

Parliaments of the South newsletter

January 2006, Issue 1

Do parliaments really matter in SADC countries?

Parliaments of the South is a new monthly newsletter published by the South African Institute of International Affairs and designed to assist in strengthening parliaments and democracy throughout the SADC region. It will discuss issues of best practice in SADC parliaments and is distributed electronically to all SADC MPs and civil society groups.

Each SADC country operates some form of parliament that ostensibly represents the political will and interests of the electorate. But what real difference do parliaments make to the lives of people in the countries of SADC?

All SADC parliaments are tasked with carrying out the three key roles of deliberation and debate, passing legislation and conducting oversight of the executive branch of government. Beyond the formal structures of parliament, however, the similarities between parliaments in the region are more apparent than real.

“Are we sure we are making a difference to the lives of ordinary people?”

*SA Deputy Speaker,
Gwen Mahlangu -
Nkabinde*

The operation of hybrid presidential and parliamentary systems in SADC holds important implications for the operation of political power. Without exception, where presidential systems operate alongside parliaments, executive power dominates that of the legislature. Very few SADC parliaments control their own budgets and are therefore directly beholden to the executive branch. Additionally, most

parliaments in SADC are poorly funded and often struggle to carry out the most basic functions effectively.

The fused nature of political power in SADC countries also leaves parliaments with a diminished appetite and capacity for carrying out oversight of the executive. So what role do parliaments really play in SADC and how can their contribution to democracy be strengthened? This is the key question to be addressed in *Parliaments of the South*.



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Bridging the gap between people and parliaments

Parliament's relationship with the public is dependent on a host of factors such as political culture, the electoral system, the strength of political parties, the media as well as a country's infrastructure and geography.

In many SADC countries there is a yawning gap between parliaments and the people. Many parliaments are relatively inaccessible and unwelcoming institutions that are often seen as the exclusive preserve of MPs and officials. This is damaging to representative democracy in SADC, but how can this state of affairs be improved?

SADC parliaments reaching out to the people

Parliaments in SADC are physically located in or near cities. Urban dwellers are thus at an advantage when interacting with parliament. Proximity to parliament allows urban dwellers the opportunity to more easily visit or even lobby parliament. Urban dwellers are also often better-educated and better resourced than rural citizens.

By contrast, rural dwellers and those living in towns far from parliament are often educationally, culturally, socially, geographically and thus politically marginalised.

To compound the problem many countries in SADC lack reliable infrastructure—roads, rail and telecommunications are often patchy and concentrated around major urban areas. These structural factors further impede access to parliament by rural people in particular.

What then are parliaments doing to publicise their activities to the people and to involve the broader public?

The encouraging news is that most parliaments in SADC have embarked on public outreach strategies. These will be discussed in some detail in future issues.

Please send us your ideas about how to strengthen the relations between parliament and the public in SADC.
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About the South African Institute of International Affairs

Established in 1934, the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA) is a non-governmental think tank based at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg,

Its principal aims are:

- To conduct and publish relevant and accessible research on South Africa, Africa and its international relations.
- To provide a non-partisan platform to enhance the public debate on South Africa, Africa and its international relations.
- To contribute to the improvement of public policy in the fields of governance, foreign affairs, trade and security.



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Media and parliaments—cosy or critical?

For the majority of people their only contact with or insight into parliament is through the media. A particular responsibility therefore rests on shoulders of SADC journalists. Are journalists doing justice to this critical role?

National broadcasters are principally tasked with covering the activities of parliament, particularly in vernacular languages. Yet one of the problems associated with national broadcasters and state-owned media is the accusation of political bias. According to critics, state-owned TV has a tendency to profile the activities and speeches of the ruling party in parliament at the expense of opposition viewpoints.

Similar criticisms are levelled at state-owned newspapers. Are these criticisms fair? What has been your experience of state-owned media coverage of parliament? Is the media in parliament doing a good job?

“Public policy and legislation is legitimised and improved by broad consultation and popular engagement”

What about the standard and quality of parliamentary journalism in SADC? Are journalists reliable, authoritative or too sensationalist and critical?

Please send us your views!

Share your experience in dealing with parliament.

Some constitutions specifically promote public participation in parliament. These parliaments are consequently obliged to put mechanisms and programmes in place to involve the public in their activities. These may involve public hearings, committee submissions and hearings or people’s forums. In other parliaments, the public, electorate and civil society is almost entirely excluded.

Where the public is welcomed into participating into parliament and its activities we find well-documented cases of civil society input into policy formulation and draft legislation in SADC parliaments. There is a wealth of experience and expertise that SADC parliaments can call upon to improve the quality of policy and legislation for the benefit of all. We would like to share these positive and constructive experiences between MPs and civil society throughout the region.

If you have interacted with any parliament in SADC and feel that your experience can help improve public engagement with parliament or the quality of policy and legislation, please send it to us for publication.

You can make a difference!

What makes for a good member of parliament?

There can be no quality democracy without quality members of parliament. But what does it mean to be a good MP? This question may be answered differently by political parties and by the voting public, but over the coming months we shall be asking our readers in SADC what they feel are the qualities of a good MP.

Here are a couple of thoughts about what makes a good MP:

Perhaps the first quality required of any MP is that of **ethics**. The electorate places considerable trust in their elected member of parliament and a relationship of trust is fundamental to representative democracy.

This means that an MP should not be motivated or swayed by material reward or self interest. S/he should avoid conflicts of interest, be they commercial or personal.

A second quality should be **dedication** to the electorate. This means the MP periodically seeking and always adhering to, a clear mandate from the electorate to represent their interests, however defined.

At a minimum this requires MPs to:

1. Diligently attend all sittings of parliament, table questions and debate motions
2. Report back to the electorate on parliament's work at regular intervals
3. Hold constituency clinics to inform constituents about the issues coming before parliament
4. Regularly seek the mandate and approval of the electorate on policy and legislation

Does your MP set a good example ?

Please send us your views on the following important questions:

- Do you feel you have a particularly good MP? Perhaps your MP has taken up an issue on your behalf or that of your community? Perhaps your MP has held many constituency clinics or has involved you in the activities of parliament, we'd like to hear from you.
- What made you vote for your MP? What qualities does your MP

possess? What selection process did your MP undergo before you elected him or her as your candidate MP?

- Do you feel you have enough on-going contact with your MP. How is this achieved?
- Do you feel that there are enough female MPs in SADC? Is the 30% female MP target set by the SADC Parliamentary Forum achievable or desirable?
- Should candidates standing for election as an MP be required to sign a social contract to better serve the electorate?

Assessing donor support for SADC parliaments

Donor activity in SADC is often controversial. Critics accuse donor countries and their agencies of imposing unrealistic expectations and conditionalities on poorly-resourced southern African countries. In extreme, some southern Africans view donor activity as a form of neo-colonialism. Others argue that donor support has been overwhelmingly positive for parliaments, governance and democracy in the region.

Are donors attempting to impose particular models of representative democracy in SADC countries unsuited to local conditions? Or are they an essential resource for strengthening democracy in SADC? We will examine some of the parliamentary programmes supported by donors in coming months.

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