



PARLIAMENTARY PANEL ON THE OCCASION OF THE SECOND PHASE OF THE WORLD SUMMIT ON THE INFORMATION SOCIETY

Co-organized by the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the
Tunisian Chamber of Deputies, in cooperation with UNESCO



Report on the parliamentary panel on the occasion of the second phase of the World Summit on the Information Society*

1. The parliamentary panel took place on Thursday 17 November 2005 at the Tunisian Chamber of Deputies from 3 p.m. to 6.30 p.m. It was co-organized by the IPU and the Tunisian Chamber of Deputies. Significant support was received from UNESCO, in the form of financial assistance to parliamentarians from developing countries and the participation of a former UNESCO Assistant Director-General for Information and Communication as a member of the panel.
2. The title of the parliamentary panel was "The role of parliaments in building knowledge-based societies: guaranteeing access to information".
3. A total of 101 registered participants attended the parliamentary panel, of which 77 were current members of parliament, from 29 different countries. Of the 77 parliamentarians, 15 (19.5%) were women.
4. The parliamentary panel was held in parallel with the second phase of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). It represented a further contribution by parliamentarians to the WSIS process, following the resolution adopted at the 109th IPU Assembly and the parliamentary panel organized at the first phase of WSIS in December 2003. The significant increase in the number of participants in this parliamentary panel was evidence of the growing interest of parliaments in the issues dealt with at the Summit, which include Internet governance, bridging the digital divide and the ensuring universal access to information.
5. In his opening remarks to the parliamentary panel, the President of the Tunisian Chamber of Deputies, Mr. Fouad Mebazaâ, underlined the need for an international partnership to ensure that the immense potential of the digital revolution is made available to all the peoples of the world. He spoke of the heavy responsibility borne by parliamentarians, who have the duty to adopt the appropriate legislative framework to guarantee access to information for all. As knowledge is increasingly recognized as one of the motors of development, WSIS represents an opportunity to accelerate the reduction in the gap between developed and developing countries.
6. The President of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, Mr. Pier Ferdinando Casini, highlighted the trend towards greater transparency and accountability in government, that can be observed in the increasing adoption of laws on the right of access to information. He encouraged parliamentarians to use the parliamentary panel as an opportunity to understand and accompany this phenomenon.
7. The first part of the meeting, moderated by Mr. Patrice Martin-Lalande, addressed ways in which Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) are profoundly transforming the work of parliaments, and in particular the relation between parliamentarians and citizens.

* This version of the report is informal and subject to approval by the Governing Council of the IPU at its 178th session (Nairobi, May 2006)

Panellists from South Africa and Mexico gave examples from their parliaments in using ICT to reach out to constituents. For example, each member of parliament in South Africa is provided with a personal computer to facilitate their work. At the same time, many hundreds of constituency offices offer a complementary point of access to information for constituents.

8. In the debate that followed, participants highlighted ways in which they are using ICT to facilitate direct exchange with the people, for example via e-mail. ICT can be used to inform people about the work of parliament, and offers an opportunity to re-engage with electors. In many countries, a generation is growing up for whom the Internet is a natural channel for receiving information and communicating. Parliaments must adapt to this societal evolution in order to maintain contact with this generation. It is however essential to address the digital divide which prevents people in many countries from having access to the technologies that enable this enhanced interaction.
9. The second part of the meeting focussed more specifically on the role of parliaments in passing legislation that guarantees the right of access to information. Under the chairmanship of Mrs. Isabelle Fila Lemina, panellists from UNESCO, the non-governmental organization Article 19 and Mexico successively illustrated the reasons why access to information is important, the principles that should guide legislation on access to information, and the experience of the implementation of access to information legislation in one particular country, Mexico. The Tunisian panellist then broadened the debate by relating the role of parliaments to the WSIS process itself, highlighting ways in which parliaments have been involved and will continue to participate in the follow up to the Summit.
10. In the debate that followed, participants pointed out certain challenges to the principle of universal access to information, such as illiteracy, the particular exclusion faced by women and the publication of important information, such as legislative texts, in languages that may not be spoken or understood by all citizens of the country. Some of the discussion touched upon the extent to which information should be made available - should **all** information be available, or only the information that is **useful**. Participants also pointed out that ICT is a means for the distribution of information, but does not in itself ensure critical thinking.
11. Participants called on the IPU to survey existing practices and legislation, in order to identify best practices and develop guidelines on the use of ICT in parliament and legislation on access to information. In the moderators' concluding remarks, Mr. Martin-Lalande proposed that national parliaments should set up dedicated structures to oversee the implementation of the commitments made by national governments at WSIS. Mr. Casini echoed the need for parliamentary follow-up on the specialized meetings organized by the IPU in general, and on this parliamentary panel on the occasion of WSIS in particular.
12. The following day, Mr. Casini presented the results of the parliamentary panel to the plenary session of WSIS. In his speech, he underlined the potential of information societies to renew and enrich democracy, and the need to successfully address the digital divide. He indicated the actions that parliaments and the IPU are taking to build inclusive and accessible knowledge societies, which include the creation of a new Global Centre for ICT in Parliament. Finally, Mr. Casini spoke of the necessary partnership between parliaments, governments, civil society and the private sector to achieve the goals set out in the Geneva and Tunis phases of WSIS.