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Global Parliamentary Report 2022

Public engagement in the work of parliament



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The visit aimed to raise awareness of harmful effects of child marriage. © Mosta Gausul Hoque

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Forewords

Inter-Parliamentary Union

The twenty-first century began as an era of great hope, emboldened by connectivity, creativity and cooperation. Two decades on, we are facing global challenges that threaten our future stability and prosperity.

This third *Global Parliamentary Report*, published jointly by the IPU and UNDP, is focused on maintaining the resilience of our democracies as we confront the many issues that require our attention. It encourages parliaments to engage with and empower the people they represent to become active participants in the processes that will help to shape our future.

As the international organization of parliaments, the IPU is committed to strengthening the relationship between the elected and the electors. This report presents a road map to achieving that important objective.

Effective public engagement requires a united effort by members of parliament, parliamentary administrations and the community. With a series of recommendations, this report provides practical guidance on the steps that can be taken to bring the people and their parliaments closer together.

The ultimate aim is to enliven and enrich the public engagement approaches and methods of parliaments, so that communities throughout the world have more and better opportunities to get their voices heard in the decision-making processes that affect their lives. The success of this report will be measured by the actions that are taken in the years ahead to make parliaments more responsive to, and inclusive of, all community sectors.

Parliaments and people from across the world have contributed their expertise and experience to this report. They have clearly shown the degree of commitment to public engagement that already exists. The IPU is hopeful that this engagement can be taken to the next level through leadership, strategic thinking, skill and enthusiasm.

Parliaments big and small can benefit from the information and recommendations outlined in this report. Those with less capacity and fewer resources can look to the community of parliaments and international partners to help them achieve good outcomes. No one should be left behind.

This report is published in the shadows of crises and conflicts that have gripped the world. In these times of uncertainty and anxiety, people are looking to their parliaments to respond with actions that will lead to a better future. Involving the community in decision-making through effective public engagement can help to ensure that parliaments respond in ways that meet people's expectations and aspirations.

The IPU's commitment to better public engagement will continue beyond this report. Through the programmes we offer, the IPU will support ongoing efforts to enhance the way parliaments engage with their communities. It is incumbent on all of us who believe in democracy to be active participants in making it work for everyone.



Martin Chungong
Secretary General
Inter-Parliamentary Union

United Nations Development Programme

This third *Global Parliamentary Report* emerges as countries and communities aim to build forward better from the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused the greatest reversal in human development ever recorded. The pandemic has compounded a range of global crises – including planet-threatening climate change and environmental degradation, deepening inequalities and poverty, and food insecurity. We are increasingly confronted with a stark reality: existing governance processes and institutions are often insufficient to address these monumental challenges. Moreover, the global crisis of trust in governance, aggravated by inequitable and inadequate responses to the pandemic, calls for a reboot of our institutions and processes. They must become more fit for purpose in order to hold decision makers to better account. Peaceful, just and inclusive societies founded upon sustainable development – as envisioned by Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 – simply cannot be built and sustained without a reimagining of governance institutions.

For some time, many civil society groups, formal and informal subnational governance mechanisms, and the private sector have shown innovation when it comes to representation, decision-making and accountability. Many national parliaments need to catch up. To assist with this transformation, this timely report sets out a case for much more open and representative institutions where accountability is understood as ongoing rather than limited to an election event every few years. It shows how digital solutions, in particular, hold the potential to extend vital state services to marginalized and vulnerable communities. At the same time, this technology can empower more people to have their say in vital decisions that affect their lives and livelihoods. It calls for innovation and partnerships for knowledge-sharing, including on a South-South basis. And it highlights the need to use foresight exercises to help parliaments play their part in leaving no one behind in a world now in flux.

UNDP's Strategic Plan 2022–2025 highlights the critical importance of supporting accountable, effective and inclusive governance to achieve the SDGs. This report provides valuable new insights which will inform our implementation of the Plan. Through a clear set of recommendations, the IPU and UNDP demonstrate our continued commitment to helping shape parliaments across the world that are fit for purpose and able to stand up to the immense tests that this century now poses.



Achim Steiner
Administrator
United Nations Development Programme

Definitions

Below is a list of key terms, along with an explanation of how they are defined and used in this report:

- **Civic space:** The environment that enables civil society to play a role in the political, economic and social life of societies.
- **Civil society:** People in the community not associated with government, as well as the groups and organizations outside of government in which people participate.
- **Communication:** The process of exchanging information, opinions and ideas through dialogue and interactions between people.
- **Community:** All the people living in the same place or with the same characteristics.
- **Consultation:** The process by which the opinions, views and suggestions of the community are sought on an issue or an activity.
- **Democracy:** A universally recognized ideal, goal and mode of government based on common values shared by peoples throughout the world community, irrespective of cultural, political, social and economic differences.
- **Diversity:** The inclusion, in activities and decision-making, of people from various backgrounds in terms of ethnicity, religion, age, gender and sexual orientation.
- **Gender-sensitivity:** An acknowledgement of the way in which gender shapes activities and decisions by taking account of and responding to the unique views, perspectives and needs of men, women and gender nonconforming individuals.
- **Inclusion:** In an engagement context, the process by which all members of society are given equal opportunities and resources to participate in activities and decisions.
- **Parliament:** A body of elected representatives that makes laws, debates issues and holds the government to account.
- **Parliamentarian:** A person elected by the people to represent them in a nation's law-making body; used interchangeably with the term member of parliament (MP).
- **Parliamentary democracy:** The system of government in which the people elect representatives and the representative body chooses the executive to govern the State, and holds the executive to account.
- **Participation:** The process by which people, individually or in groups, get involved in an activity or decision.
- **Public:** All the members of a community in general, regardless of their citizenship status.
- **Public engagement:** The various ways in which the community is involved in an activity, process or decision, including through information, education, communication, consultation and participation.
- **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):** A collection of 17 interlinked global goals designed as a "blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all". The SDGs, which are intended to be achieved by 2030, were agreed by world leaders in September 2015 as part of the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development adopted unanimously by the United Nations General Assembly.

Executive summary

The third *Global Parliamentary Report* examines public engagement in the work of parliament. It recognizes that parliaments have a vital role to play in addressing the challenges of today's rapidly changing world, by enabling people to connect with and participate in the law-making, policy formulation and oversight processes that impact their lives now and into the future.

This report takes a detailed look at why public engagement matters and how parliaments across the world are engaging with the communities they represent. It outlines trends and strategic priorities for public engagement. It also considers key focal points for ensuring better and deeper engagement into the future, in support of the fundamental principles of effective institutions and inclusive decision-making embedded within the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The information, findings and recommendations in this report set out a road map for enhanced public engagement by parliaments and parliamentarians, working collaboratively with the community to achieve participatory, inclusive and responsive parliaments.

Public engagement has many benefits

There are many reasons why public engagement is mutually beneficial for parliaments, parliamentarians and the community. Above all, it supports parliament's main functions by giving access to the breadth and depth of information and ideas that are needed for representation, law-making, public policy formulation and oversight that meet people's expectations and aspirations.

It is the means through which a fundamental tenet of democracy – participation in public affairs – can be practised by all. Effective engagement can help avoid a disconnect between elected representatives and the public they serve. It can show the community it is being listened to and heard, countering rising public distrust and negativity.

Through engagement, civic space for public debate can be promoted and protected, evidence and opinions that assist decision-making can be brought to parliament, and barriers to participation can be tackled so that no one is left behind. Parliament can present itself as a genuine forum for debate, and as an institution that is responsive to people's views and needs.

Public engagement has many dimensions: information, education, communication, consultation and participation. Experience from parliaments around the world shows that taking action in each of these areas will help to build better and deeper engagement with the community. Through comprehensive, creative and collaborative engagement approaches, parliaments have the opportunity to boost public interest and participation in their work.

Commitment to engagement is essential

Leadership from parliamentarians and the parliamentary administration's senior management team can activate broader and deeper engagement involving people throughout parliament. An engagement strategy can help to ensure that objectives are clear, and that effort and resources are appropriately targeted to maximize impact. Investing in skills will help to foster more professional engagement practices.

A diverse engagement mix, using a variety of channels and approaches to communicate with and consult the community, encourages broader interaction with the work of parliament. Memorable and inspiring visitor experiences at the parliament building motivate people to connect with parliament further.

Being strategic helps deliver results

An action or implementation plan for public engagement is an important part of shifting to more strategic thinking as it maps out the specific things that need to be accomplished in order to meet the objectives that have been identified and agreed. Since parliaments are devoting more resources to engagement projects and activities, evaluation has become a top-order priority. Robust evaluation processes will help parliaments ensure that their investment is well placed and is contributing to the desired outcomes.

Genuine dialogue builds trust

Amid today's information overload, parliaments need to make every effort to be visible. By offering genuine opportunities for dialogue between people and their elected representatives, parliaments can help to build trust and reinforce their relevance. There should be an emphasis on interacting with and listening to the community, and not just on informing.

Across the world, people are mobilizing through a variety of advocacy campaigns and initiatives. By giving people a voice in setting the agenda and providing regular feedback on the outcomes of their input, parliaments can help to ensure they remain relevant to the community.

Collaboration and co-design can open parliaments up to new and innovative ways of engagement. Enabling community members to influence the matters that parliament debates, investigates and researches gives the public a direct say in what parliament does and demonstrates parliament's willingness to make engagement with the community more participatory

Inclusive engagement leads to broader participation

Without a special effort to reach all communities, structural barriers are likely to reduce opportunities for some groups to engage. By working in collaboration with people who are disadvantaged or underrepresented, parliaments can address the impediments to participation that people face.

Taking parliament out to communities removes some of the barriers to participation that people experience. Measuring engagement through the lens of an inclusion checklist will ensure accessibility for all. Prioritizing gender-sensitive engagement supports progress towards equal participation of women and men.

Parliaments need to be future-focused

In a rapidly changing world, parliaments need to be responsive, adapting and revitalizing their practices and processes to meet the challenges of the present and the future. Only by moving with the times can parliaments remain relevant to the communities they represent.

This report serves as a clarion call for parliaments to be future-focused in their engagement. It outlines some key initiatives for parliaments to think about and act on:

Take youth seriously

Young people are a growing proportion of the world's population. In order to remain relevant to this expanding group, parliaments need to connect and interact meaningfully with them. Parliaments can enliven their youth engagement by working with young people to co-design a charter for youth participation.

Leave no one behind

Parliaments have a special responsibility to ensure that groups that are underrepresented, face disadvantage or are newly arrived in a country can participate in democratic processes. In order to elevate inclusion to a top priority, parliaments can develop an inclusion action plan, working in collaboration with groups currently facing barriers to participation.

Transform through technology

New ways of communicating, learning and working are transforming society. In order to keep up with the rapid pace of technological change, parliaments need to prioritize their own digital transformation, particularly in their approaches to public engagement. Across all facets of engagement, parliaments would benefit from developing a portfolio of digital tools to boost interaction with the community.

Encourage innovation

Effective engagement relies on parliament being open to the public and welcoming people's participation. Openness also drives innovation by allowing for new ways of thinking, planning and working. It demonstrates a willingness to collaborate and co-create with civil society. One way to bring about a transformative cultural shift in public engagement by parliament is to establish an innovation task force. By embracing innovation in their own processes and leading public debate about the future, parliaments have an opportunity to present themselves as forward-thinking and forward-looking institutions.

Work together

Worldwide challenges, transient populations and digital technologies that penetrate national borders all point to a future in which the global community will be increasingly interconnected. This presents an opportunity for parliaments to cooperate and draw on each other's experiences, methods and solutions. Fostering a community of practice among parliaments will stimulate effective approaches to engagement across the world.

Recommendations

This report sets out five top-level recommendations that will help parliaments boost community interest and participation in their work:

1. **Strategic: Embed a culture of engagement across parliament** for a united and concerted effort towards broader and better public participation.
2. **Inclusive: Make inclusion a priority** so that parliament is accessible to all community members.
3. **Participatory: Encourage people to participate in setting the agenda** through opportunities to influence the issues taken up by parliament.
4. **Innovative: Lead with bold and creative approaches** that involve and inspire the community to engage with parliament now and into the future.
5. **Responsive: Focus on meeting public expectations** by listening to community feedback and continually improving.

Public engagement in the work of parliament

Global Parliamentary Report 2022 Recommendations



Introduction: Charting the future of engagement

The global challenges of the twenty-first century place enormous responsibilities on elected representatives around the world to respond in ways that meet the needs and expectations of their diverse communities. Yet our democratic institutions face a loss of confidence as their responsiveness and effectiveness are questioned.

Communities are looking to their parliaments to address the issues that impact their lives and livelihoods. People want to have a say by contributing their views and suggestions.

Effective institutions and inclusive decision-making are fundamental principles embedded within the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The agenda focuses on people-centred transformative goals to build just and inclusive societies, with a particular emphasis on leaving no one behind. It makes clear that national parliaments have an essential role to play in promoting inclusive decision-making and ensuring accountability for implementation of the commitments that have been made.

This global push for equitable solutions to the challenges of our time places a special responsibility on parliaments. On matters from combating climate change to improving access to health care, people expect their elected representatives to engage, listen and respond in ways that meet community aspirations. This is an ongoing requirement for parliaments: to be accountable to the people continuously – and not just at election time.

Since parliaments derive their legitimacy from the people, public disenchantment threatens their authority. As representative institutions, parliaments are duty-bound to listen to the community and to meet public expectations when making laws, investigating public policy issues and holding the government to account.

For decades now, parliaments have been working on ways to better engage with the communities they represent. Public engagement can take many forms and can be conducted either directly with individual community members or through organized groups. It encompasses the various processes and activities through which parliament connects with the community – to inform, educate, communicate, consult and involve.

Declining trust in public institutions means that parliaments cannot simply continue with business as usual. It challenges parliaments to assess the progress they have made and to step up their efforts at engagement. Reversing the trend of disenchantment requires concerted action going forward.

Much of this report speaks to parliamentarians, parliamentary staff and people with an interest in building the capacity of parliaments to improve their public engagement. It recognizes that parliaments across the world are diverse, and that approaches to – and capacity for – engagement will depend on various factors such as size and available resources. In

mapping out future directions for engagement, the report offers guidance that can be used by all parliaments to suit their circumstances.

An important theme emphasized throughout the report is for parliaments to be inclusive, as envisaged by Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16. The central promise of the 2030 Agenda is to “leave no one behind.” The terms used in the report reflect that approach. It speaks of community and of people with shared interests. In engagement terms, the report does not differentiate between formal citizens and residents of a country, preferring instead to focus on the contribution that all people can make as community members.

This report uses the terms “engagement” and “participation” extensively, recognizing that there are various dimensions and stages of people’s involvement in the processes and work of parliament. It sees public engagement as a two-way street, with genuine dialogue between the electors and the elected.

Overall, this report provides the impetus to improve, focusing on some important themes to drive more effective engagement. It encourages those who have taken significant steps and showcases their good practice. It serves as a guide for those who are looking to enhance their engagement. And it argues stridently for more innovation as a way to better connect parliaments with the people they represent.

Encouraging public participation

If democracy is to work properly then people must participate in it. There are many ways for people to become actively involved in democracy: by standing as candidates or voting at elections, by having a say in the laws enacted by parliament, or by contributing to public policy formulation, to name but a few. There are also many factors that can help boost participation: people are more likely to get involved if they understand how democracy works, know about the issues being debated, are given opportunities to share their views, and have confidence in decision-making processes. In order to encourage participation, this report recognizes and promotes the value of a vibrant and uncensored civic space where community members can actively discuss, debate and organize to ensure their voices are heard and heeded.

The fundamental aim of this report is to encourage parliaments to boost public participation in the years ahead through actions that will increase understanding, broaden knowledge, improve opportunities and build confidence. It recognizes that public involvement is helpful to parliaments in understanding what the community expects, in broadening the voices that are heard in the decision-making process, and in accessing expertise that different sections of the community can contribute to the work of parliament. By focusing on some key principles for enriching engagement, the report seeks to provide practical guidance for future actions.

Ensuring engagement matters

Maintaining public confidence and trust in parliamentary democracy requires regular and meaningful interaction between those who are governed and those who govern on their behalf.

The chequered history of public engagement by parliaments suggests that it has often been a choice – one made according to convenience, commitment, skills and resources. The unequivocal message of this report is that engagement with the community is a necessity, not an option; an enabler, not a distraction.

This report also speaks about providing better opportunities for community members, either individually or in organized groups, to help set the agenda of matters that parliament debates and investigates. It encourages parliaments to open up to new ways of operating, so that they actively consider, engage with and act on issues that matter most to the community.

Importantly, the report recognizes that public engagement is not an end in itself. Rather, it enables the community to be involved in achieving better outcomes in all facets of human activity. And it helps to shape a more just society with dignity, peace and prosperity for all people.

Embedding a strategic approach

Public engagement is not just a series of actions and interactions. If it is to be effective, it requires a coordinated approach, a well-defined strategy and a culture that takes engagement seriously.

Parliaments are encouraged to treat engagement strategically rather than in an ad hoc manner. By embedding goals, roles, responsibilities, audiences, resources, targets and outcomes in their language and practice, parliaments can be better focused in the way they plan and deliver their engagement. And by clearly articulating responsibilities for engagement, parliaments can help the key contributors better understand their roles. This includes parliamentarians, parliamentary party groups and parliamentary staff.

It stands to reason that elected representatives are the core of any parliament, since they are chosen by the community to represent their interests and to make decisions on their behalf. The individual engagement efforts of parliamentarians are vital in ensuring that people have avenues to be informed about and consulted on issues that matter to them. This report provides a range of tips for parliamentarians seeking ways to be more effective in their engagement.

Yet parliamentarians and parliamentary administrations also share a collective responsibility to provide effective and inclusive institutional channels for public participation above and beyond politics. Such channels reinforce the central and enduring role of parliaments in the democratic process.

Another clear message of this report is that cooperation and collaboration help to shape more meaningful engagement. Involving the community in planning, implementing and evaluating engagement efforts can pave the way for more and better public participation in parliamentary democracy.

Learning from each other

A considerable body of practice has been developed over several decades of public engagement by parliaments. This report showcases initiatives and innovations from parliaments across the globe. Inspiring action by learning from others is key to better engagement.

Understanding why some parliaments have been able to advance their engagement more extensively than others is important. The case studies contained in this report point to a range of factors that contribute to better processes and deeper levels of engagement.

At the same time, it is evident that many parliaments face capacity limitations. The principle that no one should be “left behind” applies equally to the relationship between parliaments. This is where the global parliamentary community can be the enabler: parliaments with more limited capacity should be able to reach out for the advice and support they need to become more effective in their engagement.

Realizing the future

The future success of public engagement by parliaments depends on the ability of elected representatives and parliamentary administrations to respond and adapt to today’s opportunities and challenges.

We live in a world in flux, as we face health and environmental crises, social and economic pressures, conflict and shifts in population. Yet we also live in an era of connectivity and innovation that has no precedent in global history.

This report is grounded in parliamentary practice, drawing on an extensive range of interviews, focus groups, surveys and expert advice. The first three chapters consider the current state of play, looking at why engagement matters, how parliaments are engaging, and what emerging trends are relevant to public engagement. The fourth and fifth chapters look to the future, outlining strategic priorities and focal points for better engagement going forward. The report concludes with a set of recommendations for parliamentarians and parliamentary administrations. The annex, meanwhile, contains detailed case studies of national situations and particular themes, as well as practical guides to support parliamentary efforts to strengthen engagement.

Overall, this report encourages an optimistic approach to engagement. It sees technological advances, interaction and creativity as enablers, allowing everyone to participate in parliamentary democracy with understanding, knowledge, opportunity and confidence.

More and deeper engagement will enable parliaments to benefit from the variety of views and expertise available in their communities. This, in turn, will help parliaments to deliver more informed legislative and policy outcomes that meet the aspirations of their communities and the challenges of a rapidly changing world.

Part 1: Why engagement matters

An important starting point for this report is to consider why public engagement matters to parliaments. Public engagement is a broad concept. It refers to the variety of ways in which community members can get involved in decision-making. It can include a multitude of people, and it can be time-consuming and costly. Impacts are not always easy to quantify or track.

In a parliamentary democracy, people elect representatives to make decisions on their behalf. So why, once elected, should these representatives and the parliaments to which they are elected invest time and resources in engaging with the community?

The central proposition of this report is that public engagement is essential for parliaments to maintain relevance in a modern society and to avoid a disconnect between elected representatives and the public they serve. The report argues that public engagement is not a preference or a choice, but a necessity for effective representation.

“The mandate of representation must be understood as continuous contact between citizen and representative,” said Alberto De Belaúnde, a member of the Peruvian Congress.¹ Indeed, public engagement represents a continuous dialogue between people and their parliament – a constant flow of information through various channels.

Conversations about public engagement have never been more relevant and important than they are now. In the modern era, people are more vocal in demanding that their voices be heard and heeded. They no longer accept merely being called to vote once every four or five years. They do not want to wait for the next parliamentary elections to have a chance to say what they think and need.²

Modern technology has amplified this trend. The speed and accessibility of interaction in the digital age have profoundly changed the nature of engagement.³ Elected representatives are no longer simply entrusted to be the decision makers for an electoral cycle of several years. Instead, they are expected to communicate, listen and engage on an ongoing basis.

Public engagement matters because it is mutually beneficial for communities, for parliaments as institutions and for individual members of parliament (MPs). It enables parliaments to create better laws and policies by tapping into wider sources of information. It cultivates knowledge in communities and improves the quality of decision-making. It also allows closer monitoring of policy implementation. And in doing so, it sustains representative democracy in a rapidly changing world.

When MPs engage with their constituents on matters of interest and concern, they are improving relationships with



“

When MPs engage with their constituents on matters of interest and concern, they are improving relationships with their voters and countering distrust.

Benin. The President of the National Assembly meets with community members after flooding on the River Mono. © Assemblée nationale du Bénin / Andric Lokossi

¹ Quotations without an accompanying source/footnote come from the background research conducted for this *Global Parliamentary Report*. See “Methodology and data sources” towards the end of this report for more details.

² IPU, 2021a: 4.

³ Lobo-Pulo and others, 2019: 6.

their voters and countering distrust. “Public engagement gives you legitimacy ... There has to be a need in the community that legislation is providing a solution to,” said New Zealand MP Louisa Wall, adding that public engagement provides “a solid base and rationale for change”.

Yet assessing the impact of public engagement is complex. Only 34 per cent of parliaments surveyed for this report had evaluation indicators. Solveig Jónsdóttir, Director of the Research and Information Department at the National Parliament of Iceland, called impact evaluation a “mostly anecdotal” rather than a systemic practice. As it takes time to achieve impact, it is usually difficult to attribute outcomes to a specific action or decision of a legislature. Commonly used evaluation techniques do not capture what we intuitively believe to be the breadth and depth of impacts arising from public engagement and its perceived long-term benefits.

This section of the report sets out key arguments for why engagement matters. It also outlines some of the common challenges faced by parliaments worldwide in pursuing their public engagement.

1. Sustaining democracy in a rapidly changing world

There are various ways in which public engagement can sustain parliaments and democracy overall. By helping to build trust, ensuring parliaments are relevant, maintaining civic space for public discourse and ensuring all voices in a community can be heard, public engagement reinforces the principles of effectiveness, inclusion, accountability and transparency that underpin democratic governance.

1.1. Confronting public distrust

Trust in the political system is a fundamental precondition for representative democracy. The legitimacy and authority of public institutions derive from people’s trust in them. People’s cooperation with government and compliance with laws are also based on trust.

Only 45 per cent of citizens trusted their government in 2019,⁴ according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which noted that levels of trust in national governments vary greatly between countries depending on social, economic and cultural factors. Similarly, respondents to the survey for this *Global Parliamentary Report* from across different parliaments identified “lack of trust” as one of the common challenges they face.

Another worrying trend can be found in a report⁵ from the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA), which noted a decrease in average voter turnout globally since the early 1990s. Between 1940 and 1980, average voter turnout hovered at around 76–78 per cent, falling to 70 per cent in the 1990s and to 66 per cent by 2015. There has also been lower turnout among young voters, with only 43 per cent of people aged 25 years or under voting in their national elections in 2016.

Other indicators also suggest that traditional avenues of participation are not resonating, particularly among the younger generation. For instance, only 4.1 per cent of young people overall are members of a political party, dropping to 3.1 per cent for young women.

Significantly, views about the performance of democratic systems are decidedly negative in many nations, according to findings from a 2019 Pew Research Center survey.⁶ Across 27 countries polled, a median of 51 per cent of people were dissatisfied with how democracy was working in their country, while just 45 per cent were satisfied.

Although trust is based on a person’s belief and is equally influenced by their experiences and perceptions, it is reasonable to assume that people are more inclined to trust institutions that are inclusive, accountable, effective, responsive, open and transparent.⁷ These assumptions underpin a global consensus on the requirements for effective institutions in a modern world, as set out in SDG targets 16.6 (“Develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels”) and 16.7 (“Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels”).

In a democratic system, trust is not reliant solely on public perceptions of parliament. It depends to a large extent on the government’s popularity, since the public do not always differentiate between government performance and the work of parliament. In the broader public view, government and parliament are often regarded as one and the same thing.

Interestingly, when the New Zealand Parliament conducted research to measure the effectiveness of its 2018–2021 public engagement strategy,⁸ it found that public engagement can lead to measurable changes in public perceptions. Although the research was carried out with an extremely popular government in power, it nevertheless uncovered some interesting changes in views and perceptions between 2019 and 2020:

- Parliament’s reputation improved (up from 53.9 to 61.2 points, on a scale from 10 to 100).
- New Zealanders were more likely to advocate for Parliament (up from 10 per cent to 15 per cent).
- People were less likely to be critical of Parliament (down from 22 per cent to 15 per cent).
- Commitment to voting increased sharply (up from 18 per cent to 32 per cent).
- Refusal to vote decreased (down from 17 per cent to 8 per cent).

While people’s trust in parliament is not in the hands of the institution alone, parliaments can counter disenchantment and disconnection by creating a more conducive environment for effective engagement. Yet this aim cannot be achieved through the goodwill of individual MPs alone. It requires secure and well-established mechanisms and practices for public engagement at the institutional level. Public reluctance to engage can be countered by demonstrating institutional will for maintaining constructive dialogue with communities, by providing a safe space for interaction and by welcoming –

4 OECD, 2019.

5 Solijonov, 2016.

6 Wike, Silver and Castillo, 2019.

7 UNDP, 2021.

8 New Zealand Parliament, 2021.

and demonstrably considering – people’s opinions. Promoting public participation is an important step in combating disengagement and encouraging people to voice their views and concerns.

1.2. Making parliament more relevant

Empirical data suggests that representative democracy is facing growing public indifference, with voter turnout, party membership and trust in politicians all in decline. Yet it is not democracy itself that is losing relevance, but rather the people and institutions that drive it. Political parties and politicians are increasingly perceived as serving their own interests rather than the interests of the public. On this point, political theorist Simon Tormey made the following observation:

There is no real challenge to the hegemony of “democracy” in the contemporary imaginary. Rather we should be interested in the crisis of actually existing representative democracy, a democracy that rotates around politicians, elections and parliaments. This kind of democracy is in crisis – though saying that should not be taken as implying that there is any likelihood of representative democracy disappearing soon.⁹

Increasingly, people have been witnessing hostile political debates in legislatures and are not hearing about the issues-based work that is undertaken in committees and other settings. In the general community, this is matched by growing polarization and misinformation, which is further amplified by social media and other modern engagement tools. These channels have become a major source of news and a central platform for political discourse. But they have also been used to incite greater partisanship and even hostility – to the detriment of civility and compromise.¹⁰

Disengagement flows from a disillusioned society that needs to be reassured about the relevance of parliament. Disconnect with institutional democracy is even higher among young people, regardless of differences in access, interests and capacities. Significantly, this lack of engagement with parliaments or with formal processes and structures does not translate into public disengagement from societal affairs. On the contrary, people are increasingly likely to organize, communicate and engage through non-traditional channels, with digital technology supporting mass protests and grass-roots initiatives such as #FridaysForFuture and #MeToo. And as people globally find new and creative ways to make their voices heard, parliaments are left appearing less and less relevant to them.

A compelling example of alternative approaches to public participation is Change.org, which describes itself as “the world’s platform for change”. As of July 2021, it had over 458 million users globally.¹¹ Every day, millions of people use the online platform to start, sign and support petitions to bring about change on issues that matter to their lives and communities. It illustrates a significant trend that is seeing more and more people around the world congregating around new platforms and using creative ways to influence decision-making, rather than engaging directly with elected representatives and parliaments.

A key question is whether this popular energy can be harnessed and channelled to revitalize parliaments and representative democracy. If parliaments are perceived as mere rubber stamps, as being captured by vested- or self-interest, or as forums for pointless partisan hostilities, important conversations may move to an alternative place, to a digital space or even onto the streets. In response, parliaments wishing to sustain and increase their relevance must make an extra effort to provide new and effective engagement tools.

One reason for widespread disengagement is the perception that parliaments fail to respond meaningfully and in a timely way to various issues of public concern. According to a recent study by Dalia Research, the Alliance of Democracies and Rasmussen Global, more than half of citizens living in democracies think that their voices “rarely” or “never” matter in politics.¹²

Having an informed public who perceive parliament as a place of significant discussions on matters of public interest is good for representative democracy. By demonstrating that they are closely following societal developments and trends, by overseeing how policies are being implemented, and by responding in a timely way to public concerns about the consequences of the decisions they make, parliaments can build trust and reinforce their relevance among the communities they represent.

1.3. Protecting civic space for public debate

Meaningful public engagement requires civic space for public debate. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) defines “civic space” as “the environment that enables civil society to play a role in the political, economic and social life of our societies.”¹³ In other words, it is the environment that enables people and groups to engage in dialogue with one another and with authorities about issues that affect their lives. Regardless of the subject matter of this dialogue – discussions on the quality of basic services, the responsiveness of institutions or respect for fundamental freedoms – it needs to occur freely, in full security and without hindrance and fear of oppression or retribution. It is a direct responsibility of a democratic state to ensure that people’s fundamental rights – to freely express their views, to create associations and to assemble peacefully – are upheld and respected.

There are growing concerns that civic space is shrinking globally. OHCHR has sounded a similar alarm with the following observation:

Repressive laws are spreading, with increased restrictions on freedoms to express, participate, assemble and associate. New technologies have helped civil society networks to grow, but they’ve also given governments excuses to control civil society movements and media freedoms, often under security pretexts.¹⁴

Parliaments therefore have a decisive role to play in providing and protecting civic space.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated this situation, with new and worrying trends observed in many countries

⁹ Tormey, 2014.

¹⁰ Tucker and others, 2018: 49.

¹¹ Change.org, 2021.

¹² Dalia Research, Alliance of Democracies and Rasmussen Global, 2018: 1.

¹³ OHCHR, 2021.

¹⁴ OHCHR, 2021.

around the world. When physical gatherings became unsafe, many civic, political and other public activities moved to the digital space. The OECD warns that civic space will collapse if “actors have free rein to leverage digital technologies in adverse ways that restrict civil society actors’ activities,”¹⁵ while the United Nations cautions that “what is justified during an emergency now may become normalized once the crisis has passed.”¹⁶ Steps that at times may be justified to safeguard public health or security can – and do – shrink the space for public voices, unless solid legal frameworks for transparency and oversight are in place and enforced to protect democratic values.

Despite these concerns, it is important to recognize that the digital age is opening up new online spaces for people to exercise their freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression. Technology is connecting civic spaces at a global level, supporting mass social movements, and creating more dynamic and inclusive public discourse marked by greater activism and engagement.¹⁷

The Council of Europe *Guidelines for civil participation in political decision making*¹⁸ identify the following basic conditions and principles as necessary for maintaining and expanding civic space:

- Respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms and the rule of law
- Political commitment, legal framework and clear procedures
- An enabling environment
- Shared spaces for dialogue.

Parliaments, as democratic institutions representing the people, have an important role to play in shaping civic space into the future. They have a significant responsibility to ensure that their mandates for legislating and overseeing the executive are applied effectively in protecting and expanding civic space. Since meaningful public engagement is good for representative democracy and the availability of civic space is a precondition for effective engagement, it is incumbent upon parliaments to support robust rules and processes that enable civic space to flourish.

1.4. Ensuring all voices can be heard

Parliaments are the key representative institution in a democratic system. As such, they bear a responsibility for ensuring inclusive and participatory decision-making processes on issues that affect people. This universally recognized goal is reflected in SDG target 16.7. Inclusive and participatory processes allow parliaments to draw evidence and knowledge from a wider base, which contributes to more informed policy decisions and, therefore, to better outcomes.

Giving the public the tools to get involved encourages more people to speak up and promotes broad participation. Yet without a special effort to create a level playing field, only some individuals or groups may have the resources and understanding necessary to advance their interests or articulate their concerns.

Moreover, systemic inequities mean that certain groups and individuals may be less likely to be heard. Structural discrimination, inequities in access and opportunity, and physical distances erect barriers to engagement for some groups. Many factors shape opportunities for engagement, from age, sex, sexual orientation, location, physical ability and legal status, to socioeconomic status, literacy, education, and ethnic, racial, religious and gender identity.

Parliaments should represent the whole of society, not just its advantaged groups. They must therefore make an effort to hear all voices, not only those that can easily reach them. Targeted public engagement helps parliaments appreciate diversity and set a framework for fair and inclusive policymaking.

Political considerations are often an underlying challenge for engaging with certain communities, especially vulnerable, marginalized and minority groups. Their inclusion in the political process can depend, to varying degrees, on the local culture and values. The majority within a community can often react with resentment to the inclusion of marginalized groups. This places an additional burden on the shoulders of politicians, often requiring them to show courage and leadership in shaping, rather than following, opinion. Dealing with the potential backlash from dominant groups is one of the many challenges that politicians can and do face when promoting inclusive engagement.¹⁹

Authorities representing the status quo at any particular time may prefer not to hear from certain groups. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and questioning (LGBTIQ+) people, those with disabilities, members of religious or ethnic minorities, indigenous communities and other disadvantaged groups are particularly vulnerable in this context. Peruvian MP Alberto de Belaúnde made the following observation:

The fact of promoting a rights agenda for a marginalized group (LGBTIQ+ community) has generated in me a particular sensitivity regarding how to approach agendas (of minority groups) because you have been in those shoes where you have heard congressmen and authorities say “hey, no, those issues are not important”; “there is no problem”; “everything is fine”. I have felt that a rights agenda has not been valued.

Including marginalized groups in political processes takes political will and courage. Working in systemic partnership with civil society can support parliaments’ efforts to overcome structural inequalities, since activists and leaders are often strong advocates for human rights, justice, the environment, social programmes, women’s rights, and minority rights and inclusion.

To address this, parliaments around the world have applied targeted engagement approaches. For instance, in its public engagement strategy, the Parliament of the United Kingdom focuses on groups identified as being disengaged, including women, young people, people with disabilities, unskilled workers, the long-term unemployed and ethnic minorities. These groups are the target audience for its events and activities. Another targeted approach is a voting campaign in the Netherlands, as detailed below.

¹⁵ OECD, 2020: 9.

¹⁶ United Nations, 2020: 16.

¹⁷ OECD, 2020: 18.

¹⁸ Council of Europe, 2017.

¹⁹ Hedström and Smith, 2013: 5.



Without a special effort to reach all communities, structural barriers are likely to limit some voices.

Brazil. A special session of the Federal Senate to honour indigenous peoples during the week in which Indian Day is celebrated, April 19. © Senado Federal

Engagement example 1: *Ik stem ook (I Vote Too) campaign in the Netherlands*

In 2021, the Parliament of the Netherlands partnered with ProDemos, an organization that promotes democracy and the rule of law in the country, to run a campaign known as *Ik stem ook* (I Vote Too). The aim was to inform 100,000 new Dutch citizens who were naturalized in 2020–2021 about the voting and campaigning process and how they could get involved. The campaign website stated that many of the new citizens were refugees who had fled war and insecurity in the Middle East and Africa. The campaign was largely targeted at these groups, with materials translated into Arabic, Tigrinya (which is spoken in Eritrea) and other local languages. Samuel Tekeste, a refugee who led the campaign, observed as follows:

We estimate that voter turnout among Dutch citizens with a refugee background is between 20 and 30 per cent. A lot of these people come from countries where there is no opportunity or right to vote. It is something completely novel to them.

The benefits of inclusive policies go far beyond the quality of specific decisions. By making concerted efforts to hear all voices, parliaments can contribute to promoting equal opportunities for all, which eventually sets the basis for social

coherence and prosperity. Inclusive engagement ultimately helps to sustain representative democracy by ensuring that it lives up to its promise.

2. Public engagement is mutually beneficial

A fundamental tenet of this report is that public engagement has mutual benefits for communities, parliaments and individual MPs. Through engagement, parliaments and MPs gain useful information that can help them improve proposed policies or laws and identify new areas for intervention, while communities get the opportunity to contribute to and influence decision-making.

Within every community, there are multiple interests, diverse perspectives and conflicting opinions. Being aware of the full range of views helps parliaments to apply nuanced approaches and develop comprehensive initiatives based on a wider perspective.

Broader engagement can also draw parliament's attention to matters that would otherwise not appear on the parliamentary agenda and could be overlooked. It provides the means for communities to promote their interests, voice their concerns and influence policy decisions that affect their lives. Public

consultations – well-conducted and carried out in good faith – can help citizens assume ownership of decisions and make them feel included in the process as co-creators. This, in turn, can lead to deeper understanding and wider acceptance of decisions.

In many legislatures where systemic interaction with civil society groups is the norm, this approach has helped to achieve major positive change. Countless issues across the world have been promoted and resolved through civil society organization (CSO) participation. In Peru, for example, labour rights legislation passed due to the work of *Centro de la Mujer Peruana Flora Tristán* (Flora Tristán Peruvian Women's Centre), a local CSO. In Kenya, meanwhile, additional funding was allocated to health and sanitation as a result of civil society involvement. Patrick Chemwolo of the Jamii Empowering Centre, a CSO in Elgeyo-Marakwet County, made the following observation:

Our inputs have been considered, and some of the bills we have been pushing as a CSO have passed. In the areas we have been advocating for, like health and sanitation, more funding has been agreed.

Through public engagement, parliaments and MPs can also keep the community informed about their work. This contributes to greater recognition of what parliament and elected representatives are doing for and on behalf of the community, helping to build public confidence in parliamentary processes and reinforce their relevance.

2.1. Accessing more information and ideas

Parliaments are tasked with legislating and with overseeing the actions of the executive. But they are more limited in terms of the resources and information available to them than the executive. Access to a diversity of information sources strengthens parliament's independence. These sources of information include:

- the executive
- independent State institutions, such as State audit offices or national human rights bodies
- parliament's independent research services, such as the parliamentary research centre or budget office
- the wider public, including CSOs, academia, constituents and the private sector.

While information from the executive is essential, it cannot be the only source of data and evidence available to and relied on by parliament. Regardless of the quality of information supplied by the executive, parliament needs to hear complementary perspectives, including directly from the people affected by the legislation or policy under examination. It is this body of information that contributes to better-informed and more robust decision-making, as well as to more detailed and forensic oversight of the executive.

Parliaments are usually able to access high-quality information from independent State institutions, such as State audit offices and national human rights bodies. These are valuable, alternative sources of accurate, professionally produced material. Many parliaments also have access to analysis produced by their own apolitical research services. While these agencies are valued for the information they provide to MPs

and the institution, public engagement ensures that parliaments can access an even wider range of information and insight.

Parliaments across the world are well aware of the benefits of public participation. Cáit Hayes, Head of Protocol and Public Engagement at the Parliament of Ireland, explained: "If you are discussing a piece of legislation and you have interacted with an NGO or civil society group in advance ... you have more knowledge of what you want that piece of legislation to look like in the end." Kate Addo, Director in Charge of Public Affairs at the Parliament of Ghana, made a similar observation: "The more people you have participating, the more diverse views you get and the higher the chance of having legislation that is more representative of people's views."

The same applies to engagement with academia. Scholars and researchers can offer knowledge, expertise and evidence that can help parliament design better policies and effectively scrutinize the executive. Establishing closer links with them enables parliaments to tap into expertise across various fields of research, which is particularly valuable for institutions with limited resources.²⁰

CSOs also contribute to law-making and parliamentary oversight by keeping parliaments in the loop on important aspects of their work. Keren Horowitz, of the Ruth and Emanuel Rackman Center for the Advancement of the Status of Women in Israel, observed as follows:

We constantly work with MPs trying to promote legislation which is aligned to our agenda (women's equality in family law and promoting women's representation) and stop legislation which we believe will harm women and children. We meet with MPs in order to present our views, write position papers, attend open committee hearings and draft bills for MPs. In certain cases, we offer to conduct committee hearings on an important subject we promote.

As noted earlier, public engagement not only contributes to more informed policymaking but also helps parliaments to become aware of issues that otherwise might be overlooked. By proactively engaging, communities can attract parliament's attention to matters that otherwise may not appear on the parliamentary agenda. Benjamin Opoku Aryeh, from Parliamentary Network Africa in Ghana, said that "legislators wield the power and we [CSOs] need them to use that power to make changes for us."

There are various mechanisms and tools available across parliaments for the public to propose new policy ideas. Both institutional and individual approaches are practised in a variety of countries. Petitions, for example, provide an opportunity to launch discussions in parliament on specific policy issues. Many civic groups choose to approach MPs directly to ask them to sponsor certain pieces of legislation.

The below example from New Zealand gives insights into the way in which a bill was put forward following engagement between MPs and local organizations working on female genital mutilation (FGM) crimes.

²⁰ IPU, 2021a: 3.

Engagement example 2: Female genital mutilation in New Zealand

In 2020, the Parliament of New Zealand passed the Crimes (Definition of Female Genital Mutilation) Amendment Act. Although the practice of ritual cutting has been illegal in New Zealand since 1996, the legislation updated the definition of FGM to include a broader range of harmful practices and brought the law in line with World Health Organization standards. The idea for the bill came from engagement between MPs and local organizations working on these issues. Nikki Denholm, the director of the FGM Education Programme in New Zealand, explained that these organizations “first started making noise about this 12 years ago.” MP Louisa Wall, co-chair of the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians New Zealand Group, also credited local communities for the idea and resources for the bill that her group worked on:

I am convinced that the only way that happened was because the community came to us. They had an issue that was led by our Ethiopian community. And members of that community actually came to the parliament, presented to our cross-party women’s group. And then from that, we had to determine what the best way forward was. And in the end, we drafted a piece of legislation. They were fully involved throughout the whole process, which ended up with a piece of legislation going through all stages and then passing. I am quite proud of it.

Another example from Poland illustrates how the need for policy change became evident from more than 100 petitions.

Engagement example 3: Family policy in Poland

In 2019, the Senate of Poland debated a change in the law mandating parental custody following divorce (under existing law, sole custody was granted to mothers). Gabriela Morawska-Stanecka, the Deputy Speaker of the Senate, made the following observation:

We asked many experts for their opinion. The Senate received about 80 petitions on paternal custody rights from men’s and fathers’ organizations that wanted us to create a very strict bill. And in turn, organizations representing mothers submitted about 100 petitions with quite different demands. We discussed this issue for over six months – not because we thought that the current legislation was bad and we suddenly believed that men should have custody of children after a divorce, but because we saw these petitions as a sign that our legislation on this was not ideal, since many people wanted to change it.

Public engagement can also bring new ideas into draft legislation that parliament has already placed on its agenda, as shown in the example below.

Engagement example 4: Environmental justice in the United States

In the United States, the House Committee on Natural Resources took the unprecedented step of enlisting POPVOX, a non-partisan platform, to broaden the scope of stakeholder views that could be incorporated into the Environmental Justice For All Act. Between November 2019 and January 2020, more than 350 individuals and organizations shared their views by commenting on the draft legislation through an online platform – compared with the half a dozen people usually invited to a committee hearing. This approach also addressed the inequities that arise when the input Congress gets is skewed by powerful lobbies, personal networks of staff and committee chairs, geographic proximity, and the disadvantages faced by minority groups. In this instance, the committee heard from a wider and more representative range of voices. A committee staffer explained that, as a result, issues surfaced that would not otherwise have been identified: “There were recommendations that we probably would not have thought of on our own, certainly not from the perspectives offered.”

The above examples clearly show that public engagement broadens the sources of information available to parliament and promotes new ideas for the parliamentary agenda. This benefits parliament, its members and the public at large and leads to better-quality outcomes. By engaging with parliaments, people encourage elected representatives to act upon their concerns. And through their responsive actions, parliaments fulfil their primary duty: to serve the public interest.

2.2. Building consensus on policy issues

Public participation in parliamentary work gains even greater importance when the policies and laws at stake are controversial or when they affect large segments of society. The more conflicting opinions there are, the more important public engagement becomes.

Parliaments often need to resolve issues that are subject to tough debates. When there are differing and passionately held views among various groups within the community, tensions often arise. While inclusive public engagement should be an integral part of parliamentary processes in general, it becomes vital for decision-making in highly contested situations, providing the opportunity to turn challenges into success stories by opening doors to all who can contribute or who are affected by the issues under debate.

Resolving challenging issues through meaningful public participation is about more than polite discussion at meetings. It involves active listening to hear what diverse groups have to say, debating and testing differing viewpoints, and using all the available evidence to arrive at a reasoned decision.



Inclusive public engagement should be an integral part of parliamentary processes.



Germany. Bundestag President Dr. Wolfgang Schäuble opens the Day of Insights and Outlooks 2019 in the Reichstag building. © Bundestag, Germany.



Rwanda. Members of the IPU Advisory Group on Health accompany Rwandan MPs during their visit to a field clinic to inquire about the status of adolescents' health and access to services. © Lucien Gatete.

First and foremost, public engagement needs to start as early as possible in any parliamentary process. Failing to communicate about controversial legislation or policies, or doing so late, can cause greater resistance to build up over time. Public engagement can require a significant amount of effort, but this should never be seen as wasted energy. On the contrary, it is through a commitment to consultation that legitimacy is built around the difficult decisions that legislatures need to make.

The below engagement example from Georgia, which involved the development of policies on labour rights and sexual harassment, illustrates the benefits of public engagement in parliamentary work when the issues under consideration are characterized by tensions and conflicting opinions among different community groups.

Engagement example 5: Labour law reform in Georgia

Liberal economic reforms in 2005–2006 removed most protections for workers from labour law in Georgia. These changes, combined with other administrative and tax reforms, aimed to boost the economy by attracting foreign investment and creating jobs. However, easing

regulations and loosening controls led to more workplace deaths and injuries. For years, the law did not provide proper protections for workers, including against sexual harassment and discrimination in the workplace. Trade unions and human rights organizations increasingly expressed their concerns and organized protests.

While parts of the community called for reforms, attempts to introduce new regulations faced resistance from business owners. As the country's economy was quite weak, the government prioritized the interests of private companies, business associations and potential investors: there was a need to create safeguards and guarantees for employees, but it was also necessary to avoid placing an undue burden on employers.

As tensions grew, the Parliament of Georgia had to act. Human rights organizations and trade unions called on parliament to safeguard labour rights, while business associations and business owners continued to lobby against any regulations, claiming this would further increase unemployment. The media echoed the same conflicting opinions.

In April 2017, six workers died in a mine due to the absence of occupational safety regulations. Despite a major public outcry following this tragic incident, the

government supported only very modest amendments to occupational safety regulations, fuelling further discontent.

In parallel, women's activist groups demanded the introduction of policies against sexual harassment and discrimination in the workplace. They submitted a petition to parliament requesting the introduction of sexual harassment regulations, which became another point of controversy between different community groups.

At this point, parliament took the lead on comprehensive reform of the Labour Code and established an inclusive process with participation by all parties.

Georgian MP Dimitri Tskitishvili, who led the process, made the following observations in an interview:

It was key that parliament managed to fully open the process to all stakeholders. We decided that the traditional approach, such as organizing only committee hearings would not be enough in this case. We needed to launch as broad a consultation process as possible. We invited everyone in a working group: excluding any stakeholder would have resulted in further criticism in this challenging process.

All stakeholders – including trade unions, human rights organizations, business associations, the ombudsman and government representatives – were invited to engage in a series of policy dialogues.

The first meeting, which lasted two days, resulted in pushback from business associations, with a massive media campaign organized against the draft law. Meetings nevertheless continued, with 60 hours of discussions held in the working group setting. Parliament also organized public hearings in different cities, met with local activists and companies, presented the draft law and listened to stakeholders' views.

The consultation process flagged possible compromises and concessions that parties could make to find the right balance between the interests of employees and employers. The aim was to protect employees from harmful work, discrimination and unfair treatment and to keep them safe in the workplace, while at the same time avoiding an undue burden on employers.

After two years of work and a tremendous number of hours spent meeting with stakeholders, new policies were put in place. Parliament passed major amendments to the laws, introducing modern standards of employment security and occupational safety, protection from discrimination, regulations on parental leave, protection from unfair treatment at work, and special safeguards for minors, women and other groups.

Although everyone had to compromise, the overall outcome was widely welcomed and respected. Business associations, trade unions, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the ombudsman and international development organizations all acknowledged the new laws as a major step forward.

In a letter to parliament, the Georgia Business Association made the following statement: "Despite remaining differences on some of the important topics, we assess the process as setting the best standard on public engagement in the law-drafting process, which we welcome and appreciate."

This example shows that open, inclusive and participatory law-making can help to address differences of opinion and ease growing tensions around controversial policies, and that the desired outcomes can be achieved through effective public engagement. Even if such processes require a significant investment in terms of time and resources, it is only through public engagement that highly contested policies can enjoy full legitimacy and be respected when the time comes for implementation.

Part 2: How parliaments are engaging

This report draws on a number of existing studies to define engagement based on five key functions:

- Information: keeping the public apprised of parliamentary business
- Education: increasing understanding of parliaments and their work
- Communication: establishing interaction channels
- Consultation: building on collective knowledge to inform parliamentary work
- Participation: actively involving the public in the parliamentary process

These functions of public engagement all form a single continuum. Information raises public awareness of parliamentary work and developments. Education helps people understand what parliaments do and how they function. Communication keeps communities in touch with parliaments and their elected representatives. Consultation serves as the means for the public to be heard by parliaments. Participation enables the community to be directly involved in parliamentary business.

These functions are part of established practice in parliaments across the world. It is the scope and scale of engagement approaches and practices that vary between parliaments. Analysing and assessing the nature and impact of existing engagement activities can help to determine the further

progress that is needed to enhance the way in which parliaments interact with the communities they represent.

This chapter looks at how parliaments are engaging with the public today. It starts with a comprehensive overview of the five functions of engagement, with examples from a range of parliaments. It examines the reasons why parliaments engage with the public and reviews the tools they employ in this process. The analysis is drawn from a global survey in which 69 parliaments participated, as well as 136 interviews with parliamentarians, parliamentary staff and other individuals involved in public engagement.

1. Information

Parliaments are representative political institutions, so it is in their interest – and, indeed, it is their duty – to make their activities public and to inform all groups in society about their work. Disseminating information is crucial for the community's understanding of parliamentary democracy, and for ensuring transparency and accountability.

When community members have access to information about parliamentary business, about the issues that are being debated, and about the various ways they can engage with and contribute to parliament's work, they can make informed choices about how they wish to engage. They can choose to contact MPs directly, to make a submission to a parliamentary



By providing information proactively, regularly and through various channels of communication, parliaments can encourage more and deeper engagement by the community.



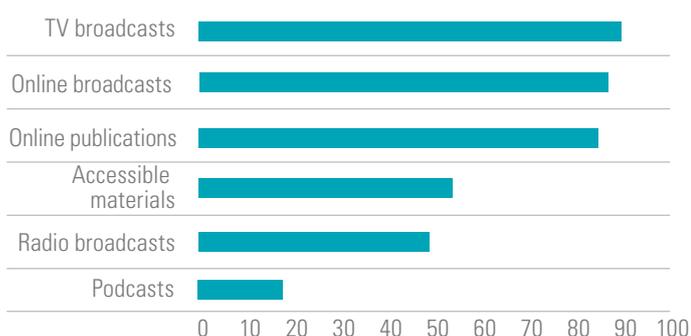
Belgium. Maggie De Block, Minister of Social Affairs and Public Health, addresses the press during a discussion on the fraud reported at the Veviba abattoir and processing plants. © Parlement fédéral Belge / Inge Verhelst.

committee, to attend a hearing, or simply to watch, listen to or read parliamentary debates.

By providing information proactively, regularly and through various channels of communication, parliaments can encourage more and deeper engagement by the community. The information they provide can be broad and cover all major aspects of parliamentary business, including the parliamentary agenda, draft legislation, oversight activities, debates, the budgeting process and committee work. The key to effective information-sharing is ensuring that it is accurate, relevant, reliable, timely, comprehensive and easily accessible to all groups within society.

Tools for disseminating information are also used to educate, communicate, consult and enable participation. In best-practice scenarios, these tools go beyond information-sharing and support two-way interaction between parliaments and their communities, creating opportunities for deeper and more meaningful engagement.

Figure 1. Engagement through information



In most countries, traditional mass media – particularly broadcast media – is still the primary channel of communication. Among the parliaments surveyed for this report, 90 per cent used TV broadcasts to inform the community about parliamentary business.

Television

According to the *World e-Parliament Report 2020*,²¹ among those parliaments using TV channels to broadcast parliamentary information, 52 per cent have their own channels, 48 per cent use time on external channels and 46 per cent have web TV. Some parliaments use more than one of these broadcast methods.

Despite the global rise in digital information platforms, TV remains by far the main source of information in many countries. Yet, as the proceedings of the 2006 Conference on Broadcasting of Parliamentary Business through Dedicated TV Channels and Public Broadcasting Systems explain, access can differ between low and high-income countries:

TV transmissions are expensive, and three quarters (76%) of parliamentary channels are financed by public funds. It is therefore no surprise that most parliamentary TV channels are located in countries in the North, although the parliaments of Brazil, Chile, Indonesia, the Republic of Korea and Trinidad and Tobago also have their own TV channels.²²

There can also be an urban-rural divide when it comes to TV access in some countries. Parliaments should consider this when deciding on the best tools for sharing information. In his address to the same conference, Joe Phaweni, who at the time was Head of the Policy Management Unit at the Parliament of South Africa, observed as follows:

The majority of South Africans live in rural areas. They are poor and unemployed. Electricity and its benefits are new developments for many of them. Owning a television set is a luxury that most people in rural areas cannot afford.²³

The Parliament of Ghana, for example, has addressed this accessibility gap by launching a public-private partnership with a TV station and setting up resource centres in different parts of the country where people can watch live broadcasts of plenary sessions and committee hearings on a computer or TV.

Radio

The *Global Parliamentary Report* survey indicates that 49 per cent of responding parliaments use radio broadcasts, while the *World e-Parliament Report 2020* reveals that the use of radio has been slowly but steadily declining over the past 10 years. Radio is especially prevalent in Africa and Latin America. UNESCO has made the following observation:

Radio is possibly the most important medium for such [a] form of communication in developing countries. It is a portable source of real-time access to information. Radio is financially very accessible – we estimate that over 75% of households in developing countries have access to a radio. Local radio has [the] potential to act as an actor for development and as support for the promotion [of] good governance.²⁴

Radio can be an important resource in parliamentary engagement campaigns, especially in countries or regions that lack ready access to other media sources. In South Africa, for example, two radio channels broadcast live plenaries, committee meetings and Speaker announcements. Having two separate channels means that two committee meetings taking place in parallel can be broadcast simultaneously. Shirley Montsho, Section Manager of Production and Publishing in the Parliamentary Communication Services, explained as follows:

We have entered into something that is very much working for us now. We saw, through radio stations, community radio stations, where we are in the hearts of every community around the country.

22 IPU, EBU and ASGP, 2007: 29.

23 IPU, EBU and ASGP, 2007: 8.

24 UNESCO, 2018.

21 IPU, 2020.

Websites

Parliamentary websites are a valuable means for informing and communicating with people, raising public awareness of parliamentary activities, and promoting and facilitating consultation and participation. According to the *World e-Parliament Report 2020*, “websites continue to occupy a critical place in the architecture of parliamentary information, education, outreach and engagement; they are both outlets for meaningful and timely parliamentary information and touchpoints for public engagement.”²⁵

The live or pre-recorded broadcast of parliamentary proceedings over the internet is now commonplace in many countries: 87 per cent of respondents to the *Global Parliamentary Report* survey indicated that plenary and/or committee meetings and audio/video materials are made available online, and 78 per cent use live webcasting. Half of parliaments use digital tools specifically to reach young people, and a further 30 per cent are planning to do so.

The Parliament of Morocco, for instance, has started live-streaming plenaries and much of the work of committees. The stream is linked to the parliamentary YouTube channel and Facebook page, where the parliament and MPs are actively seeking to engage with the community. Aziz El Mouhib, Director of Communication and Information Systems at the Parliament of Morocco, explained that efforts to broaden parliament’s audience and inform the public about its work are intended to contribute to better public knowledge and interaction:

People are now starting to understand the importance of parliamentary work ... We tell people not only about traditional plenary sittings, but also about the questions MPs are asking the government and about the work of the committees.

Social media

The use of social media to connect with the community has grown significantly in recent years. According to the *World e-Parliament Report 2020*,²⁶ the number of parliaments using social media to inform and communicate with the public rose by 31 per cent in just four years (from 58 per cent in 2016 to 76 per cent in 2020). The same report reveals that 56 per cent of MPs use social media and 39 per cent of parliaments use instant messaging (the fastest-growing communication medium for both members and parliaments since 2018), while 30 per cent of parliaments have mobile apps to inform the public about their work and, in some cases, engage directly with them.

A clear benefit of social media is that it is user-friendly and almost anyone can open an account and get connected, especially as smartphone technology becomes much more widespread. Deena Alreefy, Senior Parliamentary Relations Development Specialist at the Shura Council in Bahrain, explained:

Social media helps us as a parliament to reach a wider range of people, whether it’s the younger generation or the older generation. Everyone has a phone. Everyone has a social media account in some way, shape or form. Some are more active on Twitter. Some are more active on Facebook, Instagram or even Snapchat.

Equal access cannot, however, be assumed. In different parts of the world, factors such as age, gender, socioeconomic status and digital literacy can and do place limits on how easily people are able to get onto social media.

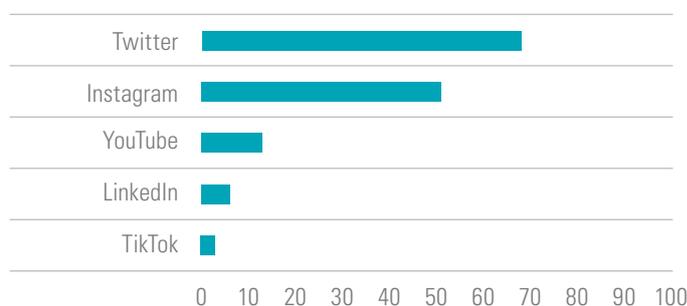
Meanwhile, the downsides of social media are becoming increasingly clear, including the role they play in the spread of hate speech, abuse and disinformation. While these challenges go well beyond parliamentary responsibility, parliaments do have a vital role to play in fostering discussion about how to address them. This includes leading partnerships with civil society, the private sector and other organizations to promote responsible use and, where appropriate, taking legislative action.

Using social media effectively and getting the message out to the right audience takes skill and practice, as well as an understanding of how social media channels shift across demographics and integrate with parliament’s wider engagement and communication strategies. The IPU’s *Social media guide for parliaments and parliamentarians*²⁷ sets out a range of models that parliaments have adopted for managing their social media presence.

As Canadian MP Julie Dzerowicz explained, keeping up with changing trends and behaviour on social media is challenging:

I feel people were all over Facebook a couple of years ago. Now the shift is they’re moving away. They’re now on Instagram. But it’s almost like I’m shifting as the social media world is shifting as well. And it’s really my desperate attempt at trying to genuinely connect with my constituents. I’m trying to find where they are.

Figure 2. Social media use by parliaments



Different social media platforms can be used to reach different groups within society. For example, at the time of the publication of this report, young people in many countries are more likely to use TikTok or Instagram, which are much newer platforms than Facebook and YouTube.

25 IPU, 2020: 36.

26 IPU, 2020.

27 IPU, 2021d.

It is important for parliaments and MPs to use the right platform to connect with the intended target audience in order to maximize the opportunities for meaningful engagement. At the same time, it is not just a case of leaping in without looking. MPs and parliaments need to carefully consider whether a given platform is a good fit for their own needs and objectives, whether it is suitable for the type of engagement they wish to undertake, and whether using that platform will allow the standing and reputation of parliament to be maintained.

Capacity to meet the demands of each platform is also an important consideration. The speed of social media and instant messaging can generate unrealistic expectations among the public in terms of how members and parliaments respond. This point was emphasized by Carleeta Charles, Parliamentary Executive Officer at the Parliament of Guyana:

We get a lot of messages on our Facebook page ... People will be asking for information about parliament or how they can get in touch with certain MPs. You know, different things, a lot of messages daily ... So as soon as a message comes in, it goes straight to my phone and I get a notification. I read it and, if I can, I answer them right away.



Representative democracy benefits from informed citizens who understand how the political system works.



Latvia. Europe Day in the Saeima. © Saeima, Latvia.

Responding to messages from the public in a timely way is important as it builds trust. But it is also vital to set clear expectations. Moderating content can be demanding and is an issue that parliaments and parliamentarians need to think carefully about when deciding whether to use a particular platform and engage with people on it. The Parliament of Norway, for example, employs a full-time moderator to cover its social media channels.

In summary, while social media can make it easier to connect with the community in new ways, these platforms also give rise to a whole new set of challenges that parliaments may not have faced previously. Parliaments can help to mitigate risks and maximize the benefits of social media by routinely sharing experience and best practice.

2. Education

Representative democracy benefits from informed citizens who understand how the political system works and actively participate in its processes, such as by voting in elections and being active in political parties and social movements. In the parliamentary context, education is focused on increasing public knowledge of parliament's role and helping the community understand some of the principles involved, including notions such as the separation of powers. In order



LE AU CONTACT DES POPULATIONS SUITE AU DEBORDEMENT DU FLEUVE MONO DU BENIN / DSCICOM / Photographe: Andric LOKOSSI

Fiji. Community members during the Parliament Bus programme in Nabukaluka village, © Parliament of Fiji..

to maximize public engagement, people should not just know where and when parliamentary processes take place, but also what powers parliament has, what types of decisions it makes, and how parliamentary decision-making can be influenced.

Building public knowledge about how democracy works is a challenging task that requires concerted and systematic lifelong learning – a process that starts in the education system. Parliaments are not educational institutions, but they do have a special responsibility to support this effort. Indeed, it is in their interest to do so, since an educated public that learns

about civics from an early age is more likely to appreciate and engage with parliament in the context of more informed and empowered interaction with governance in general.

In the background research for this report, parliamentarians and parliamentary staff frequently lamented the lack of public understanding and knowledge of parliamentary work. Salim Rebahi, Director of the Department of Communication and Information at the Council of the Nation of Algeria, expressed concerns about the impact this lack of understanding has on the public image of parliament:



Building public knowledge about how democracy works starts in the education system.



Czech Republic. At the charity contest Heart Given with Love. © Chamber of Deputies of the Czech Republic



United Kingdom. Online Education Workshop. © UK Parliament



New Zealand. School visit to New Zealand Parliament – Kirkwood Intermediate School. © New Zealand Parliament

People ask: “What are the parliamentarians actually doing?” Because they don’t know what they are doing, they don’t see what parliamentarians do, and they don’t have the opportunity to see it.

The *Global Parliamentary Report 2012*,²⁸ the first of its kind, showed how parliamentarians are frequently expected to deal with issues that are beyond their mandate. The situation has hardly changed since then. In a 2020 interview, Imen Ben Mohamed, a former Tunisian MP representing the Italian diaspora, reflected on the “real lack of understanding, among some members of the public, of the differences between the role of parliamentarians and the role of municipalities”. She described a lot of confusion between these roles:

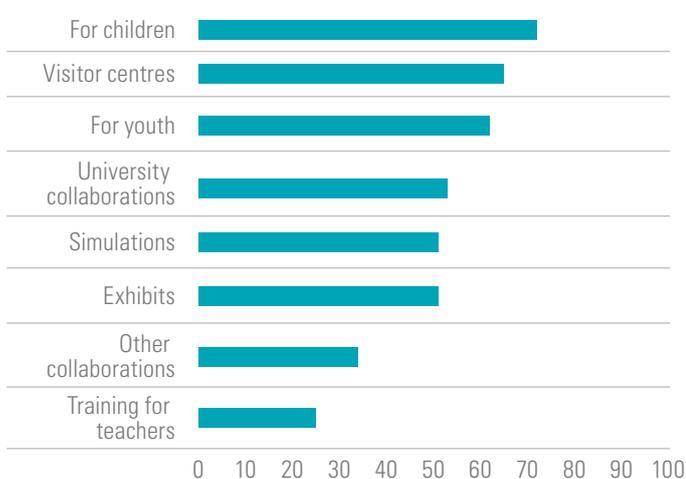
Parliamentarians end up being constantly on the phone dealing with problems such as lack of light on the road, or similar cases when this should be the role of the mayor. [They] receive different requests that are not related to their functions per se.

Parliamentary education programmes

Comparative research by the Parliament of Austria into how parliaments carry out democracy education²⁹ shows that many parliaments already offer a broad spectrum of education and outreach programmes. The *Global Parliamentary Report* survey found that over 70 per cent of respondents had education and outreach units, and that parliaments support a broad range of activities including guided tours of the parliament building, youth parliaments, events, visitor programmes and scholarships.

Parliaments use a wide variety of tools to educate their public, with educational programmes for schoolchildren being the most common (offered by 72 per cent of respondents). Parliaments from around the world shared stories of games, tours, training sessions and many other examples of activities designed to teach children about parliament. Over half of the respondents also referred to programmes for youth and university students, including internships.

Figure 3. Engagement through education



28 IPU and UNDP, 2012.

29 Parliament of Austria, 2020.

Some interesting examples of parliamentary education programmes are detailed below:

- Denmark has a nationwide three-week high school programme simulating real elections. Students can take part in debates and research the standpoints of different parties. The programme culminates in an election, with the results broadcast on national TV. Reflecting on the programme, Soren Vaever, Head of Communication at the Parliament of Denmark, explained:

We have this philosophy that we would like to try to teach or to talk about, to engage the public. And we want to start with schoolchildren ... We want to teach children to be aware of their own opinion and how [parliament] works.

- The German Bundestag runs a public education programme called “To the German People – A Journey through Parliamentary History from the Reichstag to the Bundestag”. Every summer, over 150,000 people gather in Friedrich-Elbert-Platz in the centre of Berlin to watch a film and light show (in several languages) projected on the façade of the parliamentary buildings from the river bank. The 30-minute film unpacks the German Parliament, explaining the history of the structure and the institution. It serves as an entertaining and innovative way to educate the public about their parliament.
- In March 2020, the Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago teamed up with NGO Caribbean Women in Leadership (CIWiL) and ParlAmericas to host the Young Women in Leadership Trinidad and Tobago (YWILTT) Conference. Young women with an interest in politics and community development took part in a leadership workshop and a debate on gender-responsive budgeting, with a focus on three specific government ministries. The participants gained valuable insights and training on leadership, gender issues, budgeting and debating.

Even though parliaments have a responsibility to foster an educated community, and have an interest in doing so, education is not their primary focus. Parliaments can generally offer only a limited number of educational programmes. Some parliaments have partnered with educational institutions, universities and schools to promote broader understanding of the legislature and its role, while others offer stand-alone programmes designed for different groups, as well as programmes embedded in broader school and higher-education curricula. One example, as detailed below, is the educational programmes run by the Parliament of Ukraine (Verkhovna Rada).

Engagement example 6: Parliamentary education centre in Ukraine

The Education Centre of the Verkhovna Rada runs various activities for schoolchildren and students, including meetings with MPs, debates, gamification of the legislative process, and offline and online lectures. More than 18,000 children (11,000 offline and 7,000 online) have participated in the centre's activities since 2019.

The Verkhovna Rada has also designed a comprehensive parliamentary education programme, in partnership with the EU-UNDP Parliamentary Reform Project, in order to improve people's understanding of the parliament and its functions, and of tools for citizen engagement. It has developed lectures that will be embedded into official school and higher-education curricula with the support of the Ministry of Education and Science.

Assessing impact

There are many other examples of parliamentary efforts to educate the public about the role of the legislature. Yet measurable outcomes and evidence of impact for these types of programmes are difficult to come by. One example comes from the United Kingdom, where a public engagement report by the House of Commons Library found that public knowledge about parliament had increased from 34 per cent in 2004 (when a sustained and strategic public engagement initiative was launched) to 43 per cent in 2017.³⁰

Public education can be time-consuming and resource-intensive, but there are many benefits to be gained from encouraging and supporting greater public understanding of how parliament and the democratic system work. The examples given above show that parliaments can play a constructive role in building public knowledge and understanding, either by themselves or in partnership with other State and non-State institutions. Given that many parliaments invest in education programmes, there is scope for continuing to assess the effectiveness of such programmes and looking for opportunities to make improvements, including by learning from best practice in other parliaments.



Parliaments can play a constructive role in building public knowledge and understanding.



Malta. Courtesy call by teenage students to Mr Speaker, Anglu Farrugia at the Parliament of Malta. © Parliament of Malta.



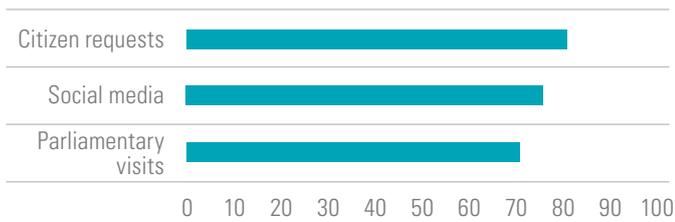
Lebanon. President Nabih Berry received university students in the Lebanese National Assembly. © Parliament of Lebanon / Hassan Ibrahim.

³⁰ Parliament of the United Kingdom, 2017: 9.

3. Communication

All of the parliaments surveyed use communication tools to facilitate dialogue with the public. Parliaments provide a range of methods for community members to engage with MPs, committees and officials.

Figure 4. Engagement through communication



Internet broadcasting allows parliaments to go beyond the traditional passive-broadcast model and introduces participatory and two-way interaction with the institution and its members. Live-streaming, social media, websites and even radio are more than just sources of information: they can also provide a space for interaction.

Many MPs and parliaments excitedly shared information about various channels they use to interact with community members. Below are two examples.

Engagement example 7: Interaction via live-streaming in Finland

The Parliament of Finland launched Facebook Live sessions in May 2018 after Paula Risikko, the Speaker at the time, felt the need to interact more with the public to allow them to understand their representatives' choices. Four 30-minute "Ask the Speaker" Facebook Live sessions were held, during which the Speaker answered parliament-related questions from community members.

Members of the public were given the chance to submit their questions beforehand via Facebook and these were addressed during the live session. Explicit criticism and opinions were permitted. Given the risks inherent in social networks, existing Facebook moderation guidelines were applied (e.g. hate speech, threats and abuse were banned, as were media and policy links in the comments). Up to 4,500 citizens engaged in the first four live sessions, demonstrating public interest in employing this type of engagement tool.

Engagement example 8: Interaction via radio in Zambia

The Parliament of Zambia uses radio as an effective tool for communication between parliament and the community. In 2009, it introduced a number of question-and-answer programmes into its parliamentary radio channel schedule. The objective was to more efficiently engage with community members and advance parliamentary transparency. The schedule includes two interactive shows, broadcast daily from Tuesday to Friday

each week, during which listeners can send in questions or comments via text message.

The first show is the *Parliamentary Business Update*, where two experts on parliamentary business are invited to answer questions on policy topics relevant to the parliamentary agenda of that day. Often, these questions are answered immediately. But if they require more research or consultation, the show broadcasts the answer the following day.

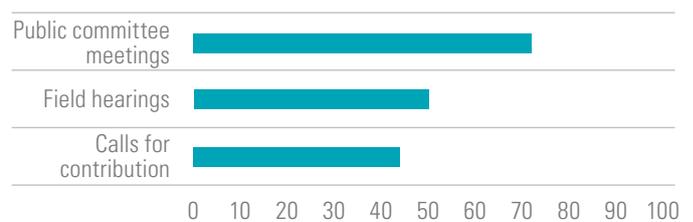
The other show is called *Know Your MP*. In this case, MPs are invited to answer questions from listeners.

During both shows, listeners can also win prizes by answering questions posed by the experts. The hosts of the radio programme receive an average of 45 to 50 text messages per programme. In the future, they hope to include questions from social media platforms as well.

4. Consultation

Parliaments consult the public in various ways in order to generate evidence that supports parliamentary work on legislation, oversight and budgeting. The most widespread and established form of consultation is committee hearings, which are convened on parliamentary premises and see MPs meet with and question witnesses. Of the parliaments that responded to the survey, 72 per cent said they used committee hearings for legislative consultations and 65 per cent reported using them for oversight. Yet as the figure below shows, parliaments are also trying out new forms of consultation.

Figure 5. Engagement through consultation



Half of the respondents said they organized **field hearings**. This practice, which involves parliamentary committees leaving parliament's premises and visiting local communities to hear their concerns, has long been a relatively simple way to facilitate public engagement while at the same time enhancing MPs' understanding of the issues at stake. As noted in the *World e-Parliament Report 2020*,³¹ the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 accelerated a movement towards remote and hybrid committee hearings, enabling individuals and groups from remote locations to engage in the consultations and to submit their views to MPs.

Further reading – see the Annex

Thematic case study – Taking committees out of parliament to listen and engage

31 IPU, 2020.

Some 44 per cent of the parliaments surveyed reported using surveys, polls or calls for contribution to consult with their public. For example, the Parliament of Mexico partners with a local organization to supply MPs with opinion poll findings on various topics under parliament's consideration. The Social Studies and Public Opinion Centre (CESOP) provides analytical information and technical support to the Mexican Chamber of Deputies through surveys and public opinion studies. The themes raised include social policy, regional development and federalism, the environment and other legislative priorities. Information collected from a survey is used to support and inform the work of legislators.

Many parliaments now use digital tools to engage and involve the public in the legislative process. The *World e-Parliament Report 2020*³² notes that 28 per cent of parliaments currently offer some form of online consultation tool relating to bills and another 19 per cent are planning to do so. While the scope of these tools is highly variable, they can potentially allow community members to directly contribute to the legislative process. These new collaborative tools also help to overcome challenges that the public face in engaging with parliament, particularly in terms of distance and time.

Further reading – see the Annex

Thematic case study – Collaboration in the legislative process

Consultation with civil society

Civil society groups are frequent participants in public consultations. Organized groups bring additional expertise and views from the community to the discussion and have a potential to amplify the voices of the most vulnerable in society.

Further reading – see the Annex

Practical guide – Engaging with civil society

Parliaments engage with CSOs as key contributors to inclusive and better-informed policy making. These consultations can take a variety of forms, including assigning CSOs a formal consultative role. In the below example from Serbia, CSOs are embedded within parliament's Environmental Protection Committee.

Engagement example 9: Environmental policy in Serbia

Pursuant to the UNECE Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters of June 1988 (the Aarhus Convention),³³ the National Assembly of Serbia has included a provision in its Rules of Procedure allowing representatives of citizens and citizens' associations to attend and/or participate in Environmental Protection Committee meetings when it is deliberating environmental issues. Milica Bašić, Secretary of the Committee, gave the following explanation:

On the basis of this provision, the Committee established a standing Green Chair in 2013 as a mechanism for including the public in the procedure of making decisions in this area. Under this mechanism, representatives of non-governmental organizations from the Green Chair Network are invited to each meeting of the Committee, including meetings held outside the premises of the National Assembly, depending on the topic to be discussed at a particular meeting.

Representatives of the Green Chair often initiate public hearings of the Committee, as well as sessions outside the National Assembly, which are useful for raising awareness among Committee members about the state of the environment on the ground, especially in parts of the Republic of Serbia that are the most vulnerable environmentally.

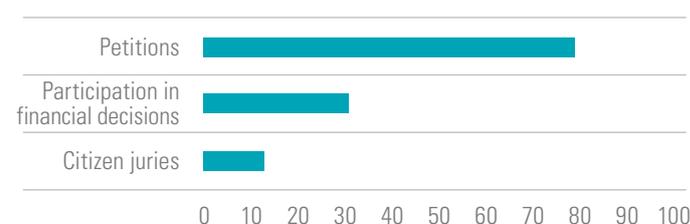
5. Participation

Parliaments provide a range of means for the community to actively participate in setting the parliamentary agenda, making legislative proposals and being involved in decision-making.

Petitions

Petitions are the most widespread tool for public participation, with 79 per cent of *Global Parliamentary Report* survey respondents stating that they have a submission process.

Figure 6. Engagement through participation



32 IPU, 2020.

33 UNECE, 1998.

Petitions are one of the oldest forms of public engagement, predating the emergence of parliaments themselves. The first documented petitions can be traced back to ancient Egypt. Essentially, they are written requests for action from an individual or group.

Petitions are, in theory, a rare example of a direct connection between community members and decision-making. By providing a direct link to decision-makers, and by encouraging discussion of community-led proposals, petitions can stimulate non-partisan dialogue and strengthen democratic support and legitimacy. In practice, this connection is often mediated (e.g. through sponsor MPs). Such mediated access can give rise to perceptions of “distance” between the people and their parliaments.

Petition systems across the world have undergone numerous innovations in the past two decades, both online and offline. As a principal means of direct engagement in politics, petitions continue to be used and defined in many different ways. In the Parliament of Australia, the *House of Representatives Practice* makes the following observation:

An important effect of the petitioning process is that Members and the Government are informed, in a formal and public way, of the views of sections of the community on public issues. Even if no action is immediately taken on a petition, it and others like it may assist in the creation of a climate of opinion which can influence or result in action.³⁴

The methods for submitting petitions vary. In countries with higher gross national income, petitions are more likely to be submitted via smartphone apps.

Over half of the countries surveyed for this report have dedicated petitions committees (a practice more common in parliamentary systems than in presidential systems). Petitions committees can help parliaments cope with rising numbers of submissions by streamlining the process of responding and referring the matter to the relevant parliamentary committees.

The effectiveness of petitions largely depends on how they are managed and addressed. Research commissioned by the Petitions Committee of the European Parliament indicated that an important criterion for evaluating the effectiveness of a petition system is “the right of every petitioner to get a formal response once his/her petition has been considered by the Parliament.”³⁵ That right is not always guaranteed in law or practice, the research noted.

Restrictions and numeric thresholds that may be applied to petitions can affect the range of topics addressed. Large quantitative thresholds can lead to “populist” petitions gaining prominence at the expense of important but more niche concerns. This may result in parliament prioritizing them in its work at the expense of issues with a lower profile. Some parliaments, however, do not place any thresholds on petitions. One example is the Parliament of Australia, which works on the following premise:

Some issues are not widely known, or may be significant to a relatively small group of individuals. These factors should not prevent such a matter being raised directly with the House.³⁶

Parliaments can be proactive in both informing the community about and responding to petitions. They can help explain the process of petitioning so that the community is aware of and understands the opportunity that it provides for direct public input to parliament. They can also provide updates on the progress of existing petitions so that people are aware of how the petition has been dealt with following submission.

Measuring the impact of petitions is not straightforward. Quantitative data can demonstrate the level of community response. Petitions that go on to generate dialogue or scrutiny in parliament can be seen as impactful and can help to promote perceptions of a “listening parliament.” By having an accessible and responsive petitions system, parliaments can encourage greater use of petitioning and can generate a climate of trust, efficacy and legitimacy. The system adopted in the Republic of Korea, as detailed below, is one example of how direct community engagement with parliament can be facilitated through petitioning.

Engagement example 10: E-petitions in the Republic of Korea

Petitions to the National Assembly of Korea were embedded in parliamentary practice through the Petition Act of 1961 and the amendment of the National Assembly Act in 1988. The National Assembly launched an e-petitions website, named *Sinmungo*, on 10 January 2020. Petitions that reach over 100 signatures within 30 days are published by the National Assembly within a further 7 days. Petitions that reach over 100,000 signatures within 30 days are referred by the National Assembly to a committee.

The Petitions Support Centre of the National Assembly is in charge of e-petitions. As of 22 January 2021, a total of 18 petitions submitted via the e-petitions platform had been referred to the relevant committees (after reaching 100,000 signatures within 30 days).

Petitions adopted by the National Assembly are also referred to the government, along with an “opinion report.” Although there is no deadline for this process, the government is expected to report to the National Assembly on the follow-up measures taken to address the petition.

Citizens’ assemblies

New and innovative participatory methods are also gaining traction as a way of involving community members directly in decision-making processes. Citizens’ assemblies, conventions and juries are being used in some countries to build consensus on policies and reforms, providing community members with the opportunity to engage in serious, informed reflections on key issues and develop proposals to address the matters under consideration.

³⁴ Parliament of Australia, 2018.

³⁵ Tibúrcio, 2015: 21.

³⁶ Parliament of Australia, 2019.

Such assemblies and juries are dialogue-based processes involving a group of community members chosen to be demographically representative. They can scrutinize evidence, call witnesses and debate topics in order to produce recommendations that can then be presented back to official bodies such as a parliamentary committee. The objective is to “narrow the gap between citizens and their representatives”,³⁷ raise public awareness of an issue and directly involve community members in decision-making.

Thirteen per cent of *Global Parliamentary Report* survey respondents indicated that they used these sorts of participatory processes as novel tools for public engagement.

Engagement example 11: The Citizens’ Assembly in Ireland

The Irish Constitutional Convention (2012–2014) brought together 66 randomly selected citizens, and 33 Members of the Irish Dáil and Senate and the Northern Ireland Assembly, to deliberate and craft constitutional recommendations. Following the success of this exercise, the Irish Government established a Citizens’ Assembly in 2016, during which 99 citizens (selected on regional quotas) came together to deliberate and offer recommendations on specific topics such as climate change, abortion and fixed-term parliaments. During the 12-week process, participants received expert instruction, considered 1,600 submissions from the public, then deliberated and crafted recommendations that were presented to a parliamentary committee and then voted on in a public referendum (which is required under Irish law to change the Constitution).

Engagement example 12: Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat (Citizens’ Climate Convention) in France

The *Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat* (Citizens’ Climate Convention, CCC), which ran from October 2019 until June 2020, brought together 150 French citizens selected by lottery and based on gender, age, profession, education and residency. Their purpose was to make proposals for what the CCC described as “a series of concrete measures aimed at achieving at least a 40 per cent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 while preserving social justice”.³⁸ Over the course of 9 months, participants drafted 149 proposals on transport, consumption, work and home life. In December 2020, the President of France announced plans to put the proposals to voters in a referendum as part of the *Loi climat* (Climate Act), and they were debated in parliament. Partially as a result of this endeavour, parliament adopted in August 2021 legislation banning some forms of short-haul domestic air travel.

These examples show that parliaments are willing to experiment with more participatory approaches to public engagement and provide more meaningful opportunities for the community to get involved. This development reflects some of the emerging trends in public engagement, which are discussed further in the next section.

6. Key trends in the way engagement is conducted

Four key trends are influencing the way parliaments conduct public engagement: the growth of digital parliaments, the use of multiple channels to inform and listen, the way parliaments manage the flow of information on social media, and options for embracing public demand for greater involvement. These trends highlight the importance of contemporary, creative and collaborative approaches to public engagement.

6.1 Growing reliance on digital tools

With near-universal access to and use of the internet, and the rapid growth of social media, today’s public have different expectations when it comes to participation and responsiveness. The era of instant and constant communication challenges parliaments to keep up with new ways of engaging.

As the *World e-Parliament Report* series clearly shows, parliaments are more reliant on digital tools than ever before. This transformation accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic as parliaments were forced to rapidly develop remote methods of working. These methods may remain in place for some time, and may even accelerate the pace of digital transformation.

The emergence of digital parliaments affects participation in various ways. Parliamentary information is now more readily available and accessible than ever before, via websites that include online documents and bills, or through open data. As more and more people adopt digital and mobile devices, parliaments can engage more directly with new audiences that have previously been excluded. Live streams of plenary debates and committee hearings keep the public informed. Social media platforms provide community members with an easy way to communicate directly with their elected representatives and parliaments. Specialist tools, such as e-petitions and platforms to comment on legislative drafting, mean the public can directly influence what parliaments do.

Now, more than ever, it is easier for people to engage on an individual level. Digital tools have widened access from organized groups, as was largely the case in the past, to anyone with an internet connection. New digital opportunities for individual engagement also create new risks of entrenching exclusion for those who do not have access or who lack the knowledge or skills to use digital tools. For some in the community, the digital divide is widening.

37 Fournier and others, 2011.

38 Government of France, 2020.

In Brazil, for example, an interactive event – part of the *e-Cidadania* initiative – was set up in 2016 to allow for public participation in public and confirmation hearings via a toll-free number and an online question and comment facility. As of late 2020, over 10 million users had registered more than 24 million opinions on 9,727 proposals. The [Brazil case study](#) prepared for this report provides further details on how digital has been blended with other communication tools to provide a broad-based approach to engagement.

Further reading – see the Annex

Country case study – Brazil: Digital engagement

It is clear that digital tools are helping to reduce the resource requirements and time commitments previously needed for community members to participate in the work of parliament. They can also facilitate connections between the public, their elected representatives and parliament regardless of the geographic distance between them. A particular benefit is that digital tools can open up channels for parliaments to engage with people who are not usually included in decision-making processes, such as traditionally marginalized groups.

Yet setting up a digital tool is only one step towards the desired goal of broadening engagement. The existence of digital opportunities to engage does not automatically lead to widespread use. In Argentina, for instance, members of the public have the opportunity to comment on legislative proposals shared by parliamentarians via the innovative *Leyes Abiertas* platform. But as of March 2019, fewer than 1,000 people had used the tool and several laws have had fewer than five contributions from the public. Similarly, in Indonesia – a country with more than 200 million voters – fewer than 200 people have made use of the SIMAS co-creation tool.

It is therefore important to raise public awareness of such tools and to encourage their use. Too often, people are not informed about new digital engagement mechanisms or do not know how they connect to the parliamentary process. After using the e-petitions system in the Republic of Korea, one petitioner, Hye-Ri Nam, made the following observation:

Since it is a petition for the National Assembly by people like me who are not familiar with the legislative process, I think there is a need to provide a more detailed and clear explanation ... At a minimum, it is necessary to establish a sufficient communication process with the petitioner for petitions before and after the e-petition is established.

Recent experience with parliamentary broadcasts in Georgia sounds another note of caution. For many years, parliamentary sessions and committee meetings were broadcast live by the national public broadcaster. In 2019, this TV broadcast was replaced with a live stream on the parliamentary website. The result has been a significant reduction in the reach of the broadcast and, therefore, in the number of people following parliament's work.

Another matter of growing concern in the digital space is abuse on social media, especially where this abuse is targeted at women. The impact of such abuse on women's participation in political life and policymaking is severe. Recent evidence of violence against women in politics shows that online violence and harmful stereotypes pose serious challenges to their ability to fulfil their mandates.³⁹ The deluge of online hate speech and abuse has been proven to disproportionately – and often strategically – target women leaders⁴⁰ and is driving them out of public and political life.⁴¹ It has a similar exclusionary effect on other population groups when directed against them, including LGBTQ+ people. One of the most visible examples of this globally was Jo Cox, a female British parliamentarian who was shot and stabbed to death just prior to hosting a constituency event. The murderer had been radicalized through years of exposure to white supremacist hate speech.⁴²

In response, there have been efforts to address the impact of online violence and hate speech on politically active women. One example is Glitch, a CSO based in the United Kingdom that is working to educate citizens on this issue and to make them more media-literate.⁴³ Similarly, the #IAMHere movement, which started in 2016 in Sweden, mobilizes women online to overrun abusive posts with ones that support and are positive about women.⁴⁴ The movement has provided training on non-violent campaign communications to political parties in a number of countries across Europe.

Parliaments also have a duty to address this problem, both individually and collectively, as a matter of urgency. In Australia, for instance, a 2021 multiparty inquiry by the Parliament of Victoria⁴⁵ found that “abuse towards journalists can discourage this important work, and gendered abuse can discourage women from participating in political journalism”. The inquiry recommended that social media companies step up efforts to eliminate fake accounts and that political parties establish online codes of conduct. It also called for increased transparency on social media, including on the funding of political content published online, in the same way that applies to broadcast and printed advertising.

As digital tools permeate every aspect of society, so they become embedded in every aspect of parliamentary business. Gradually, parliaments are coming to see digital strategy as a fundamental component of their overall business model. The COVID-19 pandemic, which has forced parliaments to innovate, has further cemented this view. Successfully incorporating digital tools into their public engagement work will continue to be a major issue for parliaments in the years ahead.

39 IPU and Council of Europe, 2018.

40 Di Meco and Brechenmacher, 2020.

41 Council of Europe, 2019.

42 The Guardian, 2016.

43 Glitch, 2021.

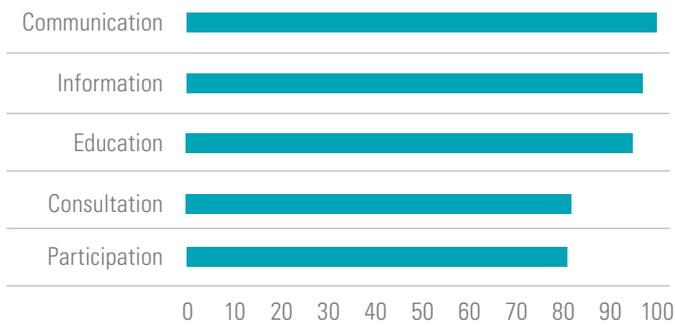
44 The Guardian, 2019.

45 Parliament of Victoria, 2021.

6.2 Listening and not just informing

As noted earlier in this report, there are many dimensions to engagement. All respondents to the *Global Parliamentary Report* survey identified communication as a primary focus of their engagement, with 82 per cent undertaking consultation and 81 per cent facilitating public participation.

Figure 7. How parliaments are engaging: summary statistics



There are signs that parliaments and parliamentarians are seeking to put themselves in “listening mode” more often.

By educating the community about how parliament functions and informing the public about the legislative and policy work they do, parliaments build public knowledge and understanding that support processes for community consultation and participation. While this is important, it tends to be one-directional engagement: the emphasis is on telling people about parliament rather than gathering their input. Increasingly, communities expect to be heard, which places pressure on parliaments to be more consultative and participatory.

There can be various reasons why parliaments choose to inform more than listen. Two-way communication can be complex, bringing together many contradictory opinions. It takes time, resources and effort. On this point, Steingrímur Sigfússon, Speaker of the Althingi (the Parliament of Iceland), made the following observation:

When there are heated debates ... not everyone is happy with the view you have taken. You attend a meeting and there is a lot of anger, and people are not very prepared to have subjective debate.



Austria. A participant asks a question to the panel during a panel debate organized by a civil society platform (GLOBART) in the Austrian Parliament on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the Austrian constitution. © Parlamentsdirektion / Thomas Jantzen.



Uruguay. A debate on “Uruguay: towards healthier, more sustainable and inclusive food systems” with relevant actors from the Government, legislators, civil society, academia and the private sector to analyze long-term visions to achieve sustainable food systems and identify priorities for action in the context of current realities. More than 1,300 citizens from all over the country participated, 50 exhibitors, 22 panelists of excellence, among others. © Senate of Uruguay



Zimbabwe. Members of the public follow proceedings during a gender based violence dialogue meeting in rural Gwanda, Matabeleland South. © Parliament of Zimbabwe / Tisadaro Kahlamba

Despite all the challenges, there are signs that parliaments and parliamentarians are seeking to put themselves in “listening mode” more often. The growth in the number of parliaments offering e-petitions or providing opportunities to comment on draft legislation is evidence of a desire to hear from the community, including on law-making – traditionally a preserve of parliament.

Even so, the various systems that have been developed have limitations, in terms of both how widely they are used by the public, and how much the community input they generate influences law-making and oversight. More experience is needed to develop robust and sustainable models for listening to communities.

6.3 Visibility in the blizzard of information

The amount of information individuals and parliaments must deal with has grown significantly in recent years. So too has the speed at which that information must be processed to meet growing expectations for responsiveness.

On the positive side, the rise of social media means that parliaments and MPs are now more able to present their own positions and engage more directly, without having to rely on traditional media as intermediaries. Parliaments can benefit by building a profile as trusted sources of information. Sabine Dubreuil, Head of the Visits, Education and Events Unit at the Parliament of Sweden, made the following observation:

The information overload is big and it's hard to reach out with our message sometimes ... At the same time, we know that our target group sees us as a trustworthy source, so if they find us, they often use our material because they know they can rely on it, which is good.

People expect comprehensive and reliable information from their parliament. Yet social media users will rarely be interested in entire debate transcripts or voting records. Effective use of social media depends on succinct, clear information – on catching users’ attention on an overflowing timeline and then being able to direct those who are interested towards more detailed information and ways to engage, often directly through parliament’s own website.

Voice matters here, and setting the right tone and message is vital – a point underscored by Rafael Gonzalez-Montero, Chief Executive of the Parliamentary Service at the Parliament of New Zealand:

We decided from the beginning that both the website and any social media we had were going to have a youthful, easy-going persona. We wanted to have something that was very relaxed. We started doing spotlight videos on parliament. And these were designed to be short and funny, normally done by our staff.

An example of effective parliamentary social media content is the Twitter graphics used by the Senate of Canada, which provide neutral, plain-language summaries of bills before the Senate. The content is developed in coordination with the member who introduced the bill, and with the Senate lawyers and procedural experts. The graphics are accompanied by links to the full text of the bill. Similarly, the Communications Directorate has prepared a series of graphics to explain various procedural terms with which community members and journalists may not be familiar. These are tweeted during live broadcasts and are available on the Senate website on a single page for quick reference.⁴⁶

Increasingly, parliaments will need to meet the challenge of communicating in engaging ways using channels such as social media to cut through the blizzard of information. For institutions that have traditionally used formal language and produced complex documents, connecting with community members in new and less rigid ways may require a cultural shift.

6.4 Growing public demand to influence decision-making

People are mobilizing through a variety of advocacy campaigns and initiatives across the globe. Public demand to influence decisions is evident in various community-led initiatives centred on grass-roots engagement. These initiatives may be directed towards getting action on significant issues, introducing new policies, strengthening the voices of vulnerable groups, countering corruption or holding governments to account. They can be global, such as the worldwide campaign on climate change, or very local.

Although democratic disengagement is a global problem, multiple examples show that groups will mobilize themselves to voice their concerns and ask decision makers to act. The challenge for parliaments is how best to show that they have heard these demands, considered them and, where possible, translated them into tangible outcomes that will satisfy the community.

If the public is to see parliaments as listening and responsive, MPs and parliaments need to act on community-led initiatives, regardless of whether they are broadly focused or localized. Since holding the government to account is a key role of parliament, it is entirely within the mandate of legislators to monitor government responsiveness to public demands. Parliaments have the legitimate power to ensure that proper attention is given to community-led initiatives.

Not every demand can or should be met. But it is important not to ignore or overlook the efforts of the public to influence what parliament and government do. Many initiatives that are proactive and initiated at the grass-roots level reflect the genuine voices of groups trying to change their circumstances. A parliament that is responsive to the concerns of community members can help to resolve, or at least better understand, the issues that matter to the community and, in doing so, build trust. A parliament that consistently ignores public demands risks worsening the democratic deficit even further.

⁴⁶ Senate of Canada, 2021.

Citizen Lab defines citizen initiatives as “the practice in which citizens speak up to counter how their current government is functioning.”⁴⁷ This section presents illustrative examples of such initiatives across different country contexts and policy areas. Importantly, each initiative seeks to make a connection with parliament, underlining how public engagement reinforces and strengthens the idea of representative democracy.

Engagement example 13: *Coalición Anticorrupción (Anticorruption Coalition)* in Honduras

The *Coalición Anticorrupción* (Anticorruption Coalition) is a network of CSOs that monitors transparency and public integrity in the political institutions of Honduras. Founded in 2019, this grass-roots network set out to fight corruption as its members found existing deterrents to be ineffective. The coalition comprises more than 20 organizations from across the political spectrum, with members including judges, legislators and youth activists.

In early 2020, the Government of Honduras decided not to renew the mandate of the Organization for American States’ Mission to Support the Fight against Corruption and Impunity (MACCIH). This represented a setback in the fight against corruption in the country. Also in 2020, the Honduran courts dismissed a case against more than 20 legislators who were believed to have embezzled public funds. These developments drove numerous CSOs to action, aiming to fill the gap that the closure of the MACCIH had left behind. Brian David Lovo, writing on behalf of the coalition, said that “only the alliance of the Honduran people ... can put an end to the corruption that is stifling the country’s development.”⁴⁸

In September 2020, the coalition issued a detailed analysis, based on 31 different publications, of how the developing COVID-19 pandemic had introduced new avenues for corruption. The coalition estimates that, throughout the pandemic, overvaluations of purchases amounted to 125,823,981.84 lempiras (over US\$ 5 million) in excess declarations made to public funds.

The public report also includes 11 practical recommendations for the National Congress of Honduras to address this matter, including instructions on legal reforms to improve transparency in emergency public procurement and emergency supply distribution processes. These recommendations represent public demand for parliament to respond to these issues.

Engagement example 14: Not Too Young To Run campaign in Nigeria

The Nigerian Age Reduction Bill, locally known as the Not Too Young To Run (NTYTR) Bill, was a proposed constitutional amendment to lower the age required to run for office. The bill was conceived in 2016 and campaigned for almost exclusively by young Nigerians. The campaign was driven by Youth Initiative for Advocacy, Growth and Advancement (YIAGA), an NGO dedicated to youth empowerment and mobilization for political participation, transparency and accountability.

The NTYTR Bill sought to reduce the qualifying age from 30 to 25 years for elected positions in the State Houses of Assembly and the House of Representatives, from 35 to 30 years for elected positions in the Senate and Governorship, and from 40 to 30 years for the office of the President. Given that almost 70 per cent of the population of Nigeria is under 35 years of age, the proposed amendments aimed to open up electoral office for a very large part of the population that was previously excluded. The NotTooYoungToRun.org web site stated: “We believe that young people deserve the same rights to run for office and that age discrimination is a hindrance to full participation and democracy.”⁴⁹

After a two-year campaign by YIAGA, the NTYTR Bill was passed by the national parliament and the required majority of the federal parliaments, and was signed into law as the NTYTR Act in 2018. This change in the law was brought about by a community-driven campaign that engaged parliament.

The campaign subsequently inspired a global movement under the same name. Launched at the Forum on Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law in 2018, the global #NotTooYoungToRun campaign seeks to lower the age required to run for public office in a number of countries across the world. The campaign is a joint endeavour by YIAGA, the United Nations Secretary-General’s Envoy on Youth, UNDP, OHCHR, the IPU and the European Youth Forum (EYF).

Samson Itodo, the Executive Director of YIAGA, observed as follows:

Any country guided by the principles of inclusion, freedom, equality and justice must ensure the full participation of young people in the electoral process. The passage of the #NotTooYoungToRun bill in Nigeria is the first step towards ensuring democratic consolidation and sustainable development.⁵⁰

47 Schroedel, 2019.

48 Lovo, 2021.

49 Egbas, 2018.

50 United Nations Office of the Secretary-General’s Envoy on Youth, 2016.

Engagement example 15: UK Youth Climate Coalition in the United Kingdom

The UK Youth Climate Coalition (UKYCC) is a group of young people aged 18–29 years organizing on climate justice issues. It is a key example of proactive public mobilization, in which people take the initiative without waiting for parliament. The stated mission of the UKYCC is to “mobilize and empower young people to take positive action for global climate justice.”⁵¹

The coalition was formed in 2008 after two students in the United Kingdom, Emma Biermann and Casper ter Kuile, joined the World Wide Fund for Nature’s Voyage for the Future programme, a 10-day expedition around the coast of Svalbard in the Norwegian Arctic. Emma and Casper joined 16 other students from around the world to witness the impacts of climate change first-hand.

When reflecting on the coalition, Biermann said:

Thousands of young people across the UK are working in their local community to lead this country into a low-carbon future. A country where energy is forever renewable, society rebuilt and life is better for all of us.⁵²

Her comment reflects the key theme of citizen leadership that underpins the work of the UKYCC – a proactive approach that does not rely on facilitation from parliaments. On the contrary, the coalition has run several campaigns that focus on “bringing MPs along” and ensuring that elected representatives keep climate change at the top of their agenda.

One example is the “Adopt an MP” campaign launched in 2010, in which all 650 members of the House of Commons were paired with a young person in their constituency. The UKYCC provided young people with information and guidance on how to present convincing arguments, how to meet MPs, how to communicate effectively and how to use social media to spread information after each meeting.

Through another campaign, called “How Green is Your MP?,” members of the public can look up their MP’s record on climate issues, as well as contacting them directly.⁵³ After checking their MP’s track record, users of the platform are encouraged to send them an email expressing their concerns. In this way, the UKYCC activates young people to engage without waiting for parliament to come to them.

In considering the lessons of these community-led initiatives, it is important to recognize that all parliaments face the challenge of catering to the needs and aspirations of many different groups. Public input from any one person does not and cannot always influence parliamentary processes. David Wilson, Clerk of the House of Representatives at the Parliament of New Zealand, explained:

I think in terms of an outcome for parliament, of people raising things that really concern them or grievances and getting a committee to give it some attention and having a response, [the public are] not always going to be happy with the outcome.

Parliaments can approach community-led initiatives as an opportunity to demonstrate that they are responsive institutions that hear and care about their public’s concerns. Even if not all the demands of such initiatives are met, it is important to listen, to try to understand these concerns and to indicate what actions have been taken.

51 UKYCC, 2018: 4.

52 WWF, 2009.

53 UKYCC, 2021.

Part 3: Building better engagement

Research for this report drew out a wide range of challenges. Key respondents from inside parliaments and across civil society identified many areas where they felt engagement should be carried out differently or better. This section starts by acknowledging the challenges then discusses five areas for improvement that came up frequently in the research.

1. Acknowledging the challenges of public engagement

Public engagement has many benefits: parliaments and MPs are better informed and more connected with their communities, while the public are more trusting and respectful of parliament and do not question its legitimacy. But these benefits only come when public engagement is done well. Poor engagement is not merely ineffective: it can also be counterproductive. If engagement is seen as superficial, or if public concerns are solicited but not addressed effectively, people can become disillusioned and drift further away from parliament. Parliaments must therefore think carefully about the risks and pitfalls of public engagement, and consider ways to mitigate any adverse consequences that could arise if it is executed poorly. It is important that this is done at an early stage of crafting engagement policies and/or rolling out actions.

There are various challenges for parliaments to consider, as detailed below.

It can be hard to manage multiple opinions. By encouraging openness and participation, parliaments can encounter myriad perspectives that could be overwhelming and difficult to analyse.

Expectations may not be realized. Creating unrealistic expectations can give rise to risks. When providing opportunities to contribute, there needs to be an understanding that all voices will be listened to, but that not all suggestions can be acted upon. Being transparent in the consultation process and giving feedback to participants can help to manage public expectations.

Decision-making processes differ across parliaments. Every parliament has its own institutional logic as to how, when and why decisions are made. The role of the executive, political parties, parliamentary leadership and individual parliamentarians will vary greatly from one context to the next. Where parliament provides opportunities for the public to share their views, such as in consultations on draft legislation, it also needs to be clear about how this input is taken into account in the decision-making process.

Those with the most resources may benefit the most from engagement opportunities. Parliaments need to design engagement processes that are inclusive, paying attention to how well they work for the entire community and not just for those people and organizations that have the most resources. Maria Baron, Director of Directorio Legislativo, a CSO in Argentina, said: "Parliaments should think about rules of engagement, otherwise Coca-Cola will have a lot more strength than cancer patients." When designing engagement policies and actions, parliaments need to consider systemic inequities that affect the ability and capacity of certain groups and individuals to engage. This includes removing barriers and making engagement tools widely accessible to all segments of society.

Polarization and abuse pose growing threats. Modern technology has contributed to easier communication and broader access to information. Although social media platforms are beneficial instruments for public engagement, they have also contributed to growing polarization, disinformation and abuse. Increased exposure to offensive language and insults requires greater resilience from politicians and may negatively influence their willingness to actively engage with the community. This is particularly challenging for women politicians, since they are more often the targets of such attacks.

Engagement is resource-intensive. Meaningful, inclusive, effective and efficient parliamentary engagement requires a significant commitment in terms of time, money and human resources. This poses a serious challenge for all parliaments as they continually operate under financial pressures, but especially for parliaments with limited resources.

Measuring progress is difficult. Gauging the impact of engagement methods is not straightforward. Impact is difficult to quantify and is rarely monitored and evaluated by parliaments. How parliaments monitor the results of their engagement requires more consideration, as discussed later in this report. There is a clear need to be more systematic in analysing what works well and what can be improved for future success.

2. Being genuine makes a difference

A true willingness to involve the community is the bedrock of meaningful engagement. Public engagement efforts by parliaments have a greater chance of succeeding when community members see authentic and genuine efforts to listen and respond. If engagement is not conducted in good faith or with sincerity, it can leave an impression of perfunctory or disingenuous consultation instead of meaningful dialogue. This can quickly put people off and will ultimately damage trust in parliament.



A true willingness to involve the community is the bedrock of meaningful engagement.



North Macedonia. Young people taking part in a simulation of a parliamentary committee. © Parliament of North Macedonia.



Burundi. The Honourable Emmanuel Sinzohagera, President of the Senate of Burundi (fourth from left) during community development work in the Isare commune of the Bujumbura province. © Parliament of Burundi.



Thailand. The President of the National Assembly received a draft bill from ethnic groups. © Secretariat of the House of Representatives

When people make an effort to reach out, mobilize others and share their views with parliament, they expect to be heard and taken seriously. If that happens, engagement can be encouraging and empowering for the community. Mark Evans, Professor of Governance at the University of Canberra, Australia, made the following argument in an article on trust in government:

Reforms that seem to provide part of the solution can sometimes make the problem worse. Offering more participation or consultation can turn into a tokenistic exercise, which generates more cynicism and negativity among citizens.⁵⁴

During a focus group for this report involving teenagers from various countries, Savannah, an 11-year-old youth activist from the United Kingdom, recounted her experience of superficial engagement. She said she ended up feeling like “the adults tried to take over and spoon-feed us the answers, and even our questions.” Engagement for engagement’s sake, merely to “tick the boxes,” is not just poor practice. It can actually discourage those who experience it, turn them away from future interaction and damage trust in the institution.

If parliament has a clear strategy for engagement and if civic participation is built into its culture, it will be more likely to design initiatives with a view to genuinely listening and capturing diverse views. As the United Nations Youth Strategy recognizes, effective engagement involves ensuring young people are “not only heard but understood, not only engaged but empowered, and not only supporting but leading global efforts and processes.”⁵⁵

It is incumbent on parliaments to have robust engagement processes that open the doors to genuine dialogue and that ensure access for anyone who wants to participate. People should be able to easily discover how they can take part, be kept informed about when and how the engagement will take place, understand what will happen when they participate, and be kept informed about the process as it continues through to conclusion. This includes understanding how their own views are received and used by parliamentarians, as well as the outcome of the process.

3. Feedback on outcomes builds trust

Knowing how their feedback and input will be used in the decision-making process is one of the key things that community members expect when they engage with parliament. Even if all viewpoints and suggestions cannot be accommodated, people want to understand how decisions were made, what matters influenced the outcome and what results were achieved from their engagement. In other words, people may not always get their way but they do want to have a say and find out whether their input made a difference.

A feedback loop is a two-way stream of communication between parliament and the public involved in the engagement exercise. Closing a feedback loop by keeping in touch cultivates a feeling of genuine engagement and influence over the decisions. It also creates a culture of responsiveness and learning that make interventions more adaptive and effective.

Tara-Jane Kerpens-Lee, who at the time of speaking served as Manager of the Select Committee Engagement Team at the Parliament of the United Kingdom, observed that at the end of a process, people were too often still saying: “We came and we said this and it was great. But we don’t know if it is going to go anywhere.”

She refers to a widespread problem. Even when public engagement is evaluated and shows demonstrable impact, parliaments do not always let participants know the outcome of their involvement. Madimetsa Molekwa, Section Manager, Provincial and Municipal Liaison at the Parliament of South Africa, highlighted this point:

We are big on 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 at the same pace. Except that we share the report, we put the report on the website. I’m saying, we went to these communities to talk with them, so it is only logical that we need to go back.

Good-practice examples can be seen in parliaments that have given feedback to community members who have participated in parliamentary processes or activities. In the Estonian petitions system, for example, the relevant parliamentary committee must inform the person who submitted the petition within 30 days as to whether it will be taken up, and if not, why. The petitioner then has a chance to amend the petition based on the feedback and resubmit it.

When inputs are given as part of a committee process, an annex to the committee’s report can list those who interacted with the committee. Ideally, the body of the report should indicate the extent to which their views helped to shape particular findings and recommendations.

By showing participants how they have contributed to change, and by letting them know that their voice is important and influential, parliaments can ensure that their engagement processes contribute to enhancing public perceptions of the institution. To succeed, parliaments need capacity as well as standards and processes that clearly outline responsibilities for responding to public input.

⁵⁴ Evans, 2019.

⁵⁵ United Nations, 2018: 6.

4. Reaching out to all communities

Without a special effort to reach all communities, structural barriers are likely to limit some voices. Inequalities can be widened if engagement does not address existing disadvantages. Parliaments risk speaking only with politically engaged groups and hearing only those voices that can reach them easily – and are often already empowered. It takes strategic and concerted effort and resources to make parliaments accessible to all groups, often requiring proactive outreach and collaboration with others who can link and bridge the divides that exist.

Parliaments need to be attentive to the question of who engages. When speaking about parliamentary consultations, Verónica Seguel, Chief Lawyer of the Access to Information and Transparency Unit at the Chamber of Deputies of Chile, noted that “the people who came or participated in audiences were mostly men and from the capital!”

Not all groups have the same power, the same resources to advocate for their concerns and the same access to channels for public engagement. Marija Golubeva, a Latvian MP, noted a shortage of organized groups representing the interests of “people who are socially vulnerable and poor ... in committee meetings on taxation and economic policy”.

It is vital that parliaments are aware of these imbalances and ensure that engagement strategies promote equity in participation. This might entail making strategic choices about whom to target, identifying the most effective ways of working with the target communities, and investing resources in making parliament more accessible to all. This is another area where parliaments can partner with CSOs that have the ability to connect with hard-to-reach and historically marginalized groups.

Some major groups and the barriers to engagement they face are listed below.

Women: IPU statistics show that, as of June 2021, 70 out of 187 national parliaments⁵⁶ had less than 20 per cent women members and only 13 had reached or were close to reaching equal representation of women and men.⁵⁷ According to the 2018 *Global Barometer Survey*,⁵⁸ in almost every region of the world, men have higher levels of political engagement than women as measured by interest in, and discussion and understanding of politics. Men are also more likely to vote, attend political demonstrations and be politically active in other ways.

Women face obstacles in engagement that result in less frequent and less meaningful engagement. There are many reasons for these differences. In her article “New Feminist Challenges to the Study of Political Engagement,”⁵⁹ Professor Pippa Norris asserts that there is a difference in the political engagement of women and men as a result of cultural

attitudes, the division of civic resources, gendered institutions and mobilization through interest groups.

Multiple factors create an unequal playing field for women. A male-dominated political culture and societal stereotypes that confine women to the private sphere are major impediments to women’s participation in both politics and public debate more broadly. Women are also often exposed to sexism, harassment and violence when they occupy the public arena.

Božena Jelušić, an MP in Montenegro, compared her own experience to that of male colleagues:

For me, a woman engaged in political parties and in parliament, I experience violence, verbal internet violence. And it is much, much harder for me to be in politics than for my male colleagues.

Mateo Lagimiri, a staff member from the Parliament of Fiji, described an example of these trends:

When they go out for public hearings, I know sometimes the witnesses tend to ... feel intimidated by a male-dominated committee. When there’s a female MP who’s ever-present on the committees, they tend to open up and give a submission to the committee members. And that’s a very good sign for us, because mostly, particularly in our context, in Fiji, the main barrier is our culture because ... it is very masculine.

All of this points to the ongoing need for parliaments to actively address the issue of equal participation between women and men, including through the way they approach their engagement.

LGBTIQ+ people: A gender-sensitive approach to engagement goes beyond binary categories of women and men, and also considers barriers to engagement on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity. To give just one example, many transgender people who live in accordance with their gender identity do not have ID documents that accurately reflect their name and gender. In the 2020 United States election, over 378,000 transgender people who did not have accurate ID documents faced barriers to voting.⁶⁰

Young people: Although parliaments run a variety of youth engagement programmes, young people are less inclined to engage with formal public institutions than older demographics. As discussed earlier, youth engagement that lacks sincerity inhibits meaningful dialogue and discourages further participation. In addition, insufficient resources, a lack of clarity about involvement and many other systemic challenges make it more difficult for young people to engage.

This lack of engagement with parliaments is not due to disinterest in the issues affecting young people’s lives. On the contrary, young people are increasingly likely to participate in non-traditional forms of engagement.

⁵⁶ Unicameral parliaments and the lower chambers of bicameral parliaments.

⁵⁷ IPU, 2021c.

⁵⁸ GBS, 2018.

⁵⁹ Norris, 2007.

⁶⁰ O’Neill and Herman, 2020: 1.

As discussed in further detail in part 5 of this report, parliaments can offer safe spaces for issues-based youth engagement to draw existing youth activism to parliament and generate meaningful connections with young people.

Rural groups: People living far away from the capital, in rural or remote areas, find it harder to testify before a committee, join a tour of parliament or take part in other in-person engagement initiatives. Dejan Dimitrievski, Head of the Unit for Education and Communication at the Parliament of North Macedonia, gave one example of this challenge, explaining why parliament cannot reach all schools:

We don't have the finances to pay for transport ... And for some, it's really a problem because they have to travel 200 kilometres to get to the parliament.

In addition, people in remote areas may have less access to digital and broadcast technologies through which engagement happens. Sikhumbuzo Tshablala, Senior Manager, Legislative Sector at the Parliament of South Africa, observed as follows:

You find that in the urban areas, people have access to TV. They've got access to Wi-Fi. They have the advantage as it is the way to engage with their parliament. But in more rural areas, people [do not].

As a result of these inequities in access, rural groups may be less likely to participate in certain events and initiatives.

People with disabilities: Multiple barriers impact engagement by people with disabilities. Social stereotyping and discrimination affect the way people with disabilities are perceived. Inaccessible spaces such as parliament buildings without access for people with disabilities present physical barriers. And modes of communication such as websites, video or audio segments may exclude people with disabilities because they do not meet accessibility requirements.

Indigenous communities: Globally, indigenous communities are often not given a voice, or are marginalized and discriminated against – sometimes in a systemic, long-term way – because of their worldview, culture and language. The Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention of 1989 (International Labour Organization Convention No. 169),⁶¹ which mandates consultation with indigenous peoples on legislative and administrative measures which may affect them directly, has been ratified by only 23 countries (each of which has adopted a different approach). Guidance on addressing issues related to indigenous communities can be found in the handbook entitled *Implementing the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*.⁶²

National, ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities: Different ethnic groups often have their own languages and unique cultures. Historic and structural discrimination poses impediments for minorities. Their languages may not be the ones that parliament communicates in. People from minority communities can feel that it is not worth engaging with parliament if their voice is marginalized or ignored.

Migrants, immigrants and refugees: In many countries, voting and other forms of political participation are restricted to those who hold citizenship and, in some instances, those who are physically located within the borders of a country. The path to citizenship (though highly variable across countries) takes time and resources. People who have either left or fled from their countries of origin may therefore be more likely to find themselves without citizenship and the access it confers.

Irrespective of citizenship status, people who are living in a country are members of that community. Parliaments need to ensure that mechanisms are available for their voices to be heard.

In addition, while some countries have parliamentary seats reserved for diaspora citizens and laws that allow extraterritorial voting, there are many cases where citizens living outside their country of origin or place of official registration have limited access.

The COVID-19 pandemic has perhaps created the conditions for renewed contact between parliaments and members of the diaspora. Elisabete Azevedo-Harman, Legislative Oversight and Openness Specialist at UNDP, highlighted an increased number of diaspora citizens of Cabo Verde following online plenary sessions and parliament (e.g. via email) and noted that “the COVID-19 situation could actually provide an opportunity for parliament to engage all these talents, not just ‘in the monologue’, but in terms of more real engagement from both sides”.

Note on intersectionality

The groups and communities listed above are not separate. They are interlinked. Identity is multifaceted and inequity is the amalgamation of layered obstacles. A study on indigenous women in Latin America found that, when trying to set up an indigenous movement, female leaders face an additional layer of discrimination because of their gender. They are at risk of even greater violence and fall prey to gendered notions of leadership. The authors note that “indigenous women still face the daunting task of addressing the exclusionary institutions built to ascertain the political power of white and mestizo elites.”⁶³ Similarly, the inequities faced by rural groups can sometimes be compounded by poverty. Racial discrimination may intensify the exclusion of youth of colour. Youth and gender intersect so that young women are less likely to identify with a party than young men. Intersectionality has a significant impact on participation and is woven into this report’s overarching concepts of engagement.

61 ILO, 1989.

62 IPU and others, 2014.

63 Rousseau and Morales Hudon, 2017.

5. Using evaluation to learn and improve

Monitoring and evaluation are key to learning and improvement. Everyone benefits when legislatures – even those with a long history of engagement – continuously assess their progress and learn about areas for further advancement.

Together, monitoring and evaluation provide the necessary data to guide strategic planning, to design and implement programmes and projects, and to allocate and reallocate resources in better ways. Effective monitoring and evaluation results in increased transparency and accountability, helps parliaments detect problems at an early stage, encourages diversity of thought and opinions, improves decision-making, encourages innovation and helps ensure resources are used efficiently.

Parliaments have been doing public engagement activities for many years. However, research for this *Global Parliamentary Report* indicates a major gap in the evaluation of public engagement in the work of parliaments. Only 34 per cent of the parliaments surveyed had evaluation indicators, and those in high-income countries were likely to have such indicators. Even when there is systematic monitoring, it tends to focus on administrative processes rather than the impact of engagement. Tumi Mogorosi, Analyst, Strategic Plan Implementation at the Parliament of South Africa, explained as follows:

So when we talk about measuring anything right now, we measure mostly administration. We will have attendance registers of everyone that attends public participation.

This kind of stocktaking, though important, may not capture the full scope of the engagement process.

This report challenges parliaments to systematically analyse and assess their engagement activities in order to determine the extent to which they are meeting their objectives. If, for example, a parliament has organized a youth forum for many years, does it continue to do so today because it is an established activity? Is this the most effective form of engagement with young people or could these resources be better invested elsewhere?

Partnering with civil society, including academia, might be beneficial for parliaments, since external monitoring and evaluation often helps to critically assess the performance of various parliamentary efforts and to identify weaknesses and shortcomings. These assessments also can be instrumental in generating new ideas for increased and more meaningful public engagement approaches.

6. Effective engagement requires both initial and ongoing investment

Engagement is resource-intensive. Public engagement relies on people as well as tools and processes. Parliamentary administrations have an incredibly important role to play in supporting institutional goals. While some parliaments are well-equipped, many others do not have designated or adequate staff and resources to deliver engagement in a comprehensive way. Public engagement is often added as an auxiliary task for parliamentary procedural, committee or administrative staff already loaded with other responsibilities.

Speaking about her role as a staff member in facilitating engagement, Carlleta Charles, Parliamentary Executive Officer at the Parliament of Guyana, said: “As support staff, we come up with these initiatives and we basically coordinate and manage everything.” On a similar note, Verónica Seguel, Chief Lawyer of the Access to Information and Transparency Unit at the Chamber of Deputies of Chile, made the following observation:

The projects with a lot of participation and public interest ... [generate] a tremendous workload for the staff. They have to organize the events, which are very complicated. [This includes] inviting people, all of the logistical support, and so on.

Parliaments vary in the way in which they organize their work on engagement. About half of the parliaments surveyed for the *Global Parliamentary Report* had dedicated planning units for engagement, and over 70 per cent had outreach, communication or education units.

However, a much smaller number of parliaments reported that these specialized units also manage consultation and participation initiatives. Often, engagement takes place in different bodies as they carry out their business, such as organizing committee hearings or inquiries. Christoph Konrath, a senior staff member at the National Council of Austria, said:

There's no sort of department for exchange with the citizens ... It's on an ad hoc basis ... And it's not the same team of people that would organize any inquiry, so people start from scratch and don't have this sort of continuous experience with engaging with citizens or with NGOs.

As a counter-example, the Select Committee Engagement Team at the Parliament of the United Kingdom supports engagement activities across all parliamentary committees, helping to standardize practices and carry over organizational knowledge from project to project. Yet this kind of approach requires investment in institutional and administrative capacity. The Parliament of the United Kingdom, for example, spends over £10 million on its visitor, education and engagement units every year. Investment in equipment and infrastructure for engagement is also crucial. Time and again, interviewees for this report referenced the challenge represented by access to resources.

In some cases, people need a physical space in which to engage. Algerian MP Fawzia Benbadis said: “Due to the limited amount of space, the Senate cannot open its door to everyone.” Parliaments surveyed cited lack of physical spaces for events, transportation, and information and communications technology (ICT) equipment (such as phones, computers and internet connections) as core challenges for engagement. This point was underscored in an observation from Billay Tunkara, an MP from the Gambia:

MPs should be also given an ICT facility, because right now there are no tablets given to MPs. In terms of connectivity, if you are in your constituency, for instance, the communication, you need to be connected, you need to know what is really going on. But when you go to your constituency in rural Gambia,

you are off unless you use your own phone and struggle to connect, you know, and that should not be the case.

As noted earlier, while the pandemic has accelerated opportunities for some parliaments to normalize hybrid and online interactions, legal and resource restrictions mean that has not been the case for all. Parliaments and parliamentarians might have access to the technology that allows them to work and respond remotely. But the people and groups who wish to engage with them that way might not.

Limited resources are a reality that parliaments will continue to face on an ongoing basis. Resource challenges only strengthen the case for strategic planning, prioritization and systematic evaluation – so that limited resources can be allocated most effectively for the greatest impact.



Public engagement relies on people as well as tools and processes.



Rwandan. MPs address citizens on family planning issues during community work. © Jean-Marie Mboniyintwali



Argentina. An award ceremony at the Argentine Parliament. © Parliament of Argentina



Bangladesh. Community members taking part in a parliamentary outreach visit to Sirajgaon. The visit aimed to raise awareness of harmful effects of child marriage. © Mosta Gausul Hoque

Part 4: Strategic priorities for engagement

In an era of increasing uncertainty and anxiety, it is timely for parliaments to step up their engagement with the communities they represent in order to help maintain public confidence in representative democracy. By moving with the times, institutions built on tradition can remain relevant to, and connect meaningfully with, their communities.

Public expectations are shaped by contemporary attitudes and practices. By continually assessing whether their methods of engagement reflect present-day approaches to communication and consultation, parliaments can be responsive to the changing ways in which people wish to connect with them.

This report encourages parliaments to make a clear commitment to public engagement and to take a strategic approach, with defined objectives, appropriate planning, adequate resources and proper evaluation. This includes using available data and involving the community to help determine the best channels and approaches to engagement.

The priorities identified in this section of the report provide an opportunity for parliamentarians and parliamentary administrations to assess the adequacy of their current approaches to public engagement. They also challenge parliaments to set out, in a comprehensive way, how they can enhance engagement with the community going forward.

It is of course important to recognize that parliaments will have varying capacities to address all these priorities. Parliaments big and small are invited to use the information and examples provided here to suit their circumstances and to progress their public engagement in ways that are sustainable into the future.

1. Strengthening the commitment to engagement

1.1 Embedding a culture of engagement

Leadership is one of the keys to effective parliamentary engagement. It is needed to develop a culture of engagement that encompasses all facets of parliamentary activity.

Leading by example

Elected representatives are the focal point for decision-making in parliament and have a leading role to play in fostering a culture of engagement. Individually, they can lead by example in the way they engage with people in their local area or region. Collectively, through parliamentary processes and structures, they can shape and influence the way parliaments engage with their communities.

MPs set the tone for engagement through the practices they employ when interacting with the community, either in their constituencies or with the public in general if they do not have a specific constituency. Various good-practice examples from around the world demonstrate how parliamentarians actively engage with community members through direct contact, social media, publications, events and programmes. MPs seeking to enhance their engagement with the community can follow these examples, looking either in their own country or in other countries with similar parliamentary systems.

Elected representatives can face various challenges when seeking to employ effective engagement strategies, and these vary from parliament to parliament. They can range from time pressures and competing demands, to staffing, capacity and financial-resource limitations. This was highlighted by Swedish MP Cecilia Widegren who, in response to the survey for this report, observed as follows:

As a politician, I have to prioritize every day. There are a lot of things that I could do, there are a lot of things that I should do, but I don't have the resources for all of that ... It is my job to do that, and to balance between different kinds of wishes, demands and authorities.

One way of supporting and encouraging better engagement is to educate and inform MPs and their support staff about good-practice approaches, particularly when they are newly elected. Since parliamentarians come from a variety of backgrounds, they might not necessarily have in-depth knowledge or practical experience of aspects of engagement such as media relations, social media and digital information platforms.

Induction and training programmes can help parliamentarians and their staff acquire working knowledge and skills in the tools and channels they can use to engage effectively with the community. Tailor-made training programmes could cover topics such as:

- digital tools for effective engagement
- media relations, including how to prepare media plans, draft media releases and do media interviews
- effective use of social media
- public presentation skills
- speech-writing
- community consultation processes
- engagement with diverse communities, including communities from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, people with disabilities and youth.

This kind of training can be delivered either by appropriately skilled parliamentary staff or by external trainers with professional expertise. The training can be supplemented with easy-to-use toolkits that guide good engagement practice. Examples of the type of practical guidance that might be provided can be found under the “[Tips for MPs](#)” section in the annex to this report.

Further reading – see the Annex

Practical guide – Tips for MPs

Driving openness and inclusion

Parliamentarians can help to shape the way in which parliaments engage with their communities. Through their collective influence, they are an important force in either driving or resisting change.

Seeking to do things better or make a difference is often a key motivating factor for people to run for office, get elected to parliament or join a parliamentary group like a committee. This was noted by Gabriela Morawska-Stanecka, Deputy Speaker of the Senate of Poland, who decided to become a member of the Petitions Committee to contribute to better law-making. A lawyer before becoming an MP, she said she often had to explain to her colleagues the unexpected consequences of a bill:

I was a barrister and I knew how bad legislation ... can damage people's lives. That's why I wanted to serve on this committee.

A mindset of openness and inclusion is a precondition for public participation in democracy. By ensuring that parliamentary processes and rules of operation do not present any barriers to public participation, MPs can actively support more and better engagement with the community. When serving on committees or boards, MPs can set or adjust the rules and practices governing public engagement, such as those covering the broadcasting of parliamentary proceedings, media access to parliament and the conduct of public inquiries.

In particular, parliamentarians can influence a shift away from the traditional approach that emphasizes engagement by invitation. Parliamentary committees are a prime example. They are a primary avenue for parliament to engage with the community. Yet, for a long time, they have been focused on MPs and community members interacting across a table in a “them and us” style of engagement, with committee members controlling who gets invited. Through committees, MPs could explore more engaging and collaborative processes of consultation, including working with CSOs as a matter of course.

One example of interesting practice comes from the Australian House of Representatives, where several years ago a parliamentary committee held a round table on constitutional reform. Community members were invited to submit questions via social media for committee members to put to the expert panel. This enabled members of the public to participate directly in the committee's fact-finding exercise.



A mindset of openness and inclusion is a precondition for public participation in democracy.



Switzerland. On 29 and 30 October 2021, to celebrate the introduction of women's suffrage 50 years ago, the second women's session was held in the National Council chamber. © Yoshiko Kusano/alliance F



South Africa. 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

In New Zealand, parliament's standing orders require all but budget and urgent legislation to be referred to a committee for scrutiny. This includes a public submission process, during which a committee proactively seeks input from experts, as well as from individuals and groups likely to be interested in the legislative proposal. The process also includes a general call for submissions through advertising. This practice often extends to other non-legislative inquiries and to the annual financial review process.

In order to capitalize on opportunities for better public engagement through parliamentary committees, members could work with parliamentary staff to come up with less formal and more participatory committee processes. Based on some of the examples that parliaments around the world have been experimenting with, this could include:

- mechanisms to get community input on issues that a committee should examine
- community forums or round-table consultations in order to collect views and suggestions in a more informal setting
- social media questions and surveys in order to gauge people's views on topics being examined by a committee
- interactive committee hearings live-streamed on social media, with the opportunity for the public to put questions in the chat for committee members to ask during the hearing
- expert or community panels convened to discuss the consequences of committee recommendations before they are finalized.

Championing better engagement

Alongside MPs, parliamentary staff play a key leadership role in forging a more strategic approach to engagement. They have the institutional knowledge, provide continuity between electoral cycles and have a focus beyond political interests. A parliament's senior management team, led by the secretary general or clerk, is responsible for ensuring that engagement is embedded in the culture and practices of the institution, in the same way that it has a duty to put in place effective policies on human and financial resources.

Parliamentary administrations need to own engagement and make sure it happens in a systemic and non-party-political manner. Embedding engagement in a strategic plan, as one of the corporate priorities for the parliamentary administration, is an important way to demonstrate the high-level commitment that is needed to ensure staff actively work towards more and better interaction with the community.

Engagement also needs to have a place at the decision-making table in the senior management team. When decisions are made about allocating human and financial resources, when new policies are discussed that may impact community interaction with parliament, and when decisions are taken on future ICT requirements, a senior management spokesperson needs to champion the interests of engagement. This is important so that decisions about the way the organization

operates into the future take account of engagement priorities and possibilities, and so that engagement stays at the forefront of people's thinking throughout the organization. By driving the development and implementation of an effective engagement strategy, these champions can ensure that all staff are aware of the strategy, understand their role in implementing it, are encouraged to support it, have opportunities to contribute their ideas and are held accountable for actions that flow from it.

Working together, MPs and the senior management team can pursue opportunities to effect change in the engagement approach and processes of parliament. Parliamentarians can collectively help to make parliamentary processes more open and inclusive. The secretary general or clerk and the management team can drive the implementation of a strategy or plan that influences a culture of engagement throughout the organization.

1.2 Defining the approach to engagement

There are many dimensions to parliamentary engagement, as discussed in detail earlier in this report. Communities are diverse, a variety of people are involved in the engagement process and there are many channels through which it is practised. Having a strategic focus on engagement draws all these strands together and ensures a comprehensive rather than an ad hoc approach.

A plan or strategy for engagement can help to ensure that objectives are clear, and that effort and resources are appropriately targeted to maximize impact. By outlining and documenting their approach to public engagement, parliaments can articulate what they are aiming to achieve, how they will undertake their engagement and who their target audiences are.

This is not to say that engagement cannot happen successfully without a formal framework or a defined plan. But parliaments big and small will gain from setting out their approach to engagement so that everyone understands what is expected and possible.

The survey conducted for this report shows that an engagement strategy can emerge in a variety of ways: from many years of practice, from legal obligations, from capacity-building programmes or from efforts to set defined priorities for a parliamentary administration.

Parliaments with a long history of public engagement have not always had a defined strategy underpinning their activities. Instead, they have developed and evolved a body of practice, starting off small and adding engagement programmes and activities when resources and political will have allowed, and in response to public expectations. Knowledge and expertise gained over time have led to more comprehensive and sophisticated approaches, products and services. Parliaments that have evolved their engagement practice in this way have sometimes decided to write down a strategy after years of ad hoc activity, in order to boost their engagement, sharpen its focus or set new directions.

A case study of public engagement by the Parliament of the United Kingdom speaks of a journey that the institution has been on over many years to develop a strategy with defined objectives and target audiences. Edge Watchorn, the parliament's former Managing Director for Participation, explained:

We started off probably 15, 20 years ago, very small scale. 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.

Further reading – see the Annex

Country case study – United Kingdom: Leaving no one behind

The engagement strategy developed by the Parliament of the United Kingdom was grounded in research that helped to define the target audiences going forward. It demonstrated a proactive approach by identifying gaps and boldly focusing on those audiences that were disengaged. The programming of activities flowed directly from the strategy.

Constitutional and legislative requirements that place certain responsibilities on parliament can also be the impetus for a defined engagement approach. In the case of South Africa, for example, the constitution provides that parliament must facilitate public involvement in its legislative and other processes.

Further reading – see the Annex

Country case study - South Africa: Embedding meaningful engagement

This requirement arose in direct response to the apartheid era, when the majority of the population was excluded from participating in government. It was later reinforced by a ruling of the Constitutional Court of South Africa, which emphasized the need for parliament to take steps to "afford the public a reasonable opportunity to participate effectively in the law-making process".⁶⁴

As a result, a legislative sector public participation framework was developed in 2013. It has become the overarching guideline for South African legislatures across different spheres of government to develop individual norms and standards to regulate the implementation of public participation mechanisms. For its part, the national parliament developed a public participation model that outlines the mechanisms and processes through which parliament can provide for meaningful public involvement and participation in its legislative and other activities.

A clearly articulated engagement strategy has also become a trend among parliaments in new and developing democracies. International partners have encouraged the preparation of

community engagement strategy documents, usually with the assistance of expert advice, as part of capacity-building initiatives at the parliaments of various countries including Fiji, Samoa and the Solomon Islands. A case study of the Parliament of Fiji prepared for this report details the strategy that was developed there as part of a UNDP capacity-building project.

According to Thomas Gregory from the UNDP Myanmar Country Office, one risk with externally driven strategy processes is that an engagement strategy prepared by an external expert from a development partner may have ideas that "don't really connect with that parliament at all". To be successful in the longer term, a strategy needs to be owned by the parliament and reflect parliament's aspirations.

In order to mitigate this risk, the strategy development process can be used as a positive opportunity to build connections within parliament among all the key players, and between parliament and the community. By consulting widely on the strategy, there is a greater likelihood that it will reflect local interests and aspirations.

Engagement can also be included in broader strategic goals that a parliament sets as part of its overall planning processes. Parliamentary administrations have a wide range of responsibilities, including managing infrastructure, people and financial resources. Contemporary governance practices have led various parliaments to develop strategic plans, with community engagement identified as a corporate priority in such plans.

Parliaments that have adopted a more strategic approach to their engagement have recognized the need for cultural change in order to open themselves up to new ways of working and new ideas. The Parliament of New Zealand's experience with developing and documenting its engagement strategy is a case in point, as David Wilson, Clerk of the House of Representatives explained:

It's allowed us to bring in people that I would have never employed because it was just too far away from my core functions. So we have a filmmaker. We have social media experts. And it's probably people we wouldn't have employed if we hadn't changed things. And that's allowed us to do a lot more work internally, which is obviously much cheaper and more responsive.

This cultural shift also required existing staff to reassess their roles and attitudes. "There was quite a lot of resistance early on," said Amy Brier, formerly Manager of Parliamentary Engagement at the Parliament of New Zealand. Committee staff saw their role as providing a secretariat service to committees rather than drumming up extra submissions from the community, which would create more work for them. This has changed now because strategic directions set down by the leadership of the parliamentary administration have given staff a clear signal that engagement is part of their role.

Globally there has been a shift among parliaments towards developing a strategy that documents the purpose and approach to public engagement, with 37 per cent of parliaments surveyed for this report indicating that they have a written strategy. Parliaments everywhere are recognizing the importance of having a strategic framework to guide their engagement, whether as a result of practical experience,

64 Constitutional Court of South Africa, 2006.

legal obligations or capacity-building imperatives. Defining and documenting such a strategy helps to demonstrate commitment to engagement and builds an expectation that actions will be taken to deliver on those commitments.

For smaller parliaments that have fewer resources and therefore limited capacity for public engagement, the question arises as to whether it is viable to define an actual strategy. This question was considered at a public engagement workshop coordinated by the UNDP in October 2019 for parliaments of a number of small island nations in the Pacific region. The outcomes report from that workshop included the following observation:

There was general agreement that an engagement strategy is an important tool to guide the way in which parliaments connect with their communities. It should identify the aims of engagement, the target audiences, the priority areas for action, the mechanisms through which engagement will be delivered, who is responsible for implementation, and the ways in which outcomes will be measured and evaluated.⁶⁵

With parliaments big and small identifying the value of defining their priorities for public engagement, having a documented strategy can help to ensure that limited capacity and resources are directed in the most appropriate way.

For parliaments without a documented strategy, developing one could help to build a focused approach to engagement. The practical guide to strategic public engagement in the annex to this report can be used as a starting point. Good-practice examples of engagement strategies that have been developed by various parliaments of all sizes can also serve as sources of inspiration.

Further reading – see the Annex

Practical guide - Strategic public engagement

The process for developing an engagement strategy can involve people from inside and outside parliament. This can help to show that parliament is listening and ensure that the strategy responds to what people want and expect from engagement. This consultation process, possibly involving surveys, focus groups and other means, can include MPs and their support staff, parliamentary staff, groups with which parliament already interacts and even groups with little or no previous connection to parliament.

The process of developing an engagement strategy also provides an opportunity for a parliament to demonstrate an inclusive approach to its interaction with the community. This can be achieved by ensuring those consulted are balanced in terms of gender and age, and that underrepresented or disadvantaged groups, as well as people living in urban and rural areas, are included in the process. This would help to embed the “leave no one behind” principle in the key document that will guide parliament’s engagement into the future.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that an engagement strategy is only valuable if it leads to effective actions and tangible outcomes. Documenting a strategy alone will not achieve effective engagement. All strategies have a shelf life and they must not be allowed to gather dust if parliaments want to achieve better engagement with their communities. The strategy will be judged not by the quality of the document but by whether it drives broader and deeper engagement between a parliament and the community it represents.

1.3 Setting engagement objectives

The strategy development process is a good opportunity to set clear objectives for engagement. As noted above, this is particularly relevant for parliaments with limited capacity, as they need to make strategic decisions on what they can and cannot do with the human and financial resources they have available.

Existing strategies from various parliaments, including the case studies of the United Kingdom, New Zealand and Fiji, show that objectives for public engagement commonly focus on better understanding of how parliament works, greater awareness of what parliament is doing, increased opportunities for people to contribute their views on matters being considered by parliament, and more public participation in parliamentary work. Importantly, these objectives all link to enhancing community knowledge of, and involvement in, parliamentary business, including law-making and the work of parliamentary committees that investigate public policy issues and provide oversight of government.

Defining the target audiences for engagement is an important part of this process. Since all community members are the audience for public engagement by parliament, everyone should have an opportunity to engage with their elected representatives. Yet it is not realistic for parliaments to expect that all community members will want to engage with them. Many people will only take an interest in politics when they need to, such as at election times. As all parliaments have limitations in the resources available to them for public engagement, they will necessarily need to make choices about the way in which they can engage, and with whom.

Some parliaments have taken a deliberately targeted approach, focusing on connecting with people who have traditionally been underrepresented in parliamentary processes or faced disadvantage in accessing them. As noted above, this was the approach adopted by the Parliament of the United Kingdom in developing its public engagement strategy.

The rationale behind a targeted approach is that extra effort needs to be directed towards people who have been ignored or neglected in the past. This is noted in the [case study of the Parliament of the United Kingdom](#) in the annex to this report, in which David Clark, Head of Education and Engagement, observed as follows:

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.”

⁶⁵ This quotation comes from an unpublished report on a UNDP-led citizen engagement workshop for parliaments in the Pacific region. For further details, see: UNDP, 2019.

Further reading – see the Annex

Country case study – United Kingdom: Leaving no one behind

In determining their target audiences, parliaments could also explore opportunities to spread their message widely by engaging with the media or collaborating with CSOs. By putting effort into media liaison or by engaging with organizations with a significant following in the community, parliaments may be able to reach a much wider audience than would be possible using their own resources alone. This is something parliaments can consider when determining the type of engagement they will undertake, how it will be targeted and which staff they will select to guide their work.

1.4 Investing in skills for better engagement

Engagement has increasingly become a professional, multifaceted undertaking. Many parliaments have identified the need to employ people with the knowledge, skills and experience to develop and use the variety of tools, channels and approaches that enable effective interaction with the community.

Parliamentary administrations vary in the way they set up and carry out public engagement. As discussed earlier, around half of the respondents to the survey for this report have planning units and around 70 per cent have education, outreach or communications units. This is a welcome development as it indicates that a significant proportion of parliaments have dedicated resources for advancing their engagement with the community.

Yet smaller parliaments face a distinct challenge as they often do not have the financial resources to employ staff specifically dedicated to engagement. These parliaments will likely need to collaborate with in-country civil society partners or seek support from international organizations that have the necessary expertise to help build their capacity in engagement approaches.

While the advent of engagement units has provided a focal point for parliaments to coordinate their outreach strategies and activities, this does not mean that responsibility for engagement rests solely or wholly with such units. Staff across parliament can contribute to engagement and be part of the institution's outreach efforts.

Planning processes that enable staff from across parliament to have an input into the engagement strategy or plan will help staff feel connected to it and better understand how their work and responsibilities fit in. Likewise, staff who have opportunities to improve their knowledge and skills can support better engagement with the community. Giving staff the chance to provide feedback on community engagement initiatives and make suggestions for improvements, as part of an evaluation process, can help to reinforce their involvement in parliament's efforts at engagement.

An important overall aim is to foster greater professionalism in the way all parliamentary staff approach engagement. In this regard, parliamentary engagement specialists can help to upskill other staff. They can also provide an internal consultancy or advisory service to functional areas of parliament, guiding them in good-practice approaches for communication and engagement. This can be encouraged by senior managers.

By involving community engagement specialists in the planning of parliamentary activities from the outset, good-practice engagement approaches can be embedded at an early stage. For example, at the start of a new committee inquiry, community engagement specialists can help a committee develop a communications plan for the inquiry. This can cover matters such as media announcements promoting the call for submissions and advising of public hearings. It can also outline tools and methods for keeping the community updated on the progress of the inquiry, as well as promoting the inquiry report following its release.

The ideal approach is for parliamentary subject-matter and procedural specialists to work closely with community engagement specialists. This ensures that the skills and expertise of these specialists can be used to good effect, thereby achieving the best outcomes for parliament and the community.

2. Broadening engagement opportunities

2.1 Encouraging community participation

Parliamentary work has many different elements, including representation, law-making, approving the national budget, exploring public policy issues, national dialogue, and oversight. Each area of parliamentary activity can be a focal point for public engagement, with opportunities for community input directly into the business of parliament.

This reflects and reinforces SDG 16, which calls for building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions. By encouraging and enabling the community to be active participants in the processes through which laws are made, public policy is considered and government is held to account, parliaments can support progress towards this goal.

Traditionally, public engagement by parliaments has tended to focus on pushing information out to the community to inform people about the way parliament works. That approach has been changing over time, with growing interest in public participation instead of just content-sharing.

As indicated earlier in this report, the evidence from parliaments across the world is that public engagement is increasingly being directed towards several key imperatives:

- Informing the community about the work of parliament and parliamentarians so that they know about and understand the matters being debated and legislated
- Educating people about the processes of parliament to help them become active participants in democracy

- Communicating with the community to interact with them directly on issues that matter to them
- Consulting with the public on matters before parliament so that they can have a say on the way their elected representatives deal with issues
- Involving the community in how engagement is conducted and how they can contribute to and influence parliamentary business.
- Collaboration, co-creation and co-design have also emerged as considerations, with parliaments seeing the benefit in working systematically with civil society to connect with and tap into the expertise within communities. This was touched on earlier and is discussed in further detail later in this section of the report.
- In practical terms, taking a strategic approach to engagement means answering a number of questions:
 - How does the public become well-informed about the laws and other business being considered by parliament?
 - How is the community best educated about the parliament's processes?
 - How can direct communication with the public be appropriately managed and encouraged?
 - How are community members actively consulted on matters before parliament?
 - Can the public have a role in agenda-setting and participating in the decision-making process?

In an era of growing public distrust, one challenge for parliaments in implementing effective engagement is ensuring that it is not simply a public relations exercise. Insincerity in engagement merely increases distrust and disenchantment. Only when they see engagement as a two-way street – as a genuine and ongoing dialogue between the elected and the electors – will community members take up opportunities for participation in any significant way.

2.2 Using a variety of channels

Engagement is rapidly changing, with technology influencing new approaches. Yet access is not equitable across the world or within countries: access to technology and the expertise needed to exploit this technology differ across parliaments and their communities.

Many parliaments have been pivoting towards digital engagement as a way to make their processes more efficient, meet contemporary expectations and respond to challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic. While digital channels are increasingly important, non-digital engagement remains a necessary part of the overall mix, as parliaments must function inclusively and leave no one behind.

This very point is illustrated in a [case study of digital transformation at the Parliament of Brazil](#) in the annex to this report. Brazil is a world leader in the use of digital tools and artificial intelligence in parliament and in wider civic participation. Yet non-digital tools remain important in a country where one third of the population lacks internet access. Alessandro Molon, an MP in the Chamber of Deputies of Brazil, underscored 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 [who are not online].

Further reading – see the Annex

Country case study – Brazil: Digital engagement

Based on the responses to the survey for this report, it is good practice for parliaments to adopt a varied engagement mix that includes:

- in-person experiences such as tours, open days, road shows and education programmes, delivered at parliament and out in the community
- online information platforms such as websites
- digital engagement tools beyond a website
- printed publications
- information provided through mass or specialist media, including newspapers, magazines, radio and television
- broadcasts of parliamentary business, including plenary sessions, committee hearings and events
- social media channels that can be used to inform, interact and involve
- consultations, particularly through parliamentary committee inquiries
- public forums and seminars on issues that matter to the community
- direct contact options, including meetings, round tables and standard communication options such as phone, email and correspondence.

Where digital platforms are used to improve access, it is important to ensure that community members who lack technology or the skills to use it can still participate. Being innovative does not just mean reaching for the latest digital tool. While the aim of innovation should be to boost participation, it must not add to disadvantage or result in exclusion.

In Brazil, the *Ideia Legislativa* (Legislative Idea) platform addressed this issue by allowing people to submit proposals online, via a toll-free number or via videos in Brazilian sign language. "We see a lot of people participating by phone [because] they don't have internet access or they are not able or capable to participate online," said Alisson Bruno Dias de Queiroz, Coordinator of the e-Cidadania Programme at the Senate of Brazil. He also noted differences between phone participants and the online audience:

We have older people, less educated people and even uneducated people, people who don't know how to write. And it's very interesting because we see that ... these [opportunities] to participate by phone are a solution to the digital divide.

Other parliaments also use a blend of contemporary and traditional media, combining the new with the old. Kate Addo, Director in Charge of Public Affairs at the Parliament of Ghana, noted that parliamentary broadcasts are very popular in the rural areas where people might not have access to the internet, and that the parliament also uses newspapers, community radio and even town criers, chiefs and churches in its outreach:

There are telephone numbers that we announce where people are able to reach us. And that's very popular with people who live in areas where internet access is difficult. So we try to reach everybody by using various media tools, depending on where a particular group of people are located.

Being strategic involves making decisions about the tools that best support engagement objectives and how those tools need to be used to get the best outcomes. This sort of strategic thinking can be applied when deciding whether existing engagement programmes or services should be retained or replaced.

2.3 Opening up parliament

A nation's parliament building is the official meeting place for its elected representatives and a key symbol of democracy. On-site interaction with the community on parliamentary premises is an important consideration in seeking a more strategic approach to engagement overall.

Further reading – see the Annex

Thematic case study – Opening up parliamentary buildings to the public

Historically, parliament buildings were designed to project power and authority. They can therefore be intimidating to visitors. On top of that, modern-day security requirements can make parliament buildings feel inaccessible. These features contrast with the image of openness, transparency and inclusion that parliaments often wish to project.

Parliaments have long recognized that their buildings should be open to the community, signalling their accessibility as a public institution. Moreover, now it is generally accepted as good practice that the business of the plenary and committees should take place in public, except in circumstances that require genuine confidentiality.

Across the world, parliaments have provided a variety of ways for the public to gain first-hand experience at the actual site where parliamentary business is conducted. These include tours, exhibitions, open days, access to public galleries during plenary sessions, and education programmes.

In recent times, many parliaments have built dedicated community facilities within their precincts to allow for better and different forms of engagement with the public. Examples include a replica chamber in Norway for education programmes, a playground at the Parliament of New Zealand, childcare facilities at the Scottish Parliament, and a substantial visitor centre at the United States Capitol that received 5 million visitors in just over two years.

Other parliaments have introduced measures to facilitate access for people who may otherwise find it difficult to visit the building for distance or financial reasons. The German Bundestag, for instance, has introduced travel subsidies and each member can invite 50 citizens from their constituency to visit the building twice a year.

Technology-based solutions such as virtual tours have also been made available by various parliaments. Initiatives like these give people the chance to see inside the building at a time and location of their choosing. They also show parliament as a modern institution focused on providing opportunities for the community to engage via the latest technology without the limitations of opening hours and the need to be physically present.

Parliaments can learn from each other about how to make their buildings more accessible to, and engaging for, the community. They can also learn from other institutions that are well-regarded within the community for the way they present their buildings and conduct their visits. The ultimate aim should be to provide visitor experiences that are memorable and inspiring, so that people are motivated to connect with parliament further.



Visitor experiences should be memorable and inspiring.



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



Azerbaijan. Students of ADA University visiting Parliament. © Milli Majlis of the Republic of Azerbaijan

Parliamentary buildings must be accessible to people with disabilities, who should be able to enter and move around the precinct as well as observe parliamentary business. This includes having hearing loops and sign language interpretation in the plenary and in committee rooms.

A long-term master plan can map out how the parliament building can be adapted for engagement and what technology and facilities are needed, including for community groups to showcase their activities to parliamentarians or conduct engagement activities linked to parliament.

3. Connecting with a diversity of people

3.1 Taking parliament to the people

Parliament is more than just a building in a capital city. It is a living institution. Increasingly, parliaments around the world have recognized the value of engaging with people in the places where they live and work. **Place-based public outreach** is part of a strategic decision to make parliament more inclusive and accessible to all sectors of the community.

Further reading – see the Annex

Thematic case study – Taking committees out of parliament to listen and engage

Taking parliament out to communities helps to remove some of the barriers to participation that people experience, particularly those in locations a long way from the capital city. It also addresses criticism that parliaments are too city-centric and do not pay adequate attention to regional or rural communities. This is important for maintaining cohesiveness between communities across a country.

In many jurisdictions, MPs' constituency or electorate offices are an important focal point for engagement between electors and their elected representatives. They are a hub for information-sharing, as well as a place where parliamentarians meet constituents in person and organize community consultations.

Resource constraints and electoral systems mean that not all parliaments around the world provide their members with constituency offices. One alternative is parliamentary regional or field offices. In Ecuador, Panama and Tunisia, for instance, multiparty constituency offices have been set up across the country to increase MPs' engagement with the public outside of parliament.

Where such facilities are not available, parliamentarians rely on existing community spaces or operate out of their own homes. Parliaments without the capacity to set up offices could consider pursuing alternatives such as shared facilities in existing local government premises, pop-up offices in local community settings, or digital engagement opportunities where technology-based solutions are viable.

Alongside constituency and regional offices, parliaments make their presence known within a community through

field hearings, education programmes, road shows and even parliament weeks. This sees parliament taken directly to the people, making it more accessible to the community.

Half of the respondents to the survey for this report said they held some hearings outside of parliament. The findings show that field hearings are more frequent in large countries where community members need to travel a long distance to reach the parliament in the capital.

Vladimir Filipović, Senior Adviser to the Foreign Affairs Department at the National Assembly of Serbia, noted that field hearings always involve local CSOs and local media, as well as meetings with government representatives in the area. This provides an opportunity to deal with local issues in the places where they are being experienced.

The visible presence of parliamentarians in communities is mutually beneficial. It enhances people's understanding of, and confidence in, parliament. It helps MPs understand their constituents' concerns. And it strengthens relationships between parliamentarians from different political persuasions, as they travel and work together investigating an issue.

The importance of field hearings and visits was highlighted by Ugandan MP Rosemary Nauwat, who noted during a parliamentary session that a visit to Moroto, a five-hour drive from the capital Kampala, enabled issues from that local community to be brought back to parliament.⁶⁶

This sentiment was echoed by Kakha Kuchava, then Deputy Speaker of the Parliament of Georgia, who cited the example of a culture committee visit to a local theatre that had fallen into disrepair. This first-hand experience of the problem ultimately helped bring about a resolution on the protection of national treasures.

Field hearings can also help to broaden the voices that are heard, and can even change the dynamics of how a consultation takes place. In the United States, for example, the House Agriculture Committee conducted a listening tour on a farm bill. Away from the formalities and time constraints of Washington, D.C., the process opened up. Instead of the usual 5-to-10-minute formal presentations by invited witnesses, community members could simply turn up and participate in an open mic session.

Examples from elsewhere show that engagement in the field – and away from parliament – can make a real difference to public understanding and perceptions of the institution. For women's group president Niumai Cavuliati from the village of Verata Wailevu in Fiji, **it was the physical presence of the Speaker during parliament's Meet the Speaker programme** that made a difference to the community's understanding of what happens in parliament and how parliamentary processes are conducted. Previously, they had been able to watch parliament on television but had not had its processes explained to them.⁶⁷

Further reading – see the Annex

Country case study – Fiji: Strategic engagement

⁶⁶ Parliament of Uganda, 2021.

⁶⁷ Parliament of Fiji, 2015: 2.



Engagement in the field – and away from parliament – can make a real difference to public understanding and perceptions of the institution.

Viet Nam. Members of the IPU Advisory Group on Health speaking with medical staff and patients at a health centre in Dien Bien Phu, Viet Nam. © IPU / A. Blagojevic.

Other examples reinforce the value of outreach visits in helping to build positive relationships between parliament and the communities they represent. In Botswana, the Parliament on Wheels programme takes parliamentary staff out to villages to explain the role of parliament, reaching people who otherwise may not get that information. And in Mongolia, parliamentary advocacy centres provide a structured setting for MPs to develop connections with community members, local administrative bodies and CSOs in a systematic way.

In South Africa, Tunisia and many other countries, “parliament weeks” see MPs travel to constituencies during set weeks. This measure helps to address past neglect of people in rural areas.

By taking parliament out to the people, parliaments can demonstrate that they are inclusive and accessible to communities throughout the nation. The survey conducted for this report shows that many parliaments already undertake a range of local initiatives. However, there is also evidence to indicate that such measures can be random, limited in their scope and reach, infrequent and not sustained over the longer term.

In order to be inclusive in their engagement, parliaments should clearly articulate how community members in regional and rural areas can participate in their democracy on a level footing with people living in the capital city. This includes setting specific commitments and targets to broaden and deepen parliament’s engagement through regular activities, programmes and consultations held locally.

By outlining an annual programme of activities in local communities, parliaments can demonstrate their commitment to engagement with people living outside the capital city. Institutions with limited resources could draw on examples

from other smaller parliaments and trial modest, less resource-intensive programmes.

Collaborating with local organizations and groups is also an important way to ensure that activities are suited to the needs and circumstances of each community. Using channels of communication commonly accessed by people living in remote or rural communities is a further way to ensure that information reaches them.

Parliaments can explore opportunities to bring people from rural and regional communities to visit parliament on a regular basis, with subsidies to support their travel (following the example of the German Bundestag as noted above). Institutions with lesser capacity for these sorts of initiatives could seek support from international partners to conduct programmes at the parliament that bring together groups of community members on an occasional basis, drawing on the model of women’s practice parliaments and youth parliaments in countries such as Samoa and Tonga. Even if resource constraints mean these kinds of events are not frequent, they can have a valuable ripple effect if they provide an engaging experience for people who otherwise would not be able to visit parliament. People returning to their local communities at the end of the programme can become informal ambassadors for parliament.

3.2 Making engagement inclusive

In a democracy, it is essential that everyone can participate and that no one is left behind. This principle is recognized in SDG 16. It also resonates throughout the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which promotes responsive, inclusive and representative decision-making that leads to effective policymaking in key areas such as reducing poverty, reducing inequality, and improving education and health care.

Inclusive public engagement requires parliaments to connect with the diverse range of communities across the country. Parliaments have a special responsibility to reach out to people who face barriers to participation or are underrepresented in democratic processes. Those that fail to do so are not speaking or listening to all the people they represent.

Traditionally, parliaments have focused their engagement on a general audience. They have tended to follow a one-size-fits-all approach, particularly when communicating with the community. Information has been made available through general publications or digital platforms such as websites.

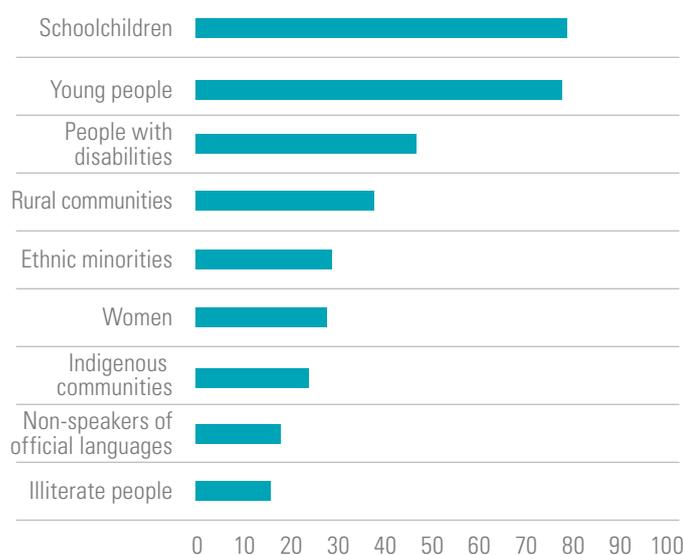
The survey undertaken for this report indicates that many parliaments have recognized the need for more targeted approaches to broaden their engagement and reach people who are disengaged. Christoph Konrath, a senior staff member at the National Council of Austria, made this very point:

There is a growing awareness about how to reach out to various groups and there are a lot of efforts to make our outreach more accessible and to draw on the experience we have gained through our very long history of engagement. We are using this experience to reach out to more and more groups.

Nearly half of the parliaments surveyed have programmes targeting women. A sizeable portion have initiatives for people with disabilities. And nearly 80 per cent have activities targeted at young people or schoolchildren.

Yet less than a third of the parliaments surveyed proactively target ethnic minorities, rural and indigenous communities, or people for whom the official language of parliament is not their first language, even though these groups are substantial segments of the population in many countries. The group least likely to be targeted is illiterate people.

Figure 8. Targeted engagement by parliaments



In countries where ethnic conflict has fuelled violence in the past, barriers to parliamentary participation can exacerbate or reignite existing tensions. Targeted public engagement by parliament aimed at diffusing previous animosities can help to bring people

and communities together. This point was emphasized by Jagdish Ayer, President of the Association of Youth Organizations Nepal, who noted that the "equitable and meaningful participation of all groups" can avoid "past mistakes that led to violent conflict".

Making public engagement inclusive has many facets, including using accessible language in communications. This point was emphasized by Alvaro Cabrera, Senior Fellow at the Office of the National Assembly of Hungary, who said: "It's always important to communicate in an understandable way with citizens."

Legislation and other aspects of parliamentary business often involve complex concepts and technical language. Parliaments can help to make the community better informed by translating this complexity into communications that the general public can easily understand. In one example mentioned in part 3 of this report, the Senate of Canada uses social media graphics to help explain bills in an easily digestible way. Ultimately, making information about proposed laws more accessible to the community contributes to more engagement in law-making.

Translating parliamentary information into various languages also helps to make parliament more accessible in countries with diverse ethnic groups. Padiphat Suntiphada, an MP in the Parliament of Thailand, pointed out that minority groups that use different languages can be marginalized and "feel that they are far away" if they are not able to access information or connect in their own language.

This can also be the experience of community members with hearing and visual impairments, who may rely on non-verbal communication. By making parliamentary information available in sign language or Braille, parliaments can reduce the marginalization of some community members who might otherwise be excluded or face significant disadvantage in participating in parliamentary processes. Some parliaments have gone further in tailoring their engagement experiences to meet the needs of these community members. The Parliament of Norway, for example, conducts guided tours for the visually impaired that involve touching objects in the parliamentary building, The German Bundestag, meanwhile, has created Braille labels and tactile models specially designed to accommodate visually impaired visitors. And in Australia, the Parliament of Victoria produces a regular video news bulletin about parliament in sign language.

These measures are all a step in the right direction and should stand as examples for other parliaments to follow. But individual initiatives only go part of the way. More comprehensive action plans to address the needs of people with disabilities would facilitate their full participation (as discussed in more detail in part 5 of this report).

Targeted engagement is not about favouring one group over another. Rather, it is about levelling the playing field. It provides those people who have faced disadvantage, who are in minority or who have been ignored in the past with the chance to participate on similar terms and with similar knowledge and understanding as those who have been at the centre of political discourse for many decades.

When seeking to reach diverse groups within a community, parliaments should use the methods of communication that they use. Minority groups, for example, may not be

consumers of mainstream media but might instead rely on media in their own languages or on community-based information services. The challenge for parliaments is identifying the appropriate channels of communication that can be used to reach specific audiences.

Inclusive engagement can also require specific support mechanisms for groups who face disadvantage. Barriers to access that prevent certain groups from participating can be addressed when planning engagement initiatives. For example, physical access arrangements for people with disabilities can be factored into events held at parliament. Measures such as captioning and sign language interpreters can be incorporated into parliamentary communications so that people with hearing impairments are able to participate. Targeted financial support can also be included in the mix of measures parliaments use to break down barriers to participation.

By measuring their engagement through the lens of an [inclusion checklist](#), parliaments can determine whether their activities and communications are accessible to people with disabilities, whether they cater for people who do not speak the official language with sufficient proficiency, whether they can be understood by people with lower levels of literacy, and whether they can be accessed by people with limited financial resources. By applying this checklist to their engagement activities and channels, parliaments can identify gaps and consider what measures are needed to address ongoing and systemic barriers to participation.

Further reading – see the Annex

Practical guide – Inclusion checklist

3.3 Ensuring engagement is gender-sensitive

Men and women should have an equal right to participate in parliamentary processes and structures without discrimination. This is a precondition for genuine democracy and a fundamental human right. In order to address the structural inequity faced by women and the resulting lower levels of engagement, it is important for parliaments to employ gender-sensitive engagement. The IPU's *Plan of Action for Gender-sensitive Parliaments* gives the following definition:

A gender-sensitive parliament is one in which there are no barriers – substantive, structural or cultural – to women's full participation and to equality between its men and women members and staff. It is not only a place where women can work, but also one where women want to work and contribute. A gender-sensitive parliament sets a positive example by promoting gender equality and women's empowerment among society both nationally and internationally.⁶⁸

For parliaments seeking to strengthen their relationship with their communities, it is crucial to strategically target women and to ensure that women's views are meaningfully included in parliamentary processes.

This report presents three key strategies for parliaments to engage more effectively with women, based on interviews with MPs, academics and community members. By addressing each of these priorities, as outlined below, within their engagement strategy, parliaments can make progress towards equal participation.

Institutionalizing women's engagement

The process of institutionalizing women's engagement involves not only targeting programmes and activities to encourage women's participation, but also mainstreaming women's engagement across the entire work of parliament. Referring to gender-sensitive parliaments, the IPU has made the following observation:

For many years, the responsibility of defending women's rights and gender equality in parliaments rested mainly on the shoulders of women MPs. We have now shifted the focus of that responsibility to parliaments, as institutions representing the interests of all citizens.⁶⁹

Research for the *Global Parliamentary Report* confirms that, in many parliaments, the leading role in promoting women's engagement still lies with female MPs or with dedicated bodies such as gender equality committees or caucuses. They help legislatures to ensure that parliament's procedures and outputs are analysed from a gender perspective.

In Sierra Leone, for example, a female parliamentary caucus was instrumental in raising awareness and leading action to address sexual and gender-based violence. Sexual offences legislation enacted by parliament reflected key concerns raised by members of the women's caucus, who also engaged local authorities and community members from six districts in a "16 Days of Activism" campaign, raising awareness of the newly adopted legislation and discussing implementation. As a result, members of the six participating district councils developed community action plans to address such violence.

Examples from various countries show that engagement conducted for women by women helps to build confidence, draws out issues affecting women and increases their participation. When women play a leading role, this contributes to more and better engagement.

At the same time, genuine gender equality cannot be achieved merely by relying on women MPs or increasing the number of women in parliaments. It also requires "looking at the institution itself with a critical eye, acknowledging unseen barriers that deter the presence of women, limit their participation or hinder progress towards gender equality, and then taking strong action to address these issues."⁷⁰

It is important that parliaments commit to gender-sensitive public engagement beyond dedicated committees and caucuses by mainstreaming gender-sensitive engagement across the entire parliamentary structure, including parliamentary committees.

68 IPU, 2017: 5.

69 IPU, 2021b.

70 IPU, 2021b.

One way parliaments can institutionalize the engagement of women in their work is for parliamentary committees to ensure that both women and men are equally represented among the experts and other witnesses at committee hearings. These contributors – whether male or female – need to be able to help parliament evaluate the effects of planned legislation on all sectors of society, in order to ensure gender equality.⁷¹ Parliaments can also aim for gender parity in participation at all levels, and have gender balance as part of the criteria when carrying out field visits, and when running specific programmes such as youth parliaments or on-site visits by students.

Involving women in all conversations

The second strategic priority to make progress towards equal participation is for parliaments to involve women in all conversations. Parliaments should keep in mind the fact that women make up half the population and are therefore affected by all the decisions they make. Women are not a uniform group in terms of interest or experience. They do not have a single identity and are not one-dimensional: they do not care solely about “women’s issues”. Harini Amarasuryia, an MP in the Parliament of Sri Lanka, emphasized this point:

There is an assumption that I, as a female parliamentarian, would be talking only about issues that are suitable for women, such as women and children. Whereas on the broader, harder questions, as it were, my opinion doesn’t really matter. I do bring a feminist perspective to everything that I speak about, but I’m not going to speak only about issues that are perceived to be about women. So I think that was something that I had to work on, to kind of make sure that I don’t get slotted into only speaking about certain things.

Her words speak to a global phenomenon: the relegation of women to conversations on certain female-focused issues. Meaningful public engagement requires parliaments to engage women on all issues under debate, from the economy and security, to health, agriculture and any other matter affecting the community.

Systematic, institutional connections with a broad range of groups – including national women’s machineries, gender and LGBTIQ+ rights advocates, civil society, private-sector organizations and academia – bring expertise into parliamentary processes and support MPs in mainstreaming gender across their law-making, representation and oversight roles.

Making public engagement safe and accessible for women

The third strategic priority relating to equal participation is for parliaments to make public engagement safe and accessible for women. This includes making engagement safe from a physical, psychological and emotional perspective.⁷²

Women can be encouraged to participate if their safety and responsibilities (such as childcare) are taken into account when deciding on the location and timing of activities. Women may also need financial support, for instance if they have

limited financial resources or need to access childcare or other services in order to participate.

Another consideration is whether the format of an engagement activity allows women to speak freely and openly, especially if a history of discrimination has made women hesitant to share their views and opinions publicly. Issues include who can take part, who leads the activity, what the rules will be on debate and discussion, and on photographing and recording proceedings, what support services may be required when discussing sensitive issues, and how the information gathered will be used. Research suggests that when a scientific conference is chaired by a woman, or when the first question is asked by a woman, other women are more likely to take part in the discussion.⁷³ Parliaments can investigate whether this also holds true in their activities.

4. Actively involving the community

4.1 Engaging on issues that matter

It is a simple but powerful truth that people care about the issues that affect them. Engaging with people on issues that matter to them can help parliaments remain relevant to the communities they represent.

If people are disillusioned with their elected representatives, disenchanted with public institutions and disaffected with political processes, they will look for alternative ways to voice their views and effect change that bypass parliament altogether.

Political activism on issues such as climate change has seen large-scale movements emerge at the grass-roots level. By engaging with and responding to public concerns about such issues, parliaments reinforce the perception that they are the locus of public debate.

One potential avenue is for parliaments to modify their existing procedures and processes so that issues proposed by the community can be discussed and investigated. By enabling community-activated pathways for engagement, parliaments demonstrate that they are taking an interest in topics that are relevant to the public, and that they are prepared to listen to people on how those issues should be addressed.

A petition system is one option. Some parliaments already refer petitions that gather enough signatures to committees for public hearings or to a plenary session for debate. Parliaments that do not have these kinds of processes could look at how they have operated in other jurisdictions, and come up with similar community-activated methods for debate and review that suit their circumstances.

As noted elsewhere, committees are a primary avenue for engagement between parliament and the community. When setting their agenda, committees have an opportunity to open themselves up to new ways of interacting with the public on topics that matter to them. Committees could, for example, host forums, round tables and workshops on subjects proposed by the community.

71 IPU, 2016.

72 IPU, 2019.

73 Salem and others, 2021.



Engaging with people on issues that matter to them can help parliaments remain relevant to the communities they represent.



Rwanda. Senators visiting senior citizens who were re-settled in modern houses in community settlements in line with the Government's policy to provide houses to elders and vulnerable citizens still living in scattered settlements or in high risk areas. © Senate of Rwanda

Committees could also use the information they collect from the community in more engaging ways. Traditionally, committees have used evidence from experts and community members only in the reports they present to parliament, avoiding any broader discussion of that evidence until the report has been published. More could be made of this information. Committees could work with parliamentary engagement staff to produce news stories, feature articles and videos. These could then be published via digital channels, such as parliament's website and social media pages. Community members whose evidence is used to produce newsworthy content will see that they are being taken seriously. At the same time, using evidence in this way can drive more public engagement, with information on the issues that committees are investigating presented to the public in ways that replicate other news content they would usually receive.

Committees can also embed community members within their structures and give them a seat at the decision-making table. An example of this approach from Serbia, as described in part 2 of this report, is the Green Chair initiative, which allows NGOs to participate in the work of parliament's environment committee.

Another way parliaments can connect with the public is by commissioning research on topics that matter to the community. Parliamentary libraries or research departments could carry out this research independently or in partnership with other research bodies, including higher education institutions. Traditionally, parliamentary researchers have focused on gathering information and examining topics to assist MPs in their legislative and committee work. The remit of parliamentary libraries and research departments could be broadened to include engagement with the community. In other words, they could prepare research material that

addresses issues of concern in the community and informs MPs about these issues.

Parliament could also organize forums and seminars on topics proposed by the community. This would give people from across society an opportunity to influence the issues that parliament examines and debates. Social media could be used to get the community involved more actively in such discussions and debates. Online forums broadcast through social media platforms, such as Facebook Live, can provide opportunities for interaction between MPs and the community. This could include mixed panels comprising both parliamentarians and members of the public.

Taking an issues-focused approach to education and youth programmes about parliament can also make the experience more interactive and encourage participants to explore the topic rather than simply follow a procedure. One example of this type of practice comes from the Parliament of Norway, which uses the DEMO simulation game to let students consider issues that matter to them and then simulate real-life circumstances in which they discuss and take action on these issues. In a similar vein, issues-based youth parliaments in Trinidad and Tobago give participants an opportunity to debate and come up with proposals to address a specific issue. The youth parliament held in 2020 focused on bridging the digital divide.

Community-activated pathways for engagement can allow parliaments to broaden and deepen their interaction, providing genuine two-way dialogue between electors and their elected representatives on issues that matter to the community. Drawing on the discussion above, examples of such pathways could include:

- a mechanism for community members to propose topics for debate in parliament, areas for investigation by committees and topics for research by parliamentary libraries and research departments
- news content published via parliament’s digital channels that either draws on community evidence presented to committees or is sourced from members of the community with expertise in legislation or public policy issues being debated by parliament
- forums at which both MPs and community members discuss topics proposed by the public
- interactive committee hearings and round tables at which community members can submit questions
- community advisory panels covering various topics, such as a panel of teachers and students to advise on the direction of parliament’s education programmes and resources.

These are just some of the ways that parliaments can empower people from across society to participate in their democracy. Enabling community members to influence the matters that parliament debates, investigates and researches gives the public a direct say in what parliament does and demonstrates its willingness to make engagement with the community more participatory.

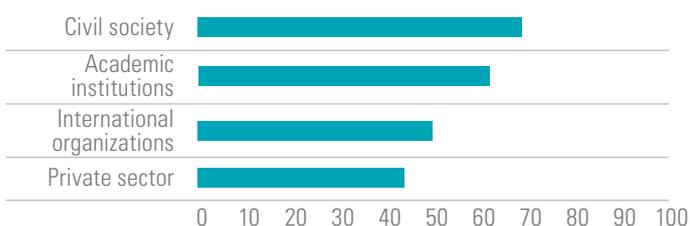
4.2 Collaborating with the community

Engagement shifts to a new level when parliaments collaborate with the community, working together to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes. This can also lead to co-creation that embeds the community in decision-making processes, so that solutions are designed with people instead of for them.

Collaboration can allow parliaments to access expertise and community members to interact with decision-makers. Limited resources can be used more efficiently, with parliaments and external partners setting up joint engagement initiatives rather than going it alone. A more localized focus to engagement can be another advantage, enabling parliament to benefit from local knowledge and allowing local communities to get more actively involved in parliamentary programmes and processes. Partner organizations that already have a membership base can connect parliament with new audiences.

Approximately 80 per cent of the parliaments surveyed for this report said they collaborated with external partners in one way or another, including with civil society, the private sector, academic institutions and international organizations.

Figure 9. Collaboration with external partners



Parliaments have embraced collaboration in various ways. The Parliament of Ireland, for example, runs an annual youth parliament in conjunction with a civil society group. In Trinidad and Tobago, a youth leadership conference was held in partnership with a women’s leadership programme and a network of legislatures. In North Macedonia, international organizations and CSOs jointly supported a parliamentary capacity-building project around strategic planning, human resource management and procurement. And in Latvia, an umbrella organization of NGOs worked with parliament to consider ways to enhance the involvement of such organizations in parliamentary processes.

The survey for this report also found that many parliaments are partnering with universities and other academic institutions on internship programmes, forums and research into key issues. Again, the benefits of this approach flow both ways: parliaments gain access to subject-matter expertise, while academics have their research used in public policy formulation and gain public exposure for their work.

Some parliaments are taking this approach a step further by experimenting with collaboration and co-creation in their legislative processes. [A case study prepared for this report points to examples from three countries.](#) In Argentina, the *Leyes Abiertas* platform, which emerged from joint work by the Chamber of Deputies and civil society, is used to publish legislative proposals, allowing MPs to see and respond to public comments and incorporate them into the bill. In Indonesia, a similar online tool, known as SIMAS, allows the public to comment on and make recommendations about bills. And in the United States, the House Committee on Natural Resources enlisted POPVOX, an existing online platform, to enable members of the public to make suggestions and propose edits to an environmental justice bill.

Further reading – see the Annex

Thematic case study – Collaboration in the legislative process

A slightly different example, this time from France, demonstrates how the community can be brought into future thinking on issues. In the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, a group of French parliamentarians launched a consultation process called *Le Jour d’Après* (The Day After). Via an open-source online platform, citizens could propose, deliberate and vote on ideas as to what should happen after the crisis subsided. A series of online thematic workshops were also held as part of the campaign.

Each of these examples shows parliaments being willing to trial new methods of engagement, by working with partners to develop new systems or by tapping into existing platforms. This openness to experimentation sets an example for other parliaments to follow as they seek to become more accessible to the community.

Although collaboration is a step forward towards more participatory parliamentary processes, it is fair to say that parliaments have only just dipped their toe in the water and could dive in further. Only through more experimentation can parliaments gain enough evidence to determine whether and

how collaboration and co-design with the community contribute to better decision-making and better legislative outcomes.

Parliaments looking to take a more strategic approach could develop a collaboration framework, setting out what their objectives are when seeking partnerships, what criteria they use to determine which partnerships should be pursued, and how the collaboration process is best managed for mutual benefit.

5. Taking action to achieve results

5.1 Mapping out a plan of action

There are many steps that parliaments can take to elevate and enliven their engagement with the community. Defining a strategy helps to set the objectives for engagement. Success, however, will depend on the actions that a parliament takes to achieve these objectives.

An action or implementation plan for public engagement maps out the specific things that need to be accomplished in order to meet the objectives that have been identified and agreed. As such, it is an important part of shifting to more strategic thinking. Such a plan outlines what tasks need to be undertaken, who is responsible for these tasks, who the intended audience is, when the tasks should be completed (the timeframe), and what specific results or outcomes are expected.

Responsibility for producing an engagement action plan rests with the parliamentary administration. It is an important administrative tool that supports a systematic approach to delivering an effective community engagement programme.

Developing the plan allows targets to be set. Targets work best if they are measurable, achievable, relevant to the result that is expected and tied to a specific timeframe. This will help to ensure that actions can be evaluated (as discussed in further detail below).

Another important aspect of the planning process for public engagement is allocating a budget to deliver the proposed actions. By costing out the various engagement activities planned for a specific time period, as part of the annual budget cycle, parliamentary administrations can set priorities for engagement.

Parliaments can also use the budget allocation process to make commitments to being inclusive. By allocating funds to activities and programmes for people who are disadvantaged or underrepresented, and for people outside the capital city and in remote areas, parliaments can ensure that those groups are prioritized for outreach.

5.2 Evaluating for better outcomes

Regular and robust evaluation is important for effective engagement, so that the reach and impact of parliament's programs and activities can be assessed in a rigorous way. Assessment criteria usually include relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability. Josephine Watara, Member of the Monitoring and Evaluation Division at the Parliament of Uganda, stresses that evaluation holds

parliament "accountable for the results that we see" and enables it to "learn from the implementation of the activities that we have actually completed."

As noted previously, 34 per cent of parliaments responding to the survey for this report said that they had indicators for monitoring and evaluating public engagement. This suggests that evaluation needs to become a higher strategic priority for parliaments, in order to ensure that their engagement is on track and continuously improves.

It is important to consider what will be evaluated, how and by whom. Clear lines of responsibility between parliamentarians and parliamentary staff are necessary. Often, evaluation will focus on the process rather than the outcomes, and as such can be undertaken by the administration.

Metrics need to be project-specific. This point was raised by Thomas Larue, Head of the Evaluation and Research Secretariat at the Parliament of Sweden, who explained that rather than using a generic evaluation manual, the parliament has evaluation principles that are tailored to specific projects.

Quantitative measures can include the number of people who participated in the engagement, demographic information showing the diversity of the audience by gender, age, location and background, and information about financial results. This builds a picture of who was reached and how much it cost to reach them.

Qualitative data speaks to the experience that people had with the engagement. This can include satisfaction rates, as well as information about what impact the engagement had on people, what they gained and how they intend to use the experience in the future. Qualitative metrics should also focus on what parliament gained from the engagement experience, and in particular on any changes that resulted from the activity. Feedback from community members is an important part of the assessment exercise.

A robust evaluation process requires appropriate systems for regular, consistent data collection, allowing trends to be analysed over time so that the longer-term impact of engagement activities and approaches can be assessed.

Just as an engagement strategy needs to be comprehensive, so does the evaluation framework that is used to assess projects and activities rolled out as part of the strategy. A comprehensive evaluation framework outlines:

- what indicators will be used to measure outcomes
- what statistics will be collected
- how feedback will be captured from participants
- when evaluations will be conducted (over what timeframes)
- who is responsible for conducting the evaluation
- how evaluation outcomes will be communicated, and to whom.

Since parliaments are devoting more resources to engagement projects and activities, evaluation has taken on more significance. Robust evaluation processes will help parliaments ensure that their investment is well-placed and is contributing to the expected outcomes.

Part 5: Future focus of engagement

In a rapidly changing world, parliaments need to be responsive, adapting and revitalizing their practices and processes to meet the challenges of the present and the future. Only by moving with the times can parliaments remain relevant to the communities they represent.

Parliaments have the authority and the opportunity to step up and be leaders in democratic practice. In many cases, tradition has served parliaments well by providing the foundations for stability and certainty. From that position of strength, parliaments can look for opportunities to renew and innovate, particularly in their public engagement, so that they are adequately prepared for the future.

As the *World e-Parliament Report 2020*⁷⁴ makes clear, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the modernization of parliaments has been rapid and dramatic. This situation offers a unique opportunity to accelerate and embed a more open and participatory approach.

This report serves as a clarion call for parliaments to be future-focused in their engagement. It recognizes that responsibility for this is shared. Elected representatives will set the example and lead the way through commitment and action, both individually and collectively through parliamentary party groups. But responsibility also rests with parliamentary administrations, which have the institutional knowledge and skills to work with parliamentarians to make change happen.

Part 4 of this report discussed various priorities that parliaments looking to broaden and deepen their engagement should address. This section outlines some key initiatives for parliaments to think about and act on. These will almost certainly raise a number of questions and provoke vigorous debate on the way forward. The hope is that parliaments will begin preparing themselves now to forge better approaches to public engagement and to remain relevant into the future.

1. Take youth seriously

Key objective:

Increase youth participation through bolder approaches involving young people

Young people are a growing proportion of the world's population. In order to remain relevant to this expanding group, parliaments need to connect and interact meaningfully with them. If this does not happen, a group that is vital to the future of our society could transition to adulthood without detailed knowledge of, interest in or commitment to parliament. This will have longer-term implications for public interaction with and respect for parliament.

According to United Nations figures from 2019, there are about 1.2 billion young people aged 15–24 years in the world, accounting for 16 per cent of the global population. By 2065, the world's youth population is projected to reach its peak, at just under 1.4 billion people.⁷⁵

Understand the youth of today

Today's young people are a digital generation, even with the effect of the digital divide. They are tech-savvy and connected through social media. Young people are more mobile than older generations in their social life, jobs and places of residence, and are eager to travel and experience new things. They tend to connect with global issues such as climate change, gender equality and racism, mobilizing to demand action on these issues. Their political activism is often focused at the grass-roots level rather than through formal, established channels.

Young people's lack of interest in the way politics is practised by older generations can be attributed to a number of factors. They feel that they are not being listened to and taken seriously, that their contributions are undervalued, and that they are being approached in insincere ways.

Impatient with and unmotivated by existing political processes, young people have shown that they are willing to do things their own way. Examples referred to earlier in this report, such as the Not Too Young To Run campaign in Nigeria and the UKYCC in the United Kingdom, demonstrate how young people are willing to take up a cause and challenge parliamentarians to bring about change.

Importantly, young people cannot be thought of as a single, homogenous group. They are diverse and have a variety of views and experiences that inform the issues that interest them and the ways they interact. It would be a mistake to think that young people only engage on "youth" issues. Young people have shown that they will take an interest in a variety of topics that impact them now and will affect them in the future.

Reimagining youth engagement

In the past, parliaments have tended to focus on educating young people about democracy and parliamentary processes. There is a long-established tradition of using school tours, role plays, student programmes, youth parliaments and competitions to teach young people about parliament and experience aspects of its procedures. From time to time, parliaments have also reached out to young people through workshops, forums and round tables, as a way to hear their opinions on issues being examined by parliamentary committees.

74 IPU, 2020.

75 United Nations, 2019a: 1.



Increase youth participation through bolder approaches involving young people.



Austria. Students participating in a democracy-workshop held on the occasion of the Fifth World Conference of Speakers of Parliament 2021 in Vienna. © Parlamentsdirektion / Michael Buchner



Chile. Workshop organized with civil society by the Bicameral Committee on Transparency to create the new rules on civil participation in the National Congress. © Parliament of Chile



Andorra. Plenary session of the youth parliament attended by the Prime Minister, the Minister of Education and the members of the Legislative Committee on Education. © Parliament of Andorra

Some parliaments have stepped up a gear and set up more in-depth programmes for youth. Examples include the internship programme at the Parliament of Ukraine, constituency youth councils in Canada and the Youth Select Committee in the United Kingdom. These are all welcome initiatives that give young people a more engaging experience of parliament through participation. But programmes like these are not widespread among parliaments across the world.

The time has come for bolder approaches that tap into the enthusiasm, energy and ideas of youth and that drive interest in and interaction with parliament. In order to connect meaningfully with young people, parliaments need to reimagine their approaches to youth engagement and co-design new initiatives for youth. Some proposals are outlined below.

Youth initiative:

Collaborate with young people to co-design a charter for youth participation

Parliaments can enliven their youth engagement by working with young people to co-design a charter for youth participation. Co-design is a collaborative process in which each group brings its perspectives and experience to the table in order to help identify and understand what needs to be done to get an outcome that satisfies the aspirations of all involved.

This sort of process is particularly important in situations where the power balance is unequal between the different parties. Through co-design, young people become equal partners in the planning of future interactions between parliament and youth. This is an entirely different approach because it puts the people who are the focus of the idea, solution, activity or project at the centre of the decision-making process. It recognizes that their lived experience is just as important as that of the decision makers or people of authority.

Co-design processes can help to ensure that all parties buy into proposed initiatives. This kind of commitment is a precondition for realizing genuine change and improvement.

A parliamentary youth charter, developed through co-design with young people, can outline:

- what principles parliament should follow for engaging with youth, in order to ensure that their views and opinions are sought, taken seriously and considered in decision-making
- how parliamentary education programmes and activities can be refreshed so that they align with contemporary educational philosophy around student voice and advocacy
- what methods, approaches and channels parliament should use to communicate with youth, and how young people can take a leading role in such communication
- what steps need to be taken to embed youth participation in parliamentary processes
- what opportunities exist for youth to gain real-life experience working with parliamentarians and parliamentary administrations on inspiring and forward-looking projects with tangible outcomes.

Empower youth

There are various examples of youth charters that have been adopted with the aim of improving engagement with young people and empowering them to participate in decision-making processes. One example is the Council of Europe's *Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life*, which includes the following statements in its preamble:

The active participation of young people in decisions and actions ... is essential if we are to build more democratic, inclusive and prosperous societies. Participation in the democratic life of any community is about more than voting or standing for election, although these are important elements. Participation and active citizenship is about having the right, the means, the space and the opportunity and where necessary the support to participate in and influence decisions and engage in actions and activities so as to contribute to building a better society.

...

Any policy or action designed to promote youth participation must ensure that the cultural environment is one of respect for young people and must also take into account the diverse needs, circumstances and aspirations of young people. And it must involve some element of fun and enjoyment.⁷⁶

Partner with youth

There are various ways for parliaments to work with young people on co-designing a parliamentary youth charter. These include:

- partnering with youth CSOs
- selecting youth delegates from the general population (e.g. through channels such as social media)
- inviting MPs to nominate youth delegates from their constituencies or regions.

Since young people are a diverse group, the co-design process must be inclusive. Factors to be considered include age, gender, educational background, socioeconomic status, disability and place of residence.

Target parliamentarians

Having parliamentarians involved in this process is vital, as it will show that young people are being taken seriously by elected representatives. Through a youth charter, parliaments can demonstrate their commitment to a two-way dialogue with young people. Parliamentarians with a large constituency of youth, who have experience working with youth or who are part of a youth caucus can be targeted to take a leading role in this engagement.

⁷⁶ Council of Europe, 2003.

Reassess education programmes

Youth interaction often begins with parliamentary education programmes. In order to implement a bolder approach to youth engagement, parliaments need to reassess the activities and resources they offer. As noted above, contemporary education philosophy emphasises student voice and advocacy. This thinking acknowledges that young people have unique perspectives and should have the opportunity to actively shape the way they learn and engage.

Parliaments looking to go down this path can tap into educational expertise in civil society by reaching out to teachers and academics who regularly work with students and are familiar with the curriculum. One option is to set up an education advisory panel to serve as an ongoing reference group for parliament in the development of its education programmes. Involving a selected number of young people in this panel would reinforce parliament's commitment to seeking youth perspectives on issues and processes that impact young people.

Promote a “for youth, by youth” approach

Another area for bold thinking is to consider the way in which information about parliament is communicated to young people. Youth-led communication would be ideal, where young people are provided with opportunities to work on specific communication projects and activities, such as communicating about the youth charter and any activities flowing from it.

Young people could be offered media and communications internships at parliament or, if resources allow, paid youth project placements with parliamentary engagement or education teams. This would provide work experience for young people, while giving them an opportunity to shape the way youth-focused information and activities are communicated to other young people.

Create a digital hub for youth

Parliaments could also work with young people to explore new digital platforms or hubs that would allow for greater interaction between parliament and youth on issues that matter to them. For example, the UNDP Bangkok Regional Hub is piloting a digital platform for youth conversations with country offices in Bhutan, Pakistan and Timor-Leste. The platform, which is currently under development, will enable policy ideas to be crowdsourced, support consensus-building on government priorities and help incite new ways of working. Online responses will be aggregated and analysed using machine learning. The platform will be powered by Polis, the open-source technology behind Engage Britain.

A digital engagement hub for youth, coordinated by parliament in collaboration with young people, would demonstrate a genuine commitment to youth participation. Developing the platform would be a valuable experience for the young people involved. This in itself is a driver for youth activation – building skills and having exciting opportunities to engage.

Reach out to youth groups

For capacity reasons, some smaller parliaments may be unable to develop a comprehensive charter for youth engagement. Yet there are still opportunities for these parliaments to take a bolder approach to their interaction with young people: they can collaborate with local youth groups to map out relevant and manageable initiatives such as internships, work experience placements and youth dialogues that provide engaging and genuine opportunities for young people to participate at parliament.

Seize a unique opportunity

In summary, developing a parliamentary charter for youth engagement would provide a unique opportunity for future-focused interaction between parliament and young people. It would demonstrate a commitment to listen, to work collaboratively, to take views seriously, and to make the changes that will enable youth to participate more meaningfully in parliamentary democracy.

An action plan flowing from the charter would translate good words into actual deeds. Progress would need to be evaluated regularly, in order to assess what works and to adjust approaches based on experience and feedback.

With the projected growth in the youth population globally, parliaments have good reasons to step up and deliver bolder and more effective approaches to youth engagement into the future. It is in everyone's interest to do so – because parliaments need to remain relevant to, and interact meaningfully with, the next generation of decision makers.

2. Leave no one behind

Key objective:

Make parliament more accessible to and inclusive of the whole community

Inclusion and equality are cornerstones of democracy. As noted earlier in this report, they are fundamental principles underpinning SDG 16, which calls for effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.

Make inclusion a top-order priority

Since parliaments have diverse audiences and limited resources, ensuring that everyone has an opportunity to participate and that no one gets left behind remains a constant challenge. Meeting this challenge means placing inclusion at the top of the agenda for engagement into the future.

Earlier chapters of this report outlined some of the ways that parliaments across the world have made targeted efforts to engage people who face barriers to engagement such as language, disability, remoteness or literacy. While these efforts have gone some way towards addressing accessibility, much more needs to be done if parliaments are to be truly inclusive.

Parliaments have a special responsibility to ensure that groups that are underrepresented, face disadvantage or are newly arrived in a country can be informed about and participate in parliamentary processes. Inclusion is not altruistic. It is a fundamental premise on which just societies are built.

In part 4 of this report, it was suggested that public engagement approaches can be measured against an inclusion checklist. Doing so will allow parliaments to identify gaps and barriers as they exist now. But in order to address any impediments moving forward, they will need to develop a clear plan of action on inclusion.

Lead by example

Elected representatives can make an important contribution if they lead by example. By opening themselves up to a diversity of views – even ones that do not accord with their own political stance – and by engaging with people with whom they would not usually interact, parliamentarians can make a powerful statement about inclusion within representative democracy. This is particularly important for parliamentarians from governing parties. Even though the majority can get its way, the minority deserves a say. Parliamentarians can also work to ensure that any parliamentary processes they lead, such as committee consultations, are inclusive.

Parliamentary administrations also have a vital role to play. They can assess all their activities and take action to address barriers and inaccessibility. Some proposals are outlined below.

Inclusion initiative: Create an inclusion action plan

In order to elevate inclusion to a top priority, parliaments can develop an inclusion action plan, working in collaboration with groups currently facing barriers to participation. A comprehensive plan would identify existing barriers to participation, outline actions to address those barriers, set specific inclusion targets, include quantitative and qualitative indicators against which outcomes can be measured, and assign responsibility for delivery of the plan.

Instil a shared commitment to action

Developing and implementing the action plan needs to be a shared responsibility. One option is to have a working group comprising senior parliamentary staff, a representative group of parliamentarians and relevant community representatives. Parliaments could also appoint an inclusion or disability adviser or advisory group to help guide this work into the future.

Priority areas to address in the action plan include:

- ensuring that information and communications from parliament are accessible to all
- making the parliament building more accessible
- providing opportunities for all people to access and engage in parliamentary events, programmes and consultations
- tailoring programmes and services to meet the specific needs of people with a disability or who face disadvantage
- building disability awareness and confidence among parliamentarians and parliamentary staff.

Another important step is to provide people with disabilities or who face disadvantage with a way to place their issues of interest and concern on parliament's agenda. New mechanisms for crowdsourcing ideas and policy proposals could be investigated.

Explore inclusion measures

Parliamentary committees are an important avenue for the public to connect with parliamentarians on issues that matter to the community. As such, they could be one place where more detailed work on inclusion could happen. Committees could carry out an inclusion assessment of their existing public inquiry and consultation processes, [using the inclusion checklist provided in the annex to this report as a starting point](#).

Further reading – see the Annex

Practical guide – Inclusion checklist

Based on the outcomes of this assessment, committees could develop a suite of measures that could then be embedded in parliament's general inclusion action plan. Specifically, they could look at:

- producing information about their work and consultations in the main languages used in the community (above and beyond the first language of the country), including sign language
- having a specialist advise on accessible ways to conduct public consultations
- enabling community members to make their submissions to public consultations in accessible ways, such as by recording a video in their first language (including sign language)
- ensuring that facilities and services are in place to make public consultations accessible to a broader cross-section of the community, including through live captioning of parliamentary broadcasts and using sign language interpreters
- establishing a mechanism that enables community members to propose inclusion-related topics for committees to investigate
- including an inclusion statement in committee reports, identifying how the processes for a given consultation or public inquiry were made accessible.

Address the gender gap

If parliaments are to become more inclusive in the future, they must also prioritize the equal participation of women and men. Parliaments need to step up to address the gender gap that still exists.

The IPU's *Plan of Action for Gender-sensitive Parliaments* is designed to support parliaments' efforts to become more gender-sensitive institutions. It offers a range of strategies in seven action areas that can and should be implemented by all parliaments. It also includes a self-assessment toolkit that parliamentary engagement staff can use to review the extent to which existing engagement approaches meet gender-sensitive criteria. Based on that self-assessment, a plan of action for addressing gender gaps can be mapped out.

Be accountable for action

To ensure the action plan leads to a parliament that is more accessible and inclusive, parliamentary administrations could look to make an annual inclusion statement on the measures they have taken and the outcomes they have achieved. This could either be incorporated into existing annual reports from parliamentary administrations, or take the form of a stand-alone statement presented to parliament or released publicly on parliament's website.

Prepare for community shifts

Understanding the make-up of the community now and into the future is an important part of being accessible and inclusive. When the demographics of a country shift, parliaments need to keep up with the changing profile of the community to ensure that they are informing, educating, communicating, consulting and involving in ways that meet the needs of various groups within society.

Today's seismic global shifts will impact many countries in the years ahead. Parliaments looking to become more inclusive will need to think carefully about how these changes will affect them and their interaction with the people they represent.

Adapt to the changing population

Although young people are a growing proportion of the world's population, particularly in the global South, people over age 65 are the fastest-growing age group in the North. Each of these groups will have different expectations and requirements for engagement that parliaments will need to plan for if they want to connect effectively with them now and into the future.

More than 3 per cent of the world's population, some 272 million people, are living outside their country of origin – a significant increase over the past decade. This includes a higher proportion of forcibly displaced people, and this share may rise even further with the disruption caused by climate change.⁷⁷ As a result, in many countries, there are large groups of people who were not born or educated there – people who may not be familiar with the parliamentary system, or who have fled conflict and consequently may be wary of public officials and authorities. Parliaments in countries with growing migrant and refugee populations will need to consider how best to interact with these groups to ensure they are able to participate effectively in the nation's democratic processes.

Another significant trend is that more than half of the world's population lives in urban areas – a figure that is expected to rise to 70 per cent by 2050.⁷⁸ This will also have implications for parliaments in their public engagement, prompting them to consider how best to interact with people spread out over increasingly sprawling cities. Public policy debates may shift as people moving into urban centres face different challenges to the issues that concerned them when they lived in rural areas.

Map out a community profile

By gaining a clearer picture of the profile of their communities, parliaments will be better placed to ensure their approaches to public engagement are inclusive. A community profile map can help parliaments in their planning and decision-making on public engagement priorities.

Such a map would provide a range of demographic statistics showing the make-up of the population by age, gender, locality, socioeconomic circumstances and educational attainment. It could also show the percentage of the population born locally compared to those born in another country. Importantly, through projections, it can provide a picture of how the population is likely to change in the immediate and longer-term future.

Armed with this kind of data, parliaments can make evidence-based decisions about their engagement going forward. They can move away from a one-size-fits-all approach to public engagement and improve the reach, relevance and effectiveness of programmes and activities.

Women and men, rural and urban dwellers, migrants and locally born community members may all have different preferences in terms of how they communicate and interact. By basing its planning on a more complete picture of the population make-up in its country, parliament can make more informed decisions about the engagement approaches it could and should be taking.

In particular, parliaments can more readily determine where they should be investing their energies and resources to ensure they are accessible and inclusive to the whole community by targeting groups that are underrepresented or disadvantaged. By preparing for the changes that are happening around them, parliaments can tailor and target their engagement to the communities that currently exist – and the ones that are emerging.

Tap into expertise

Research staff in parliamentary libraries or research departments can be tasked with mapping the profile of the community. In formulating its engagement strategy, the Parliament of the United Kingdom used its library researchers to map out the groups of people who were disengaged. Alternatively, parliaments could use external partnerships as a way to tap into research expertise at higher education institutions.

Learn lessons from civil society experience

For many years now, national and international civil society groups have devised their own methods and platforms for interacting with parliament and evaluating the impact of parliamentary business. In other words, not every initiative for interaction has to come from parliament itself. There is no need to replicate existing CSO-based initiatives. Doing so would be a waste of resources and, in all likelihood, counterproductive to ongoing dialogue.

⁷⁷ United Nations, 2019b.

⁷⁸ United Nations, 2019b.

Instead, when parliaments design their own channels for engagement, they should learn lessons from these initiatives, looking at what has and has not worked well, and what gaps exist. Parliament-led solutions should ideally look to fill these gaps.

3. Transform through technology

Key objective:

Enliven public engagement through a focus on digital interaction

New ways of communicating, learning and working are transforming society. In order to remain relevant in a rapidly changing and digitally connected world, parliaments need to focus on the best ways to harness technology to broaden and deepen their public engagement. With more and more people using technology in their daily lives, parliaments will increasingly need to address public expectations for more and better digital interaction.

In a 2016 article for the World Economic Forum, its Founder and Executive Chairman Klaus Schwab made the following observation about the impact of technology on government:

As the physical, digital, and biological worlds continue to converge, new technologies and platforms will increasingly enable citizens to engage with their governments, voice their opinions, coordinate their efforts, and even circumvent the supervision of public authorities.⁷⁹

Digital technologies are creating new spaces for civic engagement and participation. “With the rise of the internet and the various digital technologies that it supports and facilitates, there has also been an expansion with regard to the realms in which democratic participation and public debate can potentially take place,” noted communication scholar Mark Jacob Amiradakis.

Show the way

Many parliaments have been showing the way by implementing new digital tools for engagement. As noted in earlier parts of this report, parliaments in countries such as Brazil, Argentina, Indonesia and the United States have been using innovative online platforms to enable the community to comment on and make proposals in relation to legislation. Meanwhile, parliaments in Ireland, Japan, North Macedonia and elsewhere have used virtual and augmented reality to provide community members with interactive experiences from their homes, classrooms and workplaces, without the need to physically visit the parliament building.

All these new tools for engagement have opened up exciting opportunities to transform the way parliaments connect with their communities and conduct their engagement. Parliaments already using them have shown how technology can shift the scope of engagement, make processes more efficient, enhance the user experience and have a bigger impact.

But more needs to be done if parliaments are to benefit comprehensively from the interactivity offered through digital technologies.

Accelerate the switch to digital

The COVID-19 pandemic provided the impetus for parliaments to accelerate their digital transformation. As noted earlier in this report, when physical gatherings became unsafe, civic spaces moved online. Parliaments responded by switching to online tools to allow their processes to continue, including holding online committee hearings, allowing MPs to take part in plenary debates remotely and conducting student education programmes online. Evidence from various countries suggests that the public response to these online experiences has been very positive.

While digital technology became a more significant part of the engagement mix during the pandemic, parliaments did not move too far beyond traditional activities such as meetings, presentations, hearings and seminars. The focus was more about keeping the place going rather than opening it up further.

Parliaments in general did not seize the opportunity to do things all that differently or to go further in public engagement – a point emphasized by Michelle Volpin from Directorio Legislativo, a CSO in Argentina:

We thought it could be a really good chance for them to really rethink their internal procedures to enable civic space. Unfortunately, we didn’t succeed. So I think that is something we really need to push in the post-COVID era.

Sustain the digital pivot

The extent to which this digital pivot will be sustained is a matter of debate and interest for many parliaments. There is a general expectation that the digital shift driven by COVID-19 will lead to permanent changes in the way parliaments work. The National Assembly of Zambia, for instance, underwent a significant and rapid switch to remote working and expects to retain at least 85 per cent of these innovations post-pandemic.

There is a risk, however, that the digital engagement practices adopted during the crisis, which have enabled broader engagement, may not be used as extensively, or could even be wound back depending on the individual preferences of parliamentarians and staff. Parliaments could revert to more traditional in-person ways of operating, such as conducting committee hearings mainly face-to-face, which may limit participation by people more distant from parliament.

The contrary risk is that increasing reliance on digital communication and interaction will have a negative impact because it will remove or diminish the human element that is so important in engagement. If more and more parliamentary activity is undertaken online, this could give rise to perceptions of parliament being remote from the community. Dialogue online may not yield the same level of exchanges that can occur when people meet face-to-face to discuss issues and concerns. It may lead to more set-piece presentations by people when they engage with parliamentarians and less opportunity to participate in two-way conversations.

⁷⁹ Schwab, 2016.

When considering the best way forward, parliaments need to determine whether they are equipped and have the right structures in place for enhanced digital engagement in the future. These considerations heap additional complexities and pressures on parliaments already facing the challenge of dealing with the here and now.

For parliaments with limited resources and capacity, preparing for a digital future can be particularly challenging. Without support from the international community, the digital divide between big and small parliaments could well widen in the post-pandemic era.

Keep up with trends

Governments at various levels increasingly are using digital tools to seek the views of community members on a range of public policy and service delivery issues. If parliaments do not keep up with this trend, they risk becoming less relevant to the community.

If people can use platforms outside of parliament for civic engagement, and if those platforms are easier to use or are more popular than parliamentary channels, will the role of parliamentarians in bringing forward issues from the community and raising them in parliament be diminished? If external online platforms mirror parliamentary processes, such as petitioning, and do so in a way that achieves widespread community participation, do parliament's processes become less relevant? If the executive uses online tools to consult with people directly on policy and legislative proposals, will some of parliament's mechanisms for consultation, such as committee inquiries, gain less traction with the public?

Take bigger steps forward

Up to now, parliaments have only scratched the surface in transforming their public engagement through technology. This was pointed out by Thomas Gregory from the UNDP Myanmar Country Office:

I see a link between things like technological innovation and legitimacy, since [MPs] often have trouble understanding what the public wants, which is often reflected in the collapse of traditional polling. We still don't have tools that help us understand what people want, what they need and what parliament needs to reflect society.

Parliaments need to go further in being creative and innovative in digital public engagement. In recent times, the focus has largely been on cybersecurity. By directing more of their attention to the possibilities that technology offers, particularly for public interaction and participation, parliaments can work towards more dynamic digital engagement opportunities.

Digital initiative: Develop a portfolio of digital tools for interaction with the community

In order to keep up with the rapid pace of technological change, parliaments need to prioritize their own digital transformation, particularly in their approaches to public engagement. Across all facets of engagement – information, education, communication, consultation and participation – parliaments would benefit from developing a portfolio of digital tools to boost interaction with the community.

A comprehensive digital portfolio could include:

- mobile apps for easy access to a range of information
- electronic bulletins and videos for more engaging communications
- digital technologies at the parliament building to shape a more engaging visitor experience
- virtual and augmented reality to provide vibrant experiences of parliament and its work
- gamification to add a fun and competitive angle to learning
- live-streamed events that enable broader participation
- digital polling and surveys to gauge public sentiment and views on issues
- online chat forums for two-way exchanges
- crowdsourcing tools to solicit ideas and proposals from the community
- customer engagement platforms that provide a holistic approach to interaction with the community
- digital engagement hubs to provide engaging spaces for online participation.

Map out the digital future

Parliaments seeking to build a comprehensive portfolio of digital engagement tools will need a road map outlining major steps and key milestones. Experts in digital transformation could work together with parliamentary administrations and parliamentarians to map out the digital tools that would best meet parliament's engagement objectives and needs going forward. They could identify what digital tools are available and whether they are fit for purpose, or whether purpose-built solutions are needed.

Budget considerations will be an important factor in achieving the road map. Parliamentarians can work with parliamentary administrations to secure government funding.

Take a strategic approach

An audit of parliament's existing technological capacity, approach and culture can also contribute to the development of a digital road map. It could assess how effectively technology is currently being used to engage with people and how well digital engagement is integrated into parliament's broader ICT strategy. The assessment could also consider how parliament's digital engagement compares to that of other institutions. The overall aim would be to identify specific strategies that parliaments will need to pursue to become more digitally focused in their engagement.

Parliaments will also need to ensure that the digital tools they are selecting for engagement integrate with the broader systems they use for their day-to-day operations. By considering how digital engagement fits within their wider systems architecture, as well as their overall strategic planning, parliaments can make sure that their tools are not stand-alone and are sustainable in the longer term.

As with any planning process, priorities will need to be set. Some ICT initiatives will take longer to implement than others.

4. Encourage innovation

Key objective:

Become more innovative in public engagement

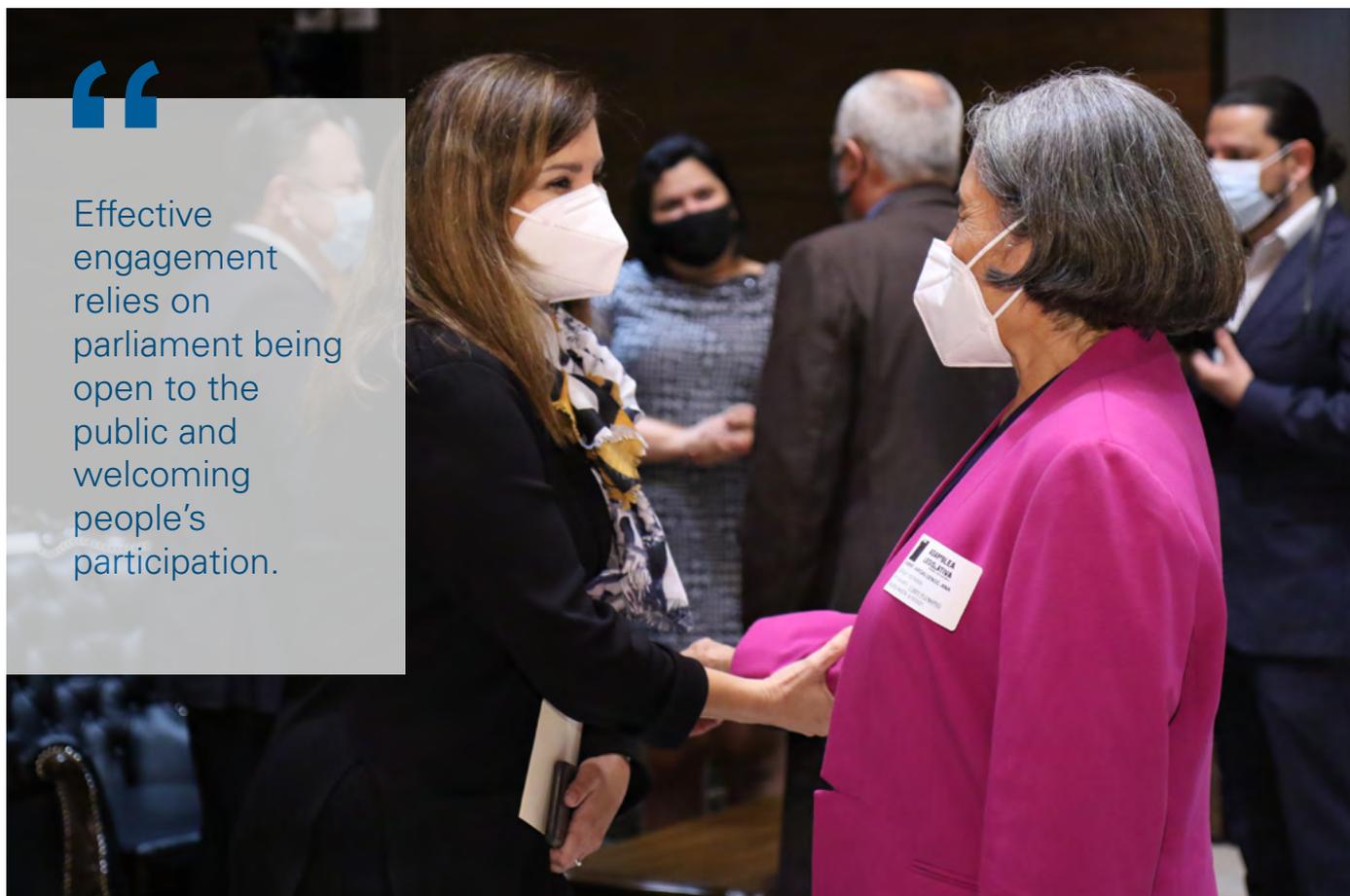
The rough and tumble of politics and the pressure to fix things now often means that parliaments are focused on electoral cycles. Yet people are demanding more of their parliaments and the pressure is on to develop longer-term thinking and be innovative in the face of mounting challenges. Parliaments cannot afford to be out of step with shifting community expectations if they are to remain relevant to the people they represent.

These changes were recognized in the *World e-Parliament Report 2018*, which noted that the public now expects ready access to parliament, just as it has to commercial brands and, increasingly, to other public services, and stated that “parliaments must innovate or be left behind”⁸⁰. Fortunately, the *World e-Parliament Report 2020*⁸¹ showed that parliaments are increasingly embracing innovation. More than half of parliaments have at least some form of informal innovation and 26 per cent have a formal innovation strategy.

Focus on a creative culture

The challenge for parliaments is multi-dimensional. Innovation relies on a creative culture, institutional mechanisms that foster forward thinking, and collaboration with people who have expertise in the tools that are making a difference in people’s lives. But parliaments are often conservative and tend to be procedure-bound. This can hamper innovation.

Effective engagement relies on parliament being open to the public and welcoming people’s participation. Openness also drives innovation by allowing for new ways of thinking, planning and working. It demonstrates a willingness to collaborate and co-create with civil society.



Effective engagement relies on parliament being open to the public and welcoming people’s participation.

Costa Rica. Unveiling of portraits of Beneméritos de la Patria “(Distinguished Citizens of the Nation)”. © Parliament of Costa Rica

80 IPU, 2018: 34.

81 IPU, 2020.

Switching mindsets – from the way things were done before to the way things could be done in the future – is not a straightforward proposition. It requires strong leadership and clear direction from MPs and the senior management of the parliamentary administration. In order to innovate, staff must be encouraged to seek out new ways of operating and translate their ideas into reality. It is also important to recognize that with experimentation and innovation comes the risk of failure. This does not need to be a bad thing if lessons are learned, and if this leads to better approaches in the future.

Innovation initiative: Set up an innovation task force

One way to bring about a transformative cultural shift in public engagement is for parliament to set up an innovation task force. This group could draw on expertise from across and outside parliament. It could assess and recommend ways in which parliament can harness new ways of engagement to improve connectivity with and participation by the community. Having people from across parliament participate in this task force would help to foster the culture of innovation and collaboration that future-focused thinking demands.

Boosting staff capability in innovation is also important, and this can be supported through appropriate training. In Bahrain, for example, the Council of Representatives delivers design-thinking training to its public engagement staff.

Lead the way forward

Parliaments can also set up formal mechanisms that enable MPs to work cooperatively in considering the administrative, legislative and policy levers needed to drive innovation. This can include innovating at parliament as well as leading the debate on innovation within the broader community.

In the United States, for example, the House Select Committee on Modernization was set up in 2019 to investigate, study, make findings, hold public hearings, and develop recommendations to make Congress more effective, efficient and transparent on behalf of the American people. Issues on which the committee made recommendations include streamlining processes, modernizing and revitalizing House technology, and making the House accessible to all Americans.⁸²

Another example comes from the Parliament of Finland, which has had a Committee for the Future since 1993. The 17-member standing committee of MPs serves as a think tank on future matters including science and technology policy in Finland.⁸³ Its mission is to generate dialogue with the government on major future problems and opportunities. In a report on crowdsourcing for democracy, the committee made the following observation:

Crowdsourcing offers exciting possibilities for democracy. Citizens can take part in brainstorming, discussing, developing, and even implementing decisions that used to be the domain of political and expert elites.⁸⁴

The report included a series of recommendations for more participatory processes in policymaking.

Each of these examples demonstrates that political will among MPs can lead to cooperative efforts to modernize and to advance future thinking for the benefit of the institution and the community. Parliaments could review existing mechanisms for MPs to contribute to parliament's modernization and the community's future advancement. Established institutional structures, such as current committees, could be used for this purpose, or new structures could be set up if needed.

A separate but related challenge concerns the growing complexity of public policy as a result of innovation. The application of artificial intelligence in various fields of human activity is a case in point. While parliaments may wish to engage the community on such matters – since they will impact people's lives – the number of people who will fully understand and be able to interact on such complex matters in a meaningful way will likely be limited. Parliaments will need to carefully consider how the community can be brought into these conversations, so that technology does not create a policy disconnect for the public.

Explore possibilities through collaboration

A hallmark of innovation is experimentation. Working with outside experts can help parliaments to explore possibilities for the future. Civic challenges, crowdsourcing of ideas, collaborative residencies and innovation partnerships are some examples of how parliaments can engage the community in future thinking, as detailed in the *World e-Parliament Report 2018*:

In such parliaments as the UK House of Commons, the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies and the US National Congress, staff have been learning how to tap into hackers' intelligence, versatility, creativity and boldness by collaborating through hackathons.⁸⁵

Having a regular innovation challenge, in partnership with CSOs, could be an exciting way for parliaments to engage their communities in some forward thinking. The challenge could focus on something that needs modernizing at the parliament. It could also delve into a broader community-based issue or problem, giving parliament an opportunity to lead innovative community thinking and discussion.

⁸² For more information about this initiative, see: United States Congress, 2021.

⁸³ For more information about this initiative, see: Parliament of Finland, 2021.

⁸⁴ Aitamurto, 2012.

⁸⁵ IPU, 2018: 34.

Drive innovation

The future should not be left to chance. The *World e-Parliament Report 2020* makes this case loud and clear:

*Innovation is not inevitable, it is driven. In the case of parliaments, the drivers are public pressure for openness and transparency and political commitment within the institution.*⁸⁶

By embracing innovation in their own processes and by leading public debate about the future, parliaments have an opportunity to present themselves as forward-thinking and forward-looking institutions. That can be beneficial for the way parliament operates and can be game-changing for how the community sees and values the institution.

5. Work together

Worldwide challenges, transient populations and digital technologies that penetrate national borders all point to a future in which the global community will be increasingly interconnected. This presents an opportunity for parliaments to cooperate and draw on each other's experiences, methods and solutions.

Learn from each other

Parliaments can benefit from working together and learning from each other to address similar challenges. The idea that no one should be left behind is an important theme repeated throughout this report. This principle applies to parliaments too: it is important for them to recognize that they are not alone.

Parliaments continually look to their procedural practice built up over many decades. The same applies to engagement: a considerable body of practice has emerged over many years, and there are public engagement practitioners working for parliaments across the world. Any parliament should be able to tap into this experience and expertise for ideas and examples of how to do engagement well.

Foster a community of practice

Parliaments can work together to develop and promote a community of practice for parliamentary engagement. This can take place between individual countries, regionally and internationally. A community of practice can involve information exchanges, online discussions and forums, workshops and even skills-development placements. This could be particularly helpful for smaller parliaments wanting to build their engagement capacity.

The IPU is committed to fostering this community of practice through a range of mechanisms and projects, including the Centre for Innovation in Parliament, which coordinates a range of decentralized parliamentary hubs where parliaments interested in subjects such as remote working and transparency meet to exchange ideas and good practices.

This report provides the impetus for broader and deeper engagement, including at the inter-parliamentary level. It will serve as a springboard for future IPU programmes and activities focusing on public engagement by parliaments.

Take action to boost participation

This report has outlined various measures that parliaments have been taking to better engage their communities. At the same time, it calls for action to broaden and deepen that engagement, with the clear aim of boosting public participation.

The recommendations outlined in the final section of this report provide a way forward for parliaments, parliamentarians and parliamentary staff to take the next steps towards better public engagement. By carefully considering these recommendations and thinking about how they can be applied at parliaments of all sizes, the global community of parliaments can come together to make a difference to the way everyone views and participates in parliamentary democracy.

⁸⁶ IPU, 2020: 77.

Recommendations

Top-level recommendations

Strategic: Embed a culture of engagement across parliament for a united and concerted effort towards broader and better public participation.

Inclusive: Make inclusion a priority so that parliament is accessible to all community members.

Participatory: Encourage people to participate in setting the agenda through opportunities to influence the issues taken up by parliament.

Innovative: Lead with bold and creative approaches that involve and inspire the community to engage with parliament now and into the future.

Responsive: Focus on meeting public expectations by listening to community feedback and continually improving.

Detailed recommendations

1. **Strategic: Embed a culture of engagement across parliament** for a united and concerted effort towards broader and better public participation.
 - Refresh and renew parliamentary processes to provide better opportunities for engagement, with MPs taking a leading role in opening up law-making and committees to more public involvement.
 - Make engagement a strategic priority for parliament and define, document and publish an engagement strategy through a co-design process that involves people from across parliament and the community.
 - Demonstrate leadership in public engagement, with MPs setting an example through their interactions with the community, and the senior management team in the parliamentary administration championing engagement throughout the organization.
 - Provide MPs and their staff with comprehensive training and guidance to help them elevate their engagement with the community.
 - Implement an engagement action plan that sets out a pathway to achieving results.
 - Increase investment in the professional capacity and skills needed in the parliamentary administration to build and implement a comprehensive engagement programme.
 - Activate staff across parliament to enhance public engagement in their areas of work and build their capacity to get involved and contribute.
 - Ensure that outreach, education and engagement are connected to parliament's digital strategy.
2. **Inclusive: Make inclusion a priority** so that parliament is accessible to all community members.
 - Implement a comprehensive inclusion action plan to eliminate barriers to participation across all facets of parliamentary activity so that all members of the community have equal opportunity to participate and no one is left behind.
 - Assess all parliamentary engagement through the lens of an inclusion checklist that ensures broad participation in programmes and activities based on factors such as income, sex, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability and geographic location.
 - Ensure engagement is gender-sensitive by mainstreaming women's engagement across the work of parliament, involving women in all conversations and making public engagement safe and accessible for women.
 - Make specific commitments to take parliament out to communities across the nation and set targets for such outreach to ensure a regular parliamentary presence in communities beyond the capital city.
3. **Participatory: Encourage people to participate in setting the agenda** through opportunities to influence the issues taken up by parliament.
 - Support processes that enable community members to propose matters for investigation, debate and research by parliament.
 - Use parliamentary committees to experiment with consultative and participatory processes that embrace community involvement.
 - Partner and collaborate with community-based organizations across the nation to broaden the reach of engagement and co-design processes that will open up parliament to new ideas and new ways of engaging.
 - Provide opportunities for the community to engage with MPs on issues that matter to the public.
4. **Innovative: Lead with bold and creative approaches** that involve and inspire the community now and into the future.
 - Tap into external expertise on contemporary approaches to engagement and how they could be implemented in parliament.
 - Implement a road map for digital engagement to advance connectivity between parliament and the community through new technologies, while ensuring accessibility and making sure no one is left behind.
 - Embed creative and forward thinking into parliamentary planning through an innovation group within parliament dedicated to considering new ways to engage and involve the community.

- Work with young people to develop a parliamentary charter for youth participation, with an action plan that sets out a more dynamic approach to youth engagement.
- Deliver memorable and inspiring visitor experiences at the parliament building that motivate people to continue engaging with parliament.
- Set a vision for enhancing visitor facilities and on-site engagement at the parliament building through a master plan that maps out ways to improve community access to the building.

5. **Responsive: Focus on meeting public expectations** by listening to community feedback and continually improving.

- Conduct regular focus groups with civil society to understand community expectations for future engagement.
- Establish community advisory groups to help develop good-practice engagement approaches that will resonate with the community.
- Participate actively in global and regional communities of practice where parliaments can share with each other and co-develop good-practice engagement principles and approaches, also drawing on relevant expertise from CSOs and other stakeholders.
- Consistently communicate the outcomes of engagement back to the community through a variety of channels.
- Create an evaluation dashboard that identifies which engagement projects, programmes and activities will be evaluated, the time frames for evaluation and the methods of assessment.
- Develop clear measures for evaluating the effectiveness of engagement projects, programmes and activities, and systematically collect data to support robust, regular assessments.
- Establish a reporting framework for engagement that identifies how, when and to whom evaluation outcomes will be communicated.

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Methodology and data sources

The report makes use of a wide range of data sources:

Interviews: Over the course of 2020, 136 interviews were conducted with parliamentarians and staff around the world. The interview sample was split almost evenly between male and female participants and was relatively balanced in regional terms (33 per cent from the Middle East, North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa, 33 per cent from Europe, 20 per cent from the Americas and 14 per cent from Asia and the Pacific).

Survey: A survey was sent out to IPU Member parliaments in the summer of 2020. Responses were received from 63 parliaments representing 69 parliamentary chambers. These included 27 submissions from Europe, 13 from North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa, 13 from Asia and the Pacific, 10 from the Americas and 6 from the Middle East. This imbalance is also reflected across different GDP size categories as defined according to United Nations standards (31 submissions from high-income countries, 18 from upper-middle income countries, 15 from lower-middle income countries and 5 from low-income countries) and population size (30 submissions from small countries (pop. <20 million), 20 from medium countries (pop. >20 million & <50 million) and 17 from large countries (pop. >50 million)).

We account for this in the analysis by including additional regional weights in all statistical models, as well as control variables for GDP and population size. Data from underrepresented regions is weighed more heavily in order to compensate for these imbalances.

Thematic focus groups: A series of four thematic focus groups (on youth engagement, CSO collaboration, COVID-19 response, and gender and engagement) were held during the autumn of 2020. They brought together a total of 28 participants from 21 countries, representing parliaments, CSOs, parliamentary strengthening practitioners and academia.

A further focus group for adolescent girls who engaged with parliament was co-organized in February 2021 with Plan International, with support from Child Rights Connect and Save the Children. At this session, young female activists from different countries shared their engagement experiences as citizens.

Written input from CSOs: Detailed written input was gathered from more than a dozen leading CSOs.

Advisory group: In the first half of 2021, monthly meetings were held with an advisory group of experts including parliamentarians, parliamentary staff, UNDP practitioners, academics and civil society leaders. These meetings further guided the development of the report and provided another source of input.

Throughout the research process, an emphasis was placed on gender proportionality. Among the adult interviewees and case study participants, 51 per cent identified as male and 49 per cent identified as female.

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Project management was led by Andy Richardson in cooperation with Charles Chauvel and Agata Walczak and with support from Irena Mijanovic. For UNDP, the text of the report was cleared by Sarah Lister.

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Parliaments participating in the research for this report

Below is a list of parliaments that contributed to the report through interviews, focus groups and/or surveys.

Country	Interview	Focus group	Survey
AFGHANISTAN			X
ALGERIA			X
ANDORRA	X		X
ANGOLA			X
ARGENTINA	X	X	X
ARMENIA	X		X
AUSTRIA	X		X
BAHRAIN	X	X	X
BANGLADESH	X		X
BELGIUM			X
BOTSWANA	X		X
BRAZIL	X		
BURUNDI			X
CABO VERDE	X	X	
CANADA	X	X	X
CHILE	X	X	X
CHINA			X
COLOMBIA		X	
COSTA RICA	X		X
CROATIA	X		X
CYPRUS			X
CZECH REPUBLIC	X		X
DENMARK	X		X
ECUADOR			X
EQUATORIAL GUINEA			X
FIJI		X	
GAMBIA	X		X
GEORGIA	X		
GERMANY			X
GHANA	X		
GUINEA			X
GUYANA	X		X
HUNGARY	X		X
ICELAND	X		X
IRAN			X
IRELAND	X	X	X
ISRAEL	X		
ITALY	X		
JAPAN			X
KENYA	X		X
KYRGYZSTAN		X	
LATVIA	X		X
LUXEMBOURG			X
MALAYSIA			X
MALI	X		
MAURITANIA	X		
MEXICO			X
MOLDOVA			X
MONTENEGRO		X	
MOROCCO	X		X
MYANMAR	X		X
NEPAL		X	
NETHERLANDS	X		X
NEW ZEALAND	X		X
NICARAGUA			X
NORTH MACEDONIA	X		X
NORWAY			X
PARAGUAY	X		
PERU	X		
PHILIPPINES			X
POLAND	X		X
QATAR	X		X
REPUBLIC OF KOREA	X		
ROMANIA			X
RWANDA	X		X
SAN MARINO			X
SERBIA			X
SIERRA LEONE	X	X	X
SLOVENIA	X		X
SOUTH AFRICA	X		
SRI LANKA		X	
SWEDEN	X	X	
THAILAND	X		X
TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO			X
TUNISIA	X		X
UKRAINE			X
UNITED KINGDOM	X	X	X
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA	X		
URUGUAY			X



Inter-Parliamentary Union

For democracy. For everyone.

 +41 22 919 41 50
 +41 22 919 41 60
 postbox@ipu.org

Chemin du Pommier 5
Case postale 330
1218 Le Grand-Saconnex
Geneva – Switzerland
www.ipu.org



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