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# Global Parliamentary Report 2022

**Public engagement in the work of parliament**

Annex: Case studies and practical guides

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# Country case studies



Children learning the dynamics of the legislative process in a playful way in the Chamber of Deputies. © Luis Macedo/Camara dos Deputados.

## Brazil: Digital engagement

When it comes to digital legislatures, Brazil is a country of innovation and new ideas, with the perfect historical conditions and scale to be a strong advocate of civic participation in parliament. The Parliament of Brazil consistently ranks at the very top in terms of digital maturity according to the *World e-Parliament Report*: the Chamber of Deputies is noted for its world-leading HackerLab, its innovative use of artificial intelligence (AI), and its rapid and agile deployment of the world's first virtual parliament, while the Senate has a long-established and well-used civic participation portal. It has been a strategic aim of both Houses to increase public participation in the work of parliament. Web-based and mobile applications have been critically important in achieving this aim, and digital infrastructure underpins the processes within each institution that allow participation to work effectively. Online tools and practices, such as open data, are well-established mechanisms for increasing legislative openness and transparency.

### Strategic alignment of participation tools

Digital tools must support the overall strategy of the institution and must work alongside non-digital (offline) tools to ensure that those who are not digitally enabled have equal access to engagement. Antonio Carvalho e Silva Neto, former Director of Projects and Management at the Chamber of Deputies, explained as follows:

We've been investing in a lot of initiatives to get citizens participating in the work of the Congress. It is a little bit to do with our constitutional origin, because when our Constitution was designed, we had this possibility ... So this kind of came with the DNA of the Chamber after the Constitution.

Non-digital tools are important in countries like Brazil, where one third of the population lacks internet access. Alessandro Molon, an MP in the Chamber of Deputies emphasized this point:

Using the internet is an important step to guarantee transparency and participation, but it is not enough. I think it's still necessary to go physically where people are ... even though we have 130 million people on the internet in Brazil, we still have something like 60 million [not online].

In Brazil, the use of digital engagement is strategically aligned with the aims of both institutions. It exemplifies how to integrate digital and non-digital tools in the same public engagement initiative to ensure maximum reach. Alisson Bruno Dias de Queiroz, Coordinator of the e-Cidadania Programme at the Senate of Brazil, said that they see a lot of people choosing to participate by telephone, either because they do not have internet access or because they do but lack the skills, knowledge or confidence to use the online tools. Emphasizing the importance of digital communication methods, Senator Antonio Anastasia explained that "it is difficult to get personal contact with [my] constituents, [my] voters". Although he receives some correspondence and requests via the Senate's e-Cidadania portal, he added that "mostly we receive a lot of demand via email and regular mail". Mr. Anastasia also noted that about 98 per cent of direct communication comes via email. Senator Paulo Paim, meanwhile, reflected on the increasing importance of social media channels:

Some people call us by phone, some send emails and others talk [to us] on social media. We have accounts on every single platform: Instagram, LinkedIn, Facebook and YouTube. And we are about to set up a TikTok account. So we talk to everyone.

Just over half of parliaments globally have a parliamentary TV channel.<sup>1</sup> For both the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies, TV and radio remain important channels for reaching the community, particularly those who are digitally excluded. TV Câmara, a free-to-air public television station created in 1998 for the Chamber of Deputies, carries the activities of the chamber 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It broadcasts both live and pre-recorded plenary sessions, committee meetings and public hearings. The channel also shows documentaries and other information programmes, with floor and committee sessions dominating the weekly schedule. The Senate, meanwhile, has used its TV Senado public channel to broadcast since 1996, and has had its own YouTube channel since 2010.

## Examples of digital platforms

While both Houses have been leading proponents of the digital parliament, there are three stand-out examples where Brazil leads the way globally on innovation in digital participation: e-Democracia, Ulysses and e-Cidadania. These are described in turn below.

### e-Democracia

The Chamber of Deputies has a long-standing track record of digital innovation, especially when it comes to improving civic participation in its work. One of the flagship tools is e-Democracia, first developed in 2009 and maintained in-house by the HackerLab, which was set up to increase the exchange of innovative ideas between civil society and parliament. It has about 37,000 registered users.

The platform was created to "provide different opportunities for legislative debates to engage with constituents and representatives through surveys, forums and collaborative wiki tools".<sup>2</sup> Mr. Neto explained that the tool was designed "to collect opinions and to make the citizen engage more in the law-making process". The e-Democracia platform includes "virtual communities" for debates on specific topics and "Wikilegis", which allows users to directly comment on or contribute to specific articles or sections of a draft bill.

An estimated 30 per cent of the 2010 Youth Policy Bill was drawn from submissions on the platform. The Civil Rights Framework for the Internet Bill went through the same process with Wikilegis in 2014, and numerous comments and suggestions were reviewed by members and incorporated into the final act. More recently, in 2020, the Internet Freedom, Responsibility and Transparency Bill attracted 394 registered participants and 618 comments, with 5,334 votes cast on these public comments. Jorge Paulo de França, Executive Director of the Secretariat of Participation, Digital Media and Interaction at the Chamber of Deputies explained:

People can ask questions before and during hearings. Those questions are separated and sent to the representative, who decides if they want to take it or not during the hearing... [Using] the tool, people can see [what is happening directly]. They don't need to go on social media or watch it on the TV ... We also have inside the tool some auxiliary documents, [and representatives can] decide to put some documents there for information.

### Ulysses

The Chamber of Deputies has developed the Ulysses smart analysis platform, an AI-based tool that uses machine learning to analyse the large volumes of documents and data produced. This "understanding" of content means that the system can classify new documents and more effectively tag them within the Chamber's public-facing web portal. This, in turn, allows the website to automatically make recommendations and provide content based on a registered user's interests. The system is being extended to tag live broadcasts and recorded video to identify speakers dynamically, again allowing content to be targeted.

In terms of participation, Ulysses provides a chatbot to make it easier for members of the public to find relevant information using a more conversational, natural-language format. The system also supports polls for community members to express their opinions on issues. People have been able to vote and comment (anonymously) on a particular bill since

<sup>1</sup> 52 per cent of parliaments have their own TV channel, 49 per cent provide content to other TV channels and 16 per cent have a parliamentary radio station (see: IPU, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Mitozo and Marques, 2019.

2018. The electronic poll is created automatically for each bill in progress in the Chamber.

Helping MPs make sense of all the comments received is a challenge (there can be up to 30,000 comments for a single bill). Ulysses solves this problem by applying a machine-learning algorithm to the comments based on natural-language processing. The system conducts a “smart” analysis of all comments on the positive and negative aspects of a specific bill, extracts their semantic structure and presents them according to user-defined parameters (here, “users” are MPs and their staff). For example, one bill in 2020 drew 11,000 public comments and Ulysses was able to analyse these and reduce them to four broad categories.

## e-Cidadania

In 2012, the Senate of Brazil launched e-Cidadania, a new online portal designed to enable more civic participation in its legislative, budget, oversight and representation activities. The portal is divided into three sections: *Ideia Legislativa* (Legislative Idea), *Consulta Pública* (Public Consultation) and *Evento Interativo* (Interactive Event). Each of these is discussed below.

- The ***Ideia Legislativa*** platform is where citizens can propose new laws or changes to existing legislation, and support proposals made by others. Proposals that receive 20,000 signatures are reviewed by the Senate Commission for Human Rights and Participatory Legislation and, if selected, debated by senators. Proposals can be registered in the system either online (the primary channel it was designed for), or via a toll-free telephone number or a sign-language submission process.
- ***Consulta Pública*** was launched in 2013, building on the initial portal offering. The consultations allow citizens to make submissions on draft bills, proposed amendments to the Constitution, provisional measures and other proposals that are in progress in the Senate.
- ***Evento Interativo***, which was added to the portal in 2016, lets people participate in public hearings and other open events held by the Senate. It includes a live broadcast feature, space for posting comments, and a repository of supporting information such as presentations, news and documents.

According to Mr. Queiroz, over 40 million individual users accessed the portal between 2015 and 2020. This figure represents almost 20 per cent of the total population (ignoring duplicate email addresses) and 30 per cent of Brazilian internet users. Some 98 per cent of internet users went online using a mobile device in 2020, so it is no surprise that 88 per cent of visitors to e-Cidadania used this same channel.

The portal has had a tangible impact on legislation and the work of the Senate. Mr. Anastasia highlighted what he considered to be “one of the most important laws” passed by the Senate, and how it originated as a proposal through the portal to introduce a “requirement that all serving and prospective public office holders have a clean criminal record”. Mr. Paim, meanwhile, incorporated an idea on emergency social security for retirees into a bill to alleviate the strains of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As well as the direct route of 20,000 signatures, the platform can be used to bring proposals to the attention of senators. A deaf student who had difficulties communicating with other, non-deaf students proposed an idea to include Brazilian Sign Language in the school curriculum. This proposal did not receive the necessary number of signatures but clearly had merit and was championed by Senator Zenaide Maia, who was able to introduce the bill in the Senate.

The e-Cidadania portal was designed to engage more community members in the work of the Senate. But it also helps senators communicate more effectively with constituents and understand their views. As Mr. Anastasia noted, the portal “gives us directions about our questions.” Ms. Maia echoed this sentiment:

These channels give me contact with a lot of people, especially deaf people. I’m a doctor, and I think [the portal has] given me a lot of opportunities to understand them more and to have more contact with them.

Mr. Paim pointed out that such digital tools are especially important in a large and diverse country like Brazil:

Brazil is a continental country. It’s a very huge country in terms of territory, in terms of land, in terms of space geographically. So, it’s very difficult to get close to people. We have 220 million people here. Travelling from the south to the north of the country takes something like eight hours in an aeroplane, so it’s a very big country. Social media makes people closer to you and it’s easier to receive suggestions and questions about our mandates.

Mr. Anastasia added that the portal has “greatly improved participation and engagement, as it has made it easier for citizens to present their enquiries not only in [my own] district, but all over Brazil”.

## Recognizing the benefits of digital tools

The adoption of any digital tool is contingent on uptake and, ultimately, it is realized user value that drives repeated use, growth and habituation. While the tools that parliaments employ are designed for engagement and outreach with the community, the success of those that impact on the legislative process and the work of the institution is also contingent on the willingness of parliamentarians to use them. As the *World e-Parliament Report* series explains, adoption depends on being able to access and use the tool, on trusting in the technology and, ultimately, on seeing the clear derived benefit from using it. The Chamber of Deputies has invested heavily in its digital infrastructure and, together with the Senate, can now function as a fully digital parliament. As a result, digital working is becoming common practice for members and, through experience and training, trust in the digital workspace is growing.

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Chamber of Deputies adapted its existing Infoleg app, which provided information on the current parliamentary session to both members and the public. As well as expanding the range of information available, the app was rapidly updated with new features: attendance, registration, speaker lists, leadership voting orientation, alerts and secure voting. This led not only to changes to procedures and business processes, but also to the introduction of more secure security protocols for mobile systems. As a result, members have a stronger appetite for innovation and better understand and accept the risks. In short, the updated app has improved uptake and acceptance of digital tools among parliamentarians, which has had a knock-on effect in terms of opportunities for parliamentary engagement. The Senate has also become more digitally enabled during this time and, as Ms. Maia observed, members recognize the benefits: “I believe that these tools or channels have made our jobs easier during the [COVID-19] pandemic.”

Vinicius Poit, an MP in the Chamber of Deputies, reflected that digital tools “are not just useful, but fundamental, because we can reach where people really are interacting.” Mr. Molon added the following observation:

How could a French revolutionary in the eighteenth century imagine that someday we could be inside the National Assembly talking to our constituents when we were voting, and watching them tell us “Do not vote like that” or “Please vote like that”? It’s incredible to imagine that you can talk to your constituents at the very moment that you are voting on something that affects them.

## Measuring success

The participatory tools used by the Parliament of Brazil are impressive and demonstrate many aspects of good practice. A word of caution is needed, however: there are no clear metrics or critical success factors in place, so it is difficult to measure the value of the platforms discussed here. Success is likely to be both quantitative (number of users, number of proposals adopted, etc.) and qualitative (community-generated content leading to an important addition or change to draft legislation). Likewise, success can also be both direct (impacting on bills, informing members) and indirect (building long-term trust in democratic processes, making more people aware of what their parliament is doing, and offering a clear route to get involved for those who wish to).

## Conclusion and lessons learned

Several conclusions and lessons learned can be drawn from the public participation strategies and digital tools adopted by the Parliament of Brazil:

- 1. Participation must be driven by institutional strategy:** While both Houses have created a broad and sophisticated range of tools for public consultation, participation and communication, these have in both cases been aligned with wider institutional strategies to broaden participation and embrace digital technology in the legislative process. This high-level commitment to both civic participation and innovation is an important predictor of success.
- 2. Co-design helps meet the needs of all stakeholders:** Parliaments are not always the best at understanding what community members want or need. The HackerLab model developed by the Chamber of Deputies has pioneered the concept of co-designing participatory tools with the public themselves. Parliaments can work with civil society organizations (CSOs), open data experts and others through hackathons and open spaces to better understand user needs and to design more effective user journeys.
- 3. Tools are only useful if they are used:** Tools for public participation must be accessible and usable by members of the public and offer demonstrable value for them. However, it is important not to overlook the other side of these tools: they must equally be usable by and provide value to members and parliamentary staff. For digital participation tools to become a standard practice, they must enhance the legislative process for all stakeholders.
- 4. Tools must be accessible and usable:** Digital tools bring parliament to people who otherwise would not be able to engage with it (for reasons of time, geography or opportunity). An emphasis on accessibility is crucial to digital engagement strategies. But it is also important to recognize that digital solutions can create new barriers. The examples from Brazil show that a digital-first solution is viable, but that parliaments need to provide alternative channels for those who are digitally disadvantaged or have additional needs. As the *World e-Parliament Report* series makes clear, access to the internet and understanding how parliament works remain significant barriers to participation.
- 5. Initiatives need to be evaluated:** Participation should be a journey of continuous improvement. Engagement exercises should be critically evaluated to understand what they achieved (against expectations and pre-agreed metrics), how well they worked and what lessons can be learned for the future.





Members of the Fijian Parliament's Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights conducting a visit to heritage sites in Levuka, Fiji, as part of their public consultation on a heritage bill. © Parliament of Fiji.

## Fiji: Strategic engagement

Parliaments big and small need to engage proactively with the communities they represent. This case study, which focuses on the Parliament of Fiji, demonstrates that making engagement a strategic priority can lead to success – and that it is the magnitude of the effort rather than the size of the parliament that counts.

### Starting with a strategy

After eight years of interruption involving several military coups, the Parliament of Fiji was re-established under a new Constitution in 2014. Parliament opened in October of that year after a general election in September. Newly elected members and newly appointed staff had to get the institution up and running quickly.

Following substantial voter turnout at the election, the new parliament recognized from the outset the importance of engaging with the community in order to maintain public interest in and enthusiasm for the country's new democracy. It was acknowledged that the eight-year gap between parliaments meant that many community members lacked understanding of parliament and how it worked.

An important first step was the development of a community engagement strategy, which was done as part of a United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) capacity-building project. This strategy, developed by the Civic Engagement Unit in consultation with an international adviser, outlined a commitment to “engage with the people of Fiji so that they understand how Parliament functions, find out about Parliament’s work and recognize how they can have a say.”<sup>3</sup>

The strategy set out four objectives: raising the profile of parliament in the community, educating the community about how parliament works, informing the community about parliament’s work, and encouraging community involvement with parliament. Recognizing that parliament represented all Fijians, the strategy outlined some key target audiences for engagement. These audiences were chosen because they were critical to the standing of parliament in the community (such as the media), because they traditionally had been less engaged in the political life of the nation (such as youth and women), or because they were distant from the capital (communities in rural and remote areas).

<sup>3</sup> Internal document provided by the Parliament of Fiji.

Covering the first full term of the newly established parliament, the strategy was a vital foundational document that set the framework for engagement with the community. It established the guiding principles for engagement and the approaches through which interaction with the community would take place.

The strategy was endorsed by the Speaker and Secretary General, ensuring that it became a strategic priority for the parliament. Importantly, the Speaker also led some key outreach initiatives, demonstrating the level of commitment that was being directed to engagement.

## Taking a professional approach

Employing specialist staff with knowledge, understanding and skills in public relations and media was critical to the early success of the engagement strategy. Within the resources that were available to it, parliament employed some key personnel with the wherewithal to develop and implement its engagement strategy.

Since not all of these staff had previous experience of working in parliament, professional development was provided through a UNDP capacity-building project and a twinning programme with the Parliament of Victoria in Australia. The staff took part in professional exchanges and were supported by mentors with experience in parliamentary engagement, enabling them to quickly adapt their public relations and media skills to the parliamentary environment.

## Developing flagships for engagement

One of the key elements of parliament's approach was the implementation of some flagship projects that would become key drivers for delivering its strategy. These included initiatives to take parliament to the people, to bring people to parliament and to keep the community updated on what was happening in parliament.

Outreach to communities scattered across Fiji, including its many islands, was deemed vital to maintaining the momentum of interest generated through the first election in eight years. A travelling road show – known as “Parliament Bus” – to symbolically connect with the way many Fijians travel – included presentations and displays in villages across Fiji. Parliament also organized a “Meet the Speaker” programme that enabled communities to hear from the Speaker and ask questions about how parliament worked in practice.

Between 2015 and 2018, the Parliament of Fiji conducted 336 outreach programmes across the country: 147 Parliament Bus and Meet the Speaker events for schools, and 189 such events for communities.

Wherever the Parliament Bus has travelled to in Fiji, it has met with an enthusiastic welcome from community members wishing to learn more about the institution. Testimonials from a range of villagers shared on parliament's website point to

the value of place-based engagement, particularly as many people are unable to travel to the capital, Suva, to experience parliament in person. For instance, village headman Ananaisa Rokovatonawa from Mau, central Fiji, noted in his testimonial that most of the villagers were not aware of how parliament worked: “It's really a good learning opportunity for us as we now know which doors to tap on when we want to voice our concerns or opinions on certain issues affecting us daily.”<sup>4</sup>

As well as supporting such outreach initiatives, the Parliament of Fiji has developed an active programme of visits to the parliament building in Suva, during both sitting and non-sitting weeks. A Parliament Discovery Centre was set up in one of the committee rooms of the building to provide a focal point for such visits, with information and artefacts helping visitors understand the history and practices of parliament. The visitor experience included a guided tour of the chamber as well as opportunities to view parliament sitting in session.

Demand for visits soon became particularly high among school students, and an education and youth flagship was launched to engage young Fijians with their new parliament. The institution also developed educational resources and school outreach programmes, along with professional development workshops for teachers to help them understand how best to use the new resources to teach civics in the classroom. The resources included a series of information sheets about parliament, a teachers' guide and some modules linking to the Fijian education curriculum, which set out some interactive learning activities targeted at students in different years. Launching the resources in 2017, then Speaker Jiko Luveni said that they would enable parliament to “maximize our outreach to students and youth.”<sup>5</sup>

A parliament news service was set up, including liaison with media outlets, information advertisements in newspapers, televised parliamentary proceedings, a comprehensive website and use of social media to inform the community about parliament's work. With almost 70 per cent of the population of Fiji using social media, parliament recognized early on the importance of connecting with community members via this channel. Facebook became a focal point for providing parliamentary information to the community, including on sittings, bills and committee work. Parliament has also live-streamed sittings and committee hearings on this platform.

Another important initiative in the first few years after the restoration of democracy was a series of community forums arranged by the Speaker. Government and opposition MPs and civil society representatives were invited to discuss a range of topics, including the Sustainable Development Goals and their relevance for Fiji. These forums were live-streamed on social media, attracting a large audience on each occasion.

Through these flagship projects, the Parliament of Fiji steadily built connections with people across the country after many years of being absent from community life. In the early years of the new parliament, this was important foundational work that provided the institution with a solid base of engagement from which to build in the future.

<sup>4</sup> Parliament of the Republic of Fiji, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Parliament of the Republic of Fiji, 2017.

More recently, technology has been an important feature of parliament's outreach work. This point was emphasized by the current Speaker, Ratu Epeli Nailatikau, at the IPU World e-Parliament Conference in June 2021: "The live-streaming of parliament sittings and committee hearings has ensured a wider reach, keeping Fijians informed and engaged with the business of parliament and thereby generating much public debate."<sup>6</sup> Mr. Nailatikau noted that timely investments in the country's e-parliament initiative from 2020 included the development and strengthening of IT facilities to ensure effective online and virtual communications. As he observed, this was important for public engagement but also for parliament's operations during the COVID-19 pandemic:

The target was enhancing parliament's accessibility to citizens for information resources and access to committee inquiries, but it became crucial in ensuring the continuity of business during the lockdowns that were instituted to counter the transmission of the pandemic.<sup>7</sup>

## Conclusion and lessons learned

This case study from the Parliament of Fiji highlights various themes outlined in the main sections of this report. The key lessons learned are listed below:

1. **Document a strategy** that sets out the guiding principles for engagement and how it is to be delivered.
2. **Obtain high-level support** for the strategy.
3. **Employ professional staff** with the knowledge and skills to implement the strategy.
4. **Draw on the expertise** of others when needed.
5. **Use a variety of approaches and channels** to connect with the community.
6. **Ensure that engagement involves face-to-face and online interaction**, by reaching out to people in the locations where they are, bringing people to parliament so that they can experience it in person, and using contemporary digital channels to regularly engage the community.
7. **Design programmes that are specific to the circumstances of the local community**, which can help parliaments deliver effective engagement regardless of their size.

<sup>6</sup> Parliament of the Republic of Fiji, 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Parliament of the Republic of Fiji, 2021.



Socio-Economic Development through oversight and public participation, Mpumalanga, Gert Sibande District Municipality, Carolina, Silobela Stadium. Submissions and questions by the members of the public and responses by the government officials. © Parliament of South Africa

## South Africa: Embedding meaningful engagement

The work of the Parliament of South Africa highlights good practices in institutionalizing and embedding public engagement, based on specific requirements in the country's Constitution. Parliament has made efforts to ensure that its engagement practices:

- align practical actions with cultural and historical context
- shape constitutional vision into institutionalized frameworks
- translate those frameworks into regular initiatives and institutionalized support structures
- use the right tools to accomplish these goals
- include consistent monitoring and evaluation mechanisms

This case study draws on existing engagement research, analyses of South African parliamentary public engagement frameworks and reports, and interviews with MPs from the National Assembly and the National Council of Provinces (NCOP), practitioners and staff members.

### Public engagement is enshrined in the Constitution

The adoption of the 1996 Constitution of the Republic of South Africa following the collapse of the apartheid regime was seen as a watershed moment in the quest to promote public participation in decision-making. This process started with the Government adopting a participatory approach to drafting the new Constitution, which has gone on to enshrine the public's involvement in legislative and other processes of governance. Public engagement practice by the Parliament of South Africa is grounded in this constitutional promise of public involvement to overcome a history of exclusion. This example emphasizes how institutionalized engagement can reflect the historical context in which it occurs.

At the national, provincial and municipal levels, the legislature represents the voice of the people in governance and is driven by a constitutional mandate to involve people in its processes and work. MP Archibold Nyambi, House Chairperson for Committees at the NCOP, regards it as the “core business of parliament to make sure that at all times the involvement of the public is facilitated in decisions that affect them”. This, as he further explained, is “not a matter of choice, rather, a constitutional obligation” and “a constitutional mandate that we, the parliament, have to be guided by at all times”. On a similar point, Sikhumbuzo Tshabalala, Senior Manager of Core Business in the Legislative Sector Support unit, stressed the importance of “making sure that everyone, irrespective of race, irrespective of age, irrespective of where you live ... feels that they are part of this democracy because there are deliberate efforts to involve them”.

This public engagement practice aims at reversing the deficits of the country’s political history when, as noted by MP Cedric Frolick, House Chairperson for Committees in the National Assembly, parliaments were “used [under the apartheid government] to oppress people, to disenfranchise people”. Highlighting the important principle that guides parliament’s approach to public participation, Mr. Frolick added:

Parliament is a very powerful instrument that makes the laws. And it is important for us to use this institution as a vehicle where the aspirations of our people can be expressed and where they can have a direct say in their future and in their destiny. And also where things are not going right, to have those platforms that are there so that they can tell us beforehand.

These constitutional provisions created a space for parliament to position itself as “the nerve-centre of people’s power, people’s participation and people-centred governance.”<sup>8</sup>

## Developing an engagement framework for the legislative sector

Effective engagement requires deliberate strategies and frameworks. The 2013 *Public Participation Framework for the South African Legislative Sector* (known more commonly as the Legislative Sector Public Participation Framework) has become the overarching guideline, setting out “norms and standards for Public Participation within the Legislative Sector.”<sup>9</sup> The framework was created collaboratively through the network of national and subnational legislatures and is anchored in the Speakers’ Forum of South Africa. Key stakeholders, including MPs and officials, were involved in both formulating and implementing the framework, ensuring that the political decisions become reality. Mr. Tshabalala explained as follows:

The Speakers’ Forum developed a secretariat ... called the Legislative Sector Support (LSS)... It is located within parliament. Parliament is responsible for ensuring the effective functioning of this office... The LSS monitors implementation of participation frameworks at different legislatures, and also provides support ... The Speakers meet on a quarterly basis ... to assess how they are doing in their work, implementing this facilitation of public involvement in the processes of the legislature.

For its part, the Parliament of South Africa has developed a Public Participation Model (PPM). *The Legacy Report of the Fifth Term of Parliament 2014–2019* sets out the aims and purpose of the PPM as follows:

[The Model] outlines the mechanisms and processes through which Parliament can provide for meaningful public involvement and participation in its legislative and other processes.

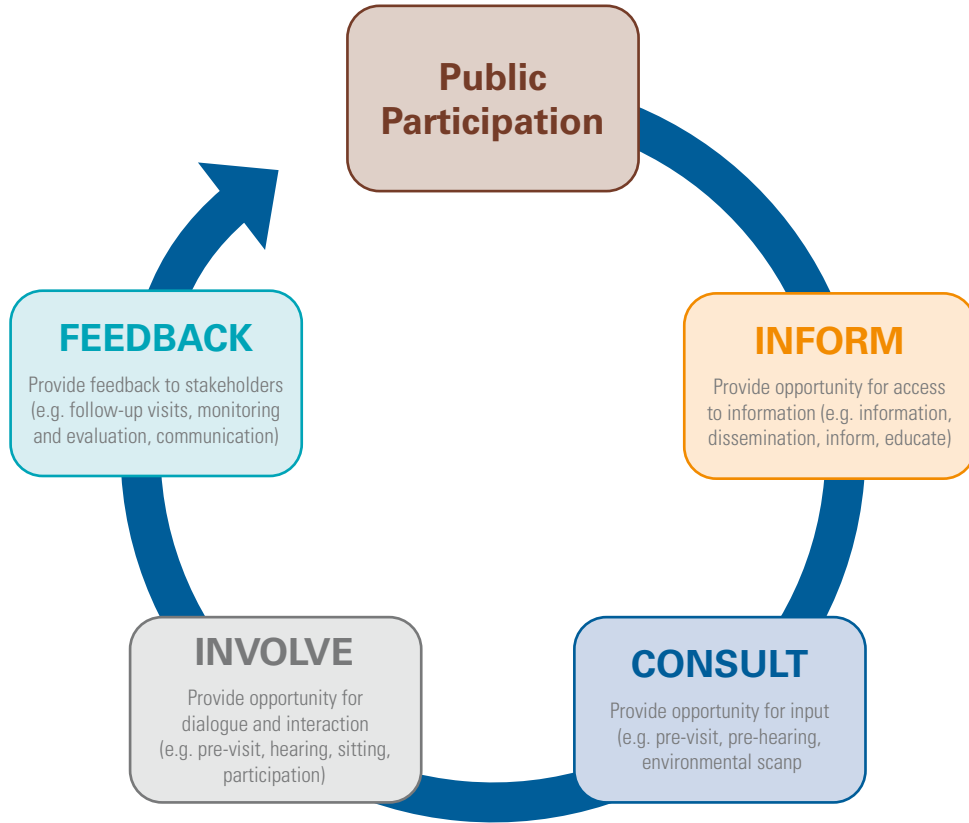
[It] also aims to improve communication support to the business of Parliament, public education, provision of information, and public access to Parliament’s processes in striving to increase the involvement of people from across the socio-economic and geographic profiles of the country. The Model also increases the accountability of Members of Parliament to the people as their elected representatives through closing the public participation cycle with the introduction of a feedback loop. Furthermore, it is integrated with the Oversight and Accountability programme so that inputs received through public participation activities are channelled to appropriate parliamentary Committees and find expression in their respective programmes.<sup>10</sup>

8 Parliament of the Republic of South Africa, 2019b.

9 South African Legislative Sector, 2013: 30.

10 Parliament of the Republic of South Africa, 2019b: 53.

Figure 1. South Africa’s Public Participation Model



Mr. Tshabalala, who was directly involved in formulating and implementing the PPM, reflected on parliament’s role in the following terms:

[Parliament operates in a way that helps to] resource all of these steps individually so that they are very effective. When we inform, we must inform so that people participate from an informed position. We must also ensure that there’s effective consultation. But what is more important is that the South African Legislative Sector, including parliament, wants to reach this level of involvement, where we are in partnership with the people.

Mr. Frolick, meanwhile, made the following observation:

Public participation is a crucial pillar of the oversight and accountability model. And that comes into expression, especially at times when committees implement their programmes, whether it is in terms of making new laws, amending existing laws, public hearings that are taking place or undertaking oversight visits to all parts of the country ... Public participation, for us, is non-negotiable.

He also highlighted the importance of designing inclusive frameworks:

We must always keep in mind that every voice in society is important, whether it comes from a person who is very influential, whether it comes from NGOs [Non-Governmental Organizations], civil society or academic institutions, or whether it is a poor person living in a deep rural village, a traditional leader or a religious leader. All those different views need to be taken on board. And that’s why you must design your public participation process in such a way that it’s inclusive so that the voices of the people are heard. Ultimately, we are representing those different voices.

According to Mr. Frolick, this commitment to a framework for participation is also reflected in the parliamentary budget:

In the budgets of the committees, as well as what we call contingency budgets, we do make the necessary arrangements and allocations to ensure that this very important and vital aspect of law-making and engagement with citizens is not neglected. And that is why we’ve seen an incremental increase in the amount of money that is being allocated to public participation, not only in terms of the money, but also the human resources and the restructuring of internal processes so that we can give full expression to the will of the people.

It is difficult to quantify the exact budget and staff resources allotted to public engagement in the Parliament of South Africa, precisely because engagement initiatives are so embedded throughout different parts of legislature. But it is clear that the institution as a whole allocates substantial resources to these initiatives. As well as earmarking financial resources for embedding public engagement, parliament has also set up training for members and staff, as Mr. Frolick explained:

After each election, there are new members coming in ... So it is important that you bring new members very quickly on board in terms of the modus operandi of public participation and why it is important. So, you must have dedicated training sessions for MPs, where you can also bring in certain elements of civil society, but also former members who can come and share their experiences with the new MPs so that they can pick up the baton and further improve on what we are doing.

Taken together, the PPM, the Legislative Sector Public Participation Framework, and the financial and human resources allocated to engagement constitute a comprehensive framework that translates the constitutional vision into an achievable reality.

## Translating the framework into parliamentary engagement

The PPM is implemented through a number of ongoing institutionalized activities. Engagement initiatives are planned in ways that promote access and social cohesion, with particular regard to language, venue use and interaction with rural communities that are digitally unconnected.

A significant proportion of activities are channelled through the NCOP, which represents the nine provinces in the national legislature. As parliament notes:

[These] programmes of the NCOP are benchmark examples in the legislative sector depicting the convergence of the oversight and accountability, law-making, public participation and cooperative government mandates of Parliament.<sup>11</sup>

Some of these activities are detailed below:

- **Provincial Week** provides a consistent space for parliamentary interaction and feedback with provinces, leaders and other key stakeholders. The NCOP sets aside one week, every year or two years, for oversight work in the provinces in conjunction with the provincial legislatures. There were six Provincial Week programmes during the fifth term of parliament (2014–2019).

- **Local Government Week** helps the institution to strengthen its relationship with the South African Local Government Association by taking parliament to municipalities across the country. Since its inception in 2012, Local Government Week has served as a “very important platform for sharing lessons and looking at solutions to challenges faced by local government.”<sup>12</sup> Mr. Nyambi explained that the initiative makes local governments realize that they are the focal point of service delivery.
- **Taking Parliament to the People (TPTTP)** takes parliament to different parts of the country, normally in remote areas with limited infrastructure. Since its inception, the activity has happened regularly in March and November each year. It has promoted increased access to parliament and fostered better participation through public education. TPTTP comprises pre-visit activities involving communities, followed by the programme itself. A third phase, known as a “report back session”, was added during the Fifth Parliament (2014–2019) as a way to provide feedback on the Government’s activities in terms of service delivery.

Reflecting on TPTTP, Mr. Nyambi observed as follows:

You make sure that the relevant stakeholders, that is your relevant ministers, your relevant emissaries in the province and the leadership of local government at the particular municipality and the relevant State-owned entities leadership, are made to attend and the public are given opportunities to ask questions, to raise their issues, to raise their frustrations, to comment when things are correct.

Mr. Frolick explained the activity in the following terms:

We have teams ... advance teams who go out into the different areas to popularize and advertise the public hearings that will take place. We make use extensively of community radio stations so that we can communicate with the people in their language so that they can understand. And we also make use of editorials in newspapers and other publications, as well as on the website of parliament that is at least now very up to date with the relevant information. And the key in terms of this involvement is committees. It is to ensure that we reach out as far as possible to all the people of our country.

Because TPTTP brings together members of the NCOP, members of Cabinet (national level), members of the Executive Council (provincial level) and municipal councillors (local government level), it facilitates direct interaction between the public and their representatives from all three spheres of the State. Parliamentarians are actively involved in all of the events and, indeed, are key to the programme’s success.

- **Sectoral engagement** initiatives enable parliament to “focus on identified special interest groups by providing them with a platform to raise issues they face on a daily basis relating to service delivery, implementation of laws or government policies as well as an opportunity to present recommendations or suggestions for remedial action.”<sup>13</sup>

11 Parliament of the Republic of South Africa, 2019b: 12.

12 Parliament of the Republic of South Africa, 2014: 22.

13 Parliament of the Republic of South Africa, 2017a: 39.

Some examples were given by Luvuyo Tyali, Team Leader of the Northern Cape Province Parliamentary Democracy Office:

A youth parliament takes place on 16 June each year. We also facilitate these processes at the women's parliament in August, where participants hold a woman's chatter where they are briefed in terms of progress on issues of women's empowerment.

Other mechanisms of engagement include **public participation in law-making** (where the National Assembly and the NCOP facilitate involvement by the public, especially CSOs, in the process of legislation), **processing of petitions** (which is subdivided into various phases: consideration, preliminary investigation, referral and appeal) and **committee-specific** activities (where the public has access to all sittings of the Houses as well as committee meetings). These mechanisms are a further indication of the many ways in which public participation is being actively encouraged in parliamentary processes.

## Platforms and support structures

Engagement requires not just a strategy but also a commitment to resource it properly. To this end, parliament carries out its various public engagement initiatives through a range of support structures:

- **Parliamentary Constituency Offices (PCOs)** are focused on "structural outreach" to foster interaction between MPs and members of the public in their constituencies. The closed-list proportional representation system adopted for elections in South Africa means that MPs are not directly elected from individual constituencies. Instead, parties assign geographical constituencies to their MPs based on their seat allocations. They are entitled to a monthly allowance for each MP to run a constituency office, and each political party makes its own constituency arrangements. There are 350 PCOs throughout the country. Mr. Frolick explained this arrangement as follows:

You know exactly where your operations are and what you can do there. When we go to our constituencies, it's one of the most valuable points of interaction because it takes you out of the formal set-up of the law-making environment and it roots you among your people. And there you can see the implementation or lack thereof of the laws that we are making.

Mr. Frolick stressed that this local connection is important for MPs and the public:

In my case, my constituency office is just across the road from the largest public hospital in Eastern Cape province. So you have a regular flow of people who go to the hospital and don't get the treatment and the service that they think they should have gotten, who then come over to the office and expect you to intervene ... So the involvement of an MP in the constituency is absolutely priceless.

One of the main aims of constituency activities is to instil the notion that public participation in the democratic process does not end with casting votes at the ballot box. Rather, public engagement in South Africa means continuous interaction

between elected officials, parties and constituents.

- **Parliamentary Democracy Offices (PDOs)**, which were launched in 2009, aim to create avenues for rural participation in parliament. Unlike PCOs, PDOs fall directly under the auspices of parliamentary institutions and officials, and are therefore more politically neutral in their interactions with the public. Having two different institutionalized offices that simultaneously and systematically manage the political and administrative sides of public engagement ensures a wider and more comprehensive reach.

Offices have been set up in Northern Cape, North West and Limpopo provinces. PDOs organize community outreach activities to educate the public and to obtain feedback from communities that tend to lack modern means of access to parliament. Mr. Tyali made the following observation:

When there are bills on the table, we call out and do what is called outreach programmes, where we educate and inform citizens so they understand what parliament is, how it impacts on their livelihoods and their daily lives, and why it is important for them to participate when there are bills ... and in the process of oversight.

- **Parliamentary Education Offices (PEOs)** are the third part of the equation. They are staffed by officials with responsibility for educating the public about the activities of parliament and how the institution fits into the wider democratic context in South Africa. Shirley Montsho, Section Manager of Production and Publishing in the Parliamentary Communication Services, noted that parliament is often confused with the executive, especially in rural areas.

Together, the PCOs, PDOs and PEOs provide a comprehensive framework for institutionalized engagement. The advent of both constituency (i.e. political) and democracy (i.e. administrative) offices underscores a key characteristic of engagement in South Africa, in the sense that it accounts for both the political and institutional sides of the coin.

## Tools

Public engagement is carried out as part of a holistic communications strategy. Responsibility for engagement rests with various sections and departments, including the Production and Publishing Unit, the Public Education Office and the Public Relations Unit, which use the parliamentary website and various social media platforms – especially Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram – to engage the public. As Ms. Montsho explained, parliament moved quickly during the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated lockdown, launching live-streaming of all House and committee sittings on parliamentary TV and social media to provide the community with ongoing access to its core business:

[By using diverse tools, we can] ensure that our public have enough choice. They have a choice as to where they can go and get us and that is what we are doing to reach out to the people.

Parliament regularly optimizes its website in line with emerging trends and to provide a better user experience. However, limited internet access and the inherent digital divide impair digital engagement. One strategy to support wider



engagement is to ensure that parliamentary websites are free to access and not charged as part of a user's broadband or mobile data plan. Parliament is working on this approach.

To reach less digitally connected sections of the public, parliament also publishes information in national and local newspapers, uses short message service (SMS) platforms to send messages, and communicates through talk shows on television channels, such as the State-owned South African Broadcasting Corporation, and radio stations. Ms. Montsho explained as follows:

We communicate via community radio stations ... print pamphlets and distribute them in local areas, and contact stakeholders in our database and in municipal databases in the provinces, so we can show that we are engaging meaningfully with them.

To promote widespread and inclusive participation, the linguistic diversity of the country is also factored into the arrangements for public hearings. Mr. Frolick explained:

We have 11 official languages in the country and we are also responsible for ensuring that we give due recognition to all these languages. So our language services are always in support when we are involved in engaging the public.

Through the Production and Publication Unit, parliament issues all publications in all official languages. Ms. Montsho also mentioned that, with the advent of COVID-19 and restrictions on public gatherings (including visits to rural communities), parliament intensified its use of alternative means of communication. This included collaborating with external companies for simultaneous live-streaming and broadcasting of various committee hearings.

## Monitoring and evaluation

The last step in institutionalizing engagement involves evaluating outcomes to hone practices and address challenges. Monitoring and evaluation provides feedback that allows parliament to improve public engagement. The Parliament of South Africa has institutionalized monitoring and evaluation into its work, as reflected in its 2020 Strategic Management Framework,<sup>14</sup> which explains how monitoring and evaluation fits into the overall process.

According to Mr. Frolick, monitoring and evaluation initiatives are geared towards ensuring that MPs and officials "become more scientific in the way that we plan, implement, execute and then process the different activities that we participate in". He made the following additional observation:

Public participation and especially the model, for us, was a continuous process where we refine our approach, see what works, see what we can do better, see how we can improve our own operations, and see how we can realign our own systems to achieve the most desirable outcome.

Mr. Nyambi also emphasized the importance of monitoring and evaluation, stating that "in all these processes, it's good to assess and monitor what you are doing to make sure that you are improving and that you are in line with what you want to achieve". He also explained how monitoring and evaluation is then used to improve the public engagement process:

We do have our own monitoring and evaluation unit in parliament ... We have what we call the Parliamentary Budget Office, which is staffed with highly qualified researchers. This office is independent from the institution. It has its own director, its own staff and its own researchers. They will always prepare an analysis to indicate what is happening about a particular policy, about a particular process, about how and where money is being spent, and about what the situation is. And once they've done that, they'll always come to us and explain that this is the situation and, from what they are picking up, this is where we have to improve.

Monitoring and evaluation is therefore carried out to provide feedback on the effect of government activities, as well as on how participation impacts parliament's programmes, and to help hone public engagement activities. Regular monitoring mechanisms (such as attendance registers at events) and regular evaluation mechanisms (such as studies measuring the effectiveness of activities) are integrated into public engagement. To date, parliament has carried out two self-assessments, both conducted by panels of former MPs and experts. The first self-assessment, conducted in 2009, explored parliament's mandate.<sup>15</sup> The second, completed in 2015, focused on impact.<sup>16</sup>

Another way that parliament seeks to continually refine its approach to engagement is by commissioning "independent impact assessment processes" to promote "evidence-based decision-making".<sup>17</sup> These assessments are carried out through external institutions "using a similar framework to enable trends analysis and consistency" and include the country's language diversity in the choice of methods.<sup>18</sup>

One central assessment, carried out in three waves between 2017 and 2019 and published in 2020, showed that while challenges remain, parliament consistently made progress in public engagement outcomes. Public understanding of parliament's mandates – law-making, executive oversight and promotion of public participation – had improved by an average of 27 per cent over the three waves, while public ratings of the effectiveness of parliament in fulfilling its mandates increased by 4 per cent (law-making), 27 per cent (executive oversight) and 5.7 per cent (promotion of public participation).<sup>19</sup>

There have also been improvements in the proportion of people participating in several of parliament's public engagement activities. While actual participation through the top five platforms increased by an average of 7 per cent between 2018 and 2019, the proportion of people who never participated in any of the activities or platforms fell from

14 Parliament of the Republic of South Africa, 2019a.

15 Parliament of the Republic of South Africa, 2009.

16 Parliament of the Republic of South Africa, 2017.

17 Internal document provided by the Parliament of the Republic of South Africa.

18 Internal document provided by the Parliament of the Republic of South Africa.

19 Internal document provided by the Parliament of the Republic of South Africa.

72 per cent to 64 per cent over the same period. There was also a rapid increase in the proportion of people leveraging parliament's digital engagement tools such as social media, mobile phones and the website. This coincided with a marked decline in the proportion of people connecting with parliament via television, radio, print media and personal contact, perhaps reflecting changing patterns of media use across society.

A 2015–2016 study by the Parliamentary Monitoring Group showed that 79 per cent of respondents perceived parliament's feedback process as inadequate.<sup>20</sup> This corroborates Mr. Tyali's views on the challenges of the feedback process, as mentioned earlier. Madimetsa Molekwa, Section Manager, Provincial and Municipal Liaison, made the following observation:

We are big in inviting them, interacting with them and so on, but we don't have the same zeal and energy, in the form of institutional energy, to equally go back to communities and give them feedback with the same pace. All we do is share the report – we put the report on the website. I'm saying, we went to these communities to talk with them, so it's only logical that we need to go back.

Parliament also operates a feedback mechanism and reports on resolutions on issues raised during public hearings and other engagement programmes. As Mr. Tyali put it, "an MP will come and give a briefing to constituents, explaining what they are doing in parliament, and also take feedback and input from the community". The aim of the "report back session" conducted by the Fifth Parliament in 2018 (see earlier) was to improve reporting on the TPTTP programme held in the same year and to provide feedback on service delivery based on issues "raised in the pre-visit and the main TPTTP programmes"<sup>21</sup> This demonstrates parliament's commitment to working on improving the feedback loop.

## Conclusion and lessons learned

Over the past three decades, public engagement has gradually become embedded in South Africa. Although the approach is continuously being improved, it has reached a point of maturity and a number of lessons can therefore be drawn. Embedding this practice in parliaments is central to creating sustainable and ongoing engagement that extends beyond a given political administration or election cycle. The South African case study demonstrates the following good practices for engagement:

1. **Align public engagement structures with the historical context:** Public engagement is always grounded in the country in which it takes place. In the case of South Africa, the history of apartheid and exclusion led to public engagement being enshrined as a core facet of South African democracy in the Constitution.
2. **Translate the constitutional vision into practical frameworks:** The Parliament of South Africa has both the PPM and Legislative Sector Public Participation Framework. Taken together, these demonstrate how a constitutional promise can be realized through an achievable framework. The idea of the South Africa Legislative Sector also promotes a more holistic approach of widespread legislative public engagement across the country.
3. **Create an ecosystem for regular engagement:** Regular initiatives, backed by a system of support structures and facilitated using relevant tools, create an ecosystem for engagement. In addition, the two chambers of parliament collaborate on engagement initiatives. Officials and MPs work closely to perpetuate this arrangement, which helps to avoid working in silos and at cross-purposes, as well as aligning human and material resources towards optimizing such initiatives.
4. **Set up monitoring and evaluation systems:** The final step of an institutionalized process involves monitoring and evaluating initiatives so that public engagement practice can be continuously honed and challenges can be addressed. This also serves as a way to close the feedback loop, by demonstrating the results of engagement to community members and MPs who were involved in the initiatives.

<sup>20</sup> Doyle, 2017: 10.

<sup>21</sup> NCOP, 2018.



Guided tour at UK Parliament. Terms and conditions: This photo, and all related crops, are released under an Attribution 3.0 Unported (CC BY 3.0) licence. © UK Parliament/Roger Harris

## United Kingdom: Leaving no one behind

This case study explores the strategies used for outreach and engagement by the Parliament of the United Kingdom (both the House of Commons and the House of Lords). In a typical year, it spends just over £10 million on education and outreach. The result is that, in 2019–2020, it reached 1,891,738 people through such initiatives. The education centre was visited by 70,238 pupils from 2,711 schools and, on average, there were 29 engagement activities per constituency, reaching 41 per cent of UK schools.<sup>22</sup>

In its strategy, the institution describes this approach as “targeted engagement”, whereby it focuses on identifying and engaging with specific communities who remain under-represented in politics and parliament. This strategy provides a useful example to parliaments because it involves:

- attempting to actively relate disengaged and hard-to-reach citizens to parliament
- educating young people nationally
- meeting citizens where they are, outside of parliament
- working with local partners to target participants and content

<sup>22</sup> Parliament of the United Kingdom, 2020a.

### Targeting the disengaged

Parliament has been considering how to broaden and deepen public engagement for almost 20 years. In 2011, the Hansard Society produced a report entitled *Connecting citizens to parliament*. It focused on engaging with hard-to-reach populations and explicitly highlighted the challenges this would entail:

Engaging more effectively with hard-to-reach groups will not be achieved through a single “big bang” change, nor can it be achieved in the short term, rather it requires a number of smaller cumulative step-changes.<sup>23</sup>

The report set out a series of recommendations that promoted a blend of formal and informal education combined with traditional and new – mainly localized and digital – forms of participation.

Since the report was published, parliament has shaped its public engagement strategy by strategically targeting disengaged groups. The stated ambition of its 2025 public participation strategy<sup>24</sup> is as follows:

<sup>23</sup> Hansard Society, 2011a: v.

<sup>24</sup> Internal document provided by the Parliament of the United Kingdom.

For people to believe that Parliament is relevant to them; for people to get involved with Parliament wherever they are in the UK; for people to be actively engaged; and for participation to have an impact.

Edge Watchorn, former Managing Director for Participation at the Parliament of the United Kingdom, described the development of the strategy:

[We started off] very small scale ... putting information out. So we were telling people about procedure and how things worked ... The journey that we've been on [is] very much recognizing that actually, we don't just want to put information out there, but we really want to engage, and we need to be where people are.<sup>25</sup>

To achieve these goals, the public engagement team has made substantial efforts since 2015 to understand exactly who is disengaged in the United Kingdom. David Clark, Head of Education and Engagement at the Parliament of the United Kingdom, observed as follows:

Five years ago, when I arrived at parliament ... it was basically whoever we could reach ... and whoever we could try to engage with, because the fear was, if we targeted people, it looked like we were being party political ... We spent a long time convincing the House to say: "What we're just doing is levelling the playing field. So those people that don't engage are disengaged from politics, disenfranchised. If we just bring them up to the same level as everybody else ... they're not being given an advantage over anyone else." So for adult audiences, we asked the ... House of Commons Library, and they produced the briefing that then gave us ... quite top-level [information]; but it gave us the focus of who we needed to talk and work with.

In a 2019 research briefing entitled *Political disengagement in the UK: Who is disengaged?*, the House of Commons Library reported the following findings:

The proportion of people who trusted the Government to put the needs of the nation first decreased from 38% in 1986 to 17% in 2013. Trust in the credibility of politicians has been fluctuating around 9%.<sup>26</sup>

The same paper also noted substantial differences between groups, with some "more likely to participate in political activities"<sup>27</sup> (and thereby potentially influence political decisions) than others. It described these groups and their characteristics in terms of engagement as follows:

- **Young people:** lower levels of knowledge about politics; less likely than other age groups to participate in [formal] political activities, to be on the electoral roll and to vote
- **Ethnic minorities:** less likely to be on the electoral roll (though this is likely due to factors other than ethnicity) and to vote

- **Unskilled workers and the long-term unemployed:** lower levels of political knowledge, satisfaction with democracy and participation in political activities; less likely to be on the electoral roll and to vote
- **Women:** lower levels of knowledge about politics; less likely to be satisfied with the present system of governing
- **People with disabilities:** as likely as people without disabilities to have participated in political activities; more likely to be on the electoral roll than any other group

Parliament has shaped its current programme based on this research. Emma Stephenson, Manager of the Campaigns Team, Education and Engagement, described the programme in the following terms:

[The programme is] very much focused on our target audience, and our target audience is always the same. .. They're our starting point with any campaign. So it's the BAME<sup>28</sup> community, women, under-25-year-olds, people with disabilities and people from a low socioeconomic background. And then our other target audience are people geographically far from Westminster.

## Putting a face to the name

The Parliament of the United Kingdom is attempting to bring new voices into the conversation and to make itself more relatable as an institution. "It's sometimes easy for people to feel that what happens at Westminster... [is] either far away or it doesn't relate to [their] lives," said Ms. Watchorn, who noted that there can, at times, be a slight tension in encouraging people to engage when they can feel that the institutional mechanisms don't always allow for it.

Lord Laming, a member of the House of Lords, recognized this tension but also acknowledged the importance of public input more broadly into the work of parliament:

For those of us on the inside, we can get completely absorbed by the dialogue between ourselves. And it's important that we have that daily dialogue ... that's an essential part of the process. That's how legislation is constructed ... [But] being involved with the process should not absorb all our time and energy, because the process has an end, and the end is about delivering services on housing estates and in far-off towns and cities ... We can learn whether or not the processes that were designed in parliament actually meet the needs of local people.

## Select committee engagement

One key way in which parliament strategically relates itself to citizens is by bringing faces and voices into the conversation that would otherwise not be heard. The Select Committee Engagement Team helps committees in the House of Lords and the House of Commons to put together face-to-face engagement events that extend beyond formal evidence sessions. The team aims to deliver 40 participatory events

<sup>25</sup> Quotations without an accompanying source/footnote come from the background research conducted for this *Global Parliamentary Report*. See "Methodology and data sources" in the main body of the report for more details.

<sup>26</sup> Parliament of the United Kingdom, 2021b: 5.

<sup>27</sup> Parliament of the United Kingdom, 2021b: 31.

<sup>28</sup> Black, Asian and minority ethnic.

reaching 52,500 people a year. Some 60 per cent of these events are held outside the parliamentary estate. Tara-Jane Kerpens-Lee, who at the time of speaking served as Manager of the Select Committee Engagement Team, explained:

We support committees to hear from the people that they want to hear from but can't always do that through the formal evidence channels ... It's all about getting people to share their experiences. And we're really about the lived experience. So that's the kind of foundation of our work ... We want people to share their experiences of a particular issue.

The Select Committee Engagement Team tailors its outreach based on the groups identified as disengaged, aiming for 60 per cent of the people reached by its events being those who have not engaged previously. Ms. Kerpens-Lee and her team also target different audiences depending on the inquiry and the topic of the committee, using further methods of linking up existing data to target relevant audiences on particular issues. For instance, she described using Petitions Committee data as follows:

They already have an interested body of people who sign a petition ... If they're willing to do that, they might be willing to do something else ... So something that we've been able to do with the Petitions Committee [is] to utilize that data. So when people sign a petition [we can contact them] and they can say to them: "We want to hear what you think." And then we can say: "Well, we'll get to run this event. Do you want to come?" So that kind of base of people that petitions have is amazing in terms of the future.

Evaluations by the Select Committee Engagement Team show that 65 per cent of participants feel heard by the committees, and that 60 per cent feel positive that their views will go on to inform the inquiry and/or the committee's work.

## Your Story, Our History

Another strategy for reaching out to people who are disengaged is to run campaigns that portray parliament in a way that more of the community can relate to. MP Valerie Vaz, when talking about how her gender shapes her interactions with citizens, said: "People have told me that they will only talk to me because I am female." This reflection underscores how seeing a relatable face changes the way in which certain groups engage.

*Your Story, Our History – How Laws Affect Lives*<sup>29</sup> is an ongoing series of YouTube films, commissioned by parliament and launched in 2016, in which a community member – looking into the camera – describes a piece of legislation and its impact on their life. Topics featured in the videos are wide-ranging, from the rights of those living with disabilities, to female genital mutilation and mental health. Participants include members of disengaged groups. Ms. Stephenson reflected on the initiative in the following terms:

[It addresses perceptions] that parliament doesn't really affect your everyday life ... like law and democracy aren't relevant to people ... We picked very big legislation, kind of wide-reaching legislation ... [so we could say:] "This is how it affects your life; this is why you are able to do these things. It's not by accident."

Campaigns like this are one way to make sure people can relate to parliament and parliamentarians, because they see people who look like them speaking, and realize that legislative issues align with their own concerns.

Both the *Your Story, Our History* campaign and the work of the Select Committee Engagement Team show how the Parliament of the United Kingdom is working to reach people who would otherwise be disengaged.

## Education

Educating and informing the public about how parliament works and what it does is vitally important to breaking down silos, getting more people engaged and building trust. Young people are a major disengaged group in the United Kingdom (as elsewhere). Parliament runs several programmes tailored specifically to engage youth, as detailed below.

### Education centre

Parliament has built a dedicated education centre, which was opened in July 2015 at the Palace of Westminster. The centre offers a range of programmes reflecting different aspects of parliament's historical and current functions, designed for specific age groups and educational levels. A total of 70,238 pupils from 2,711 schools visited the centre between 2019 and 2020, with 1,295 of these schools receiving travel stipends.<sup>30</sup> The further the school is from Westminster, the more financial support it receives for its visit. These stipends ensure equitable access for otherwise disengaged young people.

### School visits

For students unable to visit in person, parliament provides digital content, including presentations about the legislature that are compatible with national curricula. It also arranges visits to schools, in some cases by MPs themselves. The outreach team facilitates these visits, with a particular focus on schools that have not engaged before. Its target is to visit at least one school in each constituency every two years.

Parliament's Education and Engagement Service engaged with 41 per cent of schools nationally across all of its activities in 2019–2020. "[School visits] are not just a feel-good exercise," said MP Charles Walker. "I always come back and say to my team, 'that was incredible, really valuable.'" He explained that he thinks most members are very happy to engage in such events. His sentiments were echoed by Ms. Vaz, who said: "I am happy to engage with my schools and colleges. It is important for them to see us, rather than 'oh that's parliament over there'"

29 Parliament of the United Kingdom, 2019.

30 Parliament of the United Kingdom, 2020a.

Reflecting on the visits, Lord Laming made the following observation:

[They] show that we're not all drawn from the elite and that we're not all people who were born in a certain way ... I want to know what issues matter to the 16-year-old pupil at the school down the road.

The school visits are evaluated consistently, and 96 per cent of teachers rated sessions as good or excellent. Moreover, 87 per cent of students who took part strongly agreed or agreed that they had learned about how the work of parliament links to their day-to-day life, 85 per cent strongly agreed or agreed that they had learned about their MP and how to contact them, and 82 per cent strongly agreed or agreed that they had learned more about the role of the House of Lords in shaping and improving laws.

## Supporting educators

Parliament is investing in educational support infrastructure as a way to engage young people. Examples include campaigns such as the national loan box scheme and the high-profile annual UK Parliament Week – now in its 10th year – where the institution devotes one week each November to supporting schools and other organizations around the country in running programmes on democracy. The campaign has its own website<sup>31</sup> and sign-up page.

Ms. Stephenson described UK Parliament Week as a flagship event:

We just encourage people to host events in their communities and then networks in their schools. And it's very much them taking democratic action on issues they care about.

The loan box scheme, meanwhile, provides resources to inspire classroom debates, introduce concepts around law-making and support students' understanding of the democratic process. There are currently 60 loan boxes. Between 2018 and 2019, the scheme reached a total of 47,381 students across the United Kingdom.

Parliament also has a dedicated teacher training centre. David Carr, Head of Teacher Training in the Education and Engagement Team, said: "Parliament engages with every school every year ... Teachers are at the core of that ... Teachers are our way in." Working in partnership with teacher training universities, parliament provides courses while teachers are completing their basic training so that they can be force multipliers and allies of the institution throughout their careers. It also trains experienced teachers (across all age groups) who want additional resources for teaching students about parliament.

Parliament also runs a three-day residential programme once a year, inviting 70 teachers from across the country to come to London (with all expenses paid) and experience the institution first-hand. In January 2016, the institution started an "ambassadors" programme to track the reach of the teachers it trains. The 70 teachers who attended the residential programme in 2016 reached in excess of 30,000 pupils and

trained more than 2,500 other colleagues, in what Mr. Carr referred to as a cascade effect:

The feedback is always: "We didn't realize what resources were available. We had no idea that we could bring our students to parliament. We had no idea that parliament was open ... We've been in London and seen parliament; we've just seen big railings and very unfriendly security. And we never knew that we could go in." ... It really shows that we make a difference.

The format of the resources provided to teachers is highly dependent on the educational level in question. For this reason, according to internal research commissioned by parliament, "primary schools tend to have a greater cross-curricular approach to the use of text-based resources arising from a greater focus on literacy". By contrast, "secondary teachers seem to prefer access to video and tend to want resources that are more like briefing notes".<sup>32</sup> Content is also tailored and adapted to different cultural contexts. For example, more in-depth material on devolution is provided in Scotland and Wales, while in predominantly Muslim areas, the content is relevant to cultural and religious backgrounds. As Mr. Carr explained, this strategy is about reaching teachers as well as students:

We're appealing to [teachers] on two levels. We say: "Look, we [have] got loads of resources and great ideas as to how you can answer your children's questions about parliament and getting their voice heard." And we're also talking to them as 21-to-24-year-old adults who oftentimes aren't as engaged as older people in parliament and politics. And so we tried to challenge their perceptions of parliament as well.

This is all the more important because teachers often express the same reservations about parliament (and its relevance) as their students. In addressing teachers' reservations, parliament can demonstrate its ongoing relevance to their profession (and age group), and through them relate this relevance to students and younger age groups. Together, the school visits, education centre, nationwide campaigns and support, and extensive teacher training provide a comprehensive way to engage young people in the United Kingdom.

## Meeting people where they are

Not everyone can come to parliament to give evidence. In response to this challenge, the institution conducts targeted engagement by meeting people where they are, both physically and culturally. The importance of engagement beyond Westminster – and of travelling to meet community members directly – was raised by Alasdair Mackenzie, Manager of Outreach in the Education and Engagement Team:

One of our key messages is understanding the way in which parliament affects your day-to-day life ... I think that's a message that is much clearer and much more obvious if you're where people are.

31 Parliament of the United Kingdom, 2021c.

32 Parliament of the United Kingdom, 2020b: 4.

The Parliamentary Outreach service has 13 regional offices, which conduct workshops for community groups and organizations, focusing specifically on less engaged people (women, BAME communities, young people, those with disabilities, unskilled workers and the unemployed). Local teams identify groups in their region and tailor content accordingly. Mr. Mackenzie reflected on the importance of being somewhere physically:

If you come to Westminster, you are unavoidably going to get wrapped up in the building and the heritage and the history of Westminster ... The relationship is still you as a visitor to that building, and your experience as a visitor to that building ... When we go to a group, it's very much more about, "Okay, here you are in city hall, this is where you live. This is where you are." And everything is refracted through that. So all the discussion [is] about local issues. People are in familiar surroundings with their friends, and everything becomes about that.

From a logistical standpoint, he made the following observation:

I think the convenience for people [is] of having someone who can come to them, slot into their regular meeting schedule. They're not having to, kind of, make massive travel arrangements and come all the way down to London.

One example of a community event was a February 2020 discussion and activity workshop run in partnership with Leicestershire Cares, an organization that works with business, community and government to find lasting solutions to help unemployed, homeless and at-risk young people. The 18 attendees were care leavers and asylum seekers, most of whom had very little knowledge of parliament. The workshop was well received for its clarity and interactivity. Later that year, the organization submitted evidence to the Department for Education's consultation on reforms to unregulated provision for children in care and care leavers.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, one of the young people who attended sessions at Leicestershire Cares was at the initial meeting of the youth panel for the House of Lords COVID-19 Committee in July 2020, appeared in a promotional video made for the committee, and voiced enthusiasm for attending similar meetings in future.

Another example is Nottingham Women's Centre, which helps women gain confidence, skills and independence, and has worked with the Parliamentary Outreach service since 2015. Throughout this time, Clare Mullin, Education and Engagement Officer for the Houses of Parliament to the West Midlands, has delivered up to two workshops each year to groups who use the centre, covering topics from an introduction to parliament, to contacting MPs, voting and effective campaigning. The workshops have been praised as enjoyable, informative, accessible and empowering. A community-wide voter registration drive following an early workshop led to many people voting for the first time. Nottingham Women's Centre also campaigned for misogyny to be recognized as a hate crime.<sup>34</sup> This approach was piloted by Nottinghamshire Police

in 2016,<sup>35</sup> and was raised as a private members' bill<sup>36</sup> and a suggested amendment to the Domestic Abuse Bill.<sup>37</sup> Ms. Vaz emphasized the importance of creating such spaces where women could feel comfortable talking about issues that matter to them.

In both of the above examples, parliamentary outreach has not only resulted in well-received events, but has empowered citizens to engage further, on their own initiative, about the issues that matter most to them.

Feedback illustrates the outreach programme's success. Ninety-two per cent of event organizers agreed that "this visit ... has improved my understanding of how my organization can contribute to parliament's work." Eighty-five per cent of participants strongly agreed or agreed that they had learned about how the work of parliament links to their day-to-day life. Eighty-six per cent strongly agreed or agreed that they had learned about their MP and how to contact them, and 81 per cent strongly agreed or agreed that they had learned about how the House of Lords helps to make laws.

## Working through local partners

The public engagement team works with local partners to make sure these initiatives are reaching their target audiences. Mr. Clark explained as follows:

We work ... on a yearly basis to make sure that we're building up a relationship, so that we know what's going on out there, because we live in this bubble of Westminster ... We also work [with] national organizations, but we really work very hard to make sure that we're delivering with local organizations as well, because they know what is actually happening ... In Wales, we have a bilingual Welsh specialist. In Northern Ireland, we have somebody who has worked both in schools and ... in community organizations, but helps us navigate the slightly more challenging and very different relationships that we have to build in Northern Ireland.

He also explained that the team has a database of about 15,000 local organizations that it can draw on in its work.

The teams doing the outreach, education and events detailed above rely on local partners to identify and recruit participants, as well as to tailor content. "The first ... port of call for us in a number of cases is that we work very closely with organizations, because in a lot of things, we cannot reach those people on our own," explained Ms. Kerpens-Lee. The teams also use local knowledge to shape content. Ms. Stephenson gave the example of partnering with organizations that work with people living with disabilities in order to customize events to the target audience, describing this approach in the following terms:

33 United Kingdom Department for Education, 2020.

34 Mullany and Trickett, 2018.

35 BBC News, 2018.

36 Parliament of the United Kingdom, 2021a.

37 BBC News, 2020.

[We have a] consultant type of relationship with ... certain groups who support people with disabilities. So we ask them for advice – essentially, “how do we make this more accessible?” And then we implement those suggestions as far as we can.

## Conclusion and lessons learned

In conclusion, the approach adopted by the Parliament of the United Kingdom is a case study in how to successfully target engagement so that it reaches the full spectrum of community members. The trends relating to disengaged groups across the world mirror findings in the United Kingdom. In light of the central promise of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which is to “leave no one behind”, it is important for parliaments conducting public engagement to understand how to target groups who are not traditionally engaged. This point is underscored in *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2016*, which makes the following observation: “Ensuring that these commitments are translated into effective action requires a precise understanding of target populations.”<sup>38</sup> The same report states that these vulnerable groups include “children, youth, persons with disabilities, people living with HIV, older persons, indigenous peoples, refugees, internally displaced persons and migrants.”<sup>39</sup>

The strategy adopted in the United Kingdom illustrates the following best practices for targeted outreach:

1. **Make parliament relatable:** Representative democracy is premised on building institutions that represent people. Part of the reason certain groups do not engage with their parliament is because they do not feel it represents or understands them. Campaigns such as the *Your Story, Our History* video series put a different face on parliament – one to which a broader section of the population can relate – while initiatives such as the Select Committee Engagement Team help to bring the institution face to face with people who would not otherwise feel connected or heard.
2. **Build physical and virtual infrastructure for education:** Young people around the world are frequently either disengaged or engaged in non-traditional ways. Therefore, building comprehensive infrastructure for education throughout the country both encourages youth engagement and shapes new generations. The Parliament of the United Kingdom targets young people in a variety of different ways, through tailored school visits, teacher training, an education centre and other innovative campaigns.

3. **Meet people where they are:** Leaving no one behind means bringing parliaments to people who cannot otherwise interact with them. In the United Kingdom, the Parliamentary Outreach service conducts events in different parts of the country, ensuring that they are culturally, linguistically and geographically accessible.
4. **Work through local partners:** Parliament draws on a network of local partners to facilitate its targeted outreach initiatives. This enables programming to be tailored correctly and relevant participants to be recruited.
5. **Take the time to build strong outreach and engagement:** Engaging positively and building relationships is a challenging and time-consuming endeavour, especially when it comes to connecting with hard-to-reach groups. When trust in democratic systems is strained and young people (and other groups) are disconnected from the formal channels of governance and politics, parliaments need to seek partnerships and explore new ways of working. They also need to be prepared to try multiple methods of engagement and allow time for the benefits to become tangible.

<sup>38</sup> United Nations, 2016: 48.

<sup>39</sup> United Nations, 2016: 48.



# Thematic case studies



Belgium. Visit by the Committee on Public Enterprises and Federal Institutions to La Monnaie/Muntshouwborg in Brussels. © Inge Verhelst

## Taking committees out of parliament to listen and engage

Committees have long been a significant and integral part of the way parliaments work. Their history dates back as far as the fourteenth century, when their precursors in England were set up to examine public petitions and to draw up legislation in response.

Today, parliamentary committees are an almost universal institution. Committee hearings – for reviewing draft legislation, for post-legislation scrutiny or for investigating public policy issues – remain one of the most important touchpoints for members of the public to directly interact and engage with their representative body. Parliamentary committees are seen as a vital tool for public engagement – as a place where the voices of community members can be heard and where legislation can be influenced and challenged. Yet they mostly carry out their work within the parliamentary estate. This can make it challenging for members to hear a wide range of perspectives and to capture the views of those who are less able to access parliament. Indeed, according to the Hansard Society, parliaments have become better at engaging with the “already engaged,” but many challenges exist in reaching out further:

Public knowledge, interest and involvement in politics remain skewed in terms of gender, age, class and ethnicity ... A significant number of individuals, communities and social groups do not engage with Parliament (or with politics in general for that matter) and remain “hard to reach.” The reasons for this exclusion are complex and nuanced.<sup>40</sup>

Parliaments are employing a variety of methods to overcome this challenge. One such vehicle for those parliaments wishing to consult widely is field hearings, where committees travel outside parliament and into communities to hear from people in their own places and spaces. These hearings are a simple, tried and tested tool for broadening public engagement for the purpose of consultation. Steingrímur J. Sigfússon, Speaker of the Parliament of Iceland, contended that “nothing replaces person-to-person contact in this kind of work.”

<sup>40</sup> Hansard Society, 2011a.

Just over half (51%) of the 69 respondents to the survey for this *Global Parliamentary Report* indicated that their parliament holds some hearings outside of the parliamentary estate. Field hearings are more common in large countries, where distance from parliament is a greater challenge. Almost one quarter of respondents (24%) hold field hearings at least once a month, but 19 per cent hold them once every year or less.

This case study, which draws on examples from four countries (the United States, Serbia, Georgia and Norway), demonstrates why field hearings are an important way of ensuring that parliament hears a wider selection of voices and is made more accessible to those unable to access the parliamentary estate in person, thereby increasing its credibility. It also underscores how communication and local partnerships make field hearings more effective, and explores the differences between traditional hearings and field hearings in terms of who is engaged and how.

## United States: Farm Bill listening sessions

The 2018 Farm Bill, subsequently signed into law as the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018<sup>41</sup> and representing \$867 billion of government spending, fell under the jurisdiction of the House Agriculture Committee. The bill included crucial regulation on farming and food assistance. When marking up and deliberating on the bill, the House Agriculture Committee held dozens of “listening sessions” across the country, despite there being no formal requirement for committees to do this. Committee members travelled to different states and heard from farmers, advocates and other stakeholders about their experience. Many of these were “open mic” sessions held in public spaces, to which anyone could come and voice their concerns or thoughts about the bill.

Unlike formal hearings, where a handful of witnesses (normally between three and five) speak for a set amount of time (in Congress, a strict five minutes each), these sessions were attended by 200–300 people, who could go up to the microphone and share their thoughts or ask questions. Likewise, whereas standard committee hearings are inherently biased towards already engaged networks in and around Washington, D.C., these listening sessions allowed a broader range of community members from around the country to be heard, and for members to hear a wide range of different voices. The sessions were designed to be more free-flowing and much less formal than a traditional hearing.

Although other committees hold field hearings on occasion (typically in the home districts of committee chairs or senior members), this is far from regular practice. The fact that the listening tour involved multiple field hearings made it even more unique in the context of United States parliamentary practice.

## Serbia: Mobile committee hearings

In Serbia, mobile committee hearings are codified in parliamentary procedural rules. As of the end of 2021, the 19 committees of the National Assembly of Serbia have held 40 hearings outside parliament in cities around the country. These field hearings happen alongside regular parliamentary hearings, to help committees better understand the topics they are examining by consulting local stakeholders. UNDP is closely involved in facilitating these hearings, covering transportation and accommodation costs, and gathering and publishing results.

Invitations to attend the hearings are publicized by local government, by civil society and sometimes even over local radio in areas with poor infrastructure. As a result, people living in the villages surrounding the location of the hearing are made aware and choose to attend. To encourage impartiality and openness, hearings are always hosted in public buildings such as village halls or schools. And unlike the free-form approach used in the United States example above, the hearings in Serbia tend to be more structured and formal.

In one prominent example, a mobile hearing on agricultural subsidies in 2014 was held in an area that was hard to reach following major floods in Serbia. Despite this challenge, all committee MPs and staff took part in the discussion, along with between 20 and 30 community members. The members of the public in attendance stressed the increased need for agricultural insurance, since the floods had not only ruined crops and vastly diminished mobility, but also displaced wild animals by reducing their food supply. These concerns had not been raised in the committee before. As a direct result of the hearing, all committee members (including government MPs) voted unanimously against the government’s proposal for budget cuts.

In a video released by UNDP, a member of one of the largest associations of agricultural producers in Serbia reflected on the difference between these mobile hearings and previous engagement efforts:

*The main problem [was] the lack of communication with the committee ... In earlier years they were virtually impossible to reach ... So how would a peasant be able to enter the Assembly? It’s a major relief for farmers when they were able to present their problems but also offer proposals and suggestions for their solution.<sup>42</sup>*

In another example, after a presentation of the problem faced by farmers in the city of Kruševac, a regulation was adopted that gave farmers subsidies, and stricter customs measures were introduced for meat imports.

41 United States Congress, 2018.

42 UNDP, 2017.

## Georgia: Mobile hearings

Procedures in the Parliament of Georgia do not require committees to hold field hearings. But they can – and sometimes do – choose to hold such hearings on certain topics. In January 2021, for example, the Committee on Education, Science and Culture held a field hearing in the Shalva Amiranashvili Museum of Fine Arts to hear from museum staff and other specialists about the treasury depository. The hearing led to the committee making recommendations about protecting museum treasures. In another example, the Human Rights and Civil Integration Committee partnered with the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) to visit a UNICEF-backed child protection centre at Akaki Tsereteli State University to discuss child rights.

Kakha Kuchava, then Deputy Speaker of the Parliament of Georgia, explained that field hearings reveal policy issues outside of the capital and they allow parliamentarians to hear from a wide range of people:

*In the Committee on Culture or Science ... there are a number of places where this issue is still a problem and not only in the capital .... So why don't we use the chance to go out to a theatre, which is abandoned or almost destroyed, and discuss with them the possibility of renovating it?*

Mr. Kuchava went on to explain that the committee’s visit to the treasury resulted in resolutions to protect national treasures. He also shared another example of a hearing in his committee about pollution caused by a local factory:

*There was a particular concern from people from one area of the town that the smell was just killing them and it was happening even now. And when we asked the company, they said: "Oh, they're inventing it. There is no such smell." Of course, I went to that factory to find out for myself.*

This final example clearly demonstrates how going to the source of the concerns can help MPs. Without visiting the location in person, they would have relied on subjective voices and found it difficult to determine the reality of the situation.

## Norway: Virtual committee hearings

Field hearings do not just have to happen in person. Indeed, with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, parliaments were forced to suspend face-to-face sittings. This caused major disruption not only for members but also for CSOs and other stakeholders who wished to give evidence. To address these challenges, many parliaments came up with innovative solutions and turned to online meeting tools. According to the *World e-Parliament Report 2020*,<sup>43</sup> one third of parliaments held plenary sessions virtually but almost two thirds (65%) used these tools for committee sessions. Although technology was introduced as a solution to a crisis, it has generated some real benefits for committees and civil society.

The Parliament of Norway was forced to close down physical committee meetings in the early stages of the pandemic. The institution changed its rules of procedure so that committees were able to continue meeting without members having to attend in person. Specifically, the new procedures stated as follows:

*Committee members will be able to take part in meetings by means of remote technology solutions, such as telephone or Skype, or by written consideration in the committees.*<sup>44</sup>

This matter had been considered before the pandemic, with several MPs having spoken in favour of allowing certain consultation bodies to take part digitally. It was seen as an environmentally friendly approach, and a way to save time and expense. The positives for parliament have been obvious: the work of the committees was able to continue at a time when face-to-face meetings were challenging, if not impossible. However, the unexpected benefit of this situation was that access to committees was suddenly extended to anyone with a broadband internet connection, since people no longer had to travel to Oslo to give evidence in person – especially those living in the most northerly counties of Norway.

Parliament reports that the reaction from CSOs to this change was positive, as they felt that it gave them more (and more equitable) access. Yet it has also identified challenges: participants must have access to the right technology and be able to use it, and committee secretaries are often uncertain as to whether witnesses will turn up (i.e. log in) at the last minute.

## Conclusion and lessons learned

Parliaments that use field hearings value them as a tool for public engagement. Holding such hearings allows MPs to gain a greater understanding of specialized issues. This, in turn, leads to better scrutiny and more informed laws. The examples above illustrate how going out to where people are allows MPs to hear different voices. And it avoids the problem whereby parliament only hears from the loudest or best-resourced voices – the “usual suspects” who are able to attend parliament in person and are familiar with committee procedures.

The examples given above show that local voices can offer a unique and grounded perspective, helping legislators draft laws that work more effectively for the community. Field hearings are a way of overcoming an overreliance on the traditional – often narrow – range of voices that are heard by committees, exposing MPs to the narratives of real life and the lived experiences of local people who are experts in their own lives and communities. This point has been stressed by many MPs. In the United States, for instance, a member of the House Agriculture Committee made the following observation about the people who spoke in the listening tour:

43 IPU, 2020.

44 For more information about this initiative, see: Parliament of Norway, 2020.

They aren't experts. They are actually people in the community farming or insurance for farmers businesses. They are actually people practising, not experts from think tanks.<sup>45</sup>

These case studies have shown that, while expert evidence is important, hearing the voices of people directly affected by an issue under consideration matters. Field hearings are one way for parliaments to be able to reach out to consult with a much wider base of knowledge and experience, as Mr. Kuchava explained:

I cannot know all of the problems. It is simply impossible ... So engaging more people gives me more possibility to scrutinize the Government better and initiate better laws.

Looking at this from the other side, the Chair of the Subotica City Association for People with Autism Disabilities, in Serbia, made the following assertion:

I believe it was very useful for [MPs] as well ... as they were able to see real life and hear about essential problems.<sup>46</sup>

Continuing, she highlighted how being able to interact directly with MPs helps to build both trust and understanding:

Only then [after the hearing] I realized that they [MPs] are people just like us. We just need to present them the problems we are coping with.<sup>47</sup>

Mr. Kuchava added the following observation:

One of the best ways we can get trust and credibility from the people [is] not just to reply to them by letter or ask the ministers to come, but to actually go there, to see what the problem is, to see what their real concern is, and then make the decisions ... Some of them even told us that they never thought that we would come back. We really appreciate that. And the tone of discussion right away [is] very constructive, especially since they get the feeling [that] we want to make changes. In other words, if there is a real problem, we are here to help you out.

Field hearings allow MPs to hear from people who they may not otherwise have heard from in traditional hearings. Working with civil society and other partners helps to extend the reach of the committee and to extend the audience still further. The [United Kingdom case study elsewhere in this report](#) described the Select Committee Engagement Team's work in bringing committees to the public through local partnerships. This example highlights the importance of parliament's database of local partners in facilitating engagement events. Likewise, the example from Norway above shows how parliamentary committees can successfully reach out virtually, extending their reach and accessibility even further: people can now take part in the work of the committee wherever they happen to be.

Further reading – see the annex

### Country case study – United Kingdom: Leaving no one behind

Field hearings can also be an opportunity to dilute some of the more formal procedural aspects of parliamentary life. The above example from the United States shows how the evidence sessions can be made less formal, using public spaces and "open mic" sessions. A member of the House Agriculture Committee explained that the informal tone of the listening tour influenced the way that members engaged:

It's us listening and asking questions. Not asking questions that are really statements. Members can ask questions that are really just trying to drive a point in that they want to get done ... Members are much more willing to listen.<sup>48</sup>

In Georgia, Mr. Kuchava similarly explained that the fact that field hearings do not follow a strict "agenda" allows members to listen more openly:

I will listen to all of them, to the local population ... We went out in the street – literally walking down the street and asking people about this stuff. It's just sometimes it's not like an "agenda". I mean, you just hear the people and some concerns and then you realize right away the best way to proceed with that. It was very useful.

Field hearings are not often mandated by parliaments, so Serbia is somewhat of an outlier in this respect. However, they are an innovation that can be institutionalized by adapting formal procedures to allow committees to sit outside of parliament. Part of the function of continuous improvement is to identify these ad hoc and informal examples and to develop and embed them further. The United States House Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress is doing just this. Set up in 2019 to investigate how to make Congress function better, its work highlights certain sporadic good practices that could be incorporated into regular congressional work. The Committee has developed recommendations for precisely this purpose.<sup>49</sup> One example is regular bipartisan retreats in which members could travel together to learn about a policy issue (a model similar to field hearings). These trips – known as congressional delegation, or CODEL, trips – do happen but they are not institutionalized.

Lessons learned can be summarized as:

- 1. Local voices are important:** Parliaments are used to hearing from experts and those around them. But going out to engage with the general public where they live allows MPs to hear a more diverse range of views and experiences.
- 2. Local interactions increase trust and credibility:** Being visible makes a difference to trust and, when MPs go out to hold hearings in communities, they can show that they are people too. When they demonstrate that they are interested

<sup>45</sup> Kornberg, 2019.

<sup>46</sup> UNDP, 2017.

<sup>47</sup> UNDP, 2017.

<sup>48</sup> Kornberg, 2019.

<sup>49</sup> United States House of Representatives, 2020.

in and listening to the views of others, they raise their credibility. Likewise, when people engage with committees, their knowledge of parliament and parliamentary process increases.

3. **Local partnerships broaden engagement:** Parliaments cannot be expected to reach all of the people interested in a subject, since their networks are not designed for that and their own reach is too limited. To overcome this, they can build relationships with CSOs that, in turn, can translate messages into the language of their audience and support and encourage participation in evidence sessions.
4. **Tone matters:** Stepping outside of parliament allows committees to take a more casual and open approach to evidence-gathering. No longer constrained by all the formal protocols of the committee room, they are open to more discursive formats and to hearing from more people.
5. **Institutionalization helps to ensure consistency:** Ad hoc processes need to be formalized within the wider context of how parliaments work in order to become recognized as valid approaches.
6. **Virtual offers opportunities that complement physical meetings:** While field hearings usually involve MPs leaving parliament to visit another location, committees can also meet virtually and take evidence via online meeting systems. This approach increases the reach of the committee still further, since evidence can be gathered from a far more diverse audience. At the recent virtual World e-Parliament Conference 2021, Lord Clement-Jones, a member of the United Kingdom House of Lords, explained how this ability to hear evidence from anywhere in the world had been an unforeseen benefit of the COVID-19 pandemic and something that members did not wish to lose.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> IPU, 2021b.



Argentina. The Chamber of Deputies swiftly moved to holding hybrid and virtual sessions when the COVID-19 pandemic struck. 2022. © Parliament of Argentina

## Collaboration in the legislative process

Collaboration and co-creation are relatively new disciplines for parliaments. Collaboration means parliaments working together with the public for the social good so that a more diverse range of ideas can be heard and fed into legislation. Co-creation goes a step further, implying that “new solutions are designed with people, not for them.”<sup>51</sup> For parliaments, this means the “active involvement of citizens in public decision-making processes that may impact their lives.”<sup>52</sup> The benefits of co-creation have been described as follows:

- **Improved decision-making:** leads to more community-oriented services, new ideas, higher transparency and enhanced effectiveness<sup>53</sup>
- **Innovation benefits:** enables users to connect and interact with public institutions, providing opportunities for creating new potential resources<sup>54</sup>

- **Symbolic benefits:** facilitates social stability by developing a sense of community, increasing collective decision-making, and accepting and respecting governance processes<sup>55</sup>

Collaboration with civil society (either individuals or organizations) in parliamentary settings is limited but growing. Perhaps the most widely quoted example is the co-creation of Open Parliament Action Plans in collaboration with CSOs as part of the Open Government Partnership (OGP). Co-creation is a core prerequisite of OGP and it has a well-defined co-creation methodology. A number of parliaments have developed stand-alone action plans of this type, and many more have included these initiatives in broader national action plans. There are also examples of co-creation where civil society works together to improve transparency and accountability. The most notable of these is the HackerLab at the Chamber of Deputies in Brazil.<sup>56</sup>

Collaboration in the legislative process is based on a political decision to try out new approaches to law-making. It is premised on the idea that all people in society can contribute their views on what legislation should be passed, what that legislation should

51 Bason, 2010.

52 ParlAmericas, 2019.

53 Magno and Cassia, 2015.

54 Hardyman, Daunt and Kitchener, 2015.

55 Baka, 2017.

56 For more information about this initiative, see: OpeningParliament.org, 2014.

contain and, in terms of inquiries and post-legislative scrutiny, what the impact of existing legislation has been.

The *World e-Parliament Report 2020* notes that 28 per cent of parliaments currently offer online consultation on draft legislation, and another 19 per cent are planning to do so.<sup>57</sup> The report also notes that it is much more common for parliaments to identify their objectives as informing people about legislation that is passing through parliament (70%) than involving them in the legislative process (27%).<sup>58</sup> While bills usually originate in the executive or from MPs, a small number of countries (Brazil, Estonia, Finland and Latvia, for example) have a process for community-initiated legislation, whereby an idea emerging from a member of the public or CSO can pass into law. Other countries (such as New Zealand) offer citizen-initiated referendums that can then lead to legislation in parliament.

Digital tools to support collaboration and co-creation have often emerged from civil society. They radically expand the range and number of people who can participate, although they can also exclude people. While exclusion can be self-selecting, it mostly occurs when people lack access to the internet, do not have the skills to use it, do not have the necessary information literacy skills, or are not aware of opportunities to participate. All of these issues need to be addressed if parliaments are to provide opportunities for all community members to collaborate. Paula Forteza, member of the National Assembly of France, has made the following suggestion:

The underlying question is not whether we need more or less digital tools in our institutions. It is about taking into account the major transformation of our society, the digital revolution, and adapting our political culture to it.

...

The ultimate goal [of modernization] remains to transform and adapt our institutions to the needs and realities of the 21st century.<sup>59</sup>

Digital tools can make collaboration easier. Modernization and digitization have brought increasing opportunities for parliaments to share data and collaborate with civil society. Although this trend was already well established beforehand, the COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically accelerated the digitization of many parliaments, and this development offers opportunities for further transformation in the future. In terms of collaboration, the impact in parliament has so far been minimal. While the *World e-Parliament Report 2020* suggests that virtual committee meetings can increase access and participation, it also warns that parliaments have been preoccupied with internal processes during the pandemic, sometimes at the expense of engagement and collaboration. Co-creation is at the end of a long continuum that stretches from closed parliaments, through increasing openness (in processes, procedure and data), to collaboration and co-creation on an equal footing. The dramatic innovation caused by the pandemic presents opportunities, but these are largely yet to be realized – co-creation requires both technology adoption to enable it and cultural change to embrace it.

Working collaboratively in the legislative process can take many different forms. This case study looks at four examples from Argentina, France, Indonesia and the United States – just a handful of the many experiments in collaboration in the legislative process that are taking place around the world. It shares insights from the people involved in these initiatives, and draws out some key issues for parliaments to consider.

## Argentina: *Leyes Abiertas* (Open Laws)

The *Leyes Abiertas* platform was developed to help to solicit public comments on legislative proposals by individual parliamentarians. This open-source platform was built for the Chamber of Deputies of Argentina by a civil society partner and is managed by the Chamber's Directorate of Modernization. Parliamentarians can choose to post their legislative proposals on the platform and it is then up to them to follow up on public comments. Public users of the system can log in using existing social media accounts and do not need to register or create a specific account on the portal.

*Leyes Abiertas* has helped members to hear a wider range of views from community members who are not normally able to present their opinions to parliament. This point was underscored by Agustina De Luca, Global Executive Director of Fundación Directorio Legislativo, who said: "[Usually the people] who participate in the committees are chosen very discretionally by the chairmanship of the committee."

The platform was developed in 2018, evolving from the joint work of the Chamber of Deputies and civil society within the framework of the Open Parliament Network. Once parliamentarians choose to make their bill proposals available to the public, comments are sought and members are able to both observe and engage with these. Proposals emerging from the comments can be incorporated into the bill. Public users can see all the draft bills open for comment, comment publicly on them, and see other comments that have been made, as well as view different versions of the bill and any presentations and justifications for a bill provided by the member. Matias Granara explained as follows:

In the past, without the platform, in order to reach a member, a citizen would have had to be in Buenos Aires and go to the member's office. Nowadays, citizens can submit questions or add or modify bills remotely, regardless of whether they are in Salta, La Quiaca or Corrientes.

As of January 2021, 51 bills have been submitted to the platform by 31 members of the Chamber of Deputies (12 per cent of the total membership). *Leyes Abiertas* is seen as a key enabler of legislative transparency and the Chamber's new OGP Open Parliament Action Plan contains a commitment to train advisers and introduce larger-scale awareness-raising campaigns to encourage them to use the platform more. Ms. De Luca explained why the platform is beneficial for the public in the following terms:

57 IPU, 2020.

58 IPU, 2020.

59 Forteza, 2020.



You can be very specific about which article or even which words you want to amend. If there is something you want to remove, modify or add, you can see exactly what impact this will have, and how.

## France: *Le Jour d'Après* (The Day After)

This platform was created by members of the National Assembly of France as a way to solicit ideas for new legislation during the COVID-19 pandemic. The two-month project was launched in March 2020 by MPs Matthieu Orphelin, Paula Forteza and Aurélien Taché, with the support of 57 other parliamentarians.

The project was conceived as an open, national debate on what should happen after the COVID-19 crisis subsided – hence the name *Le Jour d'Après* (The Day After). Community members proposed ideas, which were debated on using the online tool, and a vote was held to collectively decide which ideas should be taken forward after the crisis. A series of online thematic workshops was organized to supplement and extend the discussions on the platform. Once ideas had been selected by the portal users, responsibility passed to parliamentarians, who were asked to find ways to follow up on these ideas through the National Assembly.

*Le Jour d'Après* received 15 million page views in its first week after going live. During the two-month period that the platform was open, some 8,700 proposals were submitted by its 26,000 registered users. The most popular proposals related to protecting the public health system and the environment, increasing recycling and tackling food waste, reducing packaging, and introducing compulsory environmental education. There was strong support for a universal income and higher salaries for carers. The proposals also called for a ban on public subsidies for fossil fuels and a tax on financial transactions to prevent tax evasion. As a direct result of the platform, the participating MPs have developed 30 measures that they plan to take forward in the National Assembly as part of a “post-crisis action plan”.

## Indonesia: Online public participation in legislative drafting

The SIMAS platform was developed to help members of the public become more informed about legislative proposals and to be able to share their opinions by adding comments to draft bills. Under Indonesian law, citizens already have “the right to give input orally and/or written in the Making [of] Rules.”<sup>60</sup> To make this facility more accessible, a web-based application, known as SIMAS, was launched in 2017 by the Centre for Legislative Drafting, which provides support to the House of Representatives in the drafting of academic papers (the first stage of the legislative process in Indonesia) and bills.

After people submit their opinions, aspirations and recommendations on the draft texts using SIMAS, the website team delivers the public opinion report to the head of the team that is responsible for drafting the academic paper and bill. The drafting team is obligated to respond to the public opinion through SIMAS, thereby closing the feedback loop. Parliamentarians are not directly involved in the process.

Anyone can participate by creating an account on the portal. As of January 2021, 64 academic papers and 61 bills have passed through SIMAS and about 200 comments have been received. The Parliament of Indonesia sees the internet as an important tool for reaching the public. Although online channels have not been widely used so far in relation to parliament, members of the public use the internet regularly for social and leisure purposes. As Endah Retnoastuti, Head of the Bureau of Inter-Parliamentary Cooperation at the House of Representatives of Indonesia, explained, parliament hopes to harness this familiarity to make engagement in the policy and legislative process more commonplace:

We understand that Indonesian people use a lot of internet for social media, but they are not really interested in seeing what’s going on with the parliament or government.

## USA: Environmental Justice For All Act

In May 2019, the United States House Committee on Natural Resources enlisted POPVOX,<sup>61</sup> a non-partisan civil society platform, to provide a way for the Committee to gather and incorporate submissions from members, stakeholder groups and individuals throughout the development of the Environmental Justice For All Act.<sup>62</sup> To enable online suggestions and edits, POPVOX incorporated features from an earlier civic tech project known as Madison, which was originally developed by the OpenGov Foundation. As with Madison, participants could highlight individual words or phrases in the draft bill, post comments and view those left by others. Keenan Austin Reed, Chief of Staff to Congressman Donald McEachin, the co-sponsor of the Environmental Justice Bill, explained:

So many people that do environmental justice advocacy are in the community fighting against brown fields and they don’t have time... It allows people to comment in their own time, when they can.

The process was sponsored by members of the House Committee on Natural Resources and supported by Committee staff. Anyone could access the portal after creating an account. All 350 online comments were reviewed and, where supported, incorporated into the final bill before the Committee.

As a staff member from the House Committee on Natural Resources explained, one of the primary drivers for this project was to extend the range of views being heard by the Committee:

<sup>60</sup> Republic of Indonesia, 2011.

<sup>61</sup> POPVOX, 2021.

<sup>62</sup> For more information about this initiative, see: POPVOX, 2020.

We would have heard from big organizations anyway, but it was important that smaller groups and individuals could see what the larger organizations were saying and could add their own perspectives. POPVOX was an equalizer. You did not need to have a federal lobbyist living in D.C. be a part of the process.

The project demonstrated that online stakeholder participation in the drafting stages helps to find shared solutions to what are often complex policy problems. The Committee realized that the public commentators were not going to “rubber stamp” their proposals and that, for the bill to be credible, it had to bring the participants along with it at the heart of the process. This point was emphasized by Ms. Austin Reed, who said:

This is a bill that, because everybody put their stamp on it, everyone has ownership in it. And I think that makes for better policy overall.

While this consultative approach represents significant work for Committee staff and members, Marci Harris, Founder and Chief Executive Officer of POPVOX, argued that there is an additional benefit in terms of increasing public knowledge of how parliament works and building trust with stakeholders:

The public emerges from a process like this not only feeling like they were asked and not only feeling like they were part of the process, but also more informed as they go through the process and see how it works or see what the questions are. There’s kind of this virtuous circle.

## Conclusion and lessons learned

Collaboration and co-creation offer a way for parliaments to open up the legislative process to greater public participation and, with that, build knowledge and trust. A more transparent and accessible process can help parliaments to ensure that public concerns are reflected in legislation. It can also contribute to improving public perceptions of parliament.

Collaborative ways of working within the legislative process are still in the experimental phase. Different models are emerging within parliaments, and institutions must be open to new ideas emerging from civil society. CSOs and civic tech companies are developing innovative tools, and fruitful partnerships with parliaments have been established.

After being forced to innovate because of the COVID-19 pandemic, many parliaments have come to realize their own capacity for innovation and have had to reflect on their risk profiles and ways of working. In the coming years, parliaments can be expected to continue using and improving collaborative and co-creation methods. In some cases, collaboration and co-creation may become a common feature of the legislative process.

Digital tools make the legislative process more accessible from anywhere, helping to overcome geographic and other barriers to participation and allowing people to engage in a way that suits their lifestyle and schedule. Yet the mere existence of a tool does not guarantee that it will be used. Promotion and awareness-raising therefore need to be factored in – for both parliamentarians and the public.

Parliaments that are interested in collaboration and co-creation can draw on these experiences when designing their own process. Some of the key lessons learned are listed below:

- 1. Build partnerships:** Parliaments can draw upon existing knowledge and tools by partnering with civil society or civic tech organizations. Partnerships are also an effective way to increase the reach of collaboration exercises. This presents a challenge for parliaments in deciding how much control to cede, and how much to retain in order for the process to be seen as legitimate.
- 2. Reach the right participants:** In deeply deliberative and co-creative processes, the target is not quantity but rather being able to ensure representative and high-quality participation from all stakeholders. Using clear language (i.e. the language of stakeholders, not parliament), giving regular feedback to participants and communicating the results of the process all help to encourage participation. Safeguards should be in place to protect participants’ data, to ensure that participants are able to express their opinion freely and to avoid abuse of the co-creation system. Another important consideration is that participants should be digitally able and information-literate, and should have access to data on the issues being considered. Parliaments will find it useful to be able to distinguish between comments that are submitted on behalf of an individual, and those that are submitted on behalf of an organization (such as a CSO or trade group).
- 3. Ensure equality of access:** The barriers to participation need to be understood so that new digital tools do not create new “elites” and leave others unable to participate. Specific consideration must be given to gender balance, minorities and marginalized groups, as well as how to manage the participation of vulnerable groups.
- 4. Involve parliamentarians:** The examples above demonstrate different forms of involvement by parliamentarians. Yet in all cases, MPs remain central players in the legislative process. The expected role of parliamentarians in co-creation initiatives needs to be clearly defined, and MPs and staff should receive appropriate training. The parliamentary administration needs to be ready to support parliamentarians throughout the process.

5. **Have a clear process in place:** Collaboration and co-creation can be used at different stages of the legislative process: to gather ideas for new laws, to comment on existing drafts, or as part of a post-legislative inquiry. Such initiatives can emerge at the level of the institution or be adopted by a single parliamentary committee or even an individual parliamentarian. Clarity on the objectives at the outset will help to achieve successful results. Likewise, sufficient time, money and staff resources need to be allocated to supporting the process. It should be clear how public input will be analysed, summarized and made available to parliamentarians. The [Brazil case study above](#) shows that, where there is a high volume of public inputs, digital tools can help with this analysis.

Further reading – see the annex

**Country case study – Brazil: Digital engagement**

6. **Accept that some risk and uncertainty is inevitable:** Parliaments need to accept that the results of any innovation are uncertain. Collaboration and co-creation initiatives may yield positive results or may not deliver on expectations. Continuous learning, assessment and improvement will be a feature of such initiatives.
7. **Measure and understand impact:** When assessing the impact of this kind of initiative, parliaments can, for example, consider its impact on the accessibility and transparency of the legislative process, the quantity and quality of public input, and the final outputs (such as any legislative proposals that were brought forward, modified and adopted as a result of collaborative working).



Austria. Art performance on the occasion of the Open House Day. © Parlamentsdirektion / Johannes Zinner.

## Opening up parliamentary buildings to the public

Parliamentary buildings are a metaphor for the democracy that they represent; for “what they say about the broader political culture that surrounds and moulds them”.<sup>63</sup> Many parliaments – such as the Palace of Westminster, the United States Capitol, the Parliament of Hungary and the National Congress of Brazil – were designed as grand architectural statements. Buildings can also be one of the barriers that the public faces when attempting to access and engage with parliament, since they can often feel intimidating or even mysterious. As parliaments look to increase awareness and understanding, access to the parliament itself is important. This can happen both physically (for those able to visit in person) and virtually, with the media – and the internet in particular – giving unprecedented access to the workings of parliament.

Historically, parliaments have often been closed, austere spaces, highly visible in their setting but inaccessible to the community. Increasingly, this is changing and the public are able to see inside – initially through radio and television and now through the internet, as well as visiting in person.

In today’s society, people expect greater openness and transparency. This is reflected in the architecture of more modern parliament buildings, such as those in Australia and Sweden, which are more accessible, open and visible compared with their more austere nineteenth-century predecessors. Parliament House in Canberra even boasts public viewing areas with unmatched views across the capital city, while the Bundestag in Berlin turns this viewing platform inward so the public can see their representatives at work in the chamber below. As Lasswell and Fox posited, the layout of the parliamentary estate and openness of the rooms within it are an indicator of the democratic inclinations of that nation.<sup>64</sup>

Today, parliaments are striving to find a balance between meeting the daily functional requirements of a formal democratic institution, capturing and reflecting the historical context and importance of the legislature, and demonstrating its relevance to people’s everyday lives, not least as an accessible public space. Designers of modern parliamentary buildings “have celebrated openness and accessibility and

63 Goodsell, 1988: 287.

64 Lasswell and Fox, 1979: 15–16.

produced designs that, in one way or another, are meant to express that value physically and symbolically.<sup>65</sup> Part of this balancing act lies in understanding how to make a building accessible when the modern demands of functionality and security can make parliaments feel inaccessible.

Most parliaments provide a range of public-facing services to “open up” this physical space, including tours, open days and exhibitions. More recently, institutions have begun to experiment with the use of digital technology for the same purpose. This case study examines the different ways in which parliamentary “spaces” (both physical and virtual) can be used for public outreach, education and engagement. It shows that it is important to effectively use and to open up the parliamentary estate, and that technology is one way of taking parliament out to the people.

## Visiting parliament

In many countries, citizens are able to attend sittings of parliament, both plenaries and committees. Yet these will always have limited physical capacity and often require advance booking. Most people will be more familiar with broadcasts of parliamentary sittings that take them directly into the chamber and allow them to experience the business of parliament. One downside of this media coverage, however, is that it can focus on the more contentious or negative aspects rather than providing a broad showcase of parliamentary activities.

Many parliaments offer guided tours, and some have special facilities to bring in groups of young people. For community members who cannot easily visit parliament, virtual tools are one alternative. Some parliaments have also used mobile solutions to reach out to and engage with communities, such as the parliamentary bus in Ecuador and the outreach to remote communities [described in the Fiji case study](#).

Further reading – see the annex

**Country case study – Fiji: Strategic engagement**

It is important to differentiate between tours of parliament that focus on the historical or architectural aspects of the estate, and those that intend to build a deeper understanding and awareness of parliamentary function and procedure. Japhet Muthomi, Chief Public Communications Officer at the National Assembly of Kenya, described how tours can be tailored to visitors in a way that shows parliament’s relevance:

*When there is space, we allow them in the chamber, in the gallery ... We give them lectures. We take them on a tour of parliament and ask questions about the law-making process. And where applicable, we invite [members] from the area they are coming from ... to address them.*

Access to parliamentary space can be opened up by ensuring that distance is not a barrier. This can be achieved by subsidizing visits, particularly for students – a service provided by parliaments including the German Bundestag, the

Parliament of Australia and the National Congress of Brazil.

In the United Kingdom, parliament spends over £750,000 each year subsidizing student visits to ensure that pupils everywhere have equitable access, no matter where in the country they live. This point was underscored by David Clark, Head of Education and Engagement at the Parliament of the United Kingdom, who said that “no one should be economically disadvantaged by engaging in their democracy”:

In Germany, each member of the Bundestag can invite 50 citizens from their constituency to visit the building twice a year. The benefits of this scheme have been described in the following terms:

*Participants have an opportunity to get to know at first hand the political scene in Berlin, the work of the members of the Bundestag, the Federal Government and the Ministries. A range of important sites of contemporary history are also visited. The length of stay in Berlin depends on the distance between the constituency in question and Berlin (from one to three nights).<sup>66</sup>*

## Sierra Leone: Open days

In December 2019, the Parliament of Sierra Leone held an open day (an event that actually spanned three days) where community members “from all walks of life including farmers, pupils, persons with disabilities, the aged, civil societies, and the media” were invited to visit and learn about parliament.<sup>67</sup>

The theme of this inaugural open day was “Making the Parliament of Sierra Leone visible and engaging with the public.”<sup>68</sup> The event was designed to highlight democratic progress in the country and to increase knowledge about what parliament is, how it works and how people can become involved. It aligned with one of the goals of parliament’s strategic plan, which is to make the institution “open, accessible, representative, inclusive, transparent and accountable to the citizens of Sierra Leone.”<sup>69</sup>

During the event, people were invited to raise their concerns and debate public policy matters. Members then discussed the issues raised. In another session, members of the public were given the opportunity to take on the role of MPs and to learn about the law-making processes and parliamentary standing orders. The youngest participant at this session was 9 years of age. Planning ahead, parliament used the open day event to promote a partnership framework for engagement with CSOs, research institutions and development partners, with the intent of ensuring that MPs are better supported in their decision-making.

In general, the open day event gave the public a chance to explore parliamentary space, talk to representatives, and increase their knowledge and understanding of the democratic process.

65 Parkinson, 2013.

66 Parliament of the United Kingdom, 2007.

67 UNDP, 2019.

68 UNDP, 2019.

69 UNDP, 2019.

## Australia: Parliamentary Education Office

The Federal Parliament of Australia has long recognized the importance of public access to the parliamentary estate and how bringing in members of the public – particularly young people – makes an invaluable contribution to public understanding of what parliaments are and what they do. Every year, over 100,000 school-age children visit parliament.

The Parliamentary Education Office (PEO) organizes in-depth learning events for primary- and secondary-school students (age group 5–12). These can take place in person (during a visit to Parliament House) or virtually (through parliament’s distance learning programme). The PEO uses a wide variety of educational methods including role-plays, where students take on specific roles in parliament.<sup>70</sup> On its website, the PEO describes the programme as follows:

The program explores the function, purpose and value of Australia’s democratic system of government. It does this by investigating:

- how laws are made through Parliament
- the responsibilities of representatives
- the formation of government
- how government is kept accountable<sup>71</sup>

During these sessions, participants can take part in the following activities: “Debating a bill with amendments”, “Question Time” and “Committee of Inquiry”.<sup>72</sup>

## Norway: *MiniTing* (Mini-Parliament)

The Parliament of Norway has a replica of the plenary chamber where secondary-school students (typically in the age group 16–19) are able to visit and take part in a “mock” parliament. The *MiniTing* (Mini-Parliament) seats 169 members and contains party and committee rooms as well as a television studio. Pupils divide into their party groups and agree their positions before splitting into committees for hearings. Each committee then rotates between four “working stations”: oral question time, group room services (where they can read emails, answer phone calls, etc.), information kiosks where they meet voters, lobbyists and the media, and a TV debate. The role-play ends in a plenary debate. About 6,000 students attend each year.

Through these resources and activities, students can learn about parliament (what it is and what it does) and connect this to their own lives. The *MiniTing* is itself an emulation of the Danish Parliament’s youth parliament project, and has also been copied in Iceland and Sweden (the Swedish example providing virtual as well as face-to-face learning options). The youth parliament is not a concept unique to Scandinavia: India, Malaysia and Pakistan have a history of youth parliaments, while in the United Kingdom and New Zealand, it has been allowed to meet in the main plenary chamber. Globally, there are 72 youth parliaments. Some have formal links to the

<sup>70</sup> This method works equally well outside parliament. For example, the New Zealand Parliament provides guidance for teachers on holding mock parliamentary debates in the classroom (see: New Zealand House of Representatives, 2013).

<sup>71</sup> Parliamentary Education Office of Australia, 2021.

<sup>72</sup> Parliamentary Education Office of Australia, 2021.

national parliament but most are coordinated by NGOs or other public bodies.<sup>73</sup>

## Parliament as a public space

Many parliaments have opened dedicated visitor centres. The Parliament of Sweden, for example, provides an enquiry service, TV coverage of the chamber, official documents, books, souvenirs, exhibitions, lectures and seminars.<sup>74</sup> Its parliamentary library is also one of the few that is normally open to the public. The United States Congress also has a dedicated visitor centre, which the Hansard Society described as “the most significant new development in this area ... its success in terms of sheer throughput of visitor numbers in its first years demonstrates that, if done well, there is a public appetite for such a facility”.<sup>75</sup> Since opening in December 2008, the US Capitol Visitor Center has welcomed more than 21 million visitors.

## United Kingdom: Different ways to connect

The Parliament of the United Kingdom has a new education centre and offers public tours. It receives over 1 million visitors every year, which itself creates a challenge whereby “the two Houses must balance the business needs of a fully working legislature and those of a visitor attraction”.<sup>76</sup>

Parliament also organizes outreach activities nationwide, with 46,000 people attending these events in 2016. They include workshops explaining the role of parliament, as well as more targeted seminars on topics such as how to submit evidence to a select committee. In 2015–2016, about 211,000 people visited parliament through their MP or a peer, or to watch proceedings in the House of Commons, while a further 223,000 people took an organized tour of the building.

Parliament also recognizes the importance of virtual participation through social media. One debate in 2016 reached more than 16 million Twitter accounts and, in 2015, e-petitions were signed almost 32 million times. Going beyond social media, parliament used virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) technologies to pilot a virtual parliament experience online, where visitors could immerse themselves in an interactive and educational exploration of parliament, its functions and its history.

## New Zealand: Parliamentary playground

In an altogether different approach to parliament as a public space, Trevor Mallard, Speaker of the New Zealand House of Representatives, announced plans to build a playground to make parliament more family-friendly, welcoming and accessible. The park-like grounds of the parliamentary estate are already open to the public and, as MP Louisa Wall noted, these public spaces can form an integral part of parliaments, the principles they attempt to communicate and how they reflect the wider culture:

<sup>73</sup> IPU, 2018.

<sup>74</sup> Hansard Society, 2011b.

<sup>75</sup> Hansard Society, 2011b.

<sup>76</sup> Parliament of the United Kingdom, 2012.

We're celebrating our history ... and encouraging people to come and look at our facilities and to use our facilities ... This is their house. This is their place ... All the symbolism around what's on our walls, the art... it's very multicultural, multi-ethnic.

## Virtual visits

Visiting parliament is the ideal way to experience it. But doing so is not always possible or practical. Christoph Konrath, a senior staff member at the National Council of Austria, observed that “[public] events are more or less restricted to audiences from Vienna and its [surrounding area], because for others it would be too [far to come] for just an hour [long] event”. The internet is increasingly offering a solution to this challenge through “virtual” tours and online resources that the public can use to explore and familiarize themselves with parliament and how it works – from wherever they are and in their own time. The types of content provided range from video and virtual tours of parliament, to online collections of curated artworks, and role-playing and educational sessions for schoolchildren.

Parliaments in Canada, the Czech Republic, Iceland, Ireland, North Macedonia and Poland offer virtual tours and experiences via their websites. The Parliament of Canada, for instance, uses virtual tours to keep the public connected to the parliament building during ongoing major renovations, and as a way of “preserv[ing] public access to Centre Block during its closure” but also “offering innovative new ways for Canadians to understand and engage with Parliament’s people, functions and history”. Dejan Dimitrievski, Head of the Education and Communication Unit at the Assembly of North Macedonia, explained that video-based tours lacked some of the factors that make face-to-face tours so successful, but that they were a good alternative, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic:

I wouldn't say it's like a normal experience, but it's the closest thing that we can do ... The participants are coming back for the virtual tour. So I would say that's a [real] success during this pandemic.

### Ireland: Virtual tour of Leinster House

The pandemic has forced many parliament buildings to close to the public. This development has been a factor in the growth of virtual offerings. Cáit Hayes, Head of Protocol and Public Engagement at the Parliament of Ireland, made the following observation:

We didn't have a virtual tour of the parliament. I'm sure we were one of the few parliaments that didn't have it. So we've gone and we've developed that and it's now online. So that's one way of reaching out to people.

The virtual experience developed in Ireland includes a fully virtual, 3D, self-guided tour of Leinster House, where both Houses of the Parliament of Ireland sit. Online visitors can click on items, read about their historical importance and learn about the functions of specific rooms. The tour provides a combination of historical and contemporary detail and aims to portray parliament not only as a heritage site but also as a modern and relevant political and national institution.

### New Zealand: Virtual reality app

In 2018, the Parliament of New Zealand released a VR app called Parliament XR, providing a 360-degree tour of parliament with narration of the institution’s history. David Wilson, Clerk of the House of Representatives, described this virtual experience as part of the House’s strategic objective:

We set a goal of all children visiting parliament during their time at school ... either in person or virtually. We can't realistically get every child through the doors and cost is a barrier for travel for some people. So we developed a virtual tour of parliament, which is a 3D interactive tour, which is available on various VR apps [and] specialized headsets ... We also did it so that it can be viewed on people's phones with cardboard headsets, which we would give to MPs and they take [them] to schools as they go out and meet with school students. They take boxes of these, give them to everyone. The kids love it because they get to keep something ... MPs love it because it's a gift they can give to people.

MPs’ role in these activities – whether virtually (via the app) or physically (e.g. in parliamentary tours) – can also be an asset for engagement. When people are able to meet their representatives and see the role they play in the political process, this strengthens the sense that they are “being represented” by parliament and its members.

## Conclusion and lessons learned

This case study has highlighted a range of ways that parliaments are bringing people into contact with the space and function of the institution, both in person and virtually.

While education is one primary aim of this approach, parliament buildings also often serve as tourist attractions. It can be challenging to manage the estate as both a fully functioning legislature and a place for visitors – a problem that is partly resolved by ensuring that the visitor experience gives equal prominence to the contemporary role of parliament alongside its history. This case study has highlighted a number of physical and virtual options, which are summarized below:

Space	Includes	Benefits	Challenges
Physical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tours</li> <li>• Exhibitions</li> <li>• Open days</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relatively low-cost, utilizing existing infrastructure</li> <li>• Can present new messages about parliament (e.g. as inclusive, diverse)</li> <li>• Makes parliament real and can help to give it context and relevance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tours can focus too much on heritage rather than ongoing relevance</li> <li>• Dependence on public proximity to parliament</li> <li>• Challenge balancing function of parliament versus needs of visitors</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Visitor centres</li> <li>• Education centres</li> <li>• Mobile outreach</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Purpose-built for engagement and/or education</li> <li>• High symbolic value in building inclusive spaces</li> <li>• Allow for rich delivery of content and high-impact face-to-face interactions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Resource-intensive (money, time, expertise)</li> <li>• Dependent on public proximity to parliament (mobile outreach units can overcome this)</li> </ul>
Virtual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Virtual tours</li> <li>• Immersive apps</li> <li>• Online education sessions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Audiences can experience and explore parliament at their leisure</li> <li>• Can reach geographically distant communities</li> <li>• Can present parliaments as innovative, modern institutions</li> <li>• Can be used to support and enhance face-to-face education or to provide just-in-time educational resources</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Requires public to have suitable internet access and skills</li> <li>• Not as immersive or engaging as face-to-face visits</li> </ul>

Lessons learned can be summarized as:

- 1. Plan to use parliamentary spaces effectively:** Parliaments are sites of democratic (and national) heritage, yet also fulfil ongoing political functions. One of these functions is public engagement, which can be strengthened by using existing parliamentary space (such as for tours, exhibitions and open days) and opening up new spaces. Facilitating public access to parliaments allows citizens to experience these institutions first-hand. This is crucial to building knowledge, engagement and trust. It can be achieved through travel bursaries, public events and engaging outside of parliament.
- 2. Digital tools make it possible to take parliament to the people:** By combining virtual and in-person engagement, parliaments can ensure that they reach an increasingly broad and representative audience. These initiatives allow people who would not otherwise be able (or motivated) to visit in person to experience parliament, to find out how it works and to do this in their own time and space.

- 3. Demonstrate the contemporary importance of parliament as well as its history:** Access to parliamentary space is symbolically important, but it also plays an important educational role. This education should go beyond history and heritage. It is important to demonstrate the ongoing relevance of parliaments by showing what they do and how they work.
- 4. Set clear targets for engagement (in-person and online):** Parliaments can set targets for engagement that are both qualitative (such as increasing knowledge of parliament) and quantitative (such as having all children visiting parliament during their time at school, as is the case in New Zealand). These targets can be achieved through the strategic use of physical space and virtual tools.



# Practical guides

# Practical guide:

## Strategic public engagement

Public engagement in the work of parliament is a complex process involving diverse communities, a variety of people and multiple channels. A strategic approach to public engagement helps parliament by having a structured process in place, and by making it more efficient and responsive to public expectations.

This practical guide to strategic public engagement combines good practices observed across numerous parliaments and lessons drawn from comprehensive research. It aims to support parliaments by summarizing the key steps in applying a strategic approach to public engagement.

### Ensure the engagement strategy contributes to parliament's strategic priorities:

- Define how public engagement supports and contributes to parliament's strategic priorities.
- Ensure that parliamentary leadership and all key services/units participate in developing the engagement strategy.
- Consult a broad range of stakeholders, while being attentive to gender balance, age diversity, and inclusion of underrepresented or disadvantaged groups, as well as people living in urban and rural areas.
- Study and analyse good practices and lessons learned from other parliaments and promote effective inter-parliamentary cooperation.

### Analyse the context that can impact the engagement strategy:

- Analyse existing practices and draw lessons learned.
- Identify the key strengths the strategy can leverage.
- Identify the main gaps and barriers the strategy might seek to address.
- Review existing resources, including human, financial and Information and Communications Technology (ICT)
- Identify specific target groups for engagement, such as women, youth, disadvantaged groups or people living in remote areas.
- Tailor engagement to the target audiences and define the methods parliament will use to reach them.

### Shape the strategic framework:

- Define long-term goals for the engagement strategy.
- Establish medium- and short-term targets.

### Determine at the outset indicators for measuring progress towards the goals and targets:

- Align the engagement strategy with digital (ICT) and communications strategies.
- Mainstream gender equality throughout the public engagement strategy.
- Consider how the use of digital technologies can broaden engagement.

### Ensure key engagement principles are incorporated:

- Inclusive: Remove engagement barriers and make the process accessible to all sections of society.
- Transparent: Be clear and open about engagement processes, as well as the outcomes of public engagement.
- Meaningful: Ensure that public engagement is genuine and has the potential to make a tangible impact on decision-making.
- Responsive: Leave space for incorporating new ideas, adapting to emerging needs and being responsive to public demands.
- Sustainable: Make sure that engagement practices are sustained over time.

### Define the implementation arrangements:

- Define who is responsible for implementing the public engagement strategy (parliamentary leadership, MPs, staff, relevant units, etc.).
- Invest in human resources, and develop relevant skill sets and expertise by providing training programmes, coaching, etc.
- Invest in relevant infrastructure to support implementation of the public engagement strategy.

### Establish a consistent monitoring and evaluation system:

- Determine what should be assessed and/or measured, how and by whom.
- Define who is responsible for monitoring and evaluation.
- Ensure that appropriate systems for consistent data collection are in place and review the different kinds of data that can be collected and analysed.
- Ensure that evaluation starts early rather than being initiated at the end of an engagement project or activity.
- Consider how engagement can grow, mature and evolve with time and experience.
- Publish reports on the outcomes of public engagement in the work of parliament.

# Practical guide: Inclusion checklist

A parliament is inclusive when all community members can access it and participate in its activities, programmes and services regardless of their age, gender, location or physical ability. This inclusion checklist is designed to assist parliaments in being accessible to their diverse communities.

## Leave no one behind

Check that the activities, programmes and services of parliament cater adequately to all sectors of society, particularly those who have been disengaged previously:

- Are parliamentary engagement activities and programmes conducted with gender balance?
- Do people from rural and remote areas have sufficient opportunities to engage with parliament?
- Are people from low socioeconomic backgrounds able to adequately access parliament?
- Are there barriers to participation for people with disabilities?
- Are minority groups from culturally diverse backgrounds encouraged or supported to engage with parliament?
- Do young people have the opportunity to contribute their perspectives in a meaningful way?
- Is information available to people who do not have online access?

## Consultations

Ensure, including through monitoring, that public consultations, including committee hearings, are conducted in an accessible and inclusive way:

- Are public consultations by parliament, such as committee inquiries, and their outcomes promoted in a timely manner and to a wide and diverse audience through channels and media that diverse groups use?
- Is information about public consultations made available in key languages spoken within the community other than the main language(s) of the country?
- Is information about public consultations made available in formats that are accessible to people with disabilities, including in Braille and sign language?
- Is pre-hearing information available to assist people of diverse backgrounds to participate in committee hearings?
- Do committees regularly conduct hearings out in the community (in both urban and rural settings)?
- Are public consultations streamed online to make them more accessible, and are recordings of these also made available in a timely way?

## Parliament building

Ensure that the parliament building is accessible to all community members:

- Are there any physical barriers to people entering the building and moving around inside?
- Is signage accessible, particularly for people who are hearing or visually impaired?
- Are there adequate facilities that cater for people with disabilities, such as accessible bathroom facilities?
- Are interpreter services available for visitors to the building who do not speak the main language(s) of the country?
- Is information readily available that can help people with disabilities prepare for a visit to parliament?
- Do displays and exhibits within parliament reflect the diversity of the community, including by being gender-balanced?
- Do catering facilities at parliament provide for the dietary requirements of culturally diverse groups?

## Outreach initiatives at community locations

Make sure that outreach initiatives conducted by parliament in urban and rural areas away from parliament are accessible and inclusive:

- Are outreach programmes conducted regularly at community spaces in urban areas and in rural and remote communities?
- Is there gender balance in the range of outreach activities conducted by parliament and are there specific programmes conducted for women?
- Is provision made for people with disabilities in outreach activities?
- Is information about outreach activities communicated in a way and through channels that help to ensure it reaches beyond parliament's existing networks to a greater diversity of community members?
- Are there groups within the community with which parliament can collaborate to ensure that a wide cross section of the community is informed about and can participate in outreach activities?
- Are outreach activities conducted in safe spaces and in respectful and culturally sensitive ways?
- Are outreach activities conducted on days and at times that enable a wide cross section of the community to participate?

- Are targeted outreach programmes conducted for groups of people who are disengaged from or who have never connected with parliament, particularly people from minority groups and youth?

### Tours and events

Make sure that access to parliament and opportunities to learn about its history and how it works are designed in an inclusive way and are accessible to all:

- Do tours and events at parliament cater for diverse communities, including people who are visually or hearing impaired or have mobility issues?
- Is technology available that can make tours and events more accessible?
- Are support mechanisms, such as subsidies, available to help people participate in tours and events at parliament where they would otherwise find it difficult to do so?
- Are tours and events promoted through a wide range of channels used by different sections of the community?
- Does parliament have staff with educational experience who can work with schools and students to maximize their learning opportunities?

### Digital communications

Check that digital communications from parliament and digital platforms are accessible and inclusive:

- Does parliament's website meet accessibility standards, such as the *Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.0* established by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C)<sup>77</sup> and relevant national standards? In particular:
  - Is all graphical content alt-tagged?
  - Do all the pages work with a screen reader?
  - Are videos closed-captioned to make them more accessible?
  - Are sign-language interpreters used in online events and video material produced by parliament?
- Do parliament's social media channels and posts meet good-practice accessibility standards such as those recommended in the IPU's *Social media guide for parliaments and parliamentarians*?<sup>78</sup>
- Are the diverse groups within society reflected in the digital material produced by parliament, including through provision of content in all recognized or official languages?
- Are the interests of both urban and rural communities catered for in digital material produced by parliament?
- Does information on parliament's website and social media pages use gender-sensitive language?
- Do parliament's website and social media pages reflect gender and age balance in the images and stories they present?

- Are information and services provided through digital means also available to people who do not have online access?
- Does parliament review the digital and social tools used by the public to help determine its own digital outreach and engagement strategy?

### Print publications

Check that print publications produced by parliament meet accessibility standards:

- Are print publications from parliament written in plain language or are there plain-language versions of publications?
- Are publications produced in Braille to enable people who are visually impaired to access them?
- Do print publications from parliament meet good-practice accessibility standards for content, structure and appearance (such as standards developed by government or CSOs in the relevant country)?
- Are versions of documents produced in languages used by culturally and linguistically diverse groups within the community?
- Are documents tabled in parliament made available to people in an accessible and timely way?

### Budget

Check that the funding devoted to community engagement promotes accessibility and inclusion:

- Is sufficient budget allocated to outreach programmes compared to engagement activities conducted at parliament?
- Is any budget allocated to promoting parliament's consultations, outreach and engagement activities in media and communication channels used by diverse communities?
- Is any budget allocated for translating information into Braille, sign language or ethnic languages used in the community?
- Are gender budgeting principles employed in determining the engagement budget and how it is used?

77 W3C, 2008.

78 IPU, 2021a.

# Practical guide:

## Engaging with civil society

The term “civil society” covers a diverse array of groups and organizations known by a variety of terms such as “private voluntary organizations,” “NGOs” and “citizen associations.” Often, there is no common understanding or universally accepted definition of these terms. These groups and organizations vary according to their form, purpose, area of interest, size and more. For the sake of simplicity, this guide uses the terms “civil society” and “civil society actors” as catch-all terms.

This practical guide for parliaments in engaging with civil society draws on the good practices observed across the parliaments in this study and takes into account the most common challenges faced by both civil society and legislatures. It aims to provide parliaments with ideas to help structure and approach the engagement of civil society actors in the work of parliaments in the most meaningful and productive way. It incorporates information collected from:

- a focus group, composed of representatives of CSOs from different countries, organized in cooperation with Civicus
- interviews with parliamentarians, parliamentary staff and CSOs
- written contributions from CSOs received through an online survey and call for contributions
- existing relevant research and publicly available information

It also builds on:

- the Council of Europe *Code of Good Practice for Civil Participation in the Decision-Making Process* (adopted by the Conference of International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) at its meeting on 1 October 2009)<sup>79</sup>
- the Open Government Partnership *Guidance for national OGP dialogue*,<sup>80</sup> and
- The *Declaration on Parliamentary Openness*<sup>81</sup>

The practical steps for civil society engagement in the work of parliament are based on the following key principles:

- **Openness:** Ensure that parliamentary operations are open to civil society actors.
- **Accessibility and inclusiveness:** Ensure that information is provided in a clear and comprehensive manner and equal access is granted to all civil society actors including disadvantaged groups.
- **Integrity:** Demonstrate a true willingness to involve the public and establish a culture of honest and ethical interaction between actors.

- **Accountability and transparency:** Establish a culture of accountable and transparent engagement through regular reporting and by publishing open data.
- **Sustainability:** Ensure that the engagement process is consistent, regular and viable.
- **Independence:** Recognize civil society actors as free and independent bodies in respect of their aims, decisions and activities.
- **Validity:** Ensure that engagement practices are equally applied to all and that there are no selective approaches that could exclude some critical voices from the process.

### Mainstream engagement of civil society in the work of parliament:

- Establish clear rules, in parliamentary rules of procedure, that ensure access to information and variety of opportunities for civil society actors to engage in the work of parliament.
- Ensure that parliament’s public engagement strategy emphasizes civil society engagement in its work (see: [Practical guide: Strategic public engagement](#) in this annex).
- Consider creating mechanisms for structuring civil society engagement, such as joint declarations or memorandums between parliament and civil society actors.
- Set up regular parliamentary bodies working on parliamentary openness, composed of MPs and representatives of civil society, such as parliamentary open governance councils.
- Establish periodic (annual, semi-annual) meetings of parliamentary leadership with civil society actors, to discuss parliamentary operations as well as engagement practices and areas for improvement.
- Designate focal points or responsible units in parliament for securing smooth and effective communication between civil society actors and parliament. Make sure information about the focal point and valid contact information are available through the parliamentary website and social media accounts.
- Collaborate with civil society groups on parliament’s institutional and capacity development, education and awareness-raising programmes. Partner with civil society groups that can connect parliament with members of the public living in geographically remote areas.
- Allocate sufficient resources from the parliamentary budget to support civil society engagement.

79 Council of Europe, 2009.

80 OGP, 2019.

81 OpeningParliament.org, 2012.

Further reading – see the annex

**Practical guide – Strategic public engagement**

**Establish engagement mechanisms:**

- Ensure free, timely and full access to parliamentary information.
- Ensure the proactive publication of draft laws, policy documents, budgets and other information on the parliamentary website in a user-friendly and timely manner.
- Ensure the availability of diverse engagement tools that can be applied depending on the complexity of the issue, level of engagement, number of people to be engaged, cost, desired level of media visibility, etc.
- Apply digital tools to support engagement, such as e-petitioning, online collaboration mechanisms and bill trackers (but also recognize that some people will want to or only be able to take part offline).
- Provide engagement opportunities through committee hearings, working groups, inquiries, etc.
- Provide opportunities for civil society actors to engage in cross-party parliamentary formats.
- Organize events such as seminars, workshops and conferences to facilitate cooperation and consultation with civil society actors.
- Ensure that committees have developed a roster of experts/advisory boards to engage them in issues-based deliberation.
- Where participation in parliamentary processes is limited to a small number of civil society actors, apply a rotation system so that different actors can take part.

**Empower civil society to be engaged:**

- Inform and educate civil society actors about the role of parliament, how it works and the tools available for engagement.
- Manage expectations to ensure that civil society actors have a clear understanding of what to expect from parliament based on its mandate.
- Carry out targeted campaigns through media releases (newspaper, radio, TV), social media activities and printed materials to raise awareness among civil society actors of ways of engaging with parliament.
- Consider providing targeted education programmes for civil society actors on the role of parliament and its work.
- Ensure inclusive and gender-responsive engagement of civil society actors by reducing barriers to participation (such as meeting location, travel costs, language, timing, etc.). Parliament can reduce barriers to engagement in various ways, including by allowing online participation in committee hearings, or offering translation and childcare services.

**Practise engagement:**

- Make sure all civil society actors have equal opportunities to engage.
- Engage civil society from the early stages of the legislative and oversight processes, including in agenda-setting and initial planning.
- Carry out stakeholder mapping to identify who may take part in public engagement activities. Use this to create a stakeholder registry and update it regularly.
- Adapt the scale of engagement to the significance of the issue and the level of interest in it.
- Facilitate participation from a broad range of organizations representing diverse points of view and ensure involvement of stakeholders beyond the “usual suspects”.
- Go beyond the capital city and be proactive when reaching out, particularly with those groups who might struggle to engage with parliament.
- Make draft laws, motions and parliamentary oversight activities, including those on budgetary issues, open to public input (including online contributions).
- Provide sufficient time for civil society actors to contribute to the decision-making process.

**Communicate engagement results:**

- Establish a standardized practice of providing feedback to civil society actors after their engagement with parliament, so that they understand what part they played in the outcome.
- Assign responsibilities to relevant parliamentary staff in providing feedback to civil society actors. Ensure staff capacity development.
- Make sure feedback is timely, constructive, harmless, clear and comprehensive.
- Explain the feedback process to participants.

**Establish a consistent monitoring and evaluation system:**

- Constantly assess and evaluate civil society engagement practices and consider how engagement can grow, mature and evolve with time and experience.
- Define who is responsible for monitoring and evaluation.
- Discuss the findings of evaluation with civil society actors to demonstrate the impact of their engagement.
- Always learn from internal evaluations by listening to civil society actors and looking at what other parliaments are doing.

# Practical guide:

## Tips for MPs

Public engagement is a key element of the work of all elected representatives. For parliamentarians, public engagement means being in constant communication with their constituents, as well as being open, accessible, responsive and well informed in their work. Engagement with the public is indivisible from political activity and, when done successfully, has the potential to benefit both electors and their elected representatives.

MPs have an inherent interest in public engagement since it helps to build trust and improve relations with voters, and is likely to bring political support. On a more practical level, successful public engagement supports the work of parliamentarians on legislation, oversight and budgeting by ensuring that they are better informed in their decision-making.

These Tips for MPs have been compiled to help members become more effective at public engagement. They derive from the good practices observed across different parliaments during the course of this research.

### Be open and accessible:

- Regularly inform the public about your activities and their outcomes.
- Be open to hearing all voices, not just those that can reach you easily or with which you agree.
- Leave no one behind, and promote fair and inclusive access to parliament for everyone.
- Proactively reach out to groups within society that would otherwise be less likely to be heard, and be accessible to disadvantaged groups and to people with disabilities.
- Where applicable, consider setting up accessible constituency outreach offices, with regular working hours and trained staff to offer safe spaces for meetings.

### Be responsive:

- Strive to strike the right balance between informing and listening.
- Make an effort to put community initiatives on the agenda, recognize and reward contributions, and take views from the public into account when deciding on a course of action.
- Keep the public informed about the processes through which their submissions are going to be handled and of the outcome of their involvement.
- Closely follow what is happening in your constituency and work on the issues that concern people (e.g. via opinion polls, media monitoring and social media monitoring).
- Listen to the voices of civil society actors, even when you are not a primary target of their advocacy actions. When applicable, be ready to translate public concerns into legislative or oversight initiatives.

- Join forces with civil society actors by sponsoring pieces of legislation stemming from public concerns.
- Make sure that your engagement activities are gender-sensitive, be mindful of the time and venue of meetings, remove barriers to women's participation, enhance the gender-sensitivity of your staff, etc.

### Be informed:

- Broaden your range of sources of information, and seek to engage civil society, including academia and watchdogs, in law-making and scrutiny of government operations.
- Reach out to members of the public and seek their input on matters of public concern when preparing for oversight work.
- Look for good-practice approaches that you can replicate in your work. Use international and regional events as opportunities to exchange views with other parliaments on new ways of increasing public engagement.

### Be effective:

- Use various information channels (television, radio, live-streaming, social media, websites and newspapers) to effectively communicate with diverse audiences.
- Choose the communication channels that will be most suitable for your audiences. Try to get a good mix of online and in-person interactions.
- Keep an up-to-date registry of different interest groups, civil society actors and other stakeholders.
- Consider engaging with key stakeholders in informal settings such as conferences, seminars and workshops.
- Join forces with other MPs and consider working in groups/alliances around topics of interest.
- Be aware of the importance of professional support staff with strong communication skills.
- Work with parliamentary staff who have institutional knowledge for technical and professional assistance and guidance.
- Seek training options for yourself and your staff to acquire knowledge and skills to effectively engage with civil society actors.
- Keep accurate records to ensure effective follow-up.
- Have a system in place to regularly analyse and assess your engagement activities and build on experience.

**Keep up with trends:**

- Follow and understand changing trends in social media platforms in your country and among different groups when planning social media communication. Follow the IPU's *Social media guidelines for parliaments and parliamentarians*.<sup>82</sup>
- Develop a strategy for how you want to use social media (what to post, how often, on which platforms, how to measure success, etc.). Consider how you can use your social networks to build engagement beyond your immediate audience, and how using different social media platforms helps you to reach diverse groups across society. Remember that effective social media use depends on succinct, clear messages that catch users' attention, and that those interested can always access more detailed information through other, more appropriate channels (e.g. the parliamentary website).
- Keep it short and simple, using language that is accessible and appropriate to the audience, and consider using live sessions or podcasts too.
- Ensure proper administrative support for timely feedback and content management, considering that the speed of social media and instant messaging may create unrealistic expectations from the public in terms of how MPs respond.
- When deciding which social media channels to use, make sure you have the necessary resources to service them regularly, as infrequent activity can be counterproductive.

**Contribute to embedding public engagement in parliament:**

- Join regular parliamentary bodies working on parliamentary openness, such as parliamentary Open Government Partnership (OGP) councils, and participate in national, regional and international forums dedicated to parliamentary openness and citizen engagement.
- Review parliament's engagement strategy, action plan and progress reports.
- Consider proposing amendments to the parliamentary rules of procedure ensuring that civil society actors have increased access to information, education, communication, consultation and participation.
- Review parliamentary engagement tools (including digital tools) and advise on their improvement.
- Participate in educational activities around the role of parliament and its work, including education programmes for young people.

82 IPU, 2021a.



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