



**FOLLOW-UP TO THE 2011 ISTANBUL PROGRAMME OF ACTION
FOR THE LEAST DEVELOPED COUNTRIES**

*7 October 2013 (11 a.m. - 1 p.m.)
Room A, CCV Annexe, CICG)*

Background document

To help provide a ground-level perspective and more tangible evidence of how parliaments are involved in the implementation of the Istanbul Programme of Action, 13 parliaments were invited to hold specialized focus groups on the main questions of the session (see accompanying concept note). The invitation to the parliaments was extended through UNDP, the IPU's main partner for parliamentary strengthening.

Three parliaments held a focus group in the lead-up to the session, namely, Burkina Faso, Samoa and Sierra Leone.¹ The focus groups were led by UNDP representatives in the field. The present document contains the summary reports from the groups, in which up to 15 members of parliament participated in each parliament.

The focus groups' main findings are set out below.

- Parliaments are generally unaware of the Istanbul Programme of Action and are not actively engaged in its follow-up. It has yet to register that parliaments are specifically mentioned in the Programme as key implementing partners. Parliaments will need to catch up with this process if they are to be ready for the 2015 global mid-term review of the Programme, which will be conducted through national consultations.
- There is nevertheless an obvious potential for parliamentary involvement in the Programme. What is needed is greater focus and coordination among the various parliamentary committees. Capacity-building and financial support will be essential to build internal oversight processes, support new structures, and even facilitate twinning and mentoring between parliaments.
- The Istanbul Programme of Action needs to be mainstreamed by each parliament together with other global agendas, such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (and eventually the new sustainable development goals), so as to avoid duplication of efforts while improving coordination and results.
- The Programme's various commitments are best pursued separately by the corresponding portfolio committees, but this will also require the development of indicators to track progress. To ensure coordination and provide overall political support, consideration should be given to establishing an additional caucus or committee dedicated to international development goals (MDGs, the Istanbul Programme of Action, etc.).

¹ The parliaments of the United Republic of Tanzania and Turkey also expressed interest in holding a focus group, but had not submitted a report at the time of writing.

- It is not easy for parliaments to ensure that the Programme is reflected in national development plans, which are generally seen as the preserve of the executive branch.
- However, parliaments can provide input and influence policy through the budget process and regular reviews by the committees.

FOCUS GROUP I: BANGLADESH

1. How familiar is parliament with the Istanbul Programme of Action as an international development agreement?

None of the parliamentarians had any prior knowledge of the Istanbul Programme of Action or their role in overseeing its implementation.

2. What mechanism is in place to help parliament mainstream the Istanbul Programme of Action through its own oversight and legislative processes?

A cross-party consensus is critical if the Programme is to be successfully implemented. The change of government following an election should not dilute/reduce that consensus. Parliamentarians will need to establish a special Millennium Development Goal (MDG) monitoring group, to assess results and provide input for the post-2015 discussions.

3. Is parliament able to contribute to national development plans and how is this done?

Parliament has very limited possibilities to effect real change in terms of assessing development priorities in the context of the Istanbul Programme of Action and other initiatives.

4. How can parliament ensure that the Istanbul Programme of Action is sufficiently reflected in the national development plan and the budget?

Parliament requires annual reports from the government about progress on the MDGs and implementation of the Istanbul Programme of Action. All external development assistance must be incorporated into the budget.

5. How are other development agendas reconciled with the Istanbul Programme of Action into one coherent policy approach?

No response

6. How difficult would it be for parliament to adopt and implement a multi-year action plan in support of the Istanbul Programme of Action?

A convoluted bureaucracy and the power wielded by many public servants make it very difficult for parliamentarians to understand and navigate the machinery of government when they seek information.

Parliament has little or no understanding of the national budget/gender budgets.

Parliament's Rules of Procedure must be amended in order to give it greater leeway to evaluate the implementation of development projects.

People's participation in public policy implementation should be enhanced so as to support the demand side of governance.

7. What support would parliament need from development partners at both country and global levels to facilitate implementation of the Istanbul Programme of Action?

- Parliament needs to internalize and be thoroughly briefed about the international global development targets that Bangladesh has committed to achieve, and have a better understanding about Bangladesh-specific sustainable development goals and the Istanbul Programme of Action.
- The international community does not fully appreciate the challenges facing parliamentarians in the least developed countries, where parliaments are underresourced in terms of both intellectual capacity and physical infrastructure. Things like the absence of access to good-quality parliamentary research staff impede their ability to discharge their key oversight functions.
- Few allowances are made for parliamentarians' need to be fully briefed about key international development initiatives, and parliamentarians have little room to contribute to policy formulation.
- The target to halve the number of least developed countries is overly ambitious and unlikely to be achieved.
- Parliamentarians would like to see Parliament become a model for the region but the incoming tenth Parliament would need a comprehensive capacity-building programme to that end.
- The Improving Democracy through Parliamentary Development Project should designate a government focal point dealing with the MDGs and the Istanbul Programme of Action, so as to enable parliamentarians to be further briefed about the Programme.

FOCUS GROUP II: BURKINA FASO

1. How familiar is parliament with the Istanbul Programme of Action as an international development agreement?

The National Assembly knows very little about the Istanbul Programme of Action, which is rarely mentioned during parliamentary debates. The issue was directly addressed last year at the 126th IPU Assembly (Kampala, March-April 2012). Of the group that was interviewed, only one member said he had heard of the Programme. This is therefore a challenge. The current legislature has served for less than one year, as its membership was renewed in legislative elections in December 2012.

Parliamentary missions abroad are very poorly documented and do not systematically report back, which explains why the Programme is relatively unknown to parliamentarians.

The resumption of parliamentary activities in September will provide the opportunity to hold an information workshop on the Programme.

2. What mechanism is in place to help parliament mainstream the Istanbul Programme of Action through its own oversight and legislative processes?

There is no mechanism to help the National Assembly mainstream the Istanbul Programme of Action into its legislative and oversight work. The Programme is to undergo a mid-term review in 2015, which coincides with the end of the country's Strategy for Growth and Sustainable

Development. This will be an opportunity for the National Assembly to be involved in evaluating the Programme, by determining the action taken and results obtained in the areas identified therein.

3. Is parliament able to contribute to national development plans and how is this done?

The 1991 Constitution provides that the National Assembly may debate public processes, in particular in budget debates, which usually extend beyond the financial framework. The Prime Minister's speeches on the state of the nation also provide an opportunity for it to help define broad policy lines and development plans. In addition, the government often submits draft public policies to the National Assembly, for its comments and contributions.

4. How can parliament ensure that the Istanbul Programme of Action is sufficiently reflected in the national development plan and the budget?

The National Assembly can ensure that the Istanbul Programme of Action is reflected in the country's development plan through the mechanisms for overseeing government action and requesting information from the government, and in discussions of the budget and the allocation of public resources. To this end, parliamentarians have proposed the following approach:

- Organize an information workshop for parliamentarians on the Istanbul Programme of Action, with the assistance of UNDP; the workshop could be followed by an appeal by the UNDP leadership to the National Assembly Bureau;
- Establish a parliamentary network or special committee on the Istanbul Programme of Action, which could be extended to other parliaments in African least developed countries;
- Formulate an action plan to support implementation of the Istanbul Programme of Action. The action plan will be proposed to the National Assembly Bureau and, if it is adopted, will be integrated into the National Assembly's workplan and implemented through the standing committees.

The parliamentary network on the Istanbul Programme of Action could be a specialized body within the existing parliamentary network on the MDGs. UNDP recently ran a workshop for parliamentarians on MDG issues and challenges.

5. How are other development agendas reconciled with the Istanbul Programme of Action into one coherent policy approach?

The National Assembly has a mechanism to ensure consistency in its activities, namely the meeting of the chairpersons of the parliamentary groups and committees. In addition to this mechanism, it might be useful to establish a special committee responsible for coordinating initiatives and ensuring consistency between development programmes.

6. How difficult would it be for parliament to adopt and implement a multi-year action plan in support of the Istanbul Programme of Action?

There would be no difficulty in adopting a multi-year action plan; whenever a plan is adopted, it is automatically incorporated into the accountability framework and the usual functions of the parliamentary committees.

7. What support would parliament need from development partners at both country and global levels to facilitate implementation of the Istanbul Programme of Action?

- Technical assistance for national ownership of the Istanbul Programme of Action is essential; it could come from the UNDP Office or the global level;
- Expertise to help the National Assembly formulate an action plan for the Programme's implementation;
- The development of such a plan would help identify assistance needs, particularly regarding finance;
- Financial resources for implementing the action plan;
- The parliamentarians who were interviewed recommended that financial resources should be mobilized at the international level by the IPU and/or the body responsible for the Istanbul Programme of Action and for assisting parliaments in least developed countries to implement their action plans.

FOCUS GROUP III: SAMOA

1. How familiar is parliament with the Istanbul Programme of Action as an international development agreement?

Samoa's parliament has limited knowledge of the Istanbul Programme of Action. However, the Strategy for the Development of Samoa 2012–2016 is compatible, in key areas, with the Programme and with other processes such as the MDGs, the Barbados Programme of Action, and Agenda 21.

2. What mechanisms are in place to help parliament mainstream the Istanbul Programme of Action through its own oversight and legislative process?

The Samoan parliament, with financial assistance provided by the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) through UNDP, is implementing the Samoa Parliamentary Support Project. The project aims to build the members' capacity with regard to parliamentary procedures and committee functions and the Secretariat's capacity to ensure that members are provided with good quality services; it also aims to engage the public and the community in the legislative process and in the composition of parliamentary committees.

Parliament's Corporate Plan 2013–2016 includes key outcomes and related activities by the Secretariat to service parliament, the Outreach Strategy for public and community engagement activities, the draft Law and Research Strategy to organize the service and information and data requirements needed to facilitate good and sound debates, the ICT Strategy, which identifies short- and long-term requirements for enhancing and utilizing ICTs in the work of parliament, and the draft Samoa Parliamentary Service Bill.

The twinning arrangement with the Australian Parliament (Tasmania) has greatly nurtured and promoted the role of parliament and parliamentarians as legislators. Exchange visits have provided members with the opportunity to observe debates and question time and with practical experience of the general oversight and legislative processes in the respective parliaments.

The AusAID Pacific Partnership Programme, which involves other Pacific parliaments, has provided an opportunity to learn about the parliamentary situation in these neighbouring countries. The Presiding Officers and Clerks Conference, which is in its forty-fourth year, is a forum at which the parliaments of Australia, New Zealand and other Pacific island countries can share their experience, in particular in terms of improving services. The 2013 conference was held in Canberra, in July, and Samoa will host the 2014 session.

Parliamentary advocacy groups have been established on health, and population and development, and the MDG Advocacy Group, which had been previously established, is soon to be activated. Efforts have also been made in the broader MDG context to mobilize resources, with UNDP providing technical guidance and assistance.

The Samoan parliament therefore has mechanisms in place to provide oversight of national development plans and to a certain extent the MDGs, but no mechanism specific to the Istanbul Programme of Action.

3. Is parliament able to contribute to national development plans and how is this done?

Parliament's response has been on policies, legislative reviews and related debates. It has also reviewed budgets against agreed corporate plans, and the annual reports and accounts of ministries and State-owned enterprises.

4. How can parliament ensure that the Istanbul Programme of Action is sufficiently reflected in the national development plan and in the budget?

The Istanbul Programme of Action has clear focal areas, and governance is one in which parliament can play a key role, in addition to overseeing other focal areas. To ensure that these focal areas are addressed and mainstreamed into the respective plans and budgets, parliament will be involved in the approval process. This process can be channelled through the work of the respective committees and during public outreach activities. The draft Law and Research Strategy is intended to facilitate access by members of parliament to updated data, information and legislation on any area of development.

Regarding the governance focal area, parliament will focus on community development through improved economic and social well-being and improved village governance. It will pay particular attention to the Village Governance Strategy prepared by the Ministry of Women, Community and Social Development; there is also inter alia the Law and Justice Sector Plan.

5. How are other development agendas reconciled with the Istanbul Programme of Action into one coherent policy approach?

The Strategy for the Development of Samoa 2012–2016 examines Samoan development issues across all sectors. The issues are presented in line with other regional action plans, i.e. the MDGs, the Istanbul Programme of Action, National Adaptation Programmes of Action, to name but a few.

Parliament's Corporate Plan provides members and external stakeholders with a snapshot of the vision, mission, guiding principles and values that are prerequisites for the good governance expected of all public sector agencies, as outlined in the Strategy for the Development of Samoa 2008–2012.

6. How difficult would it be for parliament to adopt and implement a multi-year action plan in support of the Istanbul Programme of Action?

Building the capacity of members is an ongoing exercise, as turnover is about 50 per cent. This important planning approach will nevertheless be constrained by the availability of resources for capacity-building activities.

Another difficulty is the sheer number of national, regional and global development plans and strategies relating to good governance. Parliament does not have the capacity or mechanisms to provide effective oversight of all these different plans and strategies, even if the multi-year action plan is adopted.

7. What support would parliament need from development partners at both country and global levels to facilitate implementation of the Istanbul Programme of Action?

- Training for members and Secretariat staff on leadership, parliamentary procedures and research
- Equipment
- Information and communication technology
- Effective community access and awareness
- Quality infrastructure and working facilities
- Resources to facilitate the establishment of parliamentary mechanisms for implementation and oversight thereof, and to fund the staff needed for such mechanisms; resources and support for partnership arrangements with other IPU Member Parliaments and members of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association
- Active involvement in IPU activities

FOCUS GROUP IV: SIERRA LEONE

1. How familiar is parliament with the Istanbul Programme of Action as an international development agreement?

A few of the senior members of Parliament knew about the Istanbul Programme of Action, but even they were unaware that parliaments were considered a major stakeholder in the Programme's roll-out.

2. What mechanism is in place to help parliament mainstream the Istanbul Programme of Action through its own oversight and legislative processes?

The members were very clear that the targets of each of the priority areas as stated in the Programme could be handled by Parliament through its numerous subject-specific committees.

At one point, it was suggested that a group could be constituted, like the one on population or the women's caucus, specifically to track the priority areas stated in the Istanbul Programme of Action. However, after debating the point, members unanimously agreed that an IPU committee, like the one formed in the previous legislature, could take up the task of prioritizing the Programme in the work of Parliament.

3. Is parliament able to contribute to national development plans and how is this done?

The general refrain was that Parliament does not contribute directly to the national development plan, as the role of parliamentarians, as members of the legislative branch, is distinct from that of the executive. However, many members were quick to point out that they could have an impact on the policies of ministries, departments and agencies by making suggestions and providing input when ministries submitted their strategic plans to the respective committees. One example was the government policy on petroleum, which incorporated suggestions from Parliament. At the same time, senior members said that committee recommendations often went unheeded.

Proper monitoring of ministry and departmental implementation and status reports was thought to be another way of influencing government policy.

4. How can parliament ensure that the Istanbul Programme of Action is sufficiently reflected in the national development plan and in the budget?

A monitoring framework with clear indicators needs to be designed to capture the progress made in each of the priority areas. Parliamentarians could oversee progress, suggest improvements in implementation, etc., through the subject-specific committees. They could also raise awareness of the Programme's targets by taking it to the people. This point was linked to the support provided to the previous legislature by the IPU for outreach activities.

Legislation was mentioned as an option, as it was felt that many aspects of the priority areas identified in the Istanbul Programme of Action were not reflected in the relevant legislation in Sierra Leone.

The media also played a role, by setting the agenda, discussing it at length and arousing public opinion on the Programme's priority areas, then generating momentum for policy formulation. It was pointed out at the same time, however, that policies and legislation were often rushed through, not leaving much scope for lengthy consultation and deliberation.

5. How are other development agendas reconciled with the Istanbul Programme of Action into one coherent policy approach?

This was identified as a task to be taken up by the respective parliamentary committees on areas coming within their purview and covered in development agendas such as the MDGs, the Agenda for Prosperity and the Istanbul Programme for Action, in order to enhance their oversight role.

It was felt that the ministry or department concerned should collate the targets set out in the development agendas and report regularly on them.

It was also thought that an IPU committee consisting of members of parliament could oversee and coordinate committees dealing with the Programme's priority areas.

6. How difficult would it be for parliament to adopt and implement a multi-year action plan in support of the Istanbul Programme of Action?

This was considered difficult but not impossible. It was thought to be a difficult task as the parliamentary committees had little information with which to develop indicators or a framework, much less a multi-year action plan.

7. What support would parliament need from development partners at both country and global levels to facilitate implementation of the Istanbul Programme of Action?

- Technical assistance to reconcile the different development agendas and the Istanbul Programme of Action into one coherent policy at the country level, and to develop a multi-year action plan for Parliament
- Support for parliamentary research, with a view to providing input for committees and members on the Programme
- Training for parliamentary staff on the Programme, indicators and targets, and the design of monitoring frameworks for each of the priority areas
- Training members to oversee progress on the Programme's priority areas
- Training the members of Parliament's IPU Committee to design a monitoring framework and integrate it seamlessly into the work of the respective subject-specific committees
- Support for communication, both on the Programme at country level and for members/committees to raise awareness on these internationally agreed targets among their constituents