

PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY OF THE MEDITERRANEAN
Plenary Session, Monaco 13-15 November 2008

“Closer to our citizens”

- Paper presented by the Maltese PAM Delegation –
Hon. Jesmond Mugliett (PN), Hon. Dr George Vella (MLP), Hon. Dr. Justyn
Caruana (MLP),

1. INTRODUCTION

The first five Articles of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean’s Statutes mandate the Assembly to bring all Mediterranean countries on an equal footing and enhance cooperation, partnership, constructive political dialogue and understanding. A sound mission statement that guides our institution towards more regional security, stability, peace and prosperity. Arguing from a humanitarian perspective, this mission aims at ameliorating the quality of life of all Mediterranean citizens. In fact, the welfare of Mediterranean citizens is the essence of existence of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean.

However, the achievement of such mission requires a concrete structure where citizens could voice their opinions and concerns in order to have their will expressed in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean. The involvement of citizens within parliamentary structures has become more internationally prevalent and described as a good practice by major researchers in the field. Moreover, in September 2005, a UN meeting gathering all the Speakers of Parliaments, reaffirmed this statement and stated unequivocally that “Parliaments are the central institution through which the will of people is expressed”.

We, as parliamentarians, represent the people of the whole Mediterranean littoral and we do know that at this day and age citizens are more for participative democracy. In a nutshell, for the Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean to be acquainted with citizens’ opinions and concerns, Member Parliaments should empower citizens to participate at all levels of our institution. But this assertion brings to my mind a few rather complex questions:

- What do we actually know about Mediterranean citizens and what do our citizens know about us?
- How can we involve citizens within our structure?
- How can we bring PAM closer to its citizens?

It could be argued that three main democratic principles could enlighten us to answer these questions:

- Openness;
- Transparency; and

- Accessibility.

2. PAM AS AN OPEN AND TRANSPARENT ORGANISATION

In practice, most of Mediterranean citizens are unable to visit and actively participate in the Special Task Forces, Standing Committees or Assembly sessions. To fill in this lacuna, PAM should be more open to press and encourage their participation within PAM. Media and press act as the 'eyes and ears' of the public as whole. On one hand, we should facilitate and promote more international journalists to report our proceedings. Particular attention should be given to the main media partners in Mediterranean countries. On the other hand, Member Parliaments and delegations should increase their efforts to issue regular statements on PAM activities for the consideration of their national media. Press statements should be issued prior to and after delegations' participation in a PAM activity, being a Special Task Force, Standing Committee or Assembly activity.

Informing citizens about our work is not just a concern for independent media; however it is our responsibility as well. In line with other international organisations we should make considerable efforts to inform and educate our citizens about PAM's work and engage their interest and attention. The rapid development of new forms of communication such as the 'internet' could also facilitate an interactive relationship between Member Parliaments and citizens, rather than just a one-way communication. PAM's relatively new website is increasingly becoming popular and from its inception till date there were around 200,000 hits; an average of 15,000 hits per month. Our official portal facilitates the link between citizens and representatives within PAM; perhaps we could go a step further and suggest hyperlinks to MPs personal websites. PAM parliamentarians, who have such a facility, could upgrade their websites with personal experiences and contributions within PAM. Citizens cannot hope to influence us unless they are fully informed about what we are doing in the PAM.

2.1. Taking PAM to the people

By means of all Member Parliaments and National Contact Points, we should strive and setup dedicated PAM centres in all National Parliaments. These centres could offer more information and education on PAM activities. Moreover, Member Parliaments that organise a National Parliament Open Day could direct visitors to these PAM centres and introduce PAM activities to citizens. Informative leaflets or DVDs could be distributed to Member Parliaments, local councils, local governments or regions and get citizens closer to PAM.

It is acknowledged that amongst all age groups young people are the least likely to be involved in politics. In view of this situation, PAM could engage the interests of school pupils and young people in our work. The resolutions envisaged by the Special Task Force and Standing Committee on Dialogue among Civilisations and Human Rights is a right start-up and a rather cost-contained activity to involve youth and school children within PAM, particularly the innovative idea of setting up a PAM Youth Assembly. This is a way forward to instil and inculcate a 'WE' culture amongst Mediterranean citizens and make them feel PAM as an organisation that they belong to.

3. PAM AS AN ACCESSIBLE ORGANISATION

After discussing the different ways in which citizens can be informed about PAM, now one must analyse how we could find different ways of doing so in order to be more accessible to citizens and social groups. In practice, PAM parliamentarians meet their constituents within their respective countries, but are we promoting PAM activities to our constituency?

The use of emails has enormously enhanced the ease and speed with which citizens can contact their representatives. Yet, the digital divide is still a persistent concern in our region, thus excluding large numbers of Mediterranean population from such access. Therefore, in addition to emails, other traditional forms of communication channels should be included, such as letters and informative leaflets.

3.1. Empowering citizens to seek redress

An important function for parliaments is to provide a framework through which citizens can raise grievances and have them investigated. Although this does not necessarily fit in PAM's direct remit, the Third Standing Committee on Human Rights could serve as the PAM's arm where citizens can raise a concern about public Mediterranean authorities.

Keeping in mind PAM's limitations, it is difficult to set-up a Mediterranean Ombudsman; however we can use media to raise concerns on grievances experienced by Mediterranean citizens and where applicable urge public authorities to redress citizens' rights.

3.2. Citizen involvement in the Resolution process

Akin to other national parliaments, PAM should start inviting the public to submit contributions or hold public hearing. The Standing Committees and Special Task Forces are good models where this kind of public hearing could be enhanced. Moreover, we should consider an enabling approach where citizens and social groups could forward submissions for PAM discussions. This practice is becoming more widespread and systematic amongst national parliaments. This would facilitate the citizens' involvement in the shaping-up process of resolutions. Resolutions constitute PAM's formal statement of a decision; our expression of opinion to be adopted by the Assembly; a course of action to start changing things in the Mediterranean and improve the quality of life of all Mediterranean citizens. Undoubtedly this means that involving citizens in the resolution process is another way of getting PAM closer to its citizens.

Secretary General Sergio Piazzì is inviting various national and international NGOs to participate in Standing Committees' and Special Task Forces' meetings. This is considered as a good practice and we encourage Mr. Piazzì to continue with such activities. Meeting with NGOs and social groups could get Member Parliaments closer to the diverse and culturally rich societies in the Mediterranean. However, PAM parliamentarians should bear in mind the representation and independency of NGOs and what weight they should be given. It is evident that some NGOs are powerful and well-financed organisations and these can have undue influence on PAM structures. This mandates PAM Secretariat to start compiling an exhaustive Mediterranean NGO register including full details of membership

and sources of income. Perhaps we should recommend the setting up of a Mediterranean public forum or a PAM-NGO Assembly.

3.3. Acquiring technical knowledge

By collaborating with various Mediterranean universities, PAM can start a network for sharing evidence-based research on the socio-cultural and economic characteristics and indicators of Mediterranean citizens. Nevertheless, academics can network with Standing Committees and Special Task Forces to draft and circulate thematic questionnaires among all Member Parliaments. In association with the University of Malta, the Maltese delegation drafted a template questionnaire on how we could start acquiring technical knowledge on Mediterranean citizens. The draft questionnaire deals with the national experiences and policies of Member Parliaments in promoting dialogue and understanding among cultures and religions. This is another way to know the context of our Mediterranean citizens.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The concern to bridge the gap between PAM and its citizens can be seen as a positive driving force for a newly setup institution. We have seen a number of different ways and initiatives in which PAM could get closer to its citizens. These may involve:

- Better use of our website;
- Issue of informative emails, letters, bulletins, DVDs and e-leaflets;
- Enhance relations with media and inform them with PAM activities and outcomes;
- Reaffirm PAM principles to international freedom of information and expression resolutions;
- Support press statements on PAM activities by Member Parliaments;
- Setup PAM dedicated centres within Member Parliaments;
- Initiate PAM educational activities for school children and youth;
- Encourage PAM parliamentarians to inform constituency about PAM;
- Start issuing invitation for public submission and public hearing;
- Involve citizens in the resolution drafting process;
- Target invitation to relevant NGOs and experts, including representatives of marginalised groups;
- Setup a PAM Youth Assembly, a Mediterranean public forum and a PAM-NGO Assembly;
- Promote the Third Standing Committee on Human Rights as a forum where Mediterranean citizens can raise concerns on grievances experienced from public authorities;
- Compile a register of Mediterranean NGOs including full details of membership and sources of income;
- Plan a register of university experts, academics and researchers; and
- Network with academics and researchers and draft thematic questionnaires to acquire knowledge on Mediterranean citizens.

Which of these models and in which combination is most effective will naturally depend on PAM's resources and preferences. Whatever the modes selected, all the evidence indicates that PAM should take the responsibility to engage citizens seriously and inspire a Mediterranean identity. The significant characteristic of the above recommendations is the attempt to make PAM closer to its citizens in a systematic, transparent and inclusive way. Nevertheless, the promotion of PAM as a unique Mediterranean forum where participative democracy and the welfare of Mediterranean citizens are at heart of the organisation.