



Inter-Parliamentary Union

For democracy. For everyone.

135th IPU ASSEMBLY AND RELATED MEETINGS

Geneva, 23 – 27.10.2016

Governing Council
Item 10

CL/199/10(g)-R.1
29 August 2016

Reports on recent IPU specialized meetings

(g) World e-Parliament Conference 2016
28-30 June 2016, Chamber of Deputies of Chile, Valparaíso

The World e-Parliament Conference, held in the Chamber of Deputies in Valparaíso, Chile, featured the launch of the World e-Parliament Report 2016 and discussion of its key findings. During the conference, policy and technical tracks provided a forum for participants to exchange experiences on how ICT helps to improve representation, law-making and oversight, and to increase parliament's openness, accessibility, accountability and effectiveness.

The event drew just over 200 participants - parliamentarians, parliamentary officials and representatives of civil society and other organizations - from more than 50 countries, with three days of plenary and panel sessions, practical workshops and technology demonstrations. The gender breakdown of participants was 27 per cent women and 73 per cent men.

This summary presents the key themes, ideas and considerations that emerged from the three days of the conference, along with indications of some future trends. The conference website (www.wepc2016.org) provides access to all the presentations that were made, as well as video archives of all sessions.



World e-Parliament Conference 2016

28-30 June 2016

Co-organized by the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the
Chamber of Deputies of Chile
#eParliament



Conference summary

The World e-Parliament Conference, held in the Chamber of Deputies in Valparaíso, Chile, featured the launch of the World e-Parliament Report 2016 and discussion of its key findings. During the conference, policy and technical tracks provided a forum for participants to exchange experiences on how ICT helps to improve representation, law-making and oversight, and to increase parliament's openness, accessibility, accountability and effectiveness.

The event drew just over 200 participants - parliamentarians, parliamentary officials and representatives of civil society and other organizations - from more than 50 countries, with three days of plenary and panel sessions, practical workshops and technology demonstrations. The gender breakdown of participants was 27 per cent women and 73 per cent men.

The event included an "Unconference", whose sessions were proposed and led by conference participants, and a "Hackathon", coordinated by staff of the HackerLab in the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies. The Hackathon was a hands-on event, working with open data and developing prototype applications to make data more usable for citizens. It brought together over 40 people from Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Chile, France, Italy, Peru, the United Kingdom and the United States of America. Some were present in Valparaíso while others worked remotely.

The Hackathon proved popular with delegates; the final presentation of the Hackathon projects demonstrated the value of setting up collaborative teams across parliaments and civil society. The event built on existing ideas from citizen groups around the world; it was not about creating finished applications but demonstrating a proof of concept and exploring possible uses for the data. The winning team from the Hackathon will spend a week in the HackerLab in the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies, sponsored by the Chilean Congress.

This summary presents the key themes, ideas and considerations that emerged from the three days of the conference, along with indications of some future trends. The conference website (www.wepc2016.org) provides access to all the presentations that were made, as well as video archives of all sessions.

Strategic planning

Digital tools are transforming how parliaments work, not just at the day-to-day operational level, but also in terms of new ways of thinking, innovative practices and a stronger, more vibrant culture of openness and transparency. Supported by tools that facilitate citizen engagement, new and more open models of parliament are beginning to emerge. There is evidence of increasing experimentation with, for example, the co-creation of laws.

The result is an increase in citizens' ability to scrutinize parliamentary work and better access to the parliamentary processes more broadly. This matters because healthy democracies and sustainable development require strong, inclusive institutions. However, as a French parliamentarian noted, parliament may have digitized its existing procedures, but has not yet created new procedures for the digital era. We need to think deeply about how to do this.

Strategic planning is critical for managing this complex change; high-level strategy committees and steering committees are needed to ensure success. ICT is becoming normative and will eventually cease to be an independent domain; this requires even deeper integration of technology into the architecture of the institution and the way it thinks about the future. As the Spanish Parliament observed, technology disrupts quickly so it is not enough to have a strategic plan: institutions must have strategic planning processes that are embedded, responsive and continuous to be able to adapt to the ever-changing environment.

Public engagement and parliamentary openness

Parliaments are increasingly demonstrating strong political commitment to openness. Parliamentary openness makes people feel they are (and can be more) involved in their parliament. It is open data that underpins parliamentary openness.

Where there has not been a traditional culture of openness, legal measures can support this change. Ultimately, though, there has to be a shift towards a culture of parliamentary information being “open by default”, instead of having lots of decision points about what data to release. Becoming more open means working with more channels, more two-way communication, finding ways to break down barriers and making the process human and accessible.

Dialogue with civil society helps parliaments better understand what data is wanted and how it can be delivered more effectively. While parliaments can find it difficult to understand civic hacker and youth groups, engagement with groups like these can lead to valuable cooperation. Parliaments and Parliamentary Monitoring Organizations (PMOs) should not always expect to agree but where there is dialogue, it helps both sides understand each other, leads to better results and strengthens democracy.

There are a growing number of examples of successful partnerships between parliament and civil society organizations on parliamentary openness. Parliaments choose carefully who they work with, looking for specific areas of expertise and trusted partners. Well-designed engagement processes are flexible and virtual, so that all good ideas can be heard, wherever they come from. As Georgia noted, 16 of the 18 commitments in the parliamentary action plan under the Open Government Partnership (OGP) were inspired by civil society, and the United Kingdom’s OGP National Action Plan shows a similarly strong civil society contribution. This level of partnership takes time and effort to build and relies on mutual trust.

Critical role of technology

It is a critical role of parliament’s ICT strategy to focus on building an effective and robust technology architecture. The cost and complexity of getting ICT right cannot be underestimated, however. As the Finnish Parliament demonstrated, institutions are increasingly becoming paperless and able to operate virtually. Sophisticated document management systems are replacing older, less-integrated, process in areas such as legislative drafting and tracking in some countries.

These developments offer significant benefits to the institutions that are able to use them, such as being able to access any document from anywhere, and publishing information in near-real time. But they are only made possible by significant investment in complex and expensive systems. Parliaments in smaller and lower-income countries struggle to find the resources and support needed to develop and use these systems, which in turn limits their ability to provide access to parliamentary data.

Security within the parliamentary network and data protection are major considerations, which can be complicated further by the advent of open data and cloud storage solutions.

Further examples of technology change are emerging in terms of multi-platform delivery of information and deploying functionality seamlessly across devices. The US House of Representatives and the UK Parliament are exploring how to build a set of digital components, drawn from a common core of data and documents but served through a programmable interface (API), rather than building applications to work directly with the data. The API approach creates far greater flexibility and it means that, potentially, any internal or third-party website or app can reuse parliamentary data in a much simpler way.

Open data and document standards

Parliaments produce a lot of documents in the course of their work and it can be difficult to connect them together and track what is happening. In the first instance, parliaments need to get their internal systems and processes right. Data has to be of good quality and valid for internal use. One way to achieve this is by moving parliamentary documentation from proprietary formats to XML and other open standards. This makes it possible to transition from publishing only PDF documents to more accessible and open document formats, and avoids having to make assumptions about what formats the end-users want.

Opening up parliamentary data means it can be linked to external data sources to add value, depth and richness. Open and XML-based systems bring technical advantages in the efficiency of query processing; future developments in this area include moving to better interfaces, adopting open standards for sharing data and using newer data storage tools that can manage complex linked data.

Social media

Social media is not only a powerful tool to publish information: social tools create engagement and encourage parliament to be more responsive. This in turn helps institutions better understand people's information needs and their views on policy issues. Social media builds trust by demonstrating the proximity of access to institutions.

Social media also creates its own challenges in terms of hearing what is being said above the noise, managing the volume of traffic and meeting public expectations of responsiveness. It is vital for institutions to respond in a timely manner otherwise people are left feeling ignored.

Adopting the social tools that the public already uses makes most sense, rather than trying to create new tools. It is possible to drive traffic from mainstream social tools to specific applications that are more suited for things such as submission gathering and deliberation. For example, UNICEF's "U-Report" captures, reports and aggregates data to analyse and understand people's positions on a range of issues.

There is clearly no single tool that will work for everyone. Where Facebook has a considerable audience in many countries, in others WhatsApp has become the communication tool of choice. This is the case from Chile to Indonesia to Benin; yet its use in Iceland is negligible.

Parliamentarians are inevitably drawn into using the tools that their constituents use; they need to understand them and learn how to manage them effectively. Meanwhile, parliaments need to recognize what kind of content or engagement works in each space and under what conditions. Parliaments should consider what, when and why they are sharing, listening or engaging; they need to recognise how this aligns with their overall communications and engagement strategies.

The Senate of Argentina underlined that it is important to establish clear goals and objectives, understand the current landscape (including the skills, knowledge and expectations of members), and then define targeted strategies for the different media that address the audiences that the parliament (or member) wishes to connect with and talk to. This more strategic approach allows parliaments to develop metrics to measure how successful they have been.

The downside of social media has been well documented, and parliamentarians reported the challenges of managing the high volume of interactions on social media and the negative commentary that is frequently directed at elected representatives. Information overload is a constant issue, and many parliamentarians recognize that new social tools require a significant commitment in terms of time and resources. MPs who want to be genuinely engaging are often finding it hard to manage the expectations of citizens. Others observe that the investment is worth it, for the opportunities it creates to have direct contact with constituents and to deliver key messages that are often picked up in the mass media.

Challenges and emerging trends

Though digital is a significant and overwhelmingly positive enabler of transformation for parliaments, the speed and scale of change brings challenges for parliaments. It is hard to plan for the future when there is little visibility about the state of technology in five years' time. An ongoing process of strategic planning is needed to help parliament adapt to new evolutions in technology and society.

The challenge is particularly great where parliaments lack the funding and resources to afford and properly resource complex new platforms. There are big gaps emerging between parliaments using XML and those that are not, divided from wealthy to less wealthy, and a clear need to work together, share concepts, building blocks, software and, solutions. This highlights the critical importance of effective knowledge transfer and inter-parliamentary cooperation.

The underlying challenge remains to help people understand the role and work of parliament, using whatever channels are most suitable in a particular context. Offline methods of communication remain important, particularly in countries where the technology base is low, and are complementary to digital tools everywhere.

The conference highlighted a number of future trends, not least in terms of the increasing openness of parliaments and direct communication with citizens. In the future there is an expectation that parliamentary data can be linked to other open data sets to create stronger visualizations and narratives that better relate to ordinary people and their everyday lives. Joining up data from parliament and other sources needs new technologies and will lead to much greater use of semantic web and “document-oriented” data stores, as well as reconsideration of the way data is presented through APIs.

As digital becomes embedded in parliament, it will cease to be an independent domain, and will become simply part of the parliamentary ecosystem. The Hackathon demonstrated how Brazil’s “Wikilegis” tool allows people to comment and propose modifications to draft laws, so that law-making can become a dynamic two-way process. “Co-creation” and “co-evaluation” of laws are a possible future direction that a number of parliamentarians are already advocating, even if the final decision on legislation remains with elected representatives, as the guardians of the common interest. These discussions are taking place in countries around the world, as parliaments consider how to adapt existing procedures and create new ones for the 21st century.