

AGORA Brief – May 2015

CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT THROUGH ICT

“I believe that our democracy will never be complete unless it makes an effort to reach out to those who do not participate in it, and in considering access to it, we cannot overlook the impact of the digital world.”

Robert Halfon, MP, United Kingdom

Communication has come a long way in recent years. The '90s brought us the first widely available internet browser (1993) and the first mobile phone with an internet connection (1996). The past decade saw the evolution of these tools into new digital networks and resources: Flickr and Facebook in 2004; Youtube in 2005, and Twitter in 2006. Today, 10% of the world's population has a fixed internet subscription and almost 30% has a mobile subscription, with the figures doubling in developed countries. Additionally, there are now 7.1 billion mobile phones and 1.9 billion smartphones with an internet subscription (ITU figures).

Parliaments around the world have embraced ICT and other new technologies at varying rates, and to varying degrees of success. The great majority of legislatures now have a website and many of them are active on social media networks. Some have gone further still, piloting mobile constituency offices, virtual hearings and a whole range of digital platforms designed to improve communication between citizens and their representatives (see below). Yet, countless opportunities for better use of these technologies go unexplored.

This brief illustrates how new technologies can better connect parliament with the people it represents. It discusses the use of ICT in administration, the adoption of social media, the development of citizen engagement platforms and the strategies employed by parliamentary monitoring organisations. It also offers suggestions on how to keep costs down and mobilise support. For comments and questions, please contact Lotte Geunis at lotte.geunis@undp.org.

Setting the Trend: Mobile Apps for Parliament in South-Korea

The **Republic of Korea** is a true trendsetter on mobile applications for MPs. It is the top-ranking country in the UN E-government development index and aims to be a “smart e-Parliament” that promotes participation, openness, and efficiency. The high rate of smartphone and internet penetration in South-Korea enables MPs to use these kinds of means for constituency outreach and citizen's participation in the legislative process.

Among others, MPs have access to apps that provide support for bill deliberation, research and analysis, and promotion of legislative activities. The 'bill information app' provides an at-a-glance view of information on all current bills, lists what bills were proposed by National Assembly members, and offers information on the current status of bills in the legislative process. A 'legislation app' allows MPs to check the opinions of citizens on different legislative initiatives.

For more info on South-Korea's “app experience”, please [click here](#).

Embracing ICT: E-Parliaments

“e-Parliaments” are legislatures that use ICT to support parliament’s overall work, and to support its primary functions of representation, law-making and oversight. By employing ICT, parliaments can connect with citizens in a more direct and meaningful way, strengthening their transparency, accessibility and accountability. Ultimately, the aim of adopting such technologies is to promote political engagement and build a more effective, inclusive and responsive institution.

Virtually all parliaments now draw on ICT, both in their internal functioning and in their outreach. The Cape Verde parliament features a brand new Data Processing Centre which allows, among other things, the digital processing of parliamentary activity, the automation of processes, information on legislative activities and electronic voting. The system makes parliament more open and accessible to citizens and increases public involvement and participation in the work of MPs.

Technology for Transparency: the Chilean Congress Commits with UNDP support

In the framework of the Open Government Partnership’s [Open Legislative Working Group](#), Chile’s Parliamentary Action Plan includes proposals to improve the right to access to information, transparency, accountability and the use of IT to generate greater knowledge and improve citizen engagement with the work done in Congress.

Among others, the Chilean Congress commits to recognizing “the importance of transparency and the information technologies to inform the citizens about the parliamentary work and be accountable for it. To carry out this commitment the Congress will create institutional guides to standardize the content of the institutional websites of the Senate, the House of Representatives, the Library of Congress, and the personal electronic sites of each congressmen and commission. The guides will contain precise rules that consider what transparency information should be included; norms on mandatory content and topics that should be publicly open for accountability.”

Lost in translation

What does parliament do, how does it work, and what do different pieces of legislation actually mean? None of these questions are easily answered. To most citizens the work of parliament remains fairly obscure. Legal language often alienates those without a law degree, and the intricacies of political processes are lost on many – if not most – of us who are not actively engaged in them.

New technologies are instrumental in helping citizens make sense of what parliaments do, and in offering them real and encouraging opportunities for taking part. In established democracies, there is an increasing need for more transparency, more participation and more accountability – generally, for more inclusive processes that empower rather than exclude the vast majority of citizens. Young people in particular are expressing a sense of disillusion and disappointment. There appears to be a growing

‘democratic deficit’: an increasing neglect to vote, and a widespread feeling that current systems do not allow them to voice their views and concerns (see [AGORA’s brief on parliaments and youth](#)). In young and emerging democracies, parliament is often only truly open to a very small group of people; genuine participation in debates, hearings or plenary sessions remains limited.

To counter this, many parliaments and civil society organisations are launching digital communication platforms. These platforms connect people with their parliaments and MPs, thereby strengthening not just openness and accountability, but political participation. Mexico’s [Curul 501](#) initiative, for example, enables citizens to express their opinions on the work of the legislative assembly. The platform offers reports on pending and passed legislation, while advocating for more parliamentary openness. Citizens can submit questions directly to representatives, and can even “vote” on bills.

Curul 501 was conceived to inform the public about the parliamentary functions, to encourage citizens to participate via direct interaction with representatives, and to vote on different initiatives. Perhaps most noteworthy, however, is Curul 501’s objective to “translate” the legislature’s terminology into a language citizens understand. This is a prime way in which new technologies can help pilot greater parliamentary openness and engagement – other parliaments should take note.

Digital debates: Georgia tackles constitutional reform online

In 2013, with a view to supporting the parliament in furthering nationwide discussions on the constitutional amendments, UNDP promoted the first ever Internet and social media based constitutional debates.

The interactive website at <http://www.constitution.ge> and its Facebook page were linked to the parliament’s official web portal. To ensure communication and information sharing between law-makers and the public, expert opinions and results of public opinion polls were regularly provided to the public debates commission of the Parliament.

The success of the initiative was demonstrated by the parliament’s decision to adopt draft amendments with modifications from the feedback on the website.

Citizen engagement

Citizen engagement goes beyond the publication of information and data. Parliamentary websites are an important step in providing better access to parliamentary work, but simply sharing updates is not enough. To arrive at true political participation, parliaments and MPs need to make it as quick and easy as possible for people to share inputs. New technologies offer great and often cheap ways for doing so.

Engagement is a two-way street, and civil society organisations play a major role in helping to shape more inclusive and participative institutions. They can do so by making the most of parliamentary initiatives on offer, but they can also launch independent tools and apps that allow people to stay in touch with parliament’s activities and share inputs on law-making.

Inspiring Initiatives: Citizen Engagement Platforms

You don't need to look far for inspiring ICT initiatives. Platforms that promote a dialogue between citizens and parliamentarians are increasingly successful, and are having a growing impact on law-making and parliamentary work:

- **GREECE** – Greece's **Vouliwatch**, launched in March 2014, is a digital platform through which Greek citizens can engage with their MPs. It offers people the opportunity to communicate, evaluate and hold elected representatives in the Greek and the European Parliaments accountable. The platform allows people to put questions to MPs and MEPs, keep track of legislative initiatives, and debate and discuss bills. It also offers citizens the opportunity to submit proposals to MPs.
- **GERMANY** – Germany's Parliament Watch runs the www.abgeordnetenwatch.de platforms, where citizens find short profiles of their representatives in the federal and European parliaments. They can ask those elected officials public questions and receive public answers online. As host and impartial moderator, Parliament Watch checks all questions and ensures civil conduct and respect for privacy. The platform has about 300.000 people visits every month; it has received 31.643 questions and shared 26.658 answers.
- **BRAZIL** – Brazil's **e-Democracia** platform offers simple web 2.0 tools that connect citizens with lawmakers on specific issues. Citizens can use the portal and social media networks to engage Members of Congress, mark-up legislation, and propose and debate solutions to policy problems. The platform has facilitated cross-country dialogue among disparate groups and has thousands of active users. It even allows citizens to draft legislation through the wikilegis tool. Finally, the platform maps edits made to legislation, visualising the evolution and current status of a bill.
- **UNITED KINGDOM** - The UK-based NGO mySociety launched the **WhatDoTheyKnow** and **Alaveteli** platforms. The first allows citizens to ask questions to public local or national authorities, basing their claims on the British Freedom of Information Act. It targets the House of Commons and the House of Lords, as well as local UK parliaments. The Alaveteli platform is a means by which local actors in different countries can replicate the WhatDoTheyKnow initiative. Similar platforms have been created in Uruguay, Croatia, Spain, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Czech Republic, Hungary, New Zealand and Australia, among others.

Most of the examples highlighted in this brief are internet-based. Countries without widespread internet usage can turn to mobile phone technology for similar initiatives. In Uganda the '[UsPeak](#)' project helps citizens connect with parliamentarians. The tool allows constituents to share their views and request information on issues from MPs by text message, voicemail or by leaving a message with the UsPeak call center. UsPeak then aggregates the reports and requests by issue, which allows MPs to track the information.

Social Media

"We think everyone should have a voice in Parliament - not just MPs. In the age of social media there's no excuse why the public shouldn't be more involved in asking questions of those in power who are making decisions which will affect us all."

Norman Russel, MP, New Zealand

Social media have become an essential part of parliamentary communication. The European Parliament is a frontrunner in this area. Its [facebook page](#) offers chats with Members and twice-daily updates on EU affairs, among others. The page's success, collecting over 1,6 million likes to date, is at least in part due to its tone: it's informal but informative, and it doesn't shy away from controversial questions. Twitter, too, has become a critical part of the EP's outreach. Last September, MEPs used social media networks to ask voters for questions to submit to Commissioners-designate in the public hearings. Meanwhile, the press service of the [European Parliament](#) announced that it would communicate on the outcomes of these hearings solely through its social media networks.

Social media management requires careful consideration. What is the objective of these networks? Is it to provide information, solicit feedback, launch debates? What kind of language and tone is used? Who's in charge, and how do you control what goes on?

New Zealand: Holding the Government to Account through Twitter

In a novel political twist, the Greens are giving New Zealanders the chance to join the parliamentary bullpen. Using the hashtag #myclimatequestion, party co-leader Russel Norman is crowd-sourcing questions on twitter to be put to the Government during Parliament's question time.

These kind of initiatives do not require a huge amount of skill on the part of the MP or political party, and they are enormously cost-effective. While Twitter and facebook cannot replace old-fashioned constituency outreach, they offer excellent avenues for strengthened engagement. To read the full article by www.stuff.co.nz, please [click here](#).

Parliaments should establish a clear communication strategy on social media, and should ensure that MPs and staff are advised on what (not) to do. The UK House of Commons produced [social media guidelines](#) listing what each tool aims to achieve, and what kind of communication is appropriate. It advises staff and MPs on how to set up and manage accounts, what content is restricted, and how it should tie in to the general parliament-endorsed communication. The Inter-Parliamentary Union has designed a similar set of [Social Media Guidelines for Parliaments](#), drawing lessons learned by parliaments so far and sharing good practices. As the social media landscape evolves, guidelines and parliamentary practices in this area will need to follow suit.

Breaking barriers

Political processes can only be truly inclusive if citizens are in a position to take part. Organising public hearings or opening up plenary sessions is a good step, but such initiatives can only go so far when the majority of citizens are not able to attend them. Practical problems of distance, time and cost often keep people from physically making their way to the relevant chamber(s).

Digital communication can help overcome these issues. In Italy, the M5S party live-streams any parliamentary meeting where a position is taken by their members. The parliament of Ecuador is using a video system to connect their National Assembly with the provincial capital cities in order to hold hearings with citizens, while US members of Congress increasingly hold “virtual town hall meetings” to keep in touch with their constituents.

New technologies can also play quite a literal role in breaking down barriers that stand between parliamentarians and their constituents. Internet facilities such as video conferencing can enable people from remote regions to virtually connect with parliament and parliamentarians. In Bhutan, the mountainous terrain and limited road access mean that it would take many MPs over a week to visit the remote areas of their constituencies.

As an advocate for innovation, UNDP is leading the development of a Virtual Zomdu, (“Zomdu” = a meeting of residents of villages or communities), together with project partners in Bhutan. The country’s internet penetration currently stands at 23 per cent, but exciting changes are afoot. There are already almost 100 community centres across the country that have internet connectivity; the Virtual Zomdu plans could be piggy-backed onto this infrastructure.



Bhutan: Virtual Zomdu

Videoconferencing facilities could be used to enable citizens from across Bhutan and parliamentarians to meet virtually to discuss issues of concern.

Regular meetings between parliamentarians and constituencies are developed on the basis of the Bhutanese tradition of Zomdu. It is hoped that the Virtual Zomdus will allow current and future members of parliament to engage with the people.

A joint collaboration between the National Assembly, National Council, Department of Information Technology & Telecom, Department of Local Governance, Bhutan Post and the Gross National Happiness Commission is working to make this ‘virtual zomdu’ idea into reality.

For constituents, this would provide an opportunity to find out about the work of their representative in parliament and share their views and priorities.

For more information, [watch the video](#) or [click here](#)

Keeping the costs down

Not every parliament has the means to engage IT firms to develop websites or apps, and not every secretariat can afford a (large) IT support team. Few parliaments have the resources of the UK House of Commons for example, where every incoming parliamentarian this summer is set to receive an iPad with relevant info and apps.

Luckily, technology does not need to be expensive. Open-source software is increasingly being used for government information sharing purposes. The Declaration on Parliamentary Openness, officially launched at the World e-Parliament conference in Rome in 2012, emphasizes the importance of using free software that does not render parliament dependent on external providers:

“Parliamentary information shall be released online in open and structured formats that allow citizens to analyze and reuse this information using the full range of technology tools. [...] Parliamentary websites shall seek to use interactive tools to engage citizens and offer alert or mobile services. Parliament shall give preference to the use of non-proprietary formats, and free and open-source software. Parliament has a duty to ensure technological usability of parliamentary information, while guaranteeing the privacy for those accessing the information.”

<http://www.openingparliament.org/declaration>

Civil society initiatives in particular can draw on open-source software, or turn to volunteers. France’s the [Parlement & Citoyens](#) was designed and developed by SmartGov, a four-person non-profit organization based in Paris. The platform invites parliamentarians to publish a short video and text description outlining a problem they have observed, along with the solutions they think can be codified in law. Citizens then upload their feedback and suggestions and can vote for those that they feel are best placed to offer solutions. SmartGov synthesizes the results and hosts a public debate between the MP and participants, after which the MP proposes a bill in parliament based on the results.

The SmartGov platform was developed by volunteers and without funding. Its main objectives include allowing citizens to participate directly in the legislative process, pooling collective intelligence to render legislation more efficient and responsive, and improving the transparency of the legislative process. The concept is simple, and the resources required are minimal. It demonstrates quite powerfully that citizen engagement is there for the taking, and how technology is key to unlocking this potential.

For those looking to give it all a bit of a competitive edge, hackathons might be the answer. Hackathons are events where computer programmers come together to design new applications or projects at high speed – often motivated by a deadline and, in some cases, a prize. The [European Parliament](#) has organized hackathons to build new public accountability tools; the [parliament of Indonesia](#) has done the same for open data. Hackathons are a fantastic way to spark some interest among young people, and to encourage them to apply their skills to public sector service.

Parliamentary Monitoring Organisations

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.

[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.

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).

To find out more about the use of new technologies by PMOs, please take a look at our [Briefing Note: PMOs and Parliamentary Innovation](#).

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 [Populus 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.