Briefing Note

AGORA Portal for Parliamentary Development

PMOs and Parliamentary Innovation

Parliamentary monitoring organizations (PMOs) play an important, and increasingly active, role in monitoring and assessing the functioning of parliaments or their individual members, often seeking to facilitate and promote public knowledge of, and participation in, parliamentary processes. Over 190 of these organizations monitor more than 80 national parliaments worldwide.

How Parliamentary Monitors Use Technology

A 2011 survey by the National Democratic Institute and World Bank Institute found that some 40 percent of PMOs were using e-democracy and e-participation tools, often referred to as parliamentary informatics. While informatics took off initially in developed democracies in Europe and North America, their use has increased significantly in Southeast Asia and Latin America, as well as in parts of Africa, Asia and the Middle East. Parliamentary informatics tools are being used mainly to aggregate and visualize parliamentary information, with a growing catalog of citizen-engagement tools. Of course, many PMOs work to advance both goals at once, enhancing access to parliamentary information while giving citizens and legislators the tools they need to communicate and collaborate.

Aggregation and visualization of parliamentary information

Many PMOs strive to make legislative processes easier for citizens (as well as legislators) to access and understand. They have used information and communication technologies to automate the aggregation, organization and analysis of data, and information about parliaments, particularly in countries with access to large amounts of raw parliamentary data (e.g., Hansard or parliamentary transcripts that can be “mined” for information; a large number of recorded votes; detailed information on campaign finance or asset disclosures). Other commonly disseminated information includes MP profiles, pending or approved legislation, bill summaries, and summaries of a parliament‘s activities in a session or year. PMOs typically seek to present information without political bias, because the impartiality of their work is critical to their ability to build a credible reputation among MPs and citizens.

PMOs have also been exceptionally creative in using informatics to graphically display data, for example, generating charts, graphs, maps and other visual content. These images help make parliamentary information more appealing to citizens and help reveal relationships among complex factors affecting democratic development (such as the role of money in politics).

Examples of sites that organize, disseminate and visualize information include:

- OpenCongress.org, developed by the U.S.-based Sunlight Foundation.
- TheyWorkforYou.com in the United Kingdom
- Ciudadano Inteligente in Chile
- Mzalendo in Kenya
- Marsad Majles, a project of Al Bawsala in Tunisia
- Fundacion Directorio Legislativo in Argentina
- Sinar Project in Malaysia
- RegardsCitoyens in France
- KohoVolit in the Czech Republic (a leader in visualization of parliamentary data)
- Que Hacen los Diputados in Spain
- Chesno in Ukraine
- People's Assembly in South Africa
- Congreso Visible in Colombia
- Otvoreni Parlament (Open Parliament) in Serbia

Where data is unavailable, or available but not in a format that lends itself to scraping or visualization, PMOs may focus on advocacy for parliamentary adherence to open data standards. PMOs are increasingly engaged in coordinating global advocacy efforts around standards for parliamentary transparency, including guidance on the use of open data standards.

Citizen Engagement. Web-based and mobile communication platforms, including ubiquitous social-media services such as WhatsApp and Facebook, have the potential to expand citizen participation in government by allowing new audiences to follow parliamentary business and contact their legislators. More and more PMOs are experimenting with new or existing platforms as a way to modernize civic engagement and constituent relations. Examples include:

- Abgeordneten Watch (Parliament Watch) in Germany
- GovAssurances in Ghana (a collaboration between a parliamentary committee and a media-training organization)
- Nouabook in Morocco
- Osoigo in Spain
- Councilmatic in U.S. cities

PMOs are demonstrating enormous creativity in developing these tools, but this does not automatically translate into a sustained user base. Participation in such activities, for instance, may require a substantial time commitment that citizens may not be prepared to make. Moreover, some websites that facilitate dialogue between citizens and MPs offer a clear benefit to the user in the form of an MP response or access to information, but not all websites present such a reward. Developers of crowdsourcing-reliant websites need to look critically at the assumption that innovation will lead to greater citizen participation, and account for effective outreach to potential users.

Factors a PMO Should Consider When Using Parliamentary Informatics

When an organization is contemplating the use of parliamentary informatics to bolster its monitoring activities, it should consider the issues below.

1. Planning Strategically. Informatics tools are not effective in all environments and under all circumstances. It is imperative that PMOs have clear objectives in mind when considering the use of informatics and a strategic plan for reaching out and engaging citizens once a website or app is implemented.

2. Availability of Parliamentary Information. Tools that aggregate information from websites are most effective when tailored to specific data that is available directly on parliament websites and in machine-readable formats (such as XML). While these tools can also aggregate news articles, they are less effective when used in this manner and cannot produce the same type of data. When parliamentary data is unavailable, PMOs should consider concentrating their efforts on developing tools to help address the lack of information. Even with access, a PMO has to thoroughly understand the legislative process before it can understand how to organize parliamentary data.

3. Capacity to Adapt and Improve Informatics Tools. Data-aggregation tools may not be labor-intensive once implemented, but several PMOs have cautioned that these tools often require numerous adaptations after the website is launched and visitor preferences become known. Methodological changes may also require further, potentially costly, changes to the website. When considering employing informatics, organizations must factor in the technical and financial costs involved in not only building them, but also sustaining them.

4. Accounting for Characteristics of Target Audience. Some informatics can be more effective when aimed at a specific audience. Crowdsourcing tools, for example, may be best utilized for information sharing among specific groups, like single-issue policy activists. Determining a clear audience to target when developing informatics can help ensure that projects are informatics enabled, rather than informatics driven.

Collaboration Across Borders and Sectors

As the use of parliamentary informatics has spread to more and more countries, networks such as OpeningParliament.org, the Open Government Partnership's Legislative Openness Working Group, Open Knowledge and the Personal Democracy Forum have helped disseminate project models and best practices among PMOs.

Concurrently, software developers have recognized that many PMOs are "reinventing the wheel" in building custom monitoring websites with similar purposes — such as presenting information about MPs, speeches, or electoral districts. In April 2014, the Poplus federation convened its first meeting of coders and civic activists, with the aim of minimizing duplication of efforts and collaborating on the creation of free, open-source software 'components' that can be used to build civic websites. In August 2014, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) launched the Democracy Toolkit (DemTools), a set of four open source web apps designed to help civic groups organize, connect governments with constituents, manage election data, and foster civic debate — some of the most common challenges NDI's partners around the world face.

One of the tools in the DemTools suite is CiviMP, a customized version of the open-source contact management system, CiviCRM. It enables MPs to keep in touch with their constituents via email, SMS, or printed mail merge. Legislators can easily track citizen requests using a casework management system while automated reports measure how often different types of problems occur and how rapidly issues are resolved. Easy-to-use tools that can be deployed cheaply help parliaments and civic groups around the world access the same sorts of sophisticated webapps empowering their counterparts in wealthier countries. Of course, the tech itself is only one cost, as training and organizational change still take time and effort.

Civil society groups are not the only stakeholders engaged in fruitful cross-pollination and collaboration. MPs and parliamentary staff are also reaching out to tech-savvy PMOs, journalism organizations and computer-science students to collaborate on the creation or adoption of informatics tools.

Examples include:

- In **Brazil**, the Chamber of Deputies instituted a "Hacker Lab" which provides space for software programmers and developers to use public data for civic projects.
- The Parliament of **Ghana's** Government Assurances Committee worked with local organization Pen Plus Bytes to create GovAssurances, a Web-based and mobile platform that allows citizens to follow the Committee's work, send reports about ongoing government projects in their area, and relay comments to the Committee.
- In the **United Kingdom**, the Speaker's Commission on Digital Democracy has engaged the public in a vibrant conversation about the future of representation and the evolution of democratic government.

- In September 2014, as part of the first-ever Global Legislative Openness Week, several parliaments engaged civil society to explore tools for transparency and citizen engagement:
    - In **Israel**, the Knesset collaborated with civil society organization Hasadna to organize a workshop on open legislative data;
    - In **Australia**, civic hackers explored political donation data, previewed an upcoming vote tracker project and taught web scraping during the Open Australia Foundation's Hackfest: GLOW Edition. Staff from the Federal Parliamentary Library were in attendance, marking the first time that parliamentary staff had attended a hackathon in official capacity;
    - The Open **Myanmar** Initiative hosted an "Open Parliament Event Myanmar" with lectures by former and incumbent Members of Parliament, discussions with journalists, researchers and data experts, and an exhibition of parliamentary information and processes;
    - In **Guatemala**, members of Congress and experts from civil society met via Google Hangout with **Mexican** open-data experts to discuss implementing an open-government agenda;
    - Members of Parliament from **Afghanistan, Pakistan, Kenya and Mongolia** discussed legislative openness and citizen engagement in Washington, DC as part of a House Democracy Partnership exchange program.
- In the **United States**, members of Congress and legislative staff are participating in Hack4Congress, an event aimed at creating innovative tools to improve Congress' lawmaking, deliberative and citizen-engagement processes.

Challenges of Tech-Enabled Parliamentary Monitoring

Parliamentary informatics, because of their capacity to organize and make accessible large amounts of information, are particularly useful for collecting and redistributing information. However, the findings of the NDI/ World Bank Institute study suggest that informatics developers are drawn toward certain types of information. These tools appeared to be used most frequently for analyzing the work of individual MPs, rather than for macro-level analysis of parliamentary committees or parliaments as institutions.

This can raise the concern (shared by many PMOs) that parliamentary monitoring activities may, when conducted without sufficient rigor or caution, do more to increase cynicism of political processes than to stimulate reform, and may validate citizen distrust of parliaments rather than encourage them to play a greater role in the political process. For example, MP scorecards may use attendance statistics or other simplistic indicators, which capture only a small fraction of MP participation, to generate negative assessments of MP "performance."

As informatics tools evolve and expand, they will enable deeper analysis of parliamentary institutions along with broader public engagement, providing greater utility for the many PMOs whose work is

primarily focused on engaging MPs and supporting parliamentary processes. This kind of PMO work includes fulfilling MP requests, offering legislation, testifying in parliament and proposing codes of conduct. It is important, as parliamentary informatics are adopted by a broader range of PMOs, that such tools enable PMOs to meet these monitoring and support objectives, rather than driving PMO strategy and behavior. **Parliamentary monitoring should be technology-enabled, rather than technology-driven.**

There are also practical challenges associated with informatics. Parliaments that do not present substantive information in machine-readable formats limit the utility of the most effective informatics tools. And when such information is available, websites and apps can be expensive to maintain, often requiring numerous adaptations once they are deployed and user preferences become clear. Differences in the formats, standards and the basic structure of information provided by parliaments create obstacles to the development of software that can be shared across borders and applied to multiple parliaments. But more work is being undertaken by PMOs and international organizations to address these problems so that the most effective parliamentary monitoring tools can be used around the world.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Parliaments, PMOs and international organizations can all play a greater role in opening information and in developing tools and strategies that incentivize positive behaviors among MPs and encourage systemic reform, while minimizing tactics that may further degrade a parliament's reputation. In many cases, PMOs have relied on less-than-perfect analytic indicators, such as attendance statistics, because critical information about the work of parliaments – such as voting records, legislation under consideration, transcripts of proceedings, etc. – is not publicly available. This deprives PMOs and citizens of the opportunity to effectively assess the stances of MPs and parties, and contribute to policymaking. While recognizing that a measure of privacy may, for example, facilitate deal-making between political groups, parliaments have an obligation as representative institutions to ensure public access to basic information about the work that they conduct. The lack of availability of such information about many parliaments confirms the need for PMOs to bolster monitoring activities, particularly with respect to parliamentary transparency and openness, as well as to redouble efforts to facilitate citizen engagement in parliamentary processes.

For PMOs with access to information, informatics are not a panacea, and will not resolve many of the challenges that civic organizations routinely face. The NDI/ World Bank Institute survey and associated interviews supported two recommendations for organizations considering the adoption of parliamentary informatics:

1) Informatics should be viewed as tools, rather than as solutions, and

2) The effective implementation of informatics requires a plan with well-defined objectives.