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## REGIONAL SEMINAR REPORT

# *'The Evolving Relationship between Citizens and Parliaments in the Arab World'*

Rabat (Morocco), 5-6 June 2013



## Table of Contents

<b>I. Introduction .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>II. Opening Session .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>III. Citizens' and in particular young people's expectations of Parliament and its Members.....</b>	<b>6</b>
A. Citizens' and young people's expectations.....	6
B. Good practices from the region.....	7
<b>IV. Key issues, good practices and recommendations for MPs on enhancing relations between citizens and parliaments .....</b>	<b>9</b>
A. How do MPs manage the electorates' expectations at the local level.....	9
B. Translating citizens' concerns into parliamentary action .....	10
C. Codes of conduct: strengths and weaknesses .....	11
D. The potential of social media to improve the representative function.....	12
<b>V. Recommendations and way forward .....</b>	<b>13</b>
✓ Actions at the level of parliament.....	13
✓ Actions at the constituency level .....	13
✓ Actions towards civil society organizations .....	14
✓ Actions by parliamentarians at the individual level.....	14
<b>What advice would you give to a new Member of Parliament about how to build good relationships with citizens? .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Annex: Agenda.....</b>	<b>16</b>

## **I. Introduction**

A Regional Seminar on ‘*The Evolving Relationship between Citizens and Parliaments in the Arab World*’, was jointly organized by the Parliament of the Kingdom of Morocco, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), in Rabat, Morocco on the 5th and 6th of June 2013. The Seminar opened with the presentation of the first ever [Global Parliamentary Report](http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/democratic-governance/parliamentary_development/the-global-parliamentary-report/)<sup>1</sup> on the changing nature of parliamentary participation, jointly published by the IPU and UNDP. The Seminar initiated a high-level dialogue on how to strengthen the relationship between Parliament and citizens in the dynamic and evolving context of the Arab world.

40 parliamentarians from the following countries attended the two-day seminar: Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Mauritania, Oman, Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT), Sudan, Somalia, Tunisia and Morocco. The President of the Arab Parliament, his assistants, representatives of the IPU and UNDP and high level officials in Arab parliaments also participated in the Seminar. The lead author of the Global Report, Mr. Greg Power, also participated in the Seminar.

## **II. Opening Session**

The opening session was attended by a number of ambassadors accredited to Morocco and representatives of national and international civil society organizations. Inaugural speeches were delivered respectively by: H.E. Mr. Kareem Galab, Speaker of the Moroccan House of Representatives, H.E. Dr. Mohamed Al-Sheikh Bedallah, Speaker of the Moroccan House of Councilors, H.E. Abdelwahed Radi, President of the IPU, and Mrs. Rebeca Grynspan UN Under-Secretary-General and Associate Administrator of UNDP.



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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/democratic-governance/parliamentary\\_development/the-global-parliamentary-report/](http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/democratic-governance/parliamentary_development/the-global-parliamentary-report/)

The opening speeches stressed the:

- Importance of the Global Parliamentary Report on the changing nature of parliamentary representation, and on parliamentary initiatives and innovative experiences and practices offered to enhance parliamentary representation in different parts of the world;
- Progress made in Arab political systems and increase in citizens' demands and expectations from parliaments;
- Importance of the existence of a representative Parliament since, when absent, legitimacy remains incomplete and balance of power unstable;
- Importance of the representational function of Parliament and its role in ensuring outreach to civil society organizations and maintaining dialogue with them.

The presentation of the Global Parliamentary Report set out four main themes about the changing relationship between citizens and parliaments, which sought to shape the following discussions in the Seminar.

First, it addressed why parliaments seem to be both popular and unpopular at the same time. 190 of 193 countries in the world have parliamentary institutions. In the Arab region, the public's desire for voice and accountability since 2011 has tended to focus on the need for democratically elected parliaments and mass political parties to articulate citizens' concerns. In other countries, the pressure for change often revolves around greater constitutional powers for the Parliament, and the ability to hold government to account. Yet, opinion polls consistently put parliaments as one of the least-trusted institutions of state. In the Arab world, parliaments have historically been lackluster and ineffective. However, since the uprisings the institutions have been invested with huge public expectations which they have struggled to meet.



Second, changes in recent decades have sought to make parliaments more accountable to the public. This has happened in three main ways. Voters have more information than ever before about parliaments and politicians, and more routes for communication exist between the public and their representatives. At the same time parliaments have sought to make Members of Parliament (MPs) more accountable to voters by restricting some activities, such as outside interests and second jobs, and to avoid conflicts of interest. There has been a significant growth in the number of parliaments adopting a professional code of conduct and ethics for MPs which prescribes and proscribes certain activities and forms of behavior inside and outside Parliament. Lastly, citizen initiatives designed to track the activities of parliamentarians have seen a growth in the number of parliamentary monitoring organizations (PMOs) in many countries. Such organizations have both benefits and risks, but they are likely to become a permanent feature of the political landscape.

Third, a characteristic common to almost every representative Parliament is the growth in work at the local level, in the form of constituency work. Although MPs and the public seem to believe that the principal job of the politician is to legislate, in practice MPs spend more time and resources providing services for voters or helping them with their problems than on any other activity. As one Member of Parliament from the Arab region put it, he had never been held to account for what he did in Parliament, only for what he did - or did not do - for his voters locally. Yet, many MPs are struggling to meet the expectations of voters. There is an assumption that MPs have access to money and power, and thus should provide direct help on almost every issue. MPs commonly complain that the public do not understand what they can do, and have unrealistic expectations, but most MPs feel obliged to help every voter that comes to them.

Fourth, and underpinning the three previous themes, is that despite these challenges parliaments remain remarkably resilient. The challenge currently facing all parliaments – and especially in the Arab region - is to manage the expectations of voters. This means improving the way that they inform and educate voters, so that voters have more realistic expectations of what a Parliament and their elected representatives should do. It means introducing measures that do make MPs more accountable – such as through a code of conduct – but also recognizing that MPs need enough space to take decisions, and fulfill their task of representation. This also means finding ways of saying ‘no’ to voters locally – instead of seeking to answer every individual citizen’s concerns, MPs should be trying to find strategic local solutions and parliamentary responses to national problems.



### **III. Citizens' and in particular young people's expectations of Parliament and its Members**

#### **A. Citizens' and young people's expectations**

Citizens' and in particular young people's expectations of Parliament and parliamentarians are very high since they played a crucial role in the change achieved in their countries and the formation of new parliaments. Young people consider themselves the ones that created the new history of their countries and that of the new ruling political class.

At this historical time, Parliament has become the center of political activity (Tunisia, Libya...) and the institution that should be accountable to citizens. However, the problem lies with the high expectations that young people have and which are faced by the limited capabilities that parliamentarians possess: A fact that young people are not willing to admit.

As for young people's expectations, they fall under two categories:

- Transparency, fighting corruption and application of rule of law.
- Rights of youth in employment, housing and better living conditions.



The responses from MPs highlighted three big challenges faced by parliaments in the region. First, the dominance of the Executive over Parliament meant that they were often hampered in their ability to legislate or call government to account. This imbalance of power restricts the extent to which parliaments could properly represent the concerns of voters. Many of the discussions thus turned on the need to grant parliaments additional constitutional power or reform parliamentary rules.

Second, people care about their standard of living, and simply want politicians to deliver improvements. At the local level services should be provided by municipalities not by parliamentary representatives. However, the limited power of local government meant that MPs frequently found themselves intervening in areas which were not their proper responsibility. Many argued for greater decentralization of power to the local level.

Third, all the participants recognized that a strong and vibrant civil society was essential for the creation and maintenance of representative politics. But they also identified tensions between civil society and parliaments. It is not clear from where many civil society organizations (CSOs) derive their legitimacy and authority. Unless a constructive relationship can be built between civil society and Parliament, some CSOs may simply further weaken faith in the representative process and undermine the position of Parliament.

Three broad recommendations came out of the discussions. First, both public and parliaments need to be involved in the discussion about the position and role of Parliament within the constitution. These exercises should seek to close the gap between people and Parliament, and also educate the public as to what it is realistic to expect. Second, in many states in the region, municipal government needs strengthening. But MPs also need to find non-traditional solutions to people's problems. Third, greater efforts need to be made to build alliances between Parliament and CSOs. The agenda of both is very similar, but more efforts need to be made to recognize and build upon those common interests.



## B. Good practices from the region

- Creation of talk-shows which focus on the work of Parliament and provide citizens with a better understanding of the institution and the issues with which they are dealing.
- Lowering the age for voting, and the age at which people can run for parliamentary office.

- Inviting relevant civil society organizations to parliamentary committee meetings when discussing topics of interest to them (Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, Tunisia, Morocco).
- Organizing workshops at Parliament with civil society organizations to discuss the relationship between both parties (Morocco, Lebanon, Tunisia).
- Establishing parliamentary committees for receiving citizens' complaints (Libya, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain).
- Allowing graduate students to get enrolled in an internship program at Parliament (Lebanon, Morocco).
- Establishing a human rights parliamentary committee (Lebanon, Tunisia, Morocco, Libya, Iraq).
- Establishing a committee for youth (Lebanon).
- Communicating with expatriates (Tunisia, Morocco).
- Using social media tools to constantly communicate with young people (a practice used in most elected Arab Parliaments).
- Establishing an online website for Parliament for receiving citizens' comments (Lebanon, Tunisia, Libya, Morocco).

**The most important aspect in the relationship between citizens and parliamentarians is building trust.**





**IV. Key issues, good practices and recommendations for MPs on enhancing relations between citizens and parliaments**

**A. How do MPs manage the electorates' expectations at the local level**

<b>Issue at Stake</b>	How do MPs manage the electorate's expectations at the local level?
<b>Key Challenges</b>	<p>-Citizens' expectations of what their MPs can do are often unrealistic.</p> <p>-Voters frequently expect that MPs will give them money or provide them with jobs. In addition, voters expect MPs to get involved in many areas which are not the jurisdiction of Parliament.</p> <p>-MPs have difficulty saying no to these requests, and will frequently feel obliged to give the voter the help that they need.</p> <p>-Surveys of MPs in Iraq, Egypt and Jordan, conducted by Global Partners, show that the top five issues which voters come to MPs about are: infrastructure, unemployment, poverty, social welfare and corruption.</p> <p>-The polls also show that MPs respond in a variety of ways – by providing advice and assistance, contacting the relevant agency or raising the matter in Parliament. However, 70% of Egyptian MPs and 60% of Iraqi MPs said they gave voters direct financial support.</p> <p>-The challenge for parliaments is to improve voter understanding of the work of Parliament, to provide greater opportunities for voters to engage with the parliamentary process and for MPs to develop new ways of dealing with voters' requests in a strategic manner.</p>
<b>Good Practices Identified</b>	<p>The discussion highlighted the difficulties faced by parliamentarians across the region, and the need to manage citizens' expectations.</p> <p>-<i>Algeria</i>: Parliamentary Permanence in regions.</p> <p>-<i>Djibouti</i>: Parliamentary Caravan.</p> <p>-<i>Iraq</i>: The Iraqi Parliament has created parliamentary outreach offices in every region of the country. These offices, staffed by parliamentary staff, provide information about the work of Parliament and MPs, but they also handle requests for help from voters.</p> <p>-<i>Lebanon</i>: The Lebanese Parliament organizes specialized regional developmental workshops covering electoral constituencies with the participation of relevant MPs, representatives of public administrations, local elected people, civil society organizations and international agencies. MPs also participate in local events (weddings, funerals, local festivals...).</p>
<b>Recommendations</b>	<p>-Parliaments should establish local offices to promote the work of Parliament and allow constituents greater public access to the national parliamentary buildings.</p> <p>-MPs should establish an inquiry office to deal with and respond to citizen's demands in their constituencies.</p> <p>-Civil society organizations should be encouraged to organize study days in the region.</p> <p>-MPs should be present in their region, at least once per month, and should participate in local events organized in their region.</p>

## B. Translating citizens' concerns into parliamentary action

<b>Issue at Stake</b>	How do MPs use the local concerns of citizens to initiate responses in Parliament by using parliamentary mechanisms to find collective solutions
<b>Key Challenges</b>	<p>-MPs tend to be judged by voters on what they do locally, and therefore tend to try and respond to every individual request for help directly. However, it is impossible to meet each and every voter's needs.</p> <p>-MPs play a vital role in articulating the public's concerns to government. And, through their work locally MPs have a huge amount of expertise about how government policy and legislation is affecting people's lives. They have direct experience of helping citizens address these problems.</p> <p>-The key challenge is to find ways of using that expertise in Parliament to find national solutions, which benefit all citizens, rather than trying to deal with each case on its own.</p>
<b>Good Practices Identified</b>	<p>MPs wish to find ways of using Parliament to respond to citizens' demands, but often were frustrated by the limited powers of Parliament and the dominance of the Executive.</p> <p><i>-Bahrain:</i> Experience with disability law.</p> <p><i>-Morocco:</i> Study days organized by political parties represented in Parliament, in order to find out about civil society's needs.</p> <p><i>-Sudan:</i> Parliamentary body to discuss citizens' demands.</p>
<b>Recommendations</b>	<p>-The work of parliamentary committees depends on the quality of evidence on which their reports are based. The public should be routinely involved in Parliament's work.</p> <p>-Parliaments should find ways of ensuring better communication between civil society and politicians. Parliaments might establish guidelines for parliamentary committees on how they can engage CSOs during their inquiries and scrutiny of legislation.</p> <p>-There should be greater decentralization to local tiers of government, so that municipalities have a greater role in dealing with voters' demands.</p> <p>-Parliaments should provide the means for individual MPs to use their local experience in plenary and committee. A right to initiate legislation which responds to local issues is one option.</p> <p>-All participants believed that parliaments should be making more efforts to build public trust in Parliament and politicians.</p>

### C. Codes of conduct: strengths and weaknesses

<b>Issue at Stake</b>	What are the strengths and weaknesses of parliamentary codes of conduct
<b>Key Challenges</b>	<p>-Parliamentary codes of conduct have been adopted by many institutions in the last two decades. They typically seek to improve public faith in Parliament by establishing ethical standards. Traditionally, codes of conduct have been introduced as a response to a scandal or evidence of corruption, and oblige MPs to disclose their financial assets and identify any conflicts of interest which might prejudice their role as a public representative.</p> <p>-However, they have two other aspects which are being explored by parliaments in the Arab region. The first is to provide more general guidance as to the role of the MP in the plenary, committee and constituency. The second, is to improve decorum and professional behavior of MPs in each of these forums, and thus reinforce the ability of the parliament’s Presidency or Speakership to enforce order. However, in many parliaments there is resistance to any codes or rules which restrict the ability of the MP to determine how they do their job.</p>
<b>Good Practices Identified</b>	<p>All the participants that contributed to the debate believed that a code of conduct was something that parliaments should seek to introduce to regulate and improve the performance of Parliament.</p> <p><i>-Iraq:</i> The Iraqi Parliament’s efforts to develop a code of conduct seeks to manage many of the tensions between MPs from different blocs, improve the tone of debate in the plenary and ensure decorum during parliamentary debates. - <i>Lebanon:</i> MPs declaring their personal and family assets to the constitutional council.</p> <p><i>-Morocco:</i> MPs are required to declare their assets to the Supreme Council of accounts. Elimination of all types of immunities and privileges except for parliamentary immunity of opinion.</p>
<b>Recommendations</b>	<p>Codes of conduct need to distinguish between ethical behaviour and criminal activity. Parliaments thus need to address both the statutory and non-statutory elements of a code of conduct.</p> <p>A statutory code of conduct should deal with financial transparency, declaration of assets and seek to avoid conflicts of interests.</p> <p>A statutory code could also deal with issues such as attendance in parliament (i.e. imposing sanctions on absent MPs), floor-crossing (i.e. switching political parties between elections) and the limits to parliamentary immunity (i.e. the circumstances under which MPs can be prosecuted).</p> <p>Parliaments should do more to help MPs understand the rules of procedure and their role within parliament. Parliaments should therefore produce a chart of responsibilities for all MPs to guide them (and especially new MPs) in their role and function. This chart should exist independently of a parliamentary code of conduct, and sit alongside the rules of procedure (perhaps as an appendix).</p>



#### D. The potential of social media to improve the representative function

<b>Issue at Stake</b>	How can MPs use widely spread social media tools to improve their representational function?
<b>Key Challenges</b>	-How can we prohibit the misuse of social media? -How can we encourage MPs and citizens to use social media?
<b>Good Practices Identified</b>	- <i>Algeria, Morocco, OPT</i> : Creating pages on Facebook by MPs to discuss draft laws submitted to parliamentary committees and receive citizens' complaints and comments. - <i>Sudan</i> : Using mobile phones instead of Internet in underdeveloped regions.
<b>Recommendations</b>	-Drafting a law to organize the usage of social media and prohibiting piracy. -Oblige MPs to create social media pages to communicate with citizens. -Encourage NGOs to create social media pages.



## ***V. Recommendations and way forward***

The regional seminar provided a useful regional platform for MPs to engage and discuss key issues regarding the issue of representation in the Arab region. From the discussions, a series of possible follow-up actions have been identified, and are summarized below, targeting different levels (Parliament – Constituency Level – Civil Society level and MPs personal level). Finally, a table provides a list of key advice that participants would give to a new Member of Parliament about how to build good relationships with citizens. UNDP and the IPU, through their on-going support to parliaments in the region will further disseminate the recommendations identified in Rabat in their respective parliamentary development programmes and activities.

### ***✓ Actions at the level of parliament***

- 1 - Work on/support draft laws that are of interest to citizens.
- 2 - Hold government accountable for current and planned development projects.
- 3 - Specify a day for organizing visits to Parliament for citizens with the presence of the MP from their respective constituencies.
- 4 - Support the adoption of a parliamentary code of conduct that emphasizes transparency and respect for the rule of law and fight against corruption.
- 5 - Provide graduate students the opportunity to enroll in an internship program at Parliament, in parliamentary committees, MPs offices and different (administrative and financial) directorates.
- 6 - Allocate appropriations in the general budget for social issues, particularly those related to marginalized groups (people with disabilities, children of the streets, prisons, etc.).
- 7 - Activate Parliament's website.
- 8 - Activate parliamentary media.

### ***✓ Actions at the constituency level***

- 9 - Increase visits to the constituency and organize meetings with citizens in order to listen to their views and perspectives.
- 10 - Establish a permanent office for MPs in the constituencies for receiving citizen's complaints and demands.
- 11 – Follow up on constituency projects in ministries and relevant departments.
- 12 - Set visiting hours for local citizens without the need for prior appointments.
- 13 - Participate in cultural and sports related activities in the constituency.

✓ **Actions towards civil society organizations**

14 – Conduct meetings with civil society organizations in order to listen to their views on topics that are being discussed in parliamentary committees and in plenary sessions.

15 – Work on creating / establishing a department in the parliamentary administration for relations with civil society organizations.

16 - Train civil society organizations on legal and organizational procedures of parliaments.

17 – Emphasize women and youth organizations' demands such as improving women and youth representation, quotas for women, youth policies, etc.

✓ **Actions by parliamentarians at the individual level**

18 – Use social media to dialogue with citizens and followers.

19 - Use of all types of media (televisions, radios, press ...) to support public issues.

20 - Commit to attend all parliamentary committee meetings and plenary sessions, without absences.



## ***What advice would you give to a new Member of Parliament about how to build good relationships with citizens?***

### ✓ **KNOWLEDGE**

- Know the constitution. Know the rules of procedure.
- Know what an MP's role is.
- Learn the ABCs of Parliament.
- Learn how to ask questions in Parliament, to oversee the government.
- Go to training programmes offered by Parliament for new MPs. Commit yourself to continuous learning.

### ✓ **COMMUNICATION**

- Keep continuous contact with citizens. Talk nicely to them. Never ignore a request.
- Communicate with all categories of citizen. Be a good listener. Be open to the opinions of others.
- Be careful about words and phraseology. Learn that 'speech is a responsibility'. Be responsible in your statements.
- Use all channels of communication, from face-to-face meetings to the Internet.
- Be present in the media, on TV. Let people see you in public.
- Communicate with the media in a positive way.
- Only talk to the media when you are ready to do so. One mistake in the media can destroy years of work.

### ✓ **ACTION**

- Give a realistic programme. It is the contract between an MP and citizens. Don't exaggerate. Don't promise what you can't deliver.
- Explain the role of an MP to citizens. Don't pretend that you can solve every problem. Prioritize the complaints from citizens. Be bold enough to face up to problems.
- Be the same person. Don't change. Avoid privileges for yourself and your family. Don't move to the capital. Don't get detached from the people. Don't change house or car. Keep your roots.
- Be with the people at all times. Have the same lifestyle as them. Visit people in their homes.
- Free yourself from all labels. Act on behalf of the nation. Be a mediator between the Executive and the citizens, even if you are a member of the opposition.
- Work hard. Be honest and transparent. Be ethical. Be transparent and full of integrity. Attend all sessions of Parliament.
- Get a good secretary. Your staff will be the first point of contact for many citizens.
- Get involved in parliamentary committees where you can be most productive. Make legislative proposals. Bring issues to Parliament by putting questions to ministers, to lead the Executive to take action.
- Work with experts around you. MPs can't resolve all the issues on their own. Make use of civil society. Communicate with civil society, learn from them. Draw on expert advice, even from outside your constituency.
- Organize workshops with all MPs. Don't isolate new MPs from more experienced ones. Take part in the work of your political party.
- Do your homework. Prepare for everything you do.
- Keep on good terms with all stakeholders, including parliamentary staff.
- Do a small number of things well, rather than trying to do everything but finishing nothing.

## Annex: Agenda

<b>Wednesday, 5 June 2013</b>	
<b>9.30 – 10 a.m. Chamber</b>	<p><b>Opening session: Launch of the <i>Global Parliamentary Report</i> in the Arab region</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Mr. Karim Ghellab, Speaker of the House of Representatives</li> <li>- Mr. Mohamed Cheikh Biadillah, Speaker of the House of Councillors</li> <li>- Mr. Abdelwahad Radi, President of the IPU</li> <li>- Ms. Rebeca Grynspan, UN Under-Secretary-General and UNDP Associate Administrator</li> </ul>
<b>10 – 11 a.m. Chamber</b>	<p><b>Session 2 : The changing nature of parliamentary representation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Chair: Ms. Jamila Mossalli, Member of the Bureau of the House of Representatives</li> <li>- Presenter: Mr. Greg Power, Author of the <i>Global Parliamentary Report</i></li> </ul> <p>Debate</p>
<b>11 – 11.30 a.m.</b>	<b>Coffee break</b>
<b>11.30 a.m. – 1 p.m. Salle Marocaine</b>	<p><b>Session 3: Citizens' and in particular young people's expectations of parliament and its members. Parliamentary innovations and good practices from the region</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Moderator: Mr. Elie Khoury, Regional Expert in Parliamentary Development</li> </ul> <p>Debate</p>
<b>1 – 2 p.m.</b>	<b>Lunch break</b>
<b>2 – 3.30 p.m. Salle Marocaine</b>	<b>Session 4: Working group – How do MPs manage the electorate's expectations at the local level?</b>
<b>3.30 – 4 p.m.</b>	<b>Coffee break</b>
<b>4 – 5.30 p.m. Salle Marocaine</b>	<b>Session 5: Working group – Translating citizens' concerns into parliamentary action</b>
<b>5.30 p.m.</b>	<b>End of first day</b>
<b>8 p.m.</b>	<b>Official dinner hosted by the Parliament of Morocco</b>
<b>Thursday, 6 June 2013</b>	
<b>9.30 – 11 a.m. Salle Marocaine</b>	<b>Session 6: Working group – Codes of conduct: strengths and weaknesses</b>
<b>11 – 11.30 a.m.</b>	<b>Coffee break</b>



<b>11.30 a.m. – 1 p.m.</b> <b>Salle Marocaine</b>	<b><u>Session 7: Working group – The potential of social media to improve the representative function</u></b> Launch of AGORA, Portal for Parliamentary Development ( <a href="http://www.agora-parl.org">www.agora-parl.org</a> )
<b>1 – 2 p.m.</b>	<i><b>Lunch break</b></i>
<b>2 – 3.30 p.m.</b> <b>Salle Marocaine</b>	<b><u>Session 8: Identification of measures that both MPs and parliaments can take within 6 to 12 months to enhance their representation function</u></b>
<b>3.30 – 4 p.m.</b>	<i><b>Coffee break</b></i>
<b>4 – 5.30 p.m.</b>	<b><u>Closing session</u></b>