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Working documents for Parliamentary Seminars: *Developing good practice in political representation and constituency work*

Overview

The Global Parliamentary Report (GPR) was published jointly by the IPU and UNDP in April 2012 (www.ipu.org/gpr) and examines political representation around the world. Specifically, it looks at the way in which the public's expectations of their representatives are changing, and how parliaments, and politicians, are responding to increased demands for information, accountability and service delivery.

This package of documents is designed to assist parliaments in organizing seminars on the representative role of members of parliament (MPs). It highlights some of the key aspects of the Report, particularly around the local activity of politicians, and draws much of its material from Chapter Four, which focuses on constituency service. However, it is also intended to be of practical value to politicians, and is designed to draw out the local experience of politicians in all parliaments. To that end the documents provide a structure which can be applied in almost any national parliament, and can be used flexibly according to local context.

The seminar uses the insights from the GPR in a way that may be of practical value to the politicians. It is structured as a capacity building event, in that each session should build on the conclusions and observations of the previous session. MPs are more likely to participate if they feel that it will help them do constituency work better by reference to international evidence and best practice.

The facilitation notes in this package try to encourage connections between the GPR and local context. However, the success of the events will depend in part on the quality of facilitation itself. The facilitator should understand parliament, politicians and political incentive structures, as well as being familiar with the content and logic of the GPR.

Any questions, feedback or comments on the documents would be very welcome, and should be sent to Andy Richardson at the IPU (postbox@mail.ipu.org; +41 22 919 41 50).

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1. Concept Note

The seminar is designed to help MPs to find practical ways of improving the way they perform their representative role. The structure of the seminar tries to link some of the main findings of the Global Parliamentary Report (GPR) to the practical experiences of politicians. The seminar will help MPs understand and manage the expectations of voters in terms of service and delivery, by examining the international evidence in the GPR, and seek to find insights that help MPs do their jobs within the national parliament.

During the seminar, participants will:

- a) discuss the themes of the Global Parliamentary Report, specifically the practicalities of representation,
- b) share their experiences of political representation and the challenges that they face on a daily basis,
- c) draw lessons from international best practice in this area,
- d) identify strategic approaches to improving representation, and
- e) identify the practical measures that individual MPs and the parliament in that country might seek to implement in the next 6-12 months.

The seminar is envisaged as having four main parts.

The first session '**Political representation and voter expectations**' will go through some of the main insights from the Global Parliamentary Report in four areas. It will use the results of the survey of MPs' attitudes towards their roles, and what MPs believe voters want from politicians. The survey discovered that although politicians regard legislating as their most important role, they believe that voters think that constituency work is the most important. Perhaps more significantly, when asked what is the biggest hindrance to effective representation the survey found that lack of resources to do constituency work was the most frequent answer. MPs also seem to spend more time on constituency work than any other activity.

The session will then highlight the diversity, volume and difficulty of constituency casework, illustrated by quotes from MPs reproduced in the report. The purpose will be to emphasise to the MPs in the room, that whatever difficulties they face, they are common to many MPs in different countries.

The session will examine both the demand for, and supply of, constituency work. The evidence in the report suggests that the provision of more resources to do constituency work will often simply result in increased expectations from voters.

The session will encourage MPs to think about how they might approach constituency work in a more strategic fashion, emphasising the need to find solutions which move them from specific to

strategic ones, from individual to collective and from local to national. These themes will underpin the remaining three sessions during the day.

The second session '**The content of constituency work**' is designed to be more interactive and will draw directly on the experiences of the MPs in the seminar. The MPs will be invited to speak about the main challenges they face in delivering for constituents, providing examples of problems voters bring to them and describing how they have addressed them. Initially, MPs should be asked simply to list the range of casework, but then to group problems into different categories and think about how these different types of problems might be amenable to different types of solutions.

The session will also look at the amount of time MPs take to deal with different types of casework and the resources needed. Depending on the size of the group and the issues being raised, MPs could be broken into groups of four or five to examine types of casework, and identify the principal difficulties in that particular country.

The third session '**Strategic responses to voter expectations**' will build specifically on the content of session two by looking at strategic solutions. It will use examples from the GPR and have four parts to it.

First, the session will look at how MPs might use local consultation techniques to both understand the concerns of voters and educate them as to the role of the member of parliament.

Second, it will examine the creation of additional resources for constituency offices, constituency service and the establishment of constituency development funds in certain countries.

Third, the session will look at how MPs might find strategic and collective solutions to individuals' problems. It will use examples from the GPR, such as that of the Bangladeshi MP who established a micro-finance union (pp.58-9) or the development of community hospitals in Ghana to encourage MPs to think about how they might address the problems highlighted in session two.

Finally, the MPs will be invited to think about how they might use their constituency expertise as a way of informing policy development and legislation within parliament. This might involve the creation of new mechanisms within parliament to channel that constituency experience into the legislative process or in to government, or it might result in specific recommendations for new legislation or policy to address problems that emerged during the day.

The fourth and last session '**Identifying practical next steps**' will build on the previous sessions by asking the MPs what they will do to improve constituency services and make greater use of this expertise in parliament. The range of options here is very wide. This might include asking parliament for the provision of more resources for constituency offices, the development of a code of practice which defines what is legitimate constituency work, the adoption of new consultation techniques locally, the agreement amongst a group of MPs in a particular region to find collective local solutions to particular problems or the creation of new parliamentary mechanisms to insert constituency expertise into the parliamentary system.



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2. Draft Agenda

9.30-9.45: Introductions

9.45-11.15: Session 1: Political representation and voter expectations

The first session will highlight some key findings from the Global Parliamentary Report and the challenges that MPs face in meeting the expectations of voters. It will look at how MPs perceive their own role and what they believe voters want. It will also highlight the diversity, volume and difficulty of much of this 'casework'.

11.15-11.30: Break

11.30-13.00: Session 2: The content of constituency work

During the second session the participants will discuss the variety of issues that are brought to them. They will use the experience of MPs in the seminar to understand the different types of requests, and the difficulties in responding to them, including the amount of time and resources necessary to resolving constituents' problems.

13.00-14.00: Lunch

14.00-15.30: Session 3: Strategic responses to voter expectations

The session will draw look at ways in which MPs can seek strategic solutions to handling constituency work. This will include the use of consultation, the creation of constituency development funds, innovative responses at the local level and how parliament could be used to find national solutions to local problems.

15.30-15.45: Break

15.45-16.15: Session 3 continued

16.15-17.00: Session 4: Identifying practical next steps

The final session will draw together all the information from the day and seek to identify some immediate and practical steps that the parliament and MPs might implement to improve the way in which constituency work is delivered, and how parliament can make better use of the expertise gained in constituency service work.



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3. Facilitation notes and guidance for seminar organisers

The seminar is structured so that each session should build on the insights and observations of the previous one.

Introduction

Purpose: Explaining the purpose of the day, establishing an atmosphere for dialogue, outlining the key elements of the GPR and identifying what MPs want to get from the seminar.

It may be that the representatives from different political parties do not have much contact with one another and may thus be wary about being open. This may particularly be the case with constituency work. What MPs do locally is likely to be the biggest determinant of whether they get re-elected. They may thus not want to share many secrets about their local services. The introduction and Session 1 need to encourage openness and honesty. This may be difficult, but during the opening sessions the facilitator should seek to emphasise the points of commonality and similarity between participants. S/he should also identify the group's shared objectives for the seminar. Subsequent sessions should then build on these points of common interest to foster openness.

The introduction should describe the main points of the GPR (as set out in chapter 1) and ask the participants about their objectives for the day. (These should be put on a poster so that they can be reviewed at the end of the seminar.) MPs should also be asked to explain their background, how long they have been an MP, why they became an MP and the biggest challenges they face in representing voters. (All of this information should be recorded and retained.) The facilitator should be looking for similarities and shared interests throughout the session.

Session 1: Key findings from the GPR on constituency work

Purpose: Explaining some of the key findings of the GPR, using them as the starting point for a conversation amongst the MPs.

During Session 1 the onus will be on the facilitator to present key elements of the GPR. The facilitator is likely to do more talking in this session than any of the others. S/he should encourage the MPs to comment and ask questions, but Session 1 will require more explanation than subsequent sessions. The session should be run flexibly, depending on the volubility of participants, but should last around an hour and a half.

The facilitator should get across information in four key areas:

i) The importance attached to constituency work by MPs and voters

The facilitator should use the information on pp. 111-113 of the GPR to highlight that although MPs regard law-making as their most important role, they think voters value solving constituents problems much more highly.

The figures on p. 113 highlight the amount of time that MPs tend to spend on citizens concerns, with 21% spending more than 40 hours per week.

Critically, two thirds of respondents regarded lack of resources for constituency work as an impediment to their work. (p. 113)

ii) The diversity, volume and difficulty of constituency work

The facilitator should use a range of quotes and figures from pp. 59-64 of the report to highlight the difficulties that MPs say they face in dealing with constituency work. The choice is up to the facilitator but the report tries to emphasise the range and diversity of challenges.

For example:

- Gabon “MPs to take care of their roads, schools or funerals, even if this is not part of the parliament’s powers. Every day people are dying and MPs are asked to contribute financially and physically to the funerals. Others come to the deputy because they cannot get any food”.
- Malawi: “The constituents want our help with funerals, clean water sources, transport ... Money for coffins or transportation comes from our pockets. We also frequently pay for school fees. It isn’t our job, but we have to do it for human reasons and to gain sympathy with voters”.
- Papua New Guinea, “They think that we parliamentarians get paid a lot of money, but in fact I was a lot richer when I was working as a doctor. Now that I’m an MP, even though I make a little bit more than I used to get before, it makes no difference because my pay does not belong to my family - it belongs to everyone in my electorate”.
- In countries where parliamentary systems have been in place for longer, such as the UK, Canada, Australia and the US, constituency service also appears to be taking up an increasing amount of politicians’ time. Surveys conducted in the UK suggest that in 1996 an already large 40% of their time was spent on constituency work, but by 2006, new MPs put the figure at 49% of their time. In Canada, constituency work takes up more time than any other activity and parliament adjourns every fourth or fifth week to enable MPs to spend more time with their constituents.
- One Swedish MP recounted the story of a man going through a divorce who asked if the MP could help him get his wife back, while a British MP recalled being called by a constituent because the rubbish collectors had left his bin in the middle of his driveway. When asked why the man had phoned the MP, he replied that he had already tried the Prime Minister’s office and they told him to phone the MP.

These quotes and figures should be used to prompt a reaction from participants. Session 2 will look at the challenges specific to this parliament in detail, so the facilitator should seek only short reactions at this stage – emphasising the commonality of the problems.

iii) Demand and supply

The third part of the session will look at why constituency work continues to grow. There are two main reasons for this, contained on pp. 62-64 of the GPR. The first is that MPs get satisfaction from the work.

- As a British MP commented, “It is the one concrete thing you have some control over and that you will get some personal satisfaction from ... Often it is simply enough to get a reply explaining what has happened. But it is something [the constituent] would not have got otherwise”.
- It is the one area where the MP can exert some influence and as such it contributes to the MP’s self-esteem or, in the words of one MP, ‘it keeps you sane.’ Various polls emphasise this point. In Honduras, 75% of MPs mentioned personal satisfaction as a key element in undertaking such work. Similarly, in Kenya it was by far the most popular role identified by MPs, at 69%, and in other African states more than half of all MPs cited it as the most satisfying part of the job in all

countries except Namibia (at 41% still markedly higher than their next most satisfying role, representation, at 24%).

The second is that MPs believe they get an electoral benefit from such work.

- Polling conducted in Africa supports this impression. In a selection of six African countries (Kenya, Malawi, Zambia, South Africa, Namibia and Mozambique), voters consistently listed constituency service and representation as the most important parts of the MPs job. In Tanzania, a separate poll showed that 64% of voters would vote for the candidate who can deliver goods and services to the local community.
- In many countries evidence suggests that voters have low levels of awareness of parliamentary activity. ‘Law-making’ was seen as the most important role by only a quarter or less of voters, and oversight of government did not poll more than 10% in any country. Few, if any, MPs assume that they are held to account by voters for their legislative or oversight activity – MPs from Ghana, for instance, mentioned the pressures from voters to account for constituency activity, but none reported any pressure to account for their parliamentary work, unless it related to the constituency.

However, the GPR suggests that MPs may simply be creating unrealistic expectations by seeking to meet all voters demands.

- Kenya: Voters look to MPs for everything, “from electricity to hospitals ... And in most cases when this is not done, everything gets blamed on the MP, even though it is the responsibility of the Executive”.
- Senegal: “The main challenge lies in the fact that citizens’ requests often come under the purview of the Executive and thus transform MPs into intermediaries if not “beggars” ... MPs thus find themselves in an unenviable position as they are not recognised for what they can do, but are asked to act by proxy on behalf of other parts of government where they have no direct control – and are judged by their ability to achieve anything in that area”.

It is summed up by an MP from Papua New Guinea:

- “My people expect me to pay for their school fees, funeral expenses, transport expenses ... I know I can’t give them what they want because this is not parliamentary procedure. But what do I do? If I say no, my stay in parliament is threatened”.
- However, MPs have created a set of monsters which need to be faced - *“we have to face people and tell them what is right and what is wrong as leaders. If we simply run away, the monsters will grow. We need to educate the people about our role and that of parliament”*.

iv) Finding strategic solutions

All of the above should be familiar to participants. Finding solutions is more difficult. The final part of the session should emphasise the purpose of the day, namely to find better ways of doing constituency work.

Briefly, the facilitator should explain the need to find more strategic solutions by moving from

- a) the specific to the strategic to find policy solutions to common problems rather than deal with each case on its own;
- b) the individual to the collective – finding responses that benefit a number of people locally rather than single individuals; and,
- c) the local to national – finding ways of drawing constituency expertise into the parliamentary and policy process in a much more systematic fashion.

These themes will be drawn out more fully in Session 3.

Session 2: Understanding the local context

Purpose: To get examples from the MPs about what sort of local activity they undertake, categorise the different types of constituency work and identify the main obstacles to delivering.

Session 2 is designed to be much more interactive. There are three main elements to it.

First, the facilitator should ask the MPs to simply list the sorts of issues that citizens ask them for help with. They should be asked to describe any similar requests that they have had, the difficulties they faced and how they deal with such challenges. The facilitator should not try to find solutions at this stage, but simply pose questions and highlight problems. The key points should be recorded on a poster.

Second, the MPs should then be asked to try and group these range of problems into different categories. The GPR suggests four main categories of work, namely:

- First, support to individuals ranges from legitimate help to find work or opportunities, to more clientelistic patterns of behaviour which are clearly designed to buy the support of those individuals.
- Second, grievance-chasing is where citizens have a particular problem with a government service, welfare entitlement or bureaucracy. The MP acts as an influential friend to help resolve such problems, even though they may have no official jurisdiction in many of these cases.
- Third, policy responsiveness is where voters try to seek or influence the MP's opinion on particular issues, particularly on votes in parliament. Although not generating much specific work for the MP, attentiveness to the opinions of key groups within the constituency will involve meetings and public events.
- Fourth, project work involves politicians seeking funds for the development of the area or the promotion of local economy, or 'pork', where MPs use their position to secure government expenditure.

Third, the MPs should be asked to think about how much time and effort they spend in each of these areas, and whether they approach the problems in different ways. Depending on the time available the participants could be broken into groups to examine in more detail the challenges that they face. The results of that group work would then be reported back to a plenary, and the common themes drawn out by the facilitator.

A key distinction to make in this session, is between those activities which help individuals, and those which benefit the entire local community.

Session 3: Finding strategic solutions

Purpose: To get the MPs to think about constituency work might be done differently, particularly by trying to find strategic solutions.

Using the examples provided in Session 2 the facilitator should explain how constituency work might be done differently, by using four techniques described in the GPR. The facilitator should explain how each of the techniques works and then ask the MPs whether the problems listed in Session 2 might be amenable to one of the four approaches outlined below.

i) Use of consultation techniques

Section 4.4.2 of the report (p. 66) describes how MPs have used consultation as a way of better understanding the concerns of voters. However, consultation could also be used to educate the voters about the role of the MP – and what s/he can and cannot do.

ii) Increased constituency resources

The GPR highlights the growth in parliamentary resources for constituency work in many parliaments. This comes in a number of forms, often either in the provision of offices and allowances for local work or through the establishment of constituency development funds. (pp.66-70). The MPs should be asked to discuss the strengths and weakness of the current system, and how additional resources might be created and used.

iii) Strategic solutions

The facilitator should use the example of Saber Chowdury (pp58-59) at the start of the chapter to introduce this section. The development of a credit union is a far more strategic response than simply giving money to voters. Other examples (pp.65-6) from Ghana and elsewhere could also be used.

iv) Legislative and policy solutions

The facilitator should encourage the MPs to think about whether any of the problems highlighted in Session 2 should be dealt with at the national level – through new policy and legislation – rather than by the individual MP at the local level. It should emphasise that MPs have a huge amount of expertise in understanding how policy is working because of their constituency work. However, they should be asked how they are using this expertise to improve policy and legislation at the national level.

Session 4: Practical next steps

Purpose: To get the participants to identify some practical steps they will take, either as individuals or collectively to improve the way in which parliamentary representation takes place.

This session can be as long or as short as the facilitator deems suitable. However, the point is that the participants should identify very practical things that they will take responsibility for implementing. This might be the establishment of a micro-finance union locally or pushing for more resources from parliament or even the creation of a CDF. Whatever the group comes up with though, must be tested by the facilitator in terms of its practicability. All of the suggestions should be documented.

Other considerations for seminar organisers

- Size of group

The ideal size of group would be between 8 and 20 MPs. This is enough to include a range of opinions and experience, and ensure a lively debate around some of the key issues

With a larger group MPs can be broken into smaller groups to encourage discussion, although this is at the discretion of the facilitator.

- Range of backgrounds

Efforts should be made to ensure that the politicians come from a range of backgrounds. Participants should include both men and women. As mentioned above, MPs from different political parties may be wary of talking candidly in front of their political opponents. It would be far better to have MPs from many parties, but this may prove impossible in some cases. The key aim is to encourage the development and adoption of good practice, and in certain circumstances it may be that this can only be done with MPs from the same party. In that situation, the same seminar should be offered to all the political parties.

- Venue

The perennial problem with holding events for MPs is that if you hold the seminar away from parliament you run the risk of MPs not showing up. But if you hold it in parliament MPs are likely to be distracted and only attend for part of the event.

Whichever is chosen the venue should be set up to encourage discussion, which suggests a roundtable format or even an absence of desks at all. The venues will also need enough space, or alternative rooms to allow small group discussion.

- Resources

The facilitation notes above are deliberately general. It is up to the facilitator whether they wish to use powerpoint. This may be useful for getting across some of the key facts and figures from the report, especially in Session 1. It may also add an air of formality and structure, which may be useful for convincing MPs wary of 'training' that this is a worthwhile exercise.

The participating MPs should be encouraged to write as much down as possible, either on posters or on computers if feasible.

- Recording and documenting information

In general, the facilitator should seek to capture as much information as possible from the participating MPs. There is very little reliable research on what MPs do locally, and the information from these exercises will have immense value. However, in order to encourage MPs to be candid, their anonymity should be preserved (as well as that of any constituency cases they might mention). This should be stressed at the outset of the seminar.

Facilitators should be required to write up a detailed report of the findings, insights and recommendations from each of the seminars.

Greg Power

15 August 2012