Mind the Gap: Lessons Learnt and Remaining Challenges in Parliamentary Development Assistance

Parliaments and parliamentarians are the fulcrum of democratic political systems. They sit at the centre of a web of domestic accountability that links them to the executive and other branches of government, to constituents and the wider public, and to political parties. Expectations about what parliaments should deliver have increased tremendously over the past two decades. Yet in many countries parliaments are weak and ineffective and remain among the least trusted and legitimate institutions in the eyes of the population. As such, parliaments are both a cause of poor democratic governance – and an integral element in improving it. How to help parliaments become more effective and responsive is therefore a crucial question for international development actors who are committed to democratic strengthening.

In 2011 Sida commissioned an Evaluation Pre-Study on Parliamentary Development Assistance (PDA) from the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) to review the state of knowledge on donor approaches and their effectiveness since 2005, identify lessons learnt and key gaps in knowledge, and assess the need for a multi-stakeholder thematic evaluation. This Report Brief highlights the key findings and conclusions from the Pre-Study Report, as well as recommendations on possible next steps. More in-depth analysis and detailed references can be found in the full report (available at http://www.sida.se/publications).

Evolution of Parliamentary Development Assistance

Parliamentary development (PD) has been a growing area of interest and donor engagement across the developing world since the 'third wave' of democratisation in the 1980s, both in terms of funding levels and the number of parliaments being supported. In aggregate, however, PD has remained a relatively small component of international democracy assistance: donor support has mostly focused on civil society, elections and decentralisation, while parliaments (as well as political parties) have been considered too politically sensitive to work with. Most recently, the Arab uprisings and the debate around the role of parliaments in their future direction have given renewed impetus to parliament as a symbol of democracy and a representative state.

The PD universe is diverse and complex. There has been a proliferation in the number and types of organisations that support parliaments and parliamentary reform processes, ranging from bilateral and multilateral agencies to parliamentary associations and political party foundations. There are differences both within and across these different types of PD actors in terms of what they seek to achieve, how, and why. In practice, however, five main modes of parliamentary strengthening have emerged since the 1990s (see Box 1).

> **Box 1: Main models of parliamentary strengthening**
> **1. Discrete *PD projects*:** Short-term, ad hoc activities to develop the capacity of parliament, MPs and parliamentary staff in generic parliamentary functions, procedure and duties.
> **2. *Direct funding* for parliamentary organisations:** Core funding or grants to support parliamentary associations or political foundations, or groups operating within parliaments (e.g. parties).
> **3. Longer-term *PD programmes:*** Multi-year programmes of linked activities to develop the capacity of parliament to perform its core functions, often focused on institutional and organisational reform.
> **4. *Issue-based* programmes and projects:** Long- or short-term interventions that work with/through parliaments/parliamentarians to achieve other, more targeted, policy objectives, either as a discrete project or as part of a broader sectoral programme.
> **5. Integrated *democracy programmes*:** Multi-year programmes integrating activities targeting different elements of democratic governance, with parliaments as only one element of the programme and also including support to other democratic institutions and organisations.
> **6. *Politically aware* programming:** Less a modality than a cross-cutting approach that seeks to understand and influence the informal politics, rules and relationships, based on political economy analysis, local buy-in and adaptable programming.

To some degree, these different modalities are chronological and based on learning in the field. But these phases have overlapped and all modalities are still in operation. This is, in part, because some organisations have found it difficult to change their practice, but also because early modalities are still the most appropriate in some contexts.

Lessons and Innovative Practice

PDA remains an under-evaluated area of donor support. As with democracy strengthening more generally, evaluation efforts have not been systematic, robust, or comprehensive enough. The evaluation literature consists mostly of either ad hoc single programme evaluations (which were beyond the scope of this study) or broad thematic reviews that draw quite general lessons from a diverse set of programmes. For this reason, there is almost no comparative data on funding levels and activities, and little detailed analysis of what has worked under different conditions and why.

At the same time, the body of academic and donor material from the past two decades does provide a general sense of what is thought to have worked well and, more often, less well in parliamentary support. From this, a clear and remarkably consistent set of lessons and recommendations about how external PD actors can improve their assistance has emerged (see Box 2).

Perhaps the single most important lesson is that understanding the political economy of parliaments in incipient democracies is an absolute necessity. There is growing recognition that formal rules and individual and organisational capacity constraints are not the only, or even in most instances the most important, determinants of parliamentary effectiveness – and that the political context that parliaments and parliamentarians operate in are an integral part of the puzzle. This means that PD should not be only about fixing the car (i.e. formal rules and capacity), but also about

engaging with the driver and his/her incentives, while having a sound understanding of road conditions and how these define where it is possible to head.

Box 2: Characteristics of effective PD programmes

There is a consensus in the literature, reinforced in the interviews carried out for this study, that PD organisations and programmes are more likely to be effective if they:

- Develop a deep understanding of the political economy of the parliaments they work with and use political economy analysis to ensure that programmes are appropriate to context.
- Are driven from within – either by parliamentarians/parliamentary staff or parliamentary reformers within civil society – with interventions tailored according to needs and demand.
- Develop an approach that provides needed technical support but is also politically savvy.
- Treat parliaments as part of the broader political system and integrate support with other areas of assistance.
- Build assistance around specific policy issues rather than generic activities.
- Encourage south-south learning.
- Base assistance on long-term commitments to partners.
- Are realistic about what can be achieved.
- Improve programme management, including better coordination, programme design and monitoring and evaluation (M&E), more tolerance of risk and more appropriate staff skills and incentives.

Over the past decade, many donors and other organisations have tried to incorporate these lessons and insights into their policy and practice – with varying success, as briefly outlined below.

International and strategic efforts

The most striking changes within PD support have occurred at the international and strategic levels. There is now a strategic consensus among donors, reflected in joint documents and commitments, about the key features of more effective parliamentary programmes in line with the lessons outlined above, especially in terms of recognising that PD needs to grapple with the political dynamics embedded in parliaments.

Over the past five years, many donors have also made more consistent efforts to improve the coordination of their PD activities and to share knowledge and experience. This is, in large part, an outcome of the donor coordination group that was set up in 2007 by the Department for International Development (DFID), the United Nations Department Programme (UNDP) and the World Bank, and has continued to meet since. Though still in its infancy, one of the most significant initiatives to emerge from this group is Agora, a web portal and online community set up in 2010 to make expertise more accessible and to facilitate cooperation and learning amongst different stakeholders active in PD. More work now needs to be done to ensure that Agora is a relevant and useful resource for all its constituencies.

There are also growing efforts at both the global and the regional levels to help parliamentarians develop benchmarks to monitor the performance of their own parliaments, including ongoing work within the OECD Development Assistance

Committee (DAC) to develop principles for PD engagement (alongside principles on electoral assistance, political party assistance and media assistance). On the other hand, it is not clear how the development of benchmarks will be taken forward and what impact they will have on parliamentary performance and behaviour. Individual agencies, notably the European Commission (EU) and the US Agency for International Development (USAID), have also taken some strides to improve their own programme management and evaluation, including ongoing efforts to develop more appropriate process and performance indicators to assess the impact of PD activities.

Translating strategic knowledge into practice

There has also been some progress, albeit limited and uneven, at the operational level. Two of the most significant changes over the past five to ten years are: (i) a move towards more issue-based approaches; and (ii) the increase in support to the political elements of parliamentary business, particularly the representative function, but also oversight and, to a lesser degree, to political parties.

Many donors are also increasingly undertaking political economy analysis as part of their country strategy development. However, they have found it much more difficult to use the insights emerging from that kind of analysis to develop more strategic, realistic programmes that target the underlying causes of parliamentary dysfunction. Some notable efforts to design and implement more politically aware and context-sensitive programmes include the National Democratic Institute (NDI)'s parliamentary work, the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy (NIMD)'s support to multi-party dialogue, and International IDEA's work with *bancadas políticas* and on the infiltration of drug money into the political process in Latin America.

There have also been some attempts to develop more comprehensive and longer-term programmes that integrate support to a variety of political institutions or organisations – including parliaments, political parties, media and civil society/parliamentary monitoring organisations – deemed crucial to the quality of democratic governance. The two leading examples are USAID Political Governance programmes and the basket-funded Deepening Democracy programmes (see Box 3).

Box 3: Lessons from Deepening Democracy programmes
Over the past decade like-minded donors have been investing more in integrated democracy programmes. These have common features including comprehensive scope, long-term commitments and basket funding. Comparative analysis of these programmes to date – such as Greg Power and Olivia Coleman's work on political programming for International IDEA – suggests that they vary in terms of their management arrangements, approaches and success. Key factors include the degree to which they:
- Actually integrate support to different political institutions in practice.
- Are comfortable having overtly political objectives and ways of working.
- Facilitate genuinely local agendas.
- Adopt a strategic and flexible approach able to adapt activities to contextual changes.
- Have realistic objectives and innovative approaches to results-based management.

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In addition, some organisations are experimenting with more intensive and hands-on efforts to develop capacity in a more sustainable manner, including, for example, UNDP's deployment of long-term parliamentary mentors or advisers and the Commonwealth Secretariat facilitation work with political parties and the executive.

Finally, our research also suggests that some organisations have been better than others at doing demand-led work more systematically – that is where beneficiaries/ partners request support and are fully involved in the development and implementation of programmes. Interestingly, organisations with the most effective practice in this area appear to be those that either work on a limited set of issues and have more secure funding streams (e.g. NIMD and the World Bank Institute), or are smaller consultancy firms (e.g. State University of New York and Global Partners and Associations).

Areas of limited progress
The high-level strategic activities and these more downstream examples of innovative practice are important signs that things are moving – incrementally – in the right direction. Nevertheless, this progress remains on the margins of the field because, with notable exceptions, most PD organisations have not been able (at all or consistently) to put into practice strategic insights about the importance of programmes that are politically informed, adapted to context, focused on the long term, and driven by and tailored to the needs and preferences of domestic constituents.

A significant challenge in this respect is that political programming does not fit neatly into ex ante off-the-shelf logical frameworks (logframes). Our research suggests that the most successful programmes are those that are implemented by experienced and specialist staff who are able to recognise opportunities, and experiment and deviate from programme documents – conditions that are unlikely to flourish in agencies with generalist staff that lack time and other resources, whose career incentives favour frequent rotation, and whose first concern is upward accountability and bureaucratic compliance.

However, progress also seems disappointing in areas where there are less obvious constraints. The call for more indirect and issue-based support in PD is well established, but, with a few exceptions (e.g. the work of the Budget Support Initiative on budget monitoring), our informants often seemed hard-pressed to find concrete examples of this approach in practice. Moreover, more needs to be done to build linkages around specific policy issues to gain traction and realise more meaningful change. A significant constraint is that key stakeholders continue to view parliaments as ineffective (if not irrelevant) partners: all the action is perceived to be taking place within the executive, and as a result it seems more effective to target efforts and engagement at that level.

Finally, it is widely recognised that the health of parliaments and political parties is deeply interconnected. But, again, while there have been forays into coordinating action between those working on PD and political party support (e.g. joint meetings

and reviews), examples of greater integration of these areas in practice are few and far between. Even when organisations assert that they are integrating parliament and party work, closer examination often reveals that parliament is simply the entry point for more traditional party development activities.

Constraints on Uptake of Lessons

The headline messages about how to improve PDA are well known, but there appears to be resistance to putting some types of lessons into practice – and difficulties with applying them consistently. Why? We have already indicated some of the reasons for the gap between learning, aspiration and practice. Below we consolidate our findings into four principal constraints to more politically informed and demand-led programming.

Constraint one: Gaps in knowledge

While the general lessons about how to support parliaments more effectively are widely accepted, **efforts to collect evidence about what works in PDA and why have not been systematic, comprehensive, well-resourced or robust enough**. Some 'lessons' are extrapolated more from what has not worked than evidence of what has – and all are more general principles for PDA than detailed operational guidance. Many of the recommendations are still relatively untested and, where innovative practice does exist, it is not being sufficiently researched. There is an urgent need to enrich the evidence base with analysis of both the process of new approaches and whether they have been able to make a difference (intended or otherwise) – both to support better programme design and to avoid harm.

Three other serious knowledge gaps emerge from our research. First, the fact that context matters has become a development mantra but there is hardly any material on whether and how different international PD actors have adapted different programmes/ approaches to specific contexts (e.g. by type of political, party or electoral system, level of stability or democracy, etc.). Second, there appears to be almost no research (in-depth or otherwise) on the motivations and preferences of Members of Parliament (MPs) in hybrid and fledgling democracies or on how social media and communication technologies may be altering accountability relationships and helping to reshape incentives – and whether and how international actors can engage with these incentive structures. Third, there is insufficient understanding (documented at least) about the incentives, capabilities and relationships of those providing PDA – including donors and the various types of implementing agencies.

At the same time, there have also been **insufficient efforts to synthesise and share the evaluative knowledge** that does exist (mainly in the form of evaluations of individual programmes) about the past thirty plus years of parliamentary support. Along with the extensive tacit knowledge of parliamentary specialists, this could be a rich vein of evidence and inspiration for programmers.

Constraint two: Tensions between different lessons and objectives

PD lessons and recommendations are often presented as a coherent and mutually reinforcing set, but there are some clear **trade-offs between different parts of the PD improvement agenda**. First, there are tensions between different recommendations within PD itself. For instance, large-scale integrated, basket-funded democracy support programmes may not be compatible with increased ownership or demand-led programming. Discussions with parliamentary practitioners and experts suggest that these kinds of programmes can increase transaction costs for local democracy promoters within civil society and make it more difficult for them to identify donor(s) that share their agenda. Similarly, working in a more politically aware manner within PDA may imply a more interventionist strategy that is not necessarily conducive to more local 'ownership'.

Second, there may be tensions between PD objectives and broader donor objectives – notably between working more politically and demonstrating results in ways that satisfy bureaucratic and political demands (see Box 4). These tensions need to be recognised more fully so as to make informed choices about which desired outcome(s) are the most important in the context of a specific programme. Along with concerns about the unintended impact of new approaches, such tensions explain why there is actually more dissention within the PD field about the way forward than the literature might suggest.

Box 4: Tensions between PD and the current results agenda

There are three main areas of tensions between more effective PDA and the results agenda *as it is currently conceived*:

1. **Sticking rigidly to an ex ante logical framework is likely to undermine programme objectives.** Outcomes and related activities can often only be finalised after proper discussion with beneficiaries (often once the programme is underway). Programmes need to be attuned to (often volatile) political processes, with flexibility to adapt their activities to capitalise on new opportunities and manage risks.
2. **Quantitative indicators are often ill suited for assessment of meaningful change.** There are no universal benchmarks or readily available data on performance against regional ones. Qualitative data can better assess programme effectiveness but is time and resource intensive to collect. As a result, programme outputs tend to be monitored rather than outcomes and impact.
3. **Political change is long term, complex and non-linear**. PD programmes link their activities to higher-level objectives that they cannot attribute to their own inputs or influence within the life of a single programme.

Constraint three: Perverse incentives in the aid system

Our research suggests that PD specialists are painfully aware of what the problems of parliamentary strengthening efforts are and what *should* be done to address them. Rather than a lack of knowledge, an important obstacle to improved practice are the underlying constraints on the ability of organisations to absorb and act on known lessons. Clearly, some of these constraints are linked to capacity issues in PD organisations, as well as to the political context of target parliaments. But there is also

a **need for greater openness and reflection about the political economy of the aid architecture and incentives structures that govern the funding, commissioning, design and implementation of PDA**. This includes the incentives that emanate from and influence donor commitment to democratic development in practice; programme design, monitoring and evaluation; knowledge sharing and feedback loops; staff competencies and risk-taking; relationships within PD organisations and between them; and reduction in core funding of implementing agencies and the 'projectisation' of PD funds. Without this honest reflection, simply reiterating general lessons and principles is unlikely to improve practice.

Constraint four: Insufficient attention to variation within the PD sector
A newcomer to the PD field would be forgiven for thinking that it is largely homogenous, with many PD organisations pursing the same objectives, working within similar constraints, using broadly similar methods, and achieving the same limited impact. On closer inspection, however, it is clear that the PD universe is extremely diverse with many different types of PD actors, and a plethora of objectives, partners, methods and modalities. While in general PD organisations share characteristics and ways of working, our research suggests that there are some important differences between, and even within, different categories of PD actors.

Recognising this variation is needed to improve practice (and ignoring it an obstacle) for at least four reasons. First, it can help identify successful activities that can advance learning about what has worked well and less well to improve the functioning of parliaments. Second, disaggregation is the basis for more targeted evaluations that compare like with like; a first step towards more rigorous evaluation of PD. Third, it means that specific recommendations on how to improve practice and more detailed guidance on programme design can be targeted at the organisations that they apply to. Fourth, it facilitates understanding of the objectives and constraints of specific types of organisations – which makes assessment of realistic objectives and remedial action possible. Again, simply reiterating a list of what PD actors should do without considering whether it is at all appropriate to them or providing more substantive advice on how they can change their practice is not a sensible way to move forward.

Recommendations on Evaluation Options to Improve Practice

The main purpose of the Evaluation Pre-Study was to assess the need and appetite for a multi-stakeholder evaluation of PDA and explore other options for addressing gaps in knowledge. Below we briefly present the main recommendations from the study (further detail and options can be found in the full report).

Do not conduct a large-scale thematic evaluation …
A key recommendation from our research is that a single, large-scale evaluation of the PD field is not needed and should not be undertaken. There are several reasons for this. One is the sheer diversity of the international actors involved in PD and the activities they carry out, which means that a single evaluation is unlikely to capture all

of what is going in the field in a manner that does it justice and compares like with like. Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, there is a strong feeling among PD specialists that, even if the evidence base is not robust enough, the criticisms made of PDA are for the most part valid. The general perception is that a large-scale, retrospective evaluation of PDA is unlikely to generate new knowledge and will instead reinforce lessons, recommendations and principles that are already widely accepted. Instead, there is a great desire to see finite funds for research and evaluation concentrated on exercises that are more targeted and thorough, add cumulatively to existing knowledge, and look forward.

… but do invest in discrete and targeted evaluation and research exercises
A clear message from the study is that there is a need to build a more robust and/or substantive evidence base on many areas related to PD effectiveness. Our main recommendation is that PD actors address this through a series of discrete and tailored exercises able to drill down into and fill the specific knowledge gaps identified in the research. Below we set out priority areas for action – and Box 5 outlines the core principles that should guide all these efforts.

Box 5: Principles for action
In addressing knowledge gaps, donors, implementing agencies and partners should keep in mind a few key principles:
- *Coordinate*: Identify shared priorities and a lead organisation to take forward particular initiatives, and devote resources to actual learning rather than bureaucracy.
- *Comparative advantage*: But go it alone (and build on the work of others) where coordination will block innovation and lead to a lowest-common-denominator approach.
- *Disaggregate*: Recognise that the PD field is diverse, with different actors with different objectives specialising in different areas and operating under different constraints.
- *Be targeted and specific*: Focus resources on specific questions and types of organisations to generate knowledge about the relative effectiveness of particular types of activities or approaches.
- *Know your audience*: Who are different exercises to address knowledge gaps aimed at, and how can those audiences be reached?
- *Don't reinvent the wheel*: Capitalise on existing knowledge generated by other organisations and in other periods, and use resources to move the agenda forward.

(i) Donors should conduct/commission **targeted evaluation work** able to address the main knowledge gaps and build more rigorous evidence. This could include:
- A systematic review of existing PD evaluations.
- Focused evaluations on areas or types of PDA or specific types of PD organisations. Clear candidates are parliamentary networks and associations, integrated democracy programmes, issue-based approaches, and support to regional parliaments.
- Track innovative approaches in real time.
- Commission in-depth, comparative country case studies of parliamentary strengthening in historical perspective with a focus on what combination of external and internal factors have made the most difference over time.

(ii) Donors should conduct/commission **targeted research exercises** to address those knowledge gaps that cannot be addressed through evaluation. This could include:

- In-depth research on *what MPs and parliamentary staff need and want*, whether PD programmes are the right ones, and if and how things can be done better or differently. A similar exercise could be done for civil society organisations involved in parliamentary work.
- Research on the *political economy of PDA aid architecture* to improve understanding of the internal constraints that have made it so difficult for donors and, importantly, implementing agencies, to act on lessons learnt in the PD field and how the development assistance architecture can be better aligned with the need for PDA to be longer-term, experimental and more politically attuned and savvy.

Redefine the results-based agenda

Rather than being on the defensive about the results-based agenda, the PD community should seek to redefine it so that it can become more appropriate to the types of support most likely to help transform parliaments, be better attuned to risk, and better able to focus on qualitative dimensions of parliamentary effectiveness. Programmers can begin to get some traction on this by having more realistic intermediate outcomes and appropriate activities – because they are then more likely to have results to show – and political economy analysis can be instrumental to identifying feasible objectives and pathways. PD actors also need think about what types of indicators and evidence (often context-specific and process-oriented) are most appropriate for PD.

More fundamentally, however, donors and other relevant stakeholders need new approaches to managing and communicating results if they are to become brokers of meaningful change and if they are to design programmes that help parliaments address the root causes of their dysfunction (rather than simply their symptoms). Programme managers need the space to work with stakeholders in the early stages of a programme to identify realistic, intermediate outcomes, as well as appropriate indicators, and to revise activities as conditions change. This requires M&E frameworks that focus on reporting against agreed processes and higher-level strategic objectives. By contrast, programme managers are unlikely to design transformative programmes if they are held to fixed, *ex ante* logframes and/or put under pressure to undertake activities that produce quick and easily measurable outputs or results. To move forward, an honest debate about these issues is needed.

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The pre-study was carried out by Alina Rocha Menocal and Tam O'Neil. It was commissioned by Sida and is found at http://www.sida.se/publications.