

Mobilizing parliamentarians for development

How can legislators spur development? A conference held in Vienna, Austria, on June 11–13, cosponsored by the World Bank and the Austrian Development Agency, argued that lawmakers in donor and recipient countries can encourage good governance and ensure the resources needed to fuel growth.

This first-of-its-kind event brought together over 100 representatives from about 30 parliamentary organizations and assemblies, as well as representatives from multilateral organizations, aid agencies, foundations, and institutions. It connected a wide range of actors that provide both knowledge and financial assistance to capacity-building programs for legislators on development, and spurred discussion on how to improve cooperation and collaboration.

There was broad consensus among participants that legislators can play important roles in promoting sustainable development and reducing poverty. In developing countries, parliamentarians—as elected representatives—can give voice to the interests of disadvantaged people affected by economic reforms. As lawmakers, they can champion economic and social reform, and promote good governance so as to spur growth and raise living standards. In donor countries, legislators are typically responsible for approving foreign aid allocations and help shape the debate and policy choices on development priorities.

But legislators in low-income countries are sometimes not fully involved in economic and financial decision making, particularly in formulating the budget or drafting countries' poverty reduction strategy papers (PRSPs). Each PRSP, which lays out the macroeconomic, structural, and social policies and programs that a country will pursue to promote broad-based growth and reduce poverty, is meant to be developed in conjunction with domestic stakeholders and external development partners, including the IMF. Many conference participants called for a greater flow of information to legislators—particularly from their own governments—so they can make more informed decisions and better fulfill their roles as representatives of their people.

But what can legislators do to promote development? Participants proposed a range of interesting ideas. In the open-

ing session, Eveline Herfkens, the UN Secretary-General's Coordinator for the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), called on legislators to be more proactive and scrutinize the actions of their national governments with regard to progress on the MDGs and trade matters. She also urged them to ask their respective governments for reports on their positions before IMF–World Bank meetings. In fact, in several countries, such as Finland, France, Ireland, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom, national parliaments ask the government to report to parliament on the policies pursued at the World Bank or the IMF. Norbert Mao, Member of Parliament in Uganda and Board Member of the Parliamentary Network on the World Bank (PNoWB), asked donors to consult with recipient country parliaments before devising their policies and setting project priorities.

Mao also called for a strengthening of domestic parliaments—for example by requiring parliamentary approval of loans and financial assistance—and urged fellow legislators to take advantage of IMF and World Bank efforts to improve their

dialogue with legislators, noting that “the doors of the Bank and the Fund are now open for legislator engagement, and it is up to parliamentarians themselves to walk through the door and seize the opportunity.” This is a timely call, since the IMF has been expanding its outreach efforts to legislators in recent years. Discussions highlighted the continued lack of awareness of the IMF's parliamentary outreach efforts, however.

The conference, which explored the scope for collaborating with new partners as well as bilateral donor agencies, expressed interest in creating a “network of networks.” A loose and informal alliance of parliamentary networks on development could, participants suggested, improve cooperation and coordination for outreach activities. This would include sharing information on activities, funding, and best practices; setting up a mechanism for more direct interaction—a “matchmaking role” of the PNoWB; and increasing the scope and ability for joint action. ■



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Frank Härtel/IRINMEDIA

Patrick Cirillo and Michaela Schrader
IMF External Relations Department