



Informing democracy: Building capacity to meet parliamentarians' information and knowledge needs

**16 October 2008
Geneva, Switzerland**

Aide-mémoire

This one-day event will permit an exchange of perspectives on the challenges faced by parliaments in obtaining the information and knowledge they require to function effectively. Focusing on the evolving needs of parliamentarians, the role that can be played by library and research services, and the development of good practices, it will be relevant to parliamentarians, secretaries general and those responsible for library and research services.

Access to reliable, timely information is essential to the proper functioning of democratic legislatures. In their legislative role, parliamentarians need information as they monitor issues, develop policy solutions, predict consequences, and influence government decision-making. In their role of overseeing the executive, they need information in order to monitor the success of ongoing programmes and to identify areas of weakness.

Parliamentary libraries and research services are accountable for understanding the needs of their clients in order to provide them with the specialized information that will substantively assist parliamentarians who are working under great pressure and within demanding constraints of time. These services contribute to the effectiveness of parliament by providing authoritative, independent and non-partisan information. The unique value to parliamentarians of dedicated library and research services is growing. A growing volume of information can be found through search engines and other sources, but often the motives of those providing the information are about the promotion of a point of view or a specific course of action. Information from a trusted source carries an increasing premium.

Parliamentarians' need for independent information is probably even greater in developing democracies and economies, where government may be the gatekeeper of information relevant to policy-making and where few non-governmental alternatives exist. When government is the only source of information, or when available information is not

transparent, parliamentarians are limited in their ability to hold governments to account, and an imbalance of power between the legislature and the executive may result.

Over the past quarter-century, there has been a growing demand from parliamentarians for more advanced information services, including expert analysis and synthesis of information. There has also been increasing competition from lobbyists and organizations offering their own version of information assistance and briefing through intensive communication campaigns. Sifting through this “information overload” presents a major challenge for parliamentarians.

Historically, the role of parliamentary libraries has included collecting, cataloguing, conserving materials and providing an information service function. These services have in many places evolved greatly in recent decades, in parallel with new information and communications technologies that have fundamentally changed how parliaments manage knowledge and information.

Some parliamentary libraries and research services have adapted well to this new environment, creating practical, client-oriented information products and services that anticipate clients’ needs as well as training programmes to help parliamentarians access and use information. These services are often supplemented by other information and documentation functions, such as public outreach programs, digital archiving of parliamentary proceedings, and media monitoring.

Other library and research services have remained within a more traditional role as suppliers of books, journals and documentation and may lack the capacity, resources or institutional support to build an enhanced service model. Newer services in post-conflict states and in some developing democracies may have even more serious resource issues.

The challenge is to develop strategies to support the evolution of parliamentary libraries and research services so that they can provide more value for their clients. By adopting new methods and technologies in information management, these services can provide part of the solution to information overload and to issues of legislative quality and accountability. The goal, which some services are already attaining, is to build the capacity to deliver sustained support tailored to the specific information requirements of parliamentary clients.