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Africa i-Parliaments

GlobalCentre  ICTParliament

Global Centre for Information and Communication Technologies in Parliament

Context

Parliaments have a long tradition of bilateral and multilateral cooperation on many levels and on a wide array of subjects. Thousands of agreements and partnerships exist among chambers and parliaments to carry out common activities or achieve shared goals. The last decade has witnessed a significant surge in international activities undertaken by legislatures. This has been accompanied by the establishment of new regional and transnational parliaments and by the creation of formal parliamentary assemblies, informal parliamentarians' associations and networks of legislators. As the Inter-Parliamentary Union highlighted in a recent publication "*One common feature of regional inter-parliamentary assemblies is the aim to foster greater integration and legislative coordination between member countries.*"¹

Although the majority of these exchanges have taken place among members of parliaments, many assemblies have also engaged in bilateral or multilateral efforts directed at mutually strengthening, improving or evaluating the effectiveness and efficiency of their administrations. Apart from the importance of political collaborations, it is in fact commonly acknowledged that frequent consultations, sharing of experiences, targeted knowledge transfers and the exchange of lessons learned are extremely important mechanisms to strengthen the human resources capacity needed by parliaments to perform a variety of critical tasks in support of their representative, legislative and oversight functions.

There is no doubt that the recent evolution and growth of technology has helped to intensify the number of exchanges and facilitate communication between parliaments and supporting institutions. But few people would challenge that global and regional coordination among all the parliaments involved needs to improve to ensure coherence of action, leverage the forces of many institutions, and foster better analyses of lessons learned.

The success of long established networks like the NCSL/NALIT in the United States and the ECPRD in Europe, both with more than 20 years of experience, underscores the value of these associations for parliamentary development. And their success suggests the opportunity to extend the benefits of cooperation to other regions and eventually to a global level.

Regional groups are a natural way to gather information from participating parliamentary bodies. Knowledge can be gained through a variety of channels, including conferences, virtual meetings, online discussion groups, and even simple e-mail exchanges. There are, of course, significant challenges in establishing and sustaining cooperation and collaboration. Differences in language, for example, can be a hindrance, especially when there are limited resources. Differences in the infrastructure or the technical approach preferred by individual parliaments can also limit sharing.

Parliaments participating in networks intended for information exchange have to be willing to commit the staff time necessary to make it a success. It takes time to respond to survey questionnaires, maintain a shared database, answer e-mail questions, or advise a colleague over the phone. However, by engaging as many entities as possible the burden on any single parliament can be reduced and the value of the benefits gained by sharing experiences and working together will certainly overcome the investments needed.

Today, the time is right for expanding these exchanges among parliaments in Africa, between sub-regional groups, and between individual countries in different sub-regions. The establishment of the Pan African Parliament (PAP) has also created new and legal compelling reasons to foster collaboration and exchange of information among African Parliaments, while the existence of regional parliamentary assemblies, like the East Africa Legislative Assembly (EALA), the Economic

¹ *Parliament and democracy in the twenty-first century: A guide to good practice*, Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2006..

Community Of West African States (ECOWAS) Parliament and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Parliamentary Forum should be taken into account.

At a meeting hosted by the National Assembly of Nigeria in Abuja in March 2007 the opportunity to establish a continent-wide African Parliamentary Knowledge Network (APKN) was discussed among members and officials from twelve parliamentary delegations from African assemblies and the Pan-African Parliament. The meeting, supported by the United Nations, and taking place under the auspices of the Pan African Parliament, evaluated a number of options and possibilities relating to the establishment of the APKN, and proposed different modalities for its implementation.

Participants agreed on the establishment of the APKN with the aim of strengthening the information and knowledge management capacity of parliamentary administrations to better serve their institutions and members. The need to promote at a continental level the training and capacity building of members of parliaments and parliamentary staff in the area of legislation, information, research, documentation and technologies was amply recognized. While acknowledging that ICT is not an end in itself, participants stressed its potential to reinforce other areas of the network, as well as parliaments' core functions and practices. The value of existing regional initiatives, such as the Network of ICT Managers of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region, and of existing networks around the world, was praised, and the need to take into account these experiences and to benefit from them was highlighted.

Yet, Participants stressed that a strong political commitment is required for the African Parliamentary Knowledge Network to grow as a true continental network and to operate in a conducive environment with long-term objectives ensuring sustainability over time.

Against this background, there is a need to pursue the establishment of the AKPN through a second International Conference which should serve to agree on a framework for the foundation of such a continental platform.

Objectives

The aim of the International Conference **African Parliamentary Knowledge Network - Building Together Open and Learning Parliaments in Africa** is to provide a political and technical platform for parliaments from the whole African Continent to agree on the Charter and a plan of action outlining the work modalities of the APKN.

As discussed at the Conference in Abuja, the APKN is meant to promote and enhance the collaborative creation and sharing of knowledge, ideas, experiences and good practices among parliamentary administrations in the areas of a) legislation, b) information, research and documentation, and c) information and communication technologies.

More specifically APKN is intended to:

- promote the exchange of experiences and information on the different aspects of parliamentary works among parliamentary officials;
- promote at continental level the training and capacity development of members of parliaments and parliamentary staff in the areas outlined above;
- encourage the elaboration of capacity development programmes and joint activities to improve the effectiveness of parliaments in carry out their work;
- act as a hub and clearing house for innovation and harmonization of activities, facilitated where possible through the effective use of modern ICT tools

To do so, the APKN would rely on the willingness of African parliaments to cooperate voluntarily among them and on the commitment of a group of African parliamentary leaders to provide political support and guidance to it through the approval of its Charter and plan of action.

Format of the Conference

The Conference will take place over two days in plenary and parallel sessions.

The plenary opening session in the morning of the first day is aimed at presenting an overall analysis of issues, challenges and objectives that the APKN may have to face and deal with from both political and technical perspectives. The session will serve to present the draft Charter for the APKN and the alternatives modalities for its establishment and further developments, around which high-level representatives from Parliaments of the African continent will be asked to provide views and inputs.

Two sessions of parallel workshops focusing on the three main topic areas of the Network identified at the Conference in Abuja will take place in the afternoon of the first day and in the morning of the second day:

- Legislative Process
- Information, Research and Documentation
- Information and communication technologies

Parallel to these, high-level representatives from African Parliaments will continue discussions on the Charter and on its plan of action.

The outcome of the parallel workshops will be presented at the beginning of the final plenary session, in the afternoon of the second day. During this session, the Charter and plan of action of the AKPN shall also be endorsed by participating parliaments.

Thematic workshops

The parallel thematic workshops will be articulated around the current concerns that parliamentary administrations in Africa are facing. Opening presentations of experts will be followed by discussions among representatives of parliaments to identify those topics that would require more attention by the APKN after its establishment to improve the quality and effectiveness of parliamentary works, by also promoting professionalism and innovation in parliament.

In the parallel workshops, members and officials will have the opportunity to discuss and agree on what training, guidelines and policies and common services should be collaboratively developed in the following thematic areas:

• **Legislative Process**

Parliamentary documents, such as bills, amendments, committee reports and texts of debates and hearings, are the fundamental records of legislatures. These documents must be prepared quickly, efficiently, and accurately. They must be distributed easily and then amended, revised, and redistributed just as easily. And they must be archived effectively to ensure availability and long-term preservation.

Managing effectively and transparently the proposed laws and their accompanying amendments is therefore an essential requirement for modern legislatures in carrying out their law making responsibilities. The documents of the legislature must also be made readily available to citizens and to civil society. Access to these documents serves to legitimize the authority of the parliament and provides one of the most important means of ensuring respect for the rule of law.

A preliminary list of topics that could be addressed during the Legislative Process Workshop includes:

- Parliamentary and legislative information systems to support the entire life cycle of bills: from drafting to management of amendments

- Bill drafting and markup;
- Bill summaries (brief explanation that clarifies the meaning of the bill and provides some context for understanding its intent) and analytical reports (background documents that provide an analysis of the issue, a review of the options, and the rationale for the approach being proposed);
- Human resources capacity to support the legislative processes: roles and competencies.

• Information, Research and Documentation

Librarians and researchers need to have the expertise to access a broad array of digital resources, validate the source, and to identify those that are most useful content to respond to questions posed by members and other staff and to support data-driven policy formulation.

Also, maintaining a permanent, authoritative record of parliamentary activities in a digital form that is capable of being accessed despite changes in technology also requires a major commitment of resources and expertise.

A list of topics that could be addressed in the Information, Research and Documentation Workshop includes:

- Archival preservation of digital information: Parliaments face a significant challenge in establishing digital archives of their documents and actions. Providing permanent access to digital resources is critical for a parliament if it is to ensure the authenticity of digital documents and a permanent institutional record.
- XML markup of parliamentary documents: the adoption of open standards for structuring and tagging documents is a major undertaking, but it is key to being able to improve interoperability and the exchange of documents, the efficiency of search engines, the adequacy of links, and flexibility and efficiency in generating various output formats.
- Parliamentary portals: portals to provide access to policy-relevant information, news, and legislation relevant to parliaments are an important instrument for information, research and documentation. There might be the need to evaluate the opportunity to join forces in establishing an Africa cooperative parliamentary portal under the AKPN framework to benefit all parliaments in the continent.
- Human resources capacity to respond to demand for collaborative production and the sharing of knowledge

• Information and Communication Technologies

The World e-Parliament Report 2008 highlights that only some legislatures have been very successful in their use of ICT to support and even enhance their functions. Overall the Report analysis makes evident that there is a substantial gap in most parliaments between what is possible with ICT to support the values and goals of parliaments and what has been accomplished. This gap is especially pronounced among legislatures from countries with lower income levels. This has implications not only for the efficiency of parliamentary operations, but also for the quality of the relation between parliament and citizens.

In addition to resources, however, there are a number of other reasons for this gap. There is sometimes a lack of understanding of what can be achieved with ICT, which leads to the

absence of a clear vision that can be shared with others and used as the basis for moving forward.

Parliaments need to build capacities to manage the deployment of ICTs in support of parliamentary activities in order to set in motion a holistic approach to their adoption at the service of the different processes within the institution.

A list of topics that could be addressed in the ICT workshop includes:

- Planning and implementing ICT in parliament
- Resources, skills, and organizational and cultural change
- Infrastructures for ICT in parliament, including data management and security
- Open source applications to promote sustainable quality
- Collaborative efforts for capacity development for the African continent

Expected Outcome

The expected outcome of the International Conference is:

- The adoption and endorsement of the APKN Charter by a number of leaders of African Parliaments
- The agreement on a shared plan of action setting short- and medium-term goals and targets
- The establishment of thematic working groups to be supported by different legislative bodies

Participation

It is expected that leaders and high-level representatives of the Pan African parliament, Regional Assemblies and national African Parliaments attend the Conference to finalize and approve the APKN Charter and its Action Plan. High-level guests from parliaments around the world, particularly from the Arab region, will be invited to observe.

The Conference will also be attended by parliamentary officials from African and partnering Parliaments responsible for Legislation, Information, Research and Documentation, and Information and Communication Technologies in their respective institutions.