Parliamentary Workshop

*Developing good practice in political representation
and constituency work in the Caribbean region*

26-27 November 2012, Port-of-Spain (Trinidad and Tobago)

Developing political representation and constituency work in the Caribbean region

27 November 2012

The following analysis and proposals emerged during a regional workshop for English-speaking parliaments organized by the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago in Port-of-Spain. The workshop made use of the analysis of relations between parliaments and citizens in the first *Global Parliamentary Report*, published by the IPU and UNDP in April 2012 (www.ipu.org/gpr).

The context

Participants categorized the local activities they carry out with citizens, using the framework proposed by the *Global Parliamentary Report* (support to individuals; grievance-chasing; policy responsiveness; and project work at the constituency level).

Individual requests for support are by far the most common form of constituency work in the English-speaking Caribbean. Citizens ask their MP to pay their electricity bills, to help them find a job, to provide funding for a business venture, and a myriad of other services. The type of request put to MPs is influenced by people's level of education. For example, people with low education might ask for a house; people with high education might ask for the contract to build the houses. The second most common expectation is that MPs will act as a development agent for the constituency, bringing infrastructure such as roads, healthcare centres, recreational facilities and other public goods. These expectations are accompanied by a strong belief that contracts to carry out this work should be given to local companies.

MPs have multiple responsibilities: to their family, constituents, party, to parliament and sometimes also as a Minister. Dealing with public expectations places a great burden on MPs' time, energy and finances. Yet MPs believe that they have a strong political interest in responding positively to requests. They hope to gain electoral benefits by doing so, and fear electoral sanction if they do not.

Nevertheless, the volume of requests is always greater than the capacity of a single MP can have to deliver. MPs in the governing party generally have significantly greater access to resources than those who are in the opposition. Meanwhile, the polarized nature of politics in the Caribbean means that development initiatives undertaken by one MP or party may be discontinued as a matter of principle when that MP or party is removed from office.

Possible solutions

Participants sought practical ways in which MPs and/or parliaments could address these issues in a strategic manner, rather than on a case-by-case basis. Below is a selection of suggestions made by MPs in the workshop. These are structured according to the four approaches to constituency work identified in the *Global Parliamentary Report*.

Approach: Using consultation techniques

Challenge: Expectations are unrealistic. People see their MP as the person to whom they can take all their problems

- Educate citizens about the role of an MP by communicating clearly what you as a representative can and cannot do for them.

- Educate citizens about their own responsibilities by helping them to understand the processes that lead to getting a house, a job, etc.

- Provide clarity by telling constituents in which areas you are going to focus your efforts - and do it!

- Draw the line by giving people a straight 'yes' or 'no' answer - people often appreciate honesty and frank talk. Ask them 'Would you rather that I lie to you?'

- Redirect requests by informing constituents about existing government programmes that provide the kind of assistance they are seeking.

- Raise awareness of a common problem, such as non-payment of utility bills, by discussing the issue at a constituency meeting.

Approach: Seeking strategic solutions; moving from the individual to the collective

Challenge: Young people no longer expect to solve their problems by themselves

- Empower citizens by developing their sense of self-worth and encouraging them to seek solutions by themselves (for example, by writing a letter of recommendation for a constituent rather than trying to find them a job oneself).

- Help young people to find their place in society by setting up mentoring programmes that pair them up with successful men and women.

- Inspire young people to achieve by creating Youth Awards in different areas (agriculture, business etc). See example from Trinidad and Tobago.

- Build social cohesion by organizing community activities where MPs can meet their constituents and people can get to know each other.

Challenge: Some parts of the country do not have adequate infrastructure, schools, healthcare

- Improve national development policies by subjecting them to parliamentary scrutiny and making more use of MPs' detailed knowledge of local needs.

- Strengthen parliament's capacity as an institution by ensuring its financial and administrative independence from the executive branch of government.

- Strengthen the role of MPs by providing equitable access to resources for all MPs, whether in government or opposition.

- Improve perceptions of MPs by drawing more systematically on their local expertize during the policy-making process in parliament.

Challenge: All MPs are providing essentially similar constituency services but individually and in an uncoordinated manner

- Seek collective solutions to constituents' problems by organizing workshops for MPs to share information about the challenges that everyone is dealing with, and discuss more strategic approaches to responding to the requests for assistance. These workshops could by organized by parliament, a political party, cross-party women's caucuses, etc.

- Educate the public about their entitlements and how to access them by creating a bi-partisan campaign in collaboration with State agencies.

Challenge: Polarized party politics creates a 'winner takes all' situation

- Demonstrate that an MP represents all their constituents by not displaying party colours in constituency offices, nor asking visitors about their party affiliation.

- Be attentive to the 'silent majority' of citizens by insisting that the criteria for receiving assistance must be 'need', not 'party affiliation'.

- Change public perceptions of politics by organizing bi-partisan outreach visits (for example, to schools) with the representatives of different parties in a constituency

- Bring about change in the way resources are allocated by seizing opportunities for introducing reform, such as the beginning of a new legislature.

- Campaign for re-election on the basis of the government's record in delivering services, or the opposition's policy proposals, rather than solely on the basis of the services provided by individual MPs.

- Limit the influence of wealthy donors by adopting transparent rules on campaign financing.

- Contribute to the gradual development of a rules-based democratic culture in politics and society by being a proponent of change, and not reinforcing old ways of doing business.

- Ensure continuity by placing local development projects with an NGO rather than directly under the MP, so that they may continue if the MP loses the next election.

- Facilitate dialogue across the political divide by including members of both the governing and opposition parties on delegations to international conferences, workshops etc.

Approach: Increasing constituency resources

Challenge: MPs' access to resources for constituency work is limited

- Make better use of existing resources by ensuring that citizens are informed of the existence of benefit programmes and that the corresponding funds are disbursed in an equitable and transparent manner.

- Demonstrate leadership even when an MP has limited access to financial resources, by guiding people towards existing government programmes designed to meet their needs.

- Increase resources earmarked for local use by creating a Constituency Development Fund which has powerful mechanisms for public consultation and accountability, as well as transparent decision-making procedures.

- Limit attempts to 'cheat the system' by assessing whether the assistance being requested is genuinely needed or not. Work with community-based organizations to identify the people who are the most in need.

Approach: Seeking legislative and policy solutions

Challenge: People ask their MP to help them find jobs, to pay for funerals, to pay for roads etc

- Improve access to existing government programmes by ensuring that these programmes are 'poor-friendly' and keeping bureaucracy and paperwork to the minimum necessary. Reduce the gap between the source of funding (the administration) and the people who are beneficiaries of the funds.

- Set up non-partisan constituency offices which can serve as "service centres" where citizens can go and meet the MP as well as find information on dealing with local administration regarding certificates, services, etc. See for example Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago.

- Develop the local economy by providing targeted help to small businesses so they can grow and create new jobs.

- Make dedicated resources available to help people pay for funerals by creating a fund for this purpose at the national level. See for example Jamaica.

- Involve the local community in upkeep of roads by creating 'self-help commissions' to which communities can apply for building materials, and in return supply the labour to carry out the work. See for example Trinidad and Tobago.

Challenge: Countries do not have the skilled workforce to benefit from new economic opportunities

- Plan for the future by identifying areas of the economy where growth is expected, and setting up programmes to develop the required skills (example: train students in geology and engineering when oil or gas is discovered).

Challenge: People have views on policy issues, but they prefer to express them on radio call-in shows, rather than directly to their MP

- Invite input to parliament by multiplying the number of places (online or in the physical world) where people can express their views, and demonstrating that parliament is responsive to citizen input.

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