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Adding Innovation to Standard Approaches

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As experience in parliamentary strengthening assistance grows, donors and implementers are beginning to identify emerging patterns in successful assistance strategies. Building on the lessons learned during decades of this type of assistance, the addition of new ideas and innovation to time-tested activities are helping practitioners to sharpen their approaches and incorporate tools and techniques from other disciplines in order to make the impacts of assistance more sustainable and effective. The Laurentian Seminar series provides an example.

In 1997, the World Bank Institute and the Parliamentary Centre of Canada, supported by the Canadian International Development Agency, launched the Laurentian Seminar series in order to facilitate global dialogue and consensus building about the role of parliamentarians in promoting good governance. The seminars employ the widely practiced approach of bringing leaders together at an event to discuss important topics. However, the seminars have also recently incorporated two successful elements from other disciplines into their format.

Using Role Plays to Address Corruption

In 1998 and 1999, the Laurentian Seminar employed basic precepts of adult education methodologies to illuminate the role of parliamentarians in curbing corruption. Seminar participants were involved in a role play in which they became members of a select committee whose mandate was to produce a handbook about controlling corruption. Officials from the World Bank, leading academics, and representatives from civil society organizations served as expert witnesses in the exercise. The resulting publication, Controlling Corruption: A Parliamentarian’s Handbook, is now in its second edition and has been translated into French, Arabic, Kymer, Thai, and Bahasa Indonesian; a Spanish version is planned.

With the help of other donors, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands and the Department for International Development of the United Kingdom, subsequent regional versions of these corruption seminars were held in Africa, South Asia, and South East Asia. Success of the regional seminars has helped parliamentarians to internalize the lessons of the seminar and has assisted in putting corruption issues on regional agendas. Changing attitudes toward corruption sparked in the seminars can be seen through post-seminar support for the formation of organizations with proactive anti-corruption stances, such as the African Parliamentarian’s Network Against Corruption and the Global Organisation of Parliamentarians Against Corruption.

The methodology employed by the seminars sought to engage learners by acting out legislative processes and sharing their own experiences. Its impact was twofold because it helped to raise awareness about corruption issues, and it helped to demonstrate the potential effectiveness of parliamentary processes by using them as a teaching tool. Lessons can be learned from the seminars’ efforts to provide meaningful and innovative learning methodologies for adult learners and to create opportunities for collective discussion.

Harnessing Technology to Address Poverty

The 2000 Laurentian Seminar, held in Canada, also took the basic conference-type approach to assistance a step further, this time with the incorporation of multi-media technology. Preceded by a virtual conference, which included some 200 parliamentarians and others in a four-week moderated e-mail discussion group.
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the seminar brought together 15 participants and observers from 13 countries to talk about poverty reduction policies. Using video conferencing technology, several seminar presentations originated from elsewhere in the world. The trend is set to continue with regional video conferences scheduled for Africa, the Middle East, and South East Asia during April-May 2001. The seminar has employed a long-standing tool in parliamentary assistance, that of seminars, but by linking it to media technology, the breadth and depth of the discussion have been expanded so that more parliamentarians around the world can benefit from the exercise.

Both examples of adult learning methodology and technological innovation demonstrate how practitioners and donors can improve the quality of widely accepted types of programming by staying abreast of tools and techniques in other areas of development assistance.

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A similar argument can be made regarding electoral systems. An important distinction among electoral systems is whether voters choose individual legislators or choose party lists. Under “closed list” proportional representation (PR) systems, voters choose among parties but do not typically know which candidates will fill the parties’ spots in the legislature. In other situations, including single member district plurality elections and “open list” PR systems, voters can choose specific legislators.

The two electoral systems have important but different benefits that interact with that government’s type of executive system, whether it is a derivative of presidentialism or parliamentarism. Their varying incentive structures have a tremendous impact on legislators’ perceptions of their constituencies and result in different interests in bill writing, oversight activities, constituency services, and types of committees on which they will seek to participate. Influences in both systems are mediated by the relationship between the executive branch and the legislature. Open list electoral systems encourage legislators to take action more directly for their constituents. In closed list systems, legislators are more responsive to the leader who creates the list than to constituents and are less influenced by powerful lobbyists. These observations illustrate why activities that seek to generate political will and domestic support, promote advocacy programs, or increase oversight activities should target different audiences depending on the system.

Not only do these varying interests indicate which groups should be engaged, but often they also point to where to engage them. For example, supporting efforts to create district-level legislative offices would be much more successful in systems that allow citizens to choose specific legislators at the district-level. Alternatively, in systems that employ closed list PR, legislators may not find district-level offices as useful. In this case, donors would most likely have greater success working with political parties to strengthen their abilities to articulate the interests of their grassroots membership.

Institutional Context Matters

The success of legislative strengthening programs depends on the ability of development assistance to tailor programs to fit different institutional shapes. Many facets of the political system must be taken into consideration. Oversight in systems where the legislature faces a separately elected president will not have the same meaning as strengthening the backbench of a parliamentary system. Similarly, constituency groups cannot expect to articulate their interests in the same way in countries where the electoral system generates independent-minded legislators as in countries where the system produces legislators who owe loyalty to their party leaders. Designing a successful program, therefore, requires accounting for the different needs and interests of the members of a legislature.

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