

PARLIAMENT'S ROLE IN DEFINING AND PROMOTING THE POST-2015 DEVELOPMENT AGENDA

As we approach the MDG deadline, development partners must look beyond 2015 and consider the role of democratic governance and parliaments in continuing to promote development objectives. This will be particularly important if the international community commits itself to a new set of goals. Democratic governance has not received enough attention in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), but is increasingly advocated for the post-2015 development agenda. There are many successful MDG elements relevant to parliaments that new development goals should maintain. And there are some clear gaps they should strive to address. An assessment of these successes and gaps will help prepare the ground for parliamentary engagement in the possible next generation of goals. This policy brief looks at some of the lessons learned and entry points for defining the role of parliaments in promoting the post-2015 development agenda.

Parliaments' contribution to the Millennium Development Goals and the post-2015 development agenda

Parliamentary systems differ, so a 'one size fits all' approach will not help to determine the extent to which parliaments have been successful in building on political will and momentum to deliver on the MDGs. Parliaments around the world have played varying roles in contributing to their country's achievement of the MDGs. Parliaments in developed countries should ensure that their governments honour their commitment to allocate 0.7 percent of GDP to Overseas Development Assistance (ODA), as called for by the Monterrey Consensus. They should also pay greater attention to the quality of aid. But experience suggests that they have often been sidelined in discussions on ODA, resulting in low

accountability for the budgeting of aid and its allocation to MDG achievement.

Parliaments in developed countries should ensure that their governments honor their commitment to allocate 0.7 percent of GDP to ODA

In Mongolia, the Parliament adopted a resolution on the national MDGs that included a ninth MDG on human rights, democratic governance, and anti-corruption in addition to the globally recognized eight MDGs.¹ In Sweden, though, the government launched a bill – Shared Responsibility: Sweden's Policy for Global Development – that brought all components of Sweden's development policy together, and took a comprehensive approach to policy areas (debt, trade, agriculture, education, environment, and migration). This legislation ensures a coherent and consistent development policy, because the country speaks with one voice in international fora. The bill was debated and improved by the Swedish Parliament further requested an annual report on progress on implementation of the new policy.

In developing countries, parliaments need to ensure that their governments mobilize the resources necessary for development. They should establish national strategies to adapt policies to the MDGs and participate in formulating and monitoring poverty reduction strategies (PRS). It is now axiomatic that greater parliamentary engagement and greater accountability are required in the process of developing PRS.

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Internal parliamentary mechanisms related to work on the MDGs also differ between countries. In some, working groups

have been established that promote engagement and discussion of the MDGs within the parliament. For example, the Bangladesh's Parliamentary Caucus on education has succeeded in introducing legislation in parliament on a constitutional amendment to recognize education as a fundamental right.² The Bangladesh's first parliamentary caucus on education was composed of representatives from all the political parties in parliament and its work was supported by the People's Empowerment Fund, a non-profit legislative advocacy group. The Parliamentary Caucus on MDGs in the Kenyan Parliament consists of an informal group of Members of Parliament (MPs). It provides a platform with which to engage civil society and to discuss issues related to achievement of the MDGs. Similar mechanisms exist in India and Indonesia.³ In India, a well-established interaction between the executive and parliamentary committee on development issues further promotes greater political engagement on the national development agenda. Some parliaments have established standing committees on the MDGs (e.g., Nigeria). The absence of dedicated parliamentary mechanisms for the MDGs has not prevented countries from achieving most of their MDG targets (e.g., South Africa). Some of the lessons learned indicate that the existence of a parliamentary group on the MDGs has helped create awareness of the MDGs among MPs. But the key to success lies elsewhere. It is found, for example, in a strong national development agenda, in a strong executive-legislative working relationship, in a sufficiently resourced parliamentary committee structure, and in genuine parliamentary engagement on the national development agenda (where MDGs have been institutionalized in national targets and related development policies, including the MDG reports, and are discussed and debated in parliament).

Many countries routinely prepare national MDG progress reports – although, regrettably, most processes leading to the reports produced so far have not been fully participatory. National MDG reports and the targets to which countries have committed themselves are rarely discussed in national parliaments.

National parliaments have largely been overlooked as development actors and partners in MDG achievement. Similarly, parliaments have not often been engaged in PRS process in terms of providing oversight of performance and aid delivery results.

In the Parliament of Serbia, a Poverty Reduction Standing Committee was established. The Committee chair has been included as a member of the working group formed by the government to support analysis of the nationalized MDGs. This

is one example of how parliamentary committees can play a leadership role in MDG-related issues. Nigeria's success in meeting most of the goals is linked to the country's multi-sectoral infrastructural development. It is one of the few countries whose parliament has been pivotal in pushing the MDG agenda. From the stand-up campaign in Parliament to the creation of a standing committee, the Nigerian Parliament has made important efforts to engage and be profiled as highly committed to delivering on the MDGs.

Nigeria is on track to achieve Goal 4 by 2015. It is one of the few countries whose parliament has been pivotal in pushing the MDG agenda forward

Efforts are now being targeted at the 'off-track' MDGs and consolidating and sustaining results achieved so far.⁴ Parliaments have also demonstrated a capacity and willingness to act. For example, the African Speakers of Parliaments and Presidents of Senate have unanimously adopted a landmark resolution on a Declaration of Commitment. This prioritizes parliamentary support for increased policy and budget action on maternal, newborn, and child health in African countries. This milestone was adopted at the 3rd Pan African Speakers Conference (17–18 October 2011), convened by the Pan-African Parliament in Johannesburg, South Africa. The commitment is the first of its kind by the African Speakers of Parliament, and is a significant marker in accelerating progress in Africa towards the attainment of MDGs 4 and 5 on Child and Maternal Health, respectively.⁵

Parliamentary engagement with development objectives should be sustained after 2015, at global, regional and national levels for possible nationally-determined goals. Engagement with regional (such as Parlato and the Pan African Parliament) and sub-regional parliaments (Parlacen, SADC PF, ECOWAS Parliament, and East African Legislative Assembly) should strongly link regional, sub-regional and national policy frameworks to strengthen cross-national learning, harmonization of policy and accountability of the executive at the supra-national level. Parliaments should be adequately supported to enable them to promote, and deliver on, the new set of goals. While specific post-2015 goals have not yet been determined, underlying trends and priorities shaping the development agenda have been identified, as have guiding principles relating to sustainability, inclusion and equity, and improvements in human security and fulfillment of human rights. Building on existing examples of where parliaments have strengthened democratic governance for the MDGs,

more active engagement of parliamentarians across the world should be encouraged so that there is greater public accountability for creating the policies and practices essential for achieving the post-2015 goals.

Parliamentary engagement with development objectives should be sustained after 2015

Parliaments can make a direct difference by implementing nationally relevant development plans and budgets that are compliant with associated priorities defining the post-2015 development framework. These are inclusive social development, inclusive economic development, environmental sustainability, and peace and security.⁶ Those priorities need to be further disaggregated to address the challenges of equity, equality and non-discrimination. Such an approach should be encompassed in a rigorous data collection and benchmarking exercise for the post-2015 goals. Parliaments can adopt legislation that specifically responds to these critical challenges, for example by passing laws that are sensitive to climate change, that foster employment and job creation, or address patterns of inequalities, demographic change/population growth, urbanization, infrastructure, and migration.⁷ For example, citizens of Costa Rica have the right to a healthy environment and the government will provide and defend that right by enacting legislation that will provide a standard – and penalties for violating that standard. Finally, Parliaments could be the main champions in terms of promoting a dedicated goal on democratic governance at global, regional or national levels.

Lessons learned from the MDGs in relation to parliaments

The post-2015 development agenda will build on the momentum of, and lessons learned from, the MDGs. The need for country ownership, government accountability, and national policy was not sufficiently taken into account during the MDGs design and implementation, and is now being highlighted as a requirement to ensure that the new set of objectives is attained.⁸ Parliaments are at the forefront of these imperatives, because they play a critical role in meeting those requirements through their lawmaking, budgeting, and oversight functions.

Accountability

Parliaments have a clear role in monitoring and holding governments to account for the international, regional and

national commitments they have made. Parliamentarians are also actively engaged in regional or sub-regional parliaments. Lack of accountability has been identified as a major weakness in MDG implementation. From the Paris Accord to the Accra Declaration to the recent statements from Busan, the international community has continued to express its hope that countries' institutions be sufficiently capacitated to ensure internal supervision of a national government's international commitments. Future goals would also benefit from clearer definition of responsibilities at the country level.⁹ A stronger accountability scheme requires that parliaments and others – including local level elected representatives and institutions – engage throughout the policy-making process and the associated stages of the budget cycle to promote and deliver the post-2015 goals. Such an approach will strengthen political commitment and offer incentives for better service delivery for all.

Parliaments must become leaders in accountability at all levels to ensure the government is continuing to push for the achievement of future objectives and in meeting international commitments (including duties under international human rights standards, regional commitments). There are several tools that a parliament can use to monitor government actions, including policy implementation, expenditure review, and oversight of independent institutions.

Parliaments must become leaders in domestic accountability

A parliament normally has a number of functional committees that reflect the various government ministries. It is the committees' role to monitor their respective ministries to ensure they are acting broadly in the interest of the citizens and that they are specifically, properly, and adequately implementing laws passed by the parliament to meet certain policy objectives.

Once a state budget has been passed, one committee is normally designated (e.g., Public Accounts Committee) to review government expenditures. Often, this is done in conjunction with the State Auditing Institution (e.g., Cour des Comptes). It is through annual parliamentary reviews of proposed government expenditures that parliaments can

Parliamentary reviews of proposed government expenditures can help ensure that adequate funding is allocated to achieving the post-2015 objectives

ensure adequate funding is allocated for the achievement of the post-2015 objectives, and that funding is spent properly to allow laws to be translated into action throughout the country.

In many situations, the parliament is responsible for appointing and monitoring the work of independent agencies, such as the state auditor, an anti-corruption commission, or a human rights commission. The parliament should not interfere in the work of these bodies, but should ensure they remain independent of the executive branch, have adequate funding required for their assigned jobs, and are working in the interests of all citizens.

National implementation

Another acknowledged shortfall of the MDGs is the lack of translation of global trends and goals into national policy-making.¹⁰ All too often, international commitments are made without legal standing in a country unless and until those commitments are translated into laws and policies. As United Nations Secretary-General, Kofi Anan, said, "It is not in the United Nations that the Goals will be achieved. They have to be achieved in each of its Member States, by the joint efforts of their governments and their people". Parliament, then, will have a specific role in adopting a national legal framework that reflects and domesticates international commitments from the post-2015 development framework. Parliaments will be responsible for scrutinizing draft laws and adopting laws needed to turn commitment into action.

National ownership

While it is vital to engage parliaments in the process following the establishment of the new set of goals, it is also important to stress their involvement in the process leading up to the agreement. This was not fully the case with the MDGs, because parliaments were not engaged in the process until later. Indeed, the signatories to the Millennium Declaration at the United Nations Millennium General Assembly in September 2000 and the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were representatives of 189 governments from the North and the South, ignoring the importance of the legislative branch and its role in the Declaration's implementation. The exclusion of key stakeholders, including parliaments, is seen as another shortfall of the MDGs. It is only in the last five years that the work with parliaments has started to be recognized as an important part of a strategy to achieve the MDGs. This began primarily with the natural curiosity of MPs who began to ask questions about the MDGs and government efforts to meet their commitments. Promoting national, regional, and global consultations with representatives from parliaments at the

conception of the goals, engaging them from the very outset, and ensuring they are equal signatories of the new goals, will help build greater commitment and national ownership. That will boost domestic accountability and avoid criticism of the MDGs as a top-down/donor-centric agenda that lacked inputs from developing countries.

It is important that parliaments are engaged in the process leading to the agreement of the new goals

At the same time, a strategic approach needs to be put in place to strengthen coherence between development, trade, investment, intellectual property, and other key policy regimes. Parliaments are well-positioned to promote such an integrated approach by passing and promoting coherent laws and policies that meet economic, social, and development goals, and by aligning international commitments with national priorities.

Way forward

Evidence shows that the presence of a strong legislature is an unmixed blessing for democratization.¹¹ During the June 2011 Tokyo MDG follow-up meeting, UNDP reiterated the need "to emphasize institution building and system strengthening" and urged that "more attention needs to be paid to capacity development". The United Nations System Task Team on the Post-2015 UN Development Agenda also stated the MDGs "overemphasized financial resource gaps to the detriment of attention for institutional building and structural transformations".¹² Achieving the post-2015 development agenda will therefore take more than just technical inputs. It must include political interventions and support to political actors to overcome some of the hurdles that have prevented the full achievement of the MDGs. To that end, active and sufficient support to all political institutions, including parliaments, should be ensured. Development partners must recognize the crucial role of parliaments and provide them with strategic and directed support.

Today, UNDP is supporting one in three parliaments around the world in an effort to build inclusive and participative political institutions, to develop sustainable capacities in legislators and parliamentary staff, to share best democratic practices, and to strengthen dialogue with civil society to prevent violence and promote women's participation. Looking ahead, and recognizing the role of parliament as a development actor and contributor to the possible post-2015 targets and objectives, UNDP and development partners must

continue to strategically empower parliaments, and support both parliamentarians and staff in the following areas:

- ✓ The provision of information and knowledge of international best practices and concrete examples from other countries;
- ✓ Long-term capacity development; and
- ✓ Support to key parliamentary committees and the staff they rely on so that they fulfill their functions.

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More specifically, development partners must be prepared to support the role of parliament beyond 2015 in its law-making and oversight functions, targeting both parliamentarians and staff. Projects should be developed to ensure that a parliament's key components have the capacity and knowledge to properly review draft laws related to the post-2015 objectives. They must also have an ability to ensure that draft laws are of a high quality, reflecting regional and international best practices and international human rights standards. That should include building the capacity of research and legal drafting divisions of the parliamentary secretariat. And direct support to relevant parliamentary committees will help to ensure that the committees have access to the appropriate expertise, (including CSOs, citizens, academics, and UN experts) to reflect both best practices and the concerns of citizens. Development partners can build the capacity of parliamentary committees that oversee the key ministries responsible for implementing the post-2015 development agenda.

As the process of passing a state budget differs from country to country, the passage of the budget provides an opportunity for MPs to press for the funding required to achieve the post-2015 objectives. Timely access to expertise and the capacity to build political demand for such funding are crucial. Development partners can promote the role of parliament in monitoring government expenditures, as well as supporting civil society organizations and other actors to monitor public performance. This can be highly detailed and technical work, but the provision of expertise can help relevant committees (e.g., public accounts committee) to fulfill their roles. Provision of information and access to experts will be crucial to the proper functioning of such committees.

It is through these key considerations that development partners can ensure that parliaments play an active role from the outset in achieving the post-2015 development objectives. By supporting parliaments and promoting enhanced coordination between all donors and stakeholders, we will be working with an important national institution that can – and must – be positively engaged if development objectives are to be met.

Endnotes

- ¹ [“Millennium Development Goal 9: Indicators and the State of Democracy in Mongolia”](#), UNDP, the Institute of Philosophy, Sociology, Law of the Mongolian Academy of Sciences and UNDEF, 2009.
- ² [“Toolkit for Parliamentarians, International Parliamentary Conference on the Millennium Development Goals”](#), Houses of Parliament, Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, 2012.
- ³ [“Analytical Study of Parliamentary mechanisms for MDGs”](#), IPU and Millennium Campaign, 2010.
- ⁴ The poorest and most fragile countries being left behind; growing concerns about pockets of indigenous and socially excluded groups in middle income countries. See [“Millennium Development Goals: 2012 Progress Chart”](#).
- ⁵ [“Speakers of African Parliaments Adopt Resolution on Declaration of Commitment to Prioritize and Increase Budget Support to Maternal, Newborn and Child Health”](#), October 2011
- ⁶ [“Realizing the Future We Want for All, Report to the Secretary-General”](#), UN System Task Team on the Post-2015 UN Development Agenda, June 2012.
- ⁷ *ibid.*
- ⁸ [“Report of the Experts Group Meeting to support the advancement of the Post-2015 UN Development Agenda”](#), New York, 27-29 February 2012.
- ⁹ [“Getting to Zero: Finishing the Job the MDGs Started”](#), March 2012.
- ¹⁰ [“After 2015: contexts, politics and processes for a post-2015 global agreement on development”](#), ODI, January 2012.
- ¹¹ Steven Fish, [“Stronger Legislatures, Stronger Democracies”](#), Journal of Democracy Volume 17, Number 1, January 2006.
- ¹² [“Review of the contributions of the MDG Agenda to foster development: Lessons for the Post-2015 UN Development Agenda”](#), UN System Task Team on the Post-2015 UN Development Agenda, March 2012.

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