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Evaluating parliament: A self-assessment toolkit for parliaments

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1. Objective

The purpose of the IPU self-assessment toolkit is to assist parliaments in a systematic analysis of their performance, leading to the identification of strengths and weaknesses, and the formulation of recommendations for reform and development. Although the toolkit is organised as a series of questions, it is not intended as a questionnaire, with 'scores' to be reported to some external agency, such as the IPU. The questions are intended to facilitate discussion among parliamentarians themselves, to explore differences of perception and judgement between them, and to develop agreement on priorities for change and improvement. Since the impetus for change has to come from within a parliament, supported by an attentive public opinion, any process of assessment is best owned and conducted by parliamentarians themselves. The toolkit provides busy members with the opportunity to stand back from their day-to-day work, and reflect on their parliament's work in a systematic way.

2. Origin and development

The toolkit developed out of a major programme of work undertaken by the IPU, to examine what makes a parliament *democratic*, both in the way it functions and interacts with its electorate, and in its effectiveness in performing its roles within a democratic system of government. This programme involved inviting all member parliaments of the IPU to contribute examples from their own experience of reform, which they thought worth sharing with others; and the results were compiled into a handbook of good practice under the title *Parliament and democracy in the twenty-first century*. This programme has informed key features of the toolkit, including its structure, its emphasis on parliament as the key site of a country's democracy, and its participant-led approach to identifying and assessing good practice.

3. Evaluation method and content

The self-assessment framework consists of six sections:

1. The representativeness of parliament
2. Parliamentary oversight of the executive
3. Parliament's legislative capacity
4. The transparency and accessibility of parliament
5. The accountability of parliament
6. Parliament's involvement in international policy

Each section comprises a list of questions, framed in the comparative mode ('How effective, adequate, systematic, etc.?'), to which individual participants are invited to provide assessment answers on a five point scale from 'very good' to 'very poor'. Further questions then ask for the biggest recent improvement in the respective section, the most serious ongoing deficiency, and

the measures needed to remedy this. The answers are intended to provide the basis for group discussion among the participants. Additional questions can be included where appropriate.

4. Practical application

The toolkit as published by the IPU suggests a number of possible scenarios for its use: preparing a strategic plan; stimulating a reform process; monitoring the results of such a process; promoting gender sensitivity in the work of parliament; contributing to an induction programme for new members; and more. The precise format for using the toolkit will depend on its purpose. Important for all, however, is that the initiative for its use should come from parliaments themselves; that key parliamentarians should be involved, for example members of an existing reform or modernisation committee; and that the assessment group should reflect the broadest possible range of perspectives within a parliament. The IPU has trained facilitators to assist in the assessment process, but their precise role and scope should be agreed with participants in advance, as should the expected timescale and outcomes of the process.

5. Current use

The IPU toolkit has been used in the parliaments of Rwanda and Sierra Leone as part of their strategic planning exercise, to help bring fresh perspectives to the process. In Cambodia, it has been used as part of a 10-year review of the Senate's existence. In Pakistan, the NGO PILDAT initiated an assessment of the National Assembly using the IPU toolkit. The toolkit has been tested with parliamentary administrations in Sri Lanka and Algeria. The Institutional Performance task team in the South African Parliament is considering incorporating elements of the toolkit in its working methods. The parliaments of Ireland and Andorra are currently using the toolkit to assess their performance. In January 2009 the Bureau of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe drafted a motion for elaborating a model rulebook for self-evaluation by national parliaments in Europe (Doc. 11774), taking into account work already done in this field by the IPU and other organisations.

6. Evaluation and next steps

Some uses of the toolkit have been directly facilitated by the IPU, whereas in others the parliament worked alone or with other partners. Where the IPU has been involved, a 'lessons learned' document is prepared at the end of each activity. This experience has led, for example, to the formulation of a guidance note for parliaments, setting out the steps involved in carrying out a self-assessment. Case studies are systematically requested from parliaments that use the toolkit. Testing the toolkit with parliamentary administrations indicated that some of the questions were not suitable for this user group, while other issues were not sufficiently addressed. The Association of Secretaries General of Parliament (ASGP) has therefore taken the initiative to prepare a version of the IPU toolkit specifically addressed to parliamentary administrations.

Promoting the toolkit remains a priority for the IPU. Discussions have been initiated with regional parliamentary organisations in Africa, the Arab States and Latin America, with a view to enhancing awareness and use of the toolkit. The IPU participates actively in the working group on parliamentary benchmarks, indicators and assessment methodologies.