



Statement from the Regional Community Engagement Workshop for Pacific Parliaments

Pacific Parliaments met in Apia, Samoa from 6-7 August 2012 to consider the ways in which they engage with their communities and opportunities to enhance that engagement and strengthen parliamentary democracy in the region. The workshop was attended by Presiding Officers, Deputy Presiding Officers, parliamentarians and parliamentary staff from 11 Pacific Parliaments: Australia, Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, New Caledonia, New Zealand, Niue, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. The workshop was coordinated by the Samoan and Australian Parliaments and the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), which was represented by its Director of Programmes, Mr Martin Chungong. The IPU and AusAID generously funded the workshop.

The workshop considered the IPU and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Global Parliamentary Report on the evolving relations between parliaments and citizens and discussed the relevance of the report and its findings for Pacific Parliaments, focusing in particular on ways in which Pacific Parliaments and parliamentarians can best connect with their communities to meet community expectations for parliament as the primary representative and legislative institution.

Good practice examples from Pacific Parliaments were discussed at the workshop as part of efforts to encourage information sharing through a Pacific Parliaments Network.

Workshop participants from the 11 Pacific Parliaments reached consensus on priorities for community engagement in Pacific Parliaments. It was agreed that responsibility for implementation of the priorities needs to be shared with a range of people and organisations, including parliaments, parliamentarians, governments, community based organisations and members of the public, with support from international parliamentary organisations such as the IPU and international donors.

In discussing these priorities, workshop participants agreed on the value of their interaction with the IPU and the importance of drawing on the experiences, expertise and support of the IPU and the Australian and New Zealand Parliaments in relation to parliamentary strengthening. Workshop participants agreed to seek ongoing engagement of the IPU in the Pacific region, including through membership of the organisation and through coordination of future regional activities with the support of the IPU.

The agreed community outreach priorities for Pacific Parliaments are:

1. Improve community consultation on bills.
2. Seek the financial independence of parliament to let parliament set its priorities, including a specific budget for community outreach.
3. Use village networks more effectively to consult with the community.
4. Use all media to help inform the community about the work of parliament: radio, television, newspapers, websites and social media, focusing particularly on visual learning tools that are important in the Pacific.
5. Consider new mechanisms to collaborate with the community including different approaches depending on the desired outcome (engagement to seek opinion and outreach to inform).

6. Develop education programs about parliament for schools.
7. Seek to establish constituency offices to give members of parliament a base in the community, to help improve the professionalism of members of parliament.
8. Address at a national level the culture or expectation that members of the public can ask for money from members of parliament to help pay for specific needs people may have in their daily lives.
9. Members of parliament help formulate district development plans through a collaborative approach with the community.
10. Ensure all sections of the community are engaged with parliament, targeting in particular groups that are not fully engaged or represented, including women and indigenous groups, prioritising outreach programs for less represented sections of community.
11. Examine whether parliamentary processes are adequate, in particular whether existing parliamentary rules help or hinder connection with the community, and provide more opportunities for members of parliament to raise community issues in parliament.
12. Develop outreach programs for public servants to help ensure people who deliver services understand how parliament works and also provide members of parliament with briefings on how government agencies operate and the services they provide.
13. Develop evaluation processes to determine whether outreach tools are working.
14. Use outreach and parliamentary processes to build respect for the parliamentary institution and the role and value of members of parliament within that institution.
15. Examine parliamentary sitting calendars and hours so that they allow adequate time for members of parliament to return to their communities, which is particularly important for members of parliament from remote communities.
16. Engage with civic commentators, working with people in the community who can help encourage debate, including academics, civil society organisations, community groups and parliamentary monitoring institutes, helping to build expertise within the community for debate and commentary.
17. Develop specific measures to address remote community circumstances, including additional allowances for members of parliament who need to travel to remote communities and targeted outreach for remote communities.
18. Establish public outreach offices or sections within parliament to develop and implement outreach plans for the parliament, use those offices to inform the community about upcoming activities, such as committee hearings, and ensure outreach officers work with members of parliament to help deliver information on the work of parliament to the community.
19. Ensure outreach programs are sustainable after donor funding ceases.

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