

Standards for Democratic Parliaments

By Kevin Deveaux

The Necessity of Standards or Benchmarks

Every institution should be able to measure its progress over time, to ensure it is improving its capacity to meet its mandate and to continuously review its efforts to become a better institution. Parliaments are no exception. In many countries, parliaments are under-resourced and not able to fully conduct the key constitutional functions mandated to them, such as passing quality legislation, scrutinizing the actions of the government and conducting an ongoing dialogue with citizens. In other countries, parliaments and parliamentarians are unable to maintain a stable institution as a result of fragility or conflict within the state. And yet other countries have focused primarily on ensuring free and fair elections but have not considered the need for strong democratic institutions once the elections have concluded.

For these reasons and others, parliaments must have a set of standards or benchmarks by which they can evaluate themselves and measure their progress as they commit to reforms and capacity development to ensure the institution is able to meet its mandate.

Kevin Deveaux, UNDP Parliamentary Development Policy Adviser, has been Member of the Nova Scotia House of Assembly from 1998 to 2007.



In order to promote transparent accountable parliaments, Kevin started to work with the NDI in Kosovo, Cambodia and the Middle East. Then in 2007, he started to work for UNDP as Senior Technical Adviser to the National Assembly of Vietnam and, in 2008, was made the UNDP Parliamentary Development Policy Adviser, at global level.

A Work in Progress

Based on previous standards-based approaches in the fields of human rights and elections, the global parliamentary development community commenced working on standards or benchmarks for democratic parliaments in 2003. An important step in this work was the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs' (NDI) *Toward the Development of International Standards for Democratic Legislatures*, published in 2007.



Commonwealth Parliamentary Association produced Benchmarks for Democratic Legislatures covering among other things the representative aspects of parliament, and parliament's independence, effectiveness and accountability.



The Inter-Parliamentary Union introduced its self-assessment toolkit to help parliaments conduct their own needs assessment



The Assemblée parlementaire de la francophonie, with the support of UNDP, published a francophone version of the standards



This document published by National Democratic Institute for International Affairs is intended as a basis for discussion within the international community regarding standards for the functioning of democratic legislatures.

“ From past experiences, as a parliamentarian and as adviser to legislatures, parliaments have a tendency to work in isolation, always reflecting upon their own rules and procedures with little or no consideration of how other parliaments conduct their work. The development of standards for parliaments will allow parliaments, parliamentarians and secretariat staff to engage in the important job of improving the capacity of a parliament, based on the best practices of their neighbor parliaments within the region and global considerations. The development of the standards will ensure all parliaments have a basis upon which to measure their work and their efforts.

- Kevin Deveaux -

”

The draft NDI document served as an important input to a Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) parliamentary study group, resulting in 87 recommended benchmarks by which to measure an effective and democratic parliament. In 2008, building on their 2006 study of good practices, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) developed a toolkit for parliamentary self-assessments. Though the three documents are different in how they approach benchmarks and standards, together they represent an important milestone in defining best practices for a parliament that hopes to be democratic, open and accountable.

This global work has been followed by regional initiatives for which UNDP and the World Bank Institute (WBI) have been major supporters. So far, regional benchmarks have been developed in the CPA's Asia Regions (Asia, India and South-East Asia) and Pacific Region (Pacific States and New Zealand). Work to develop benchmarks for Southern Africa by the SADC Parliamentary Forum is ongoing. In 2009, the Assemblée parlementaire de la francophonie (APF) also developed benchmarks that were adopted by its members at their general assembly.

How do these Standards contribute to Parliamentary Development?

Once benchmarks have been developed by an inter-parliamentary organization at the global or regional levels, the goal is to use them to support the capacity development needs of national and sub-national parliaments. Either as part of a self-assessment process, a gap analysis or a full strategic development plan, the benchmarks will assist parliamentarians, parliamentary staff, and, where appropriate, parliamentary development partners to understand the priorities for reform and development, based on what is acceptable and recognized as a best practice within the region.

UNDP, WBI, NDI and other inter-parliamentary organizations will continue to cooperate to ensure parliaments not only endorse these standards and benchmarks but use them to enhance their own capacity. By working together and with donors, all parties can ensure the work done in support of parliaments and with parliaments is based on a common set of goals for democratic, open and accountable parliaments.

To explore AGORA's knowledge module on Standards for Democratic Parliaments, please [click here](#)