

Sharing good practices and building capacity: Strategies to assist parliamentary institutions – the view from Latvia

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The need to share good practices signifies that the time for mediation has come. In our complex world we need to build bridges – to clients, to knowledge, between parliaments.

Representative institutions are obliged to operate transparently and to facilitate citizen participation in the law making process. Any decision should be based on facts and knowledge. Therefore, it is critically important to ensure an uncomplicated and user-friendly way to obtain necessary information. That is important both for Members of the Parliament, as well as for citizens. Our conference has taken off the lid of the professional set of methods and approaches that Parliamentary libraries and research services use to provide access to complete, authoritative, timely, accurate, objective information tailored to the needs of the client.

But does the accessibility resolve all problems, satisfy all needs? The real challenges for both Members and constituents are much more than mere technology and access. A culture of responsibility and participation requires literacy – reading literacy, information literacy, civic literacy – and knowledge.

We are used to identifying the Parliament with politics, but perhaps we can agree that in the legislative environment the strongest and most important asset is the Parliament's intellectual capital. To build and strengthen the representative institution as a knowledge-based organization, we need to create and nurture a knowledge-sharing culture within the Parliament. And no other entity in the Parliament can be and must be the mediator for knowledge sharing than its library and research unit. Whatever this structure is called, wherever it is positioned in the parliamentary administration, however big it is – its main task is to serve as a mediator between the client and the informational environment.

My personal experience in serving the Latvian parliament for 18 years – since my country regained independence – has assured me that such mediation is a necessary, honourable and feasible task, but definitely not an easy one. First you have to create the information services. Without the support from parliamentary librarians and researchers in different countries this task in the new democratic parliament would be much more Sisyphean. A candid exchange of ideas, open communication, practical and emotional encouragement from my colleagues and

friends in parliaments all over the world was one of the cornerstones that helped to build the information system and knowledge-valued environment in the Saeima of the Republic of Latvia.

The IFLA Section on Libraries and Research Services for Parliaments has been the main forum for sharing best practices about information policy, systems and services, about the skills needed to use information and methods and transform them into knowledge. For myself and many of my colleagues from new democracies, that forum has served as a door to professional partnership. In conferences and workshops, but even more in personal discussions we have learned many tips and tricks. And most of all, active participation in the IFLA section has developed my mediation ability and understanding of how important the role of mediator is.

My country, my Parliament – the Saeima – and myself know from very personal experience that new democratic countries often do not have enough internal resources to create the necessary informational environment quickly enough. Assistance from more experienced countries can help to close this gap and later support sustainable democratic development. By help I do not mean only money. The experience that I have gone through shows that it is even more important to help key parliamentary staff members, particularly information specialists, to accept and manage the change process. It is crucial that assistance program identify change agents, train them, support them, multiply them, help them to become strong and smart. In short –invest in people, in the parliamentary staff! That will help to ground information and knowledge in a central rather than distant place.

From our own development and from the approach I have seen in some other post-soviet countries that I have visited as an expert, I notice a certain pattern. In the initial stage, we think/talk/dream in terms of WHAT – we need so many PCs, so many books, so many foreign laws, etc. After some time, we start thinking about HOW – how we will use all that stuff, how we can provide necessary services. And finally we start thinking about WHY – about core issues that ensure quality – why do we do what we do, why do we keep all that data, why do we need that particular piece of legislation? If we want to accelerate development and preserve the changes, we have to find a way to shorten the learning period, to jump over the first two stages, to learn from the mistakes of others. The world is changing too fast to repeat mistakes.

How can we help to build information services in the parliaments of new democratic countries? First, certainly not just by purchasing more computers, subscribing to more newspapers and organizing more conferences. Those things are not wrong, but they are not enough. If assistance is to be effective, it must be driven by demand, not supply. At the same time, the demand should be grounded in progressive thinking about a democratic future and strategic long-term planning. Therefore, it is better to make plans together.

Second, increase in assistance volume alone is not sufficient and not the most efficient. Often we focus assistance on our own priorities, services and traditions, knowing very little about the traditions, values and political culture of the recipient country. We tend to forget that before we build democratic institutions in new democracies, we first need to change old-fashioned thinking that often is concealed behind progressive wording. To create a substantial information service in the parliament of a developing country, we need to turn skeptics into allies. To succeed in that, we need mediators who can understand the needs and interests of recipients and who can translate democratic values and professional standards into bits and pieces that can be understood and accepted by the main stakeholders and implementers.

Third, more often than not, projects and programs demand management for results. In the parliamentary environment, where traditions are strong and the patrons important, the time lag between implementation and real outcome is huge. That makes evaluation difficult. But only the systemic approach and long-term efforts make it possible to plan incremental development in the parliamentary staff's mind and practice. Two of the most efficient development programs in the history of Latvian parliament were the so-called Frost assistance program in beginning of the 1990s, financed by the U.S. government, and the Program for strengthening administrative capacity of the Saeima, financed by the Swedish government at the end of 1990s. Though different in allocated resources and objectives, both of them lasted for almost four years. The know-how that our staff, particularly information specialists, learned from collaboration with American and Swedish colleagues, helped us to grow.

There is a time to learn and time to teach, a time to receive and a time to give back. After the transition period and successful accession into the EU Latvia is positioning itself as a democracy export country. Our democratization experience is currently recognized as an area of Latvian expertise by many international governmental and non-governmental organizations. The Latvian Parliament (Saeima) is or has been directly involved in several bilateral assistance activities, especially in the former Soviet republics – Moldova, Georgia, Ukraine, Byelorussia. The key issues that these non-EU countries have in common are establishing sovereignty and democracy.

I believe that countries like Latvia can be good mediators. Even more, we have advantages over the old democracies which do not have such transition experience. Countries which have chosen a democratic future and values of the European Union, for example Moldova and Georgia, are eager to learn from our experience, and in some ways they trust to us much more than they trust overseas experts, because we have common history, common good and bad days and, last but not least, we have a common *lingua franca*. We can contribute towards promoting parliamentary democracy, particularly strengthening the parliamentary administration or developing library and information services.

Unfortunately, I am not authorized to promise financial and material support, and that factor can diminish attractiveness of my good will.

The ways to support and assist are different. Although bilateral parliamentary assistance is more usual, I think that multilateral programs have a high and yet untapped potential. Multilateral programs can secure the harmonization of assistance to improve collective effectiveness. There are periods in history when a country has lot of well intentioned assistants, donors, supporters, aid programs, missions, etc. In critical times, they come at the same time or one after another. The receiving country is happy – as we often are about friends; we are happy to see and feel that we are not left alone with our problems. But sometimes 24x7 is not enough to handle several assistance programs, to think about development and at the same time to attend to the daily routine. Therefore, the multiyear plan where the experience, resources and mutual interests of assisting parliaments and the recipient are combined could be a good solution.

Twinning is another way to set up a good development framework and to build real long-term partnership between two parliaments. But it is extremely important to involve “the youngest partner” in strategic planning and in all subsequent implementation steps. That could help not only to learn particular library and research aspects, but also to boost the self assurance and general know-how.

One of the approved methods for sharing good practices is site visits. Perhaps it is a very professional way to acquire new horizons. Still some pitfalls have to be avoided. Rather often the visiting groups are unsuited when compared with the real commitments made. Parliamentary administration tends to be rather hierarchical, and it is not easy to get the right professionals on the board... of an aircraft. Therefore, professional programs must have their say about the composition of the visiting team.

To increase the effectiveness of such trips, a focused and better defined visit program should be prepared. Target themes will give more added and permanent value to inquiring participants. From my experience, I would say that smaller groups and longer periods are desirable. That would help to ask, to clarify, to delve into problems, to grow. That is particularly important for library and research unit leaders. We are all aware that building leadership capacity is one of the most pressing issues for legislative libraries, it is even “mission critical”, as we agreed in the workshop in Ottawa this summer.

So I would like to see a special program to raise and support potential leaders for parliamentary library and research services, perhaps on a regional basis – ECPRD is one of the possibilities in Europe. Distant and expensive trips usually are not within reach of the middle-level parliamentary specialist. Unfortunately, we can see that even at IFLA Conferences. But investments in parliamentary information specialists will pay off, in a long term though. The leadership program could be combined with the program “Train the trainers”. The strong new

generation of leaders will ensure that parliaments will continue to be knowledge-based democratic institutions even in the future digital world. And more and more mediators will be ready to connect the user with knowledge, donor with recipient, library with library.

I am confident that all organizations arranging this joint meeting – the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the Association of Secretaries General of Parliament, and the International Federation of Library Association and Institutions – will benefit from mediating and increasing the partnership of parliamentary information professionals. But the biggest benefactor will be the parliamentary institute and parliamentary democracy as a whole.