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REPORTS ON RECENT IPU SPECIALIZED CONFERENCES AND MEETINGS

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Modern information and communication technology (ICT) is essential to democracy and development. It can play a very important role in ensuring that parliament and political processes are accessible to the public and that people can influence political decisions. ICT is central to ensuring that work carried out in parliament is effective, transparent and accessible and parliament and parliamentarians are accountable to the public.

Yet, there is a substantive gap in most parliaments between what is possible to achieve with ICT and what is being accomplished. Lack of resources is one cause of this problem. An absence of clear understanding among parliaments of what can actually be achieved is another. This has implications not only for the efficiency of parliamentary operations, but also for the quality of relations between parliament and citizens and therefore also of democracy itself.

The third World e-Parliament Conference, held in Washington, D.C., from 3 to 5 November 2009, and hosted by the U.S. House of Representatives, addressed these challenges. It brought together 400 elected members and staff of 95 parliaments.

Delegates discussed how to connect parliaments and citizens and how to strengthen parliaments through better use of ICT. They debated the new social media and other Internet-based communication tools, including issues of security and reliability. They exchanged experiences of ICT strategic planning, ICT in legislative processes and parliamentary websites, to mention a few examples. The following is a summary of some of the salient points of those discussions.

ICT alone does not make a legislature stronger or more efficient. ICT needs to be integrated with parliamentary processes and not adopted in isolation of efforts to improve the capacities of the parliaments to legislate and to hold governments to account.

Some parliaments have added new media - such as MySpace, Facebook, Flickr, YouTube, Twitter, and Wikis - to their traditional channels of communication with a view to being closer to the electorate and facilitating dialogue between members and the public. In adopting these instruments, parliaments should consider the experience of other legislatures, be ready to experiment, and continuously evaluate their results.

Extensible Markup Language (XML) is at a crucial stage in its development in parliaments. Significant and highly beneficial discussions on XML are emerging across continents, in Europe, Africa, and Latin America. Despite apparent widespread commitment to the goal of using this open standard, implementation has been lagging for a variety of reasons, including technical complexity, the requirement to have well-trained staff, and the need for better tools. There is an evident and pressing need for the sharing of knowledge in this critical area and for cooperative initiatives to support parliaments adopting XML, including by showcasing success stories and by looking at the international convergence of existing schemas.

ICT security has become a serious issue for parliaments which cannot be ignored. It requires the appropriate technology, skilled staff, and adequate resources to sustain both. Security is also a global issue, one that a single parliament cannot solve on its own. This calls for engagement with other public and private institutions at the national and international levels and for further sharing of experiences among partnering legislatures.

The current environment holds great promise for the strengthening of parliaments through ICT: the technology is available, the knowledge of how to use it is increasing steadily, and there is a growing desire to learn from each other. However, a great deal still needs to be done by the international community - including by technologically advanced legislatures - to support parliaments in developing nations to achieve this goal.

Inter-parliamentary cooperation and the sharing of knowledge is one of the least expensive and potentially most effective ways for parliaments to enhance their use of technology. The international community and the world of parliaments should unite around the principles of the ten-year strategic plan advocated by the high-level Board of the Global Centre for ICT in Parliament to provide predictable, coherent and coordinated support to parliaments in developing nations.