

UNIT 7: TRANSPARENCY, PARTICIPATION AND OUTREACH

Learning Objectives

How do parliamentary committees enhance transparency, participation and outreach?

After studying this unit you should be able to:

- Outline and explain issues of transparency as it affects the work of parliaments;
- Discuss the twin concepts of transparency and outreach and how these concepts feed into the parliamentary process;
- Outline the types and nature of outreach methods available to parliamentarians.

Introduction

Unit 7 is devoted to parliamentary transparency, encouraging participation and promoting constituency outreach. As representatives, MPs require a system that allows concerns and aspirations of their constituents to be reflected in decision-making and laws governing the country. The unit looks at some of the suggested processes for achieving transparency, promoting participation and expanding outreach through partnerships with civil society.

Embodied in the oversight function of parliaments is the need for accountability and transparency and with it the drive to ensure that parliamentary democracy is as open, and governed by the rule of law as possible. With transparency invokes the need to reach out to constituents and that, in itself, is a mark of participation on the part of the broad masses of the people on whose behalf policy decisions are taken in parliament.

In this unit an attempt is made to explain the concepts of transparency and the key issues involved with parliamentary transparency, access to information, as well as the relationship between transparency and accountability. The units also discusses the methods of outreach open to parliamentarians, the cycle of decision-making, the transparency of parliamentary committees and the mechanisms involved.

Parliamentary Transparency

The concept of transparency as a component of good governance is linked with institutional values such as democracy, observance of human rights, accountability, and greater efficiency and effectiveness of public policy, both as output and as impact. In particular, reference to parliamentary practice, can broadly be defined as public knowledge of the processes of parliament and confidence in its intentions leading to the enactment of public policy and/or laws.

Parliamentary transparency requires:

- Making it possible for all the representatives to have access to parliamentary processes;
- Making public accounts verifiable;
- Providing for public participation in government policy-making;
- Implementing and allowing contestation over choices impacting on the lives of citizens;
- Making available accurate and timely information on results of policy for public scrutiny.

Parliamentary transparency involves certain key issues, which need to be thoroughly addressed in the effective practice of parliamentary democracy. These issues revolve around information, civil society and certain ethical considerations. In particular it involves how information is managed and the appropriate mode of communicating such information. Constituents, particularly in developing countries, are illiterate and are not comfortable with the official language for carrying out parliamentary work. Thus the key

issue is the effort made at translating information into languages that constituents can easily comprehend. Additionally, the medium of making information accessible to its intended beneficiaries is also important, paying particular attention to the rights and freedoms associated with information dissemination.

Other issues of parliamentary transparency that require special attention and focus include: the relationship between transparency and accountability; decision-making; whistle blowing, confidentiality of members of parliament; ethics; the need to strengthen the relations between civil society and constituents; development of parliamentary networks and the issue of assets declaration.

Information flow and Transparency

Consultation and involvement of the public in the work of parliament, through opening up communication channels, can be considered as a basic pre-requisite in parliamentary transparency. This allows for the views and opinions of the members of the public to be heard. Parliament may use the communication with the public to gain a clearer and more accurate view of what needs and aspirations the public has.

Consulting the public is a twin track approach to defining not only the issues being addressed by parliament but also to constitute a major part of the monitoring and assessment of public performance in terms of outputs and impacts of public policy.

The media is one of the most potent tools for reinforcing information flow and parliamentary transparency. Four of the major ways the media assists in parliamentary transparency include:

- The media can cover committee proceedings and in the process help committees communicate with all outsiders – the government and the general public;

- The media can cover committee press briefings, thus providing opportunities for the media to act as a medium for committees to reach out to the public, and the public through media to demand questions of committees;
- Committee hearings are open to the public through witnesses and all who are invited to the hearings. The media is also automatically invited to these hearings both as its own representative and as representatives of the general public; and
- The media exists permanently as a medium through which the public can reach out to committees, parliament and the government and reciprocally; other bodies – committee, parliament and government – reach out to the general public.

Rights, Freedoms and Access to Information

Democratic government relies heavily on the availability and accessibility of information to both the government and the governed. Freedoms and access to information have become an indispensable tool of efficient and effective government and, hence parliament. This vital instrument of communication has largely been undertaken through the media and hence often references the people's right to know and the media as synonymous. This allows for participation in the work of parliament through access to parliamentary proceedings.

The specific access to information issues inherent in parliamentary transparency and outreach include:

- Subjection of the media - particularly the private press – to considerable repression (laws governing licensing and operations);
- Freedom and independence of the media (Subjection of the media to government control)
- Interference with editors and publishers;
- Harassment over editorial opinions and content of publications;
- Libel and seditious laws;
- Corresponding concerns over responsibilities;

- Publication of rejoinder;
- Exercise of freedom in accordance with the law;
- Bias nature of reporting/self-censorship;
- Direct exposure to parliamentary proceedings impedes the process of debate;
- Use of privilege position to pursue personal agenda.

Relationship between Transparency and Accountability

Within the context of performing their oversight function, one of the main issues of the democratic governance process is the extent to which parliamentarians are held accountable for their actions. This relates to the issues of:

- Authority to make laws;
- Answerability for the oversight of the outputs, outcomes, and impact of public policy; and
- Retrospective references to the after-event scrutiny of government's performance by external bodies.

In many instances weaknesses in accountability is an important factor for such shortcomings in public management as poor service delivery, and inability to mobilize resources, waste or mismanagement of available resources, and the neglect of the maintenance of public goods and equipment. On the other hand, transparency is seen within the context of public knowledge of the policies of government – parliament and confidence in its intentions. This requires making public accounts verifiable, providing for public participation in policy-making and implementation. It also includes making available for scrutiny accurate and timely information.

Accountability and transparency are essential conditions for securing effectiveness in the use of public resources, promoting public welfare, enhancing governmental responsiveness and, therefore, enhancing the overall legitimacy of the political system and particularly parliament's role. In this regard, transparency and accountability puts the issue of corruption in focus and can be seen as the abuse of public office or public

trust for private gain. In public management, the public knowledge of the work of government – parliament through transparency – enables the accountability component of good governance to be evaluated.

Cycle of Decision-Making

The cycle of decision-making primarily runs from policy-makers to the public. The public are the beneficiaries of decisions and to the extent to which it is possible, they are consulted and their opinions incorporated into national policy. There is an inherent tension between the belief of consulting and involving the public and the difficulty of involving them in decision-making. The view is that when the public, the ultimate beneficiaries of policy, are involved in the decision making process, a better outcome in terms of public policy can be assured. However in an attempt to assure a more fluid channel of decision making between decision-makers and beneficiaries, certain obstacles come up. These issues become hindrances to sound administrative decision-making. The major obstacles include:

- Lack of clarity of goals;
- Confusion of the public interest with a client/constituency interest;
- Rigid conservation through strict adherence to rules, procedures and past practices;
- Specialization (particularly committee's work) causing parliamentarians and parliamentary staff to oversimplify reality; and
- Reluctance to engage in policy and program evaluation.

There is a wide range of techniques for consulting and involving service users to inform and impact on decision-making. Some of the common techniques include:

- Survey;
- Satisfaction slips;
- User forums;

- User panels;
- Focus groups;
- Complaints procedures; and
- Ideas schemes.

In the cycle of decision making consultation becomes an important component. First, the users of the policy are consulted at the design stage. Second, they are consulted at the delivery stage, after which there is further consultation and a review to mainly ascertain whether it produced the desired outcomes intended by the executive and parliaments.

One of the integral groups that are to be consulted in the decision making cycle is civil society. There is increasing recognition of the importance of civil society since it also, under constitutional governance, holds governments and parliaments to account. Ultimately governments and parliaments must be held to account by the people and not just by the checks and balances provided in the various constitutions among the branches of government.

Civil society provides experience of governance and the democratic process on a small scale with widespread participation, thus providing a cultural environment that fosters and protects good governance at the national level. It is important as the main initiator and engine of development, and not only because of its interaction with parliament. Moreover the development of civil society brings people a better quality of life. Strengthening civil society is a means as well as a goal to and for development.

Accessibility to Constituents

The need for parliamentarians to be accessible to their constituents should be considered as a basic requirement to fulfilling their democratic and constitutional obligations as representatives of the people. Whereas parliamentarians are empowered in the very ritual of their elections to represent the people, the need for constant

interaction to continue to know the needs of the people is critical. The other element of delegation of responsibility in decision making also connotes reporting back to the people what laws affect them as well as answers to their needs. The fact that parliament is often located outside the reach of most citizens means that they are limited in their attempts to reach their representatives and input into the policy-making process on a daily basis.

Making oneself accessible to the constituents means accounting to the people and reporting back on issues of critical importance. Citizens are also able to offer and receive advice on their specific needs as well as national governance in general. The concept of the town-hall meeting where citizens interact comes to the fore. The threat of a parliamentarian losing his seat in the next elections, notwithstanding the absence of interaction, places the whole society at risk due to doubt and the concomitant feeling that electing the people's representatives does not matter. Box 7.1 below highlights a number of ways of improving participation.

Box 7.1
Public Participation in Decision Making

Public participation in decision-making can be increased through:

- Television access to deliberations;
- Telephone calls;
- Letter writing;
- Radio programs;
- Regular visits.

Transparency of Committees

Major mechanisms that assure transparency in committee proceedings include:

- Keeping all records of committee proceedings;
- Making summaries of committee proceedings available to the public;
- Availing the public of verbatim transcripts of proceedings to the public;
- Availing members' votes to the public;
- Publishing plain language summaries of bills or policy oversight;
- Holding public hearings on bills;
- Holding public hearings on policy issues;
- Publicize public hearings;
- Publishing invitations to general public to attend or make submissions;
- Inviting expert testimony to committee hearings;
- Issuing press release on committee meetings;
- Opening committee proceedings to public;
- Establishing active petition committees that make the public aware of their function to receive grievances; and
- Involving civil society in committee work.

Parliamentary committees can improve community participation through community outreach programs. Such interactions with citizens in the field often provide Members of the Committees with valuable assessment of the real situation. Box 7.2 below shows an example of how the Committee on Gender and Children in the Parliament of the Republic of Ghana used the methods of Community Score Card and Citizens Report card to assess quality of education in a rural community in Ghana.

Box 7.2
**The Committee on Gender and Children, Ghana Parliament -
Assessing Quality Education through community Outreach**

The Committee on Gender and Children of the Ghana Parliament embarked on an outreach program to assess the quality of education services provided to communities in one district in Ghana. Two main methods/tools of Social Accountability namely the Community Score Card and Citizens' Report Card were adopted. It offered the Committee the opportunity to interact and work with stakeholders particularly the beneficiaries of educational policies, in assessing the outcomes and impacts of selected Government policies on Education. The process brought Parliament and Parliamentarians closer to the people at the grass root in the performance of their oversight responsibilities. This had aided the Committee in making informed views and arguments for reforms and improvements in Government policies and programmes on education.

Source: Parliamentary Centre/IPA - Committee On Gender And Children - Assessing Access And Equity To Quality Education" In Nkwanta District Of Ghana - December 2005 – February 2006

Recommendations

The importance of the rule of law, the relationship that parliaments have with the executive branch and civil society and the importance of ensuring the integrity of parliaments and parliamentarians/staff should be focused on:

- Transparency – This requires that information about governance be readily available and that the dialogue between citizens and their institutions and their institutions be open and continuous. Transparency is important in its own right and as a precondition of accountability;
- Participation – This is the vital criterion for citizenship and another pre-condition of effective accountability. Participation should provide a fair opportunity for all citizens to participate in governance;

- The reality at the global level is that much of the dynamic is outside the control of any political institution. In this new context the notion of 'parliament as a bridge' may make society groups interact in policy formulation and implementation;
- Parliaments play a crucial role in good governance by ensuring that state institutions are accountable, open and participants in their decision-making. As the governance revolution accelerates these parliamentary services will become more important to the political economic and social health of societies;
- There is considerable wariness and lack of knowledge between parliament and civil society and that there is need for building dialogue between the two to ensure and strengthen accountability;
- Parliaments often fail to serve as effective institutions of accountability because of highly centralized executive dominated systems of governance institutions and that calls for improvement;
- Parliamentary leadership should be at the fore front of the improvement of public policy and the fight against corruption;
- The role of the media should be reinforced in the dissemination of information on policy making; and
- In ensuring accountability, which is a fundamental pre-requisite of preventing the abuse of power and for assisting food governance, parliament should work for the development of systems that disclose the objectives and results of programs through monitoring and evaluation and ensure proper budgeting, management, and accountability through transparency.

Unit 7 Questions

Please answer each of the following questions. If you are taking this course in a group you may then meet to discuss your answers.

1. What is parliamentary transparency? And what are its requirements?
2. How important is freedom and access to information for transparency?
3. Explain the key mechanisms for ensuring transparency of parliamentary committees.
4. Why do parliamentary committees need constituency outreach programs?

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