

Module 6

Parliamentary Communication Strategies

Unit 1: Introduction – Setting the Stage

Members of Parliament worldwide are increasingly reaching out to their constituents¹ to inform them of the important business being conducted at Parliament, and seeking to engage the public and make them aware of how Members are representing their interests in the assembly. Despite the members' best efforts, citizens are difficult to reach, turnout at elections is plummeting especially among younger voters, membership in political parties is dwindling, and the media seem only interested in which party is up, which is down in the polls.

The UK's Right Honorable Jack Straw wrote in 2006 on Parliament's struggle for relevance wrote: *"The fundamental question for parliamentarians will always be content ... it is the substance that is crucial. All the camera angles in the world cannot make a football match more engaging if the standard of play is poor. That is why we must concentrate our efforts on what goes on in Parliament."*²

This training module is based on the premise that the "substance" of Parliament is paramount. It is thus the role of your communications unit of the parliamentary secretariat under the general direction of the corporate body responsible for managing the parliament's administrative affairs to communicate to the public what your parliamentarians are doing and how they are representing their interests. In most Parliaments, the Clerk or Secretary-General heads the secretariat and will have the responsibility to implement decisions taken by the corporate body.

¹ As noted in the overview of this module, the National Democratic Institute (NDI), published in 2008 a *"Guide to Best Practices – Constituent Relations"* (available on the Internet). The publication has been designed "to assist elected representatives with practical approaches and concepts for organizing and conducting constituent relations work. (Ref. Kenneth D. Wollack, President, John K. Johnson, Director for Governance.). I invite you to read it.

² Jack Straw, Hansard Society, *Parliament in the Public Eye 2006: Coming into Focus*, 2006.

Box 1 - Bangladesh Case:

The Strategic Plan of the Parliament of Bangladesh (2012) describes the communication function as follows:

Under the heading Promoting Effective Communication, the Bangladeshi plan states: We will increase citizen awareness and understanding of how Parliament functions and the work Honourable Members of Parliament perform in fulfilling their constitutional duties.

Communicating with the People through the most effective and efficient means. Increasing public and media accessibility to Parliament both virtually and physically. One hallmark of a well-functioning parliament is its capacity to systematically and efficiently distribute Parliamentary information so that it is available publicly. It is also important that Parliament establishes effective lines of communications to reach the citizens so that they are better educated and informed about the parliamentary system and the work of Parliament.

The task of heightening parliament's relevance and visibility is becoming increasingly necessary. A recent study by the Hansard Society, explains why. *"At Westminster, for example, the Hansard Society's annual Audit of Political Engagement demonstrates a significant decline in the perceived impact of Parliament on the British people's everyday lives over the course of the last decade. In 2009, although 60% said they believed Parliament was 'worthwhile', only 19% said it was one of the top three institutions that had the most impact on their lives, and only 27% felt that Parliament was 'welcoming' to them."*

Many parliaments, in response to increased levels of apathy of the electorate have launched public engagement programs, which have become a core activity for many legislatures. However, it is fair to say that in many democracies new and improved communication initiatives have not translated into higher turnout at the polls. A draft study commissioned by the World Bank Institute notes, *"there appears to be a paradoxical disconnect between being politically informed and being politically active. A fundamental challenge for parliaments operating in this new social context is to respond to non-traditional modes of political awareness. Young citizens are indeed plugged-"in" but parliaments need to turn them "on" by adapting communication strategies to their*

³ Hansard Society, *Parliaments and Public Engagement- Innovation and Good Practice from Around the World*, available on line at <http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Parliaments-and-Public-Engagement-2012.pdf> , page 7.

lifestyles and coded in the language of the new-age electorate- and marked by genuine openness and non-adversarial pluralism.”⁴

Critical to an organization's success in meeting the many challenges in reaching out and engaging today's public, is a systematic approach to planning parliamentary communications or simply put, designing a “communication strategy”⁵. When your corporate body determines that a parliamentary communication strategy plan is to be prepared, the legislature's communications staff are typically assigned the task of preparing the strategy. Their hierarchical superior is usually the clerk of the assembly, who is under the general direction of a Corporate Body, usually composed of Members.

This module references the communication strategies (also called public engagement strategies) of a number of parliaments whose strategies are posted on their parliamentary websites. The strategies include those of the National Parliament of Ireland, the Parliament of Northern Ireland, the European Commission, the Australian state of Queensland, and the draft strategies of Rwanda and Moldova.

This module also references the Hansard Society, which has conducted unique, abundant and very useful research on parliamentary engagement. The Society published a work in 2005, which includes a 30-page chapter, entitled *Elements of a Communication Strategy*, which set out numerous ways that the Parliament of Westminster can become more media-friendly, thereby bringing about increased press coverage of the parliament.⁶

The **Overseas Development Institute (ODI)** says that a strategy is a plan for achieving a clear, measurable outcome. It is a way of accomplishing something. Your strategy can be designed to cover a period of time for a specific project, or it can cover the same time period as your Parliament's strategic plan.

To create and implement a strategy, you need to know four things:

- Where are you now?

⁴ Gurprit Kindra and Frederick Stapenhurst, World Bank Institute, *Empowering Parliaments with Strategic Communications*, draft 8/10/2009.

⁵ Please refer to module 5 for details on Strategic Planning.

⁶ Hansard Society, *Members Only? Parliament in the Public Eye*, available on line at: <http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Members-Only-Parliament-in-the-Public-Eye-2005.pdf>.

- Where do you want to be?
- What do you have to do to get there?
- How will you know if you are succeeding as you proceed?

UNESCO states the purpose of a strategic plan for “*an organization (is) to improve its performance by ensuring that its members are working to the same goals and by continuously adjusting the direction of the organization to the changing environment on the basis of results obtained.*”⁷

If your Parliament has a strategic plan, take note of the communications functions. Normally the plan would state that communications practitioners are to seek synergies and interact seamlessly with the other services. When preparing the parliamentary communication strategy, ensure that its objectives and activities are consistent with the institutional strategic plan, and that it is similar in both style and tone.

An institutional “strategic plan,” (as described in Module 5) is a holistic strategy that covers all the operations of the legislature. It is not to be confused with a communications strategy, which is more narrowly focused on a sub-component of parliament.

⁷ UNESCO, *Educational Planning: approaches, challenges and international frameworks-Module 1*, page 10, available on line at http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/FIELD/Beirut/images/Training_Module_1_on_Educational_Planning_Eng.pdf.