



# Parliaments and Public Engagement

GPG's Guide to Parliaments series explores the key processes and functions of parliaments around the world. The Guide highlights the main elements relevant to the design and delivery of effective parliamentary strengthening projects. This note discusses the relationship between national parliaments and their citizens, and explores some of the ways in which parliaments can develop public engagement strategies and services.

## 1. Parliamentary public engagement: why?

There has been a growing recognition in recent years of the importance of parliaments developing an effective public engagement strategy for the institution as a whole, supplementing and complementing the work of individual representatives. No longer is the citizen's relationship with parliament seen simply in terms of voting once every four or five years. At a fundamental level, there are three reasons why parliaments are wise to develop strategies to engage effectively with their citizens between elections.

Firstly: the **legitimacy** of any parliament depends on the support and engagement of its electorate. Representation of the people is the basis of a parliamentary system. If people feel disconnection from parliament, or simply fail to see that it is at all relevant to their lives, why would they bother to vote at elections? Low voter turnout, and scepticism towards politics generally, are part of a general trend of decline in confidence and trust in political institutions. Supported by the opportunities afforded

by digital media, members of the public are increasingly turning to citizen action on single issue politics, rather than embracing the traditional structures of political parties and parliamentary processes.

Secondly: the **quality** of legislation and policy is improved if it is informed by citizens' concerns, experiences, and views. The scrutiny role of parliaments – tracking and challenging the executive's performance – can positively influence national policies, priorities and development goals, and ensure that they meet the needs of the people.

And thirdly: a parliament that is seen by its citizens to be connected and responsive to their concerns is more likely to earn the **trust** of the people. If citizens understand the vital role the legislature plays in representing and championing citizens' rights and concerns, they will be more likely to value the institution and its work.

## 2. What do we mean by public engagement?

The term "public engagement" can cover a wide range of communication activities: from straightforward awareness raising, information, visits programmes, and education initiatives; through two-way consultation activities; to more empowering citizen participation and decision-making opportunities. In parliamentary terms, this can mean anything from reading a leaflet explaining how laws are made, through submitting a petition to parliament or giving views to a committee inquiry, to having direct input to bills being passed.

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Concepts such as a participation ladder or an engagement pyramid are sometimes used to illustrate engagement as a series of steps: from a fairly passive public, receiving information, through increasing levels of citizen involvement and power.<sup>1</sup> This metaphor is useful, but imperfect, as it implies that citizens first need to be informed and educated about parliament in order to be able to give meaningful input on specific issues being debated in parliament. In the case of committee inquiries, for example, gathering evidence about the impact of laws on those affected will add weight to a committee's recommendations and report, whether the individuals understand parliamentary procedure or not. Furthermore, the implied linear progression can also be challenged, as many parliamentary systems (including the UK) had public participation via petitions and committees long before the more recent significant developments in parliamentary education and outreach activity. Neither is there any firm evidence suggesting that increased levels of knowledge necessarily lead to active participation. The ladder concept is helpful, however, in considering the increasing levels of active public participation, from the passive receipt of information, through consultation/collaboration, to more active input into parliamentary business.

Parliaments which have developed public engagement strategies have typically developed services such as:

- information services on parliamentary business and how parliament works
- education services aimed specifically at schools, colleges, and higher education
- media, press, communication and broadcasting services
- visitor services, facilitating access and tours of parliament
- committee engagement teams
- online and digital engagement services
- regional outreach services, working across the country
- other engagement activities - such as events, exhibitions, campaigns, etc.

What public engagement services a parliament offers, and how extensive they are, will depend on many factors including the resources available, and the maturity and priorities of the institution.

Of course, the elected representatives of most parliaments would point out that they engage with the public and conduct parliamentary

public engagement and outreach all the time, through their links with their constituents.<sup>2</sup> But elected representatives can also be – and, it could be argued, need to be – supported by the parliamentary administration in this role. By adopting a coherent approach and facilitating engagement with parliament as a whole, the efforts of individual representatives are complemented and supported, the overall impact being greater than the sum of the parts. There is a high degree of confusion in the public between parliament and government and their respective roles. Building a strategy around the institution of parliament can help highlight its scrutiny role in relation to the executive, and present the legislature as the forum for national debate, championing concerns of citizens.

### 3. Parliamentary outreach

In addition to education and information initiatives, the concept of “outreach” is now being recognized as a vital ingredient in effective citizen engagement – going out and engaging with people where they are, on their terms, on issues which are of concern to them, and in language that makes sense to them. That parliaments should be open and accessible to their citizens is a generally accepted principle, supported by international initiatives such as the open parliaments, open government partnership, open data, and transparency movements. Whatever public engagement services a parliament offers, however, there is increasing recognition that while it is important to open parliament up – be it physically, by welcoming people into the parliamentary building and proceedings, or virtually, by publishing/broadcasting all proceedings and inviting citizen input to parliamentary business – this is not, in itself, sufficient. Citizens care about issues, want their voices to be heard, and want to bring about change. Yet parliaments' communications traditionally tend to be organised around internal procedures. The key is to turn communication inside out, and view things from the citizen's viewpoint, not parliament's.

Many parliaments now work with civil society groups, cognizant of local issues and customs, with a view to establishing long-term strategic links and partnerships, and helping identify entry points for participation in parliamentary business. Outreach staff can help link public debate of issues happening in external forums into relevant parliamentary activity. They can also help citizens navigate

between the different layers of government, local and national. Some parliaments have established physical offices in the regions (for example,

), some have mobile information buses (such as the ), and others (such as the UK Parliament) have who live and work in different regions of the country but have no physical offices there.

There are some best practice outreach principles which have emerged, which help to build effective relationships with civil society:

- Go to where people are (geographically, and digitally)
- Engage on specifics, issues that people care about
- Get to know regional/sector networks
- Seek out strategic partnerships
- Use trusted intermediaries/influencers
- Use communication channels and language appropriate to audience group
- Employ the “multiplier effect” (for example, training teachers or “train the trainer”)
- Identify appropriate parliamentary entry points
- Help bridge the gap between citizens and parliamentary processes

While outreach may be set up as a specific parliamentary service, it is, in fact, more of a mind-set that parliamentarians and parliamentary staff need to develop. The existence of an outreach team within a parliament can be a valuable catalyst for improving relations with the public. Ultimately, the goal is that everyone comes to regard public engagement as a core part of their job, not an optional extra tacked onto to official business and delivered by a separate team.

#### 4. Opportunities for public participation

Beyond being open and accessible, how can parliaments open up their proceedings in a meaningful way to citizens? This is the real challenge, and may require political will to review rules of parliamentary procedure where they are creating barriers. However, there are generally ways in which links can be made with civil society within existing rules and standing orders.

Many parliaments provide public stages in the **legislative process** and in **committee proceedings**. Outreach services can help

make these stages work in a meaningful and beneficial way, and, using their knowledge of regional networks, bring in voices of underrepresented and marginalised groups. (Committees generally provide a valuable entry point for citizen participation, and are discussed separately below).

Many parliaments also have **petition systems** - paper and/or electronic. With appropriate resourcing to manage the process and ensure follow-up is provided, these can be useful mechanisms for citizens to raise issues, getting their concerns raised in parliament, feeding into the national debate and potentially bringing about change. Satisfaction for petitioners is not necessarily that they achieve their own personal preferred outcome, but that they are content the process was fair and their views were considered in the debate.

There are examples of more deliberative **public consultation mechanisms** set up to provide an outcome which is more collaborative or co-creative, such as citizen assemblies/juries and constitutional conventions. Such forums are often initiated by the executive arm or by civil society groups, but a parliamentary example is the (2012) which was a decision-making forum of 100 people, made up of 66 citizens, randomly selected and broadly representative of Irish society, and 33 parliamentarians, nominated by their respective political parties and including an elected representative from each of the political parties in the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Concern about young people’s disengagement with politics has led to the establishment of special parliamentary programmes for schools, colleges and universities. In many countries there are **youth parliaments**, and there are also international youth forums to encourage political engagement and empowerment. A good example of young people participating in the political process, is the

, where the House of Commons supports a committee of young people to run a subject inquiry along the same lines as a formal committee of the House. The committee calls government ministers and other experts to hear their views; transcripts are produced by House staff; a report with conclusions is published and sent to the government; and the government has agreed to respond.

## 5. Role of committees in engagement

Parliamentary committees provide a useful entry point for citizens to get their voices heard in parliament. Highlighting the work of committees is also a good way of explaining parliament's scrutiny function, and it is often easier for the public to engage with committees than with a legislature as a whole. Why? Because people are interested in issues, not process.

For parliamentary committees to be influential and achieve results, their work needs to be well-informed and their reports backed up by evidence. It takes conscious effort to go beyond an invitation to submit views, and ensure that interest groups do not dominate. The quality of a committee's analysis and recommendations will be improved if the committee has engaged effectively with the range of different viewpoints on the subject, including – crucially – ordinary citizens. And the committee's reputation and influence will be enhanced if this is seen to be the case.

There are many opportunities for committees to engage with the public during the course of a subject inquiry:

- Selecting inquiry topic
- Launch of inquiry
- Gathering evidence
- Launch of report
- Follow-up and ongoing communication

Parliaments which conduct post-legislative scrutiny – examining the consequences of the implementation of legislation – can really benefit from the experience of citizens to help improve policy and legislation. (For further information, see GPG's Guide to Parliaments Paper 8 on ).

### Committee communication methods

There are many different communication methods committees use to involve the public.

Formal **evidence gathering sessions** are fairly well-established in many parliaments: committees receive written submissions, and hold oral evidence sessions where they can ask questions to the authors of particular submissions. However, such sessions can be intimidating, and may not reach out to certain sectors, potentially missing out on useful experiences. So many committees look

beyond the formal evidence mechanisms to try to engage more effectively and get a wider and richer range of views. Some committees accept not just written but also **video submissions**. Feedback can also be gathered via **surveys, questionnaires, and deliberative polls**. Committees can be creative around how to use written, face-to-face, and digital communication methods to gather a range of information and opinions from a wide range of viewpoints.

**Committee visits** to organisations or areas affected by the policy, and other outreach events, can be valuable as fact-finding exercises. They can also serve as a powerful message, that parliament is going out to the people to understand their concerns on the ground. Such visits might also be picked up by the media, helping to raise awareness around the issue.

Other **face-to-face techniques** include open public meetings, seminars and workshops with invited groups and individuals, attending meetings set up by other organisations (e.g. residents'/citizens' associations), smaller managed focus groups, and structured interviews. Transcripts of face-to-face interviews, and working through trusted intermediaries/rapporteurs can help overcome challenges of literacy, language or culture.

Parliaments generally, and their committees, are becoming much more savvy at using **digital channels and social media tools** to engage better with citizens. Online discussion forums have been hosted, on committee webpages and on online community websites. Of course, different national contexts will determine what is possible in terms of communication methods, particularly around resources, digital access, and literacy levels. (See section 6 below for further discussion of digital engagement).

### Closing the feedback loop

When committees do engage with the public, it is particularly important to keep in touch with those who contributed and to provide information on the outcome. If people take time to participate, they need to know that their voice has been heard, even if the resulting legislation, committee conclusions, or debate on a petition does not support their particular point of view. Publishing submissions, notes of visits/meetings, or lists of people submitting views can help to

show the range of views received. It is also good practice on publication of a committee report to communicate with all those who contributed to the inquiry, and indeed, to use the publication as a further opportunity for public – and media - engagement.

## 6. Digital engagement

Developments in digital technology have given more scope to parliaments to involve citizens in parliamentary business through activities including: online consultations and forums; e-petition systems; discussion threads on different social media platforms and on issue-based third-party websites; digital debates running alongside parliamentary proceedings; and Twitter hashtags gathering questions to be put to government ministers. The Brazilian Parliament has an online portal where citizens can contribute to legislative initiatives and parliamentary debates.

There is great interest in how technology can facilitate citizen input to policy, and there are examples of platforms and experiments, mainly arising from civil society organisations or the executive arm of government. Examples include (Germany), (Chile/US) and the EU funded project. Online public forums are also used at local government and city council level, some of which use digital democracy to give a real voice to citizens in decision-making, such as the initiatives in and . In some countries, political parties have formed which champion digital platforms to allow citizens to practise direct democracy, e-voting on legislative issues in the parliament, such as the (the “Net Party”) in Argentina.

Parliamentarians, and traditional political parties, may feel under threat from experiments in direct democracy, but they could benefit from embracing and exploring such technologies and investigating how they could be incorporated into the procedures of a representative system of democracy.

## 7. Developing a public engagement strategy

It is likely that there are many instances of public engagement being carried out in different pockets across a parliament, even if they are not so named. How would a parliament go about developing an overarching public engagement strategy for

the institution as a whole, to coordinate and enhance this work?

There is no “one size fits all” parliamentary public engagement strategy template. Circumstances and context will have a significant and fundamental influence on what sort of parliamentary public engagement is effective or even possible. Different political, social, economic, cultural, and geographical contexts will also have an impact, as well as practical issues such as communications technology and infrastructure, education and literacy rates, resource constraints (financial staff, staff skills and capacity). But it is mistaken to think of public engagement as a luxury, or an “add-on”, that only long-established, well-developed democratic institutions can afford. Parliaments, and parliamentary public engagement strategies, can play a positive role in conflict resolution, national dialogues, post-conflict situations, and in addressing key national priorities.

To be most effective, a public engagement strategy has to be developed at an institutional level – the process and method of its development being a vital stage of the strategy. It has to have support at the highest level, on both the political side (Speaker / Presiding Officer) and the administration side (Secretary General / Clerk), who need to show strong leadership on the vision and objectives. It has to be shared widely and adopted throughout the institution.

A public engagement strategy will probably cover a five year period or thereabouts, and will be accompanied by an action plan looking two to three years ahead, being more detail for the current year, and sketched out at a higher level for subsequent years. As the strategy is implemented, it will of course evolve and develop.

While each strategy will therefore be unique, there are some common elements and basic principles, and there are now many examples of best practice and innovative activity from parliaments around the world. A public engagement strategy shares common features with a strategic communications plan, and will typically incorporate:

- Overall vision
- Specific objectives
- Key messages
- Audience and stakeholders
- Activities
- Resources and priorities
- Evaluation

- Communication channels
- Action plan

This general checklist is expanded with some typical examples in the appendix.

## 8. Conclusion

An effective parliament is attuned to the experiences of its citizens and acts as their advocate: overseeing and challenging the policies, priorities and performance of the government. An effective parliament needs the support of its citizens, for reasons of social accountability and legitimacy. And creating strong connections between parliament and the people will also help improve the relevance and quality of a parliament's legislative and scrutiny work. To be regarded as irrelevant by its citizens is perhaps the sharpest attack on a parliament's legitimacy.

## About the Author



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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Shelley R Arnstein, working in the US Department of Housing Education and Welfare, is generally regarded as the first author to identify citizen engagement as a series of steps on a ladder in 1969: Arnstein, S.R. (1969), "A Ladder of Citizen Participation", *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 35 (4): 216-224

<sup>2</sup> The NDI has recently published a manual with Moroccan elected representatives on constituency outreach for Members, available in English and Arabic -

## Appendix - Creating a public engagement strategy: checklist

### Overall vision

What is the strategic vision or ambition of the organisation as a whole? How does the parliament wish to be regarded? This needs to be a clear statement, succinctly expressed. It will be aspirational and reflect current priorities. As such, the vision statement may change over time. Think what words and phrases you want to be associated with the parliament. Examples:

- *The public recognise the important role that parliament plays representing citizens' priorities and holding the government to account.*
- *Citizens value the work of the Parliament in developing the national economy, improving living standards, and achieving sustainable development goals.*

### Specific objectives

Having established a strategic vision, think about ways of getting there. What, specifically, will you do to work towards the vision? What do you want to achieve at this stage? Select a realistic number of key objectives. Examples:

- *Make parliament feel more open and accessible*
- *Improve online presence*
- *Establish stronger links with regions/civil society groups*
- *Produce better information about what parliament is doing*
- *Conduct more public consultation (doesn't happen as often as it should)*
- *Make consultations more effective (in terms of quality of output? reach? or impact?)*
- *Highlight proven impact on government priorities/direction*
- *Improve relations with media*
- *Improve political literacy education in schools*
- *Improve the level of voter registration*

### Key messages

Create two or three key messages that express the ambition and encapsulate the vision and objectives in short, easy phrases and in plain language. Communicate these key messages among elected representatives and staff. Repeat the messages often and consistently in communications. Examples:

- *Parliament works on behalf of all citizens*
- *Parliament is the heart of our democracy*
- *Parliament is open to citizens and welcomes your views*

### Audience and stakeholders

"The public" is actually many publics, many different audience groups. Who do you want to reach? Are some audiences more important than others in achieving your objectives? What information/research can help you decide? Decide who your priority audience groups are. Examples:

- *young people (school pupils)*
- *campaigning citizen groups*
- *international community*
- *businesses*
- *families*
- *older people*

Are there other stakeholders you need to consider and encompass? (e.g. the media, political parties, international community, senior political/administration bodies)

### Activities (or Milestones)

Have a longlist of desired activities, with rough costings. All activities should be aligned with your strategic goals, be aimed at your agreed audience groups. If they are not, why do you want to do them? Examples:

- *Produce resources for a political literacy programme in schools*
- *Committees to hold three public consultations each session*
- *Pilot a new online discussion forum for a key bill*
- *Establish a (school) visits programme to parliament*

- Roll out public awareness campaigns about parliament's work
- Procure a new website
- Launch a "Democracy Day" (or "Parliament Week") campaign

#### □ Resources and priorities

You will already have a rough idea about what activities you want to undertake. Be clear about how much budget is available, and what staff resource and skills are available. You will no doubt end up with too much to do, so you will have to prioritise. Example questions to help with prioritisation:

- Which audience groups are most important?
- Are there any quick wins that will help create impetus?
- Are there any activities that will play particularly well with budget holders and help secure more funds in future?

#### □ Evaluation

Often forgotten, and often the most difficult to get right – think about data analytics and evaluation in advance. Evaluating your activities not only ensures you get value for money, but also helps build the case for maintaining/increasing the budget in the future. Questions to consider:

- How are you going to judge whether your activities were effective?
- What data are you going to collect about participants?
- Can you get qualitative and quantitative data?
- Consider a before and after survey?
- In-depth follow up interviews with a selection of participants?
- Are there official sources of data/statistics that you can track over time?

#### □ Communication channels

The audience you are trying to reach will dictate what communication channels will work best. Plug into existing networks, forums, and discussions. Use the communication channels, terminology and language appropriate to the audience group. Evaluate how successful the channels were. Some examples of communication channels:

- Face to face: open meetings, structured interviews, visits, focus groups, seminars and workshops, deliberative discussions, attending meetings/groups set up by other organisations (e.g. residents associations)
- Print: information leaflets, guides to parliamentary business, surveys, questionnaires, teaching resources for schools, opinion polls, public consultations
- Digital: parliamentary website, broadcasting media, television and radio, videos, community websites and discussion forums, social media

#### □ Action plan

The activities and evaluation sections then become your working action plan: more detailed for the first year, higher level for subsequent years. The plan will set out clearly: the activity and the goal it relates to; the audience it is aimed at; the timescale; the person responsible; the targets (from the evaluation work); and the desired outcome.

#### □ Some final thoughts

Provide **strong leadership and guidance on the big things** – vision, objectives, outcomes – but let go of control around the detail. Leave that to staff close to the services and audience. A rigid process will not be effective. Different things will work better in different sectors/regions/contexts.

Encourage a sense of **experimentation and innovation**. Pilot/test ideas, iterate, "fail fast", adapt.

**Collaborate internally and externally**. Internally, involve members and staff – public engagement is part of everyone's job. Externally, go to where people are, build partnerships and use trusted intermediaries.

**Let good practice shine through and celebrate successes**. Be bold drawing attention to effective practice. Learn from what doesn't work ("no blame").

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