict. Moreover, participants agreed on the need to elaborate constrainable codes of conduct for political parties which foster democratic principles and a culture of ethics, thereby inducing the professionalization of political parties. Participants also brought up the importance of having clear and fixed rules and regulations on how political parties are funded.

Furthermore, the relevance and legitimacy of **local parliaments and transitional councils** in terms of crisis prevention and recovery were thoroughly questioned and debated by the parliamentary working group. The federal political system, through the model of the Spanish state, was presented to showcase how diverse local social identities are better taken into account by local parliaments thus contributing to the prevention of crisis. Through the analysis of the Spanish Parliament and the Parliament of Catalonia, participants learned more about the constitutional rules and institutions which can help regulate the relation between the two levels. Through the case studies of Guinea and Niger, the working group acknowledged the importance of national councils of transition in crisis prevention and recovery. Although their members are not elected, they represent all the socio-economic entities of a nation and can contribute to the establishment of consensual constitutional, organic and electoral laws; the setting up of political institutions to manage and monitor the transition process such as independent electoral commissions or crisis management committees; the implementation of national reconciliation mechanisms and promotion of national unity and social dialogue - all which pave the way to peaceful and stable transitional societies.



**At the regional level,** the parliamentary working group acknowledged the effective contribution of the ECOWAS Parliament to the maintenance of peace and security within the sub-region through: joint committees of MPs to monitor intelligence/security issues; harmonization of security laws to respond to the threat of drug trafficking and small arms in particular (such as the legislation to ban small arms and light weapons). The notion of *'parliamentary diplomacy'* was highlighted by the participants and discussed in the framework of the

capacity of the ECOWAS Parliament to act as a mediator and provide a venue for dialogue and interactions with national parliaments to monitor crisis/engage in negotiations (i.e.: Niger and Guinea). However, as the ECOWAS Parliament enters its third Legislature and slowly moves from an "ECOWAS of States" to and "ECOWAS of the People", embracing its ambitious 2020 vision which expands its scope of activities and mandate – the institution is impeded by a number of constraints (no direct elections, no legislative power, lack of administrative and financial autonomy vis-a-vis the commission in particular, high turnover of MPs, etc.). In order to surpass these obstacles, representatives of the ECOWAS Secretariat stressed the major need to enforce the Parliament institutionally and enhance its co-decision and law-making powers as a full,



functional and *effective* regional Parliament through capacity building and provision of resources to: a) strengthen first response intervention and monitoring in emerging crises situations; b) enhance liaison with national parliaments / foster effective collaboration especially in information sharing and provision of the necessary expertise to compliment and support the efforts of national parliaments; c) increase the autonomy of the ECOWAS parliament so that it can further focus on political/peace/security issues and meditation/dialogue activities; d) strengthen its capacities to sanction recalcitrant member states for non compliance with protocols and conventions. In this respect, the working group pointed out the worth of looking into the functioning of the model of the regional parliament in East Africa and the advantages of having joint sessions with the African Union. The new ECOWAS legislature and agenda for 2011 present new opportunities to further push this agenda forward.

The parliamentary working group was also an opportunity for the representatives of national parliaments and the ECOWAS parliament to discuss and agree upon a set of **key priorities regarding UNDP's 2011 work plan**. **At the national level**, UNDP will implement the activities and recommendations of the evaluations of the self-assessment tool in Togo and Guinea Bissau; and, on the basis of additional demands from parliaments, further engage UNDP country offices in the region. Participants will also mobilize and engage their colleagues and parliament in their respective country on crisis prevention issues using the different material provided (such as the knowledge products, movie "Testimonials from MPs and practitioners on crisis prevention and recovery in West Africa, etc.). **At the regional level**, UNDP will continue to consolidate the network of parliamentarians by encouraging its members to engage on issues relevant to crisis prevention (through scrutinizing the media, work of the parliament, parliamentary committees and political parties, constituency visits, attendance to meetings at the national, regional and international levels) and disseminate good practices and lessons learned from their respective countries, exchange experiences, identify and pilot south-south solutions and share recommendations, including on the trusted area of AGORA and the group related to "Parliaments and crisis prevention in West Africa" in particular, where members will be able to blog and share articles on a regular basis, connect members of parliaments and parliamentary staff, comment on articles and lessons learned posted on AGORA, provide feedback on suggested research or comparative case studies to be conducted by the UNDP. UNDP will also continue to work in close collaboration with the ECOWAS Parliament and finalize a handbook/practice guide on Parliaments and Crisis Prevention and Recovery compiling regional research and national case studies. **At the global level**, UNDP will continue to contribute to the development of additional key learning modules to be created on-line under the dedicated West Africa page available in French and English on AGORA ([www.agora-parl.org](http://www.agora-parl.org)) - as part of the knowledge building on parliamentary development and crisis prevention and recovery.

