

Launch of the preliminary Indicators for democratic parliaments

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Concept note

In today's world, the job of parliamentarians is probably more demanding and challenging than ever, and their duties and responsibilities are becoming increasingly complex. Parliamentary agendas are usually very busy, with completely new thematic areas appearing frequently, covering subjects such as genetically modified organisms, artificial intelligence and cyber-security, to mention just a few. In addition to reading and studying a wide range of information in their regular daily work, MPs need to constantly learn and specialize to be able to effectively perform their legislative and oversight functions.

The work inside the parliamentary building, including meetings, committees and plenary debates, is just one part of MPs' duties. Parliamentarians may be answerable to their political party, their party leader, the Speaker or a committee Chair, but they are ultimately accountable and responsible to the people who elected them. MPs are expected to communicate regularly with their constituents, listen to their concerns and bring those concerns to the attention of parliament.

Decreasing trust in political institutions, including parliaments, and a growing perception that the political establishment is losing touch with the population are being experienced around the world. People today rightly request that their voices be heard and that they may participate in public decision-making. Therefore, engaging with the public, communication and collaboration with civil society actors in various areas of parliamentary work, and even presence on social media, are now essential for parliamentarians. This is particularly important in the context of the 2030 Agenda and the public's expectations of parliaments to take stronger action in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Every parliamentarian wants to have a successful term of office. For instance, initiating or changing a law to better fit the people's needs, or getting the executive to change a policy, can have an impact and make a difference in people's lives. Such achievements might enhance MPs' chances of being elected again or their prospects of a fruitful career outside parliament.

However, the willingness of individual MPs, or even a group of MPs, to invest a lot of time, energy and knowledge in efforts to make an impact is not enough. It is the overall parliamentary environment that provides, or sometimes limits, the rules of the game and the space in which MPs operate. These considerations primarily refer to the level of parliamentary autonomy of the executive, and the legal powers of a parliament to make and pass laws and to scrutinize government. The parliamentary environment includes the constitutional and legislative framework, rules of procedures, various internal rules, practices and work processes, as well as parliament's financial and administrative capacity, which all affect the level and quality of performance of MPs and of the parliament as a whole. Here are just a few illustrations: it is hard to achieve meaningful and effective oversight if parliament does not have the power to summon ministers; well-informed decision-making is not possible if the parliamentary administration does not have enough staff with the expertise to provide MPs with quality information and research; communication between MPs and their constituents is imperilled if the parliamentary budget cannot cover MPs' essential expenses when visiting their constituencies.

These cases might not be typical of many parliaments, but even in strong parliaments with a long democratic tradition, there are always things that can be changed, rearranged, or done better or differently, to improve parliamentary performance. Parliamentarians have the power to make any changes they wish that could enable them to do their jobs more effectively and sometimes even make their work easier. However, parliaments are often conservative institutions that do not tend to easily adapt to the pace of the outside world. In parliaments, one can often hear: "We've always done it this way" or "If it ain't broke, don't fix it". In addition, making improvements requires a lot of time to analyse laws, rules or work processes to find out what the weak points are and then to get familiar with the research and experience of other parliaments to figure out how to make things better. MPs usually do not have that time due to their very busy daily agendas. Plus, they would usually rather focus on goals that can be fully achieved and show results during their limited terms of office.

In order to assist parliamentary development towards strong institutions, the Inter-Parliamentary Union has initiated and led a multi-partnership project to develop a global set of parliamentary indicators structured around SDG targets 16.6 and 16.7, which depict strong institutions as effective, accountable, transparent, responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative.

"Indicators for a democratic parliament based on SDG targets 16.6 and 16.7", adapted to the institution of parliament, enable parliaments to diagnose gaps and weaknesses in any segment of parliamentary work, through a straightforward and evidence-based assessment of criteria for the selected segments. Designed as a tool for learning and development, the indicators also provide a deeper understanding of diverse issues and help to identify ways in which changes can be made. In total, there are 25 indicators, with 111 dimensions and almost 500 criteria that enable assessment of both parliamentary capacity and performance in all areas of parliamentary work, while ensuring meaningful, comprehensive, useful and comparable results. The indicators are intended to be reliable, comprehensive and universally relevant, regardless of the parliamentary context concerned.

The indicators are the result of lengthy, detailed and careful planning, analysis and consideration of already existing knowledge and parliamentary practices, in close partnership with the Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD), the European Commission and INTER PARES, the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UN Women, the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) and Directorio Legislativo. They have been drafted and reviewed by experts with considerable experience in parliamentary issues and have been tested by several parliaments. The specificities of parliaments in different political systems and parliamentary contexts have been taken into account at all stages of development of the indicators.

Nevertheless, before the final adoption of this work, the IPU and its partner organizations would like to make the indicators publicly available in the form of a "preliminary" version. The intention is to let the indicators "live in the real world" for six months to see how they work in practice. This will allow their relevance and usability to be examined and confirmed by the parliaments for which they are created.

The indicators will be launched at this virtual event, organized by the IPU in cooperation with its partner organizations. We are pleased to invite parliamentarians, secretaries-general and senior parliamentary staff to one of the two sessions proposed, depending on their time zone.