

Introduction: Parliaments as Peacebuilders

Over the last couple of decades the world has witnessed a transformation in the nature of conflict. Traditional inter-state conflicts have become rarer as non-traditional intra-state conflicts, whether in the form of civil wars, armed insurrections, violent secessionist movements or domestic focused warfare continue to rage across the globe, touching both hemispheres and every region of the world. Unfortunately, due to the interdependence of states, intra-state conflict has a tendency to move beyond the boundaries of one particular state; this process of diffusion and contagion mean that low-level intra-state conflicts can potentially escalate into more intense inter-state conflict. The evolving nature of conflict has created an impetus to reassess which actors can contribute to resolving this latest incarnation of conflict and more importantly how these actors can contribute to the peacebuilding process, particularly in conflict-affected countries. Parliaments are coming to the fore, more so than ever before, as natural forums which are uniquely designed to address contentious issues and relationships in conflict-affected societies thereby contributing to peacebuilding efforts.

Parliamentarians are uniquely positioned to play leadership roles in their societies and to strengthen peacebuilding from below. They are more representative and their members more accessible to the general public than the executive or judicial branches; therefore, can address contentious issues and relationships in conflict-affected societies. In addition, parliaments institutionalize conflict and are designed, by their very nature, to include disparate sectors of society, and to reflect and express the divergent views of those diverse groups. At its most general level parliaments are able to contribute to peacebuilding and conflict prevention by helping to create national consensus around commonly held values and goals through national policy dialogue. However, they can also contribute to conflict-prevention whilst undertaking its normal every functions.

The role of parliament in conflict-affected countries becomes even more important when considering the contribution parliaments make to poverty reduction and the well-recognized correlation between conflict and poverty; namely that poverty increases societies' vulnerability to conflict, while conflict itself generates poverty.

The objective of this parliamentary training module is to bring these two correlative relationships together to examine the nexus between conflict, poverty and parliament from the perspective of parliaments. A closer examination of the parliament, conflict, poverty nexus suggests that parliaments have a vital role to play in managing conflict not just by addressing contentious issues and relationships but by helping to avert poverty, particularly in conflict-affected countries.

A conflict-affected country, narrowly defined, often means those countries that have recently experienced, are experiencing, or are widely regarded as at risk of experiencing violent conflict. However, this is a relatively blunt definition of the intricate concept of conflict. For the purposes of this parliamentary training module, *conflict* is defined as, the "pursuit of incompatible goals by different groups." This is a much broader definition than armed or violent conflict and enables parliaments to consider ways they can manage and transform conflict at all stages of the conflict cycle, not just when conflict reaches the crisis stage.

Adopting this broader definition of conflict enables us to examine how to stop emerging conflict developing into violent conflict. This is important as there has been a decline in the incidence of civil wars over the last couple of years, shifting the focus away from the resolution of violent conflict to an examination of how emerging conflict can be better managed to prevent an increase in the incidence of violent conflict. It is believed that the strategies discussed in this parliamentary training module have a broad application, but are most applicable to those nations that are prone to civil violence.

Irrespective of the stage of the conflict cycle one is examining there is a general consensus that conflict is a phenomenon that results when people with competing interests seek to fulfill their specific interests, sometimes at the expense of others. It is not the purpose of democratic institutions to resolve tensions; rather there has been recent recognition that all societies are inherently conflicting, and that democracy acts as a system to manage and process conflict. Therefore, the issue is less so how to eradicate conflict and more so how to manage conflict when it emerges.

This module is comprised of the following units:

1. The Nexus between Parliaments, Poverty Reduction and Conflict: This unit examines the mutually reinforcing relationship between democratic governance and development and the correlative relationship between poverty and conflict, with the aim of highlighting the different strategies parliament is able to adopt while performing its everyday functions in order to contribute to conflict prevention.

2. Making Parliament More Representative: In order for parliament to reach its potential as a forum that can transform conflict, whether by addressing emerging conflict or guarding against the creation of an environment conducive to conflict, parliament has to represent the community's varied interests and ensure that its work responds to the needs of a diverse society. This unit investigates the ways in which parliament is able to ensure it is a truly representative institution.

3. Advancing Parliament's Legislative Function in Conflict-Affected Societies: A culture or atmosphere can exist within parliaments in conflict-affected countries that, due to the conflict prone environment, can go beyond being adversarial to being acrimonious. This unit examines how Members of Parliament can participate in the legislative process in a spirit of cooperation to find constructive resolutions that meet the needs of their different constituents. In addition, the legislative agenda, which can be championed in order to strengthen the potential for peace, is canvassed.

4. Strengthening Parliamentary Oversight to Prevent Conflict and Reduce Poverty: Parliament has the specific responsibility to exercise oversight of the executive in order to hold it and its agents accountable for their policies and actions. This unit examines how parliament, by ensuring the government is performing well, can instill public confidence in the government and the democratic process. In addition, this unit examines how parliament can support the formation and operation of independent accountability institutions to aid it in its oversight function.

5. Social Accountability – Citizens, Civil Society and the Media Working With Parliament: This unit examines how, by reaching out to their constituents to garner a better understanding of the needs and wants of the community, facilitating the development of a strong civil society that can support parliament's understanding

of community issues, and building an informed society through the development of a robust, diverse and independent media, parliament can keep decision-makers socially accountable.

6. Regional Parliamentary Peacebuilding and Engagement with International Organizations: This unit examines parliamentarians' growing interest in participating in regional and international professional associations and forums in order to encourage dialogue, build confidence and facilitate peer to peer learning. An alternative strategy, whereby parliamentarians participate in initiatives sponsored by the multilateral development agencies, such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the Global Aids Initiative, and the World Bank PRS process, in order to give their constituents a voice and represent their interest in peace and prosperity is also considered.

The content of the units in this module have been arranged so that each unit may stand alone. By referring to the summaries above, it should be possible to select those units that may satisfy individual interests.

Each unit contains suggested topics for discussion or questions to which answers should be attempted in order to reinforce your knowledge. Study of some of the materials in the resource lists at the end of each unit will be required for this purpose.

A select bibliography that is relevant to the study of the unit above is provided at the end of each unit.

