INTER-PARLIAMENTARY UNION

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Agenda item 50: Information and communication technologies for
development

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Madam Chairperson,

There is wide international consensus that development and peace will never be fully realised without good governance, and that parliament, as one of the institutions at the heart of governance, needs to be strengthened. The value of information and communication technologies (ICT) as a strategic tool to enhance the efficiency, effectiveness and impact of development strategies is also widely recognized.

Today, almost every parliament in the world uses ICT. In 2000, around two-thirds of national parliaments had their own web site. By 2006, more than ninety per cent of parliaments published a web site on the Internet, often following the Inter-Parliamentary Union's guidelines on good practice for parliamentary web sites[1].

Parliaments are using ICT for two main purposes: to be more transparent, accessible and accountable to the public; and to be more effective in their parliamentary processes. To give only a few examples:

In Viet Nam, the parliament is preparing to publish draft laws on its web site, so that citizens can read and comment on them, and this input can be taken into account during the legislative process.

In Austria, the Electronic Law system offers one continuous electronic production channel for legislation. All stages of a law, from the proposal to promulgation, can be tracked in a fully transparent process. It is calculated that the new system will save sixty tons of paper annually, a saving of more than one million Euros.

However, no-one can deny that the digital divide affects parliaments as much as it affects societies in general. There is huge variety in the resources devoted to ICT in different parliaments. Parliaments in many developing countries, and particularly in Africa, are doing their best with the staff, skills and equipment that are available to them.

To address this inequality, the United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) and the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) have created the Global Centre for Information and Communication Technology in Parliament. The Global Centre was formally launched in 2005. It has two principal missions:

- To reinforce parliament's capacity to harness ICT tools to better fulfil their democratic functions

- To strengthen parliament's role in the implementation of the outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society and the attainment of internationally agreed development goals

The Global Centre intends to act as a catalyst and clearinghouse for information, research, innovation and technology, as well as a hub for technical assistance.

The lessons learned within parliaments over the last 10-15 years about the implementation of ICT projects potentially form a tremendous knowledge base when introducing or developing ICT in other parliaments in developing countries. The

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[1] Inter-Parliamentary Union (2000). Guidelines for the content and structure of parliamentary Web sites. Available at <http://www.ipu.org/cntr-e/web.pdf>

Global Centre provides a framework for pooling information and resources and linking the broadest possible number of initiatives in this field.

In recent years, the number of internationally-funded projects of assistance to parliaments has increased rapidly. Many of these projects contain an ICT component, when they are not focused exclusively on ICT itself. Yet in many instances these projects are fragmented. They rarely address the entire ICT picture, focusing instead on separate pieces, and they do not always draw on the experiences of lessons learned in other parliaments.

The Global Centre aims to develop a structured approach to the development of ICT in parliament. Greater coordination between providers of ICT-related assistance would be beneficial to both the parliaments and the providers of assistance.

I would like to make it clear that ownership of the Global Centre lies with parliaments themselves. The Board of the Global Centre is composed of Speakers of national parliaments from all geographical regions, as well as certain regional parliaments, to ensure that the work of the Global Centre is driven by their needs and priorities.

When we talk about building parliament's capacity to use ICT, we can not ignore the important role that parliaments have to play in promoting the development of ICT in society. Parliaments are major stakeholders in the follow-up to the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). They have a special constitutional responsibility for adopting the appropriate legislative framework that underpins the development of information societies, for example data protection laws, access to information laws. Parliaments also vote the budget that provides funding for the implementation of national ICT policies.

As with all international agreements, parliaments must hold their government to account to ensure that their commitments are respected. So it is important that parliament be aware of the issues that came out of the summit and be equipped to deal with them.

As part of the follow-up to WSIS, the Global Centre is participating in Action Lines C1 (The role of public governance authorities and all stakeholders in the promotion of ICTs for development) and C7 (ICT applications for e-governance). The Global Centre will encourage parliaments to keep the WSIS outcomes issue high on their agenda, and help build parliamentary capacity to take action in this area on ICT.

A concrete step in this direction is the organization of an international conference on ICT-related legislation that is scheduled to take place in early 2007 in Rome. It is being organized by the Italian Chamber of Deputies within the framework of the Global Centre. The Conference will be a forum for legislators and legal experts to debate and share experiences in creating legal frameworks conducive to the development of the Information Society.

Parliaments face many challenges in the twenty-first century, not least to continuously strengthen the links between parliament and citizens. While ICT in itself is not some magic wand that will resolve all the challenges, it is clear that ICT has to be part of the solution. The IPU and the Global Centre intend to accompany parliaments as they

increasingly look to ICT to help them perform their constitutional functions in a transparent, accessible, accountable and effective manner.

Thank you.