



REPUBLIK ÖSTERREICH
Parlament



**SUMMARY OF THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE PARLIAMENTARY FORUM ON THE OCCASION OF
THE 7TH GLOBAL FORUM ON REINVENTING GOVERNMENT
Vienna, Austria, 25 June 2007**

A Parliamentary Forum took place in Vienna, Austria, on 25 June 2007 on the occasion of the 7th Global Forum on Reinventing Government. The Forum was held at the Parliament of Austria and was attended by delegations from the following parliaments: Algeria, Angola, Austria, Bahrain, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Burundi, Cameroon, Chile, Comoros, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, Estonia, France, Georgia, Indonesia, Islamic Republic of Iran, Jordan, Kenya, Lesotho, Lithuania, Morocco, Mexico, Mozambique, Namibia, Pakistan, Philippines, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Togo, Tunisia, Uganda and Viet Nam.

The Parliamentary Forum was organized by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and was hosted by the Parliament of Austria. The Speaker of the National Council (Lower House) of Austria, Ms. Barbara Prammer, presided over the opening and closing sessions of the Forum. The proceedings of the Forum were chaired by Ms. Margaret Mensah-Williams, Vice-Chairperson of the National Council of Namibia and Vice-President of the IPU Executive Committee.

The Parliamentary Forum was meant to bring a parliamentary dimension to the 7th Global Forum on Reinventing Government. It provided an opportunity for the parliamentarians attending the Global Forum to express their views and share experiences on matters related to governance. The overall theme of the Parliamentary Forum was ***Transparency and accountability as a means of restoring trust in governing institutions***. In discussing this theme, participants examined in detail prerequisites and mechanisms for holding government to account in the 21st century. They paid particular attention in this regard to the role of parliament in the budget process, especially from a gender perspective, as well as to how parliaments can most effectively exercise oversight of the security sector. In the final analysis, they examined the range of protections parliamentarians are entitled to in the performance of their oversight functions. Following is a summary of the main conclusions of the Parliamentary Forum.

Holding government to account

Governments must earn trust by promoting the rule of law, encouraging popular participation, ensuring social cohesion and promoting transparency. Participants acknowledged the existence of an accountability deficit in many countries around the world and the challenges parliaments must overcome in ensuring accountability. Foremost among these is the need for parliaments to be fully independent, especially of the Executive. In this regard, parliament needs to have budgetary and administrative autonomy which will enable it to have the information, staffing and financial resources it needs to function. Such autonomy will also guarantee financial independence for members of parliament.

Impediments which parliaments need to overcome in the performance of their role as overseers include lack of information, capacity and expertise. The Executive is quite often reluctant to provide accurate information in a timely manner to parliament for it to exercise properly its oversight function. Parliaments need to have the power to compel the Executive to make available such information as is

required by parliament. The lack of information is compounded by the high turnover of members of parliament in several countries following elections, which deprives the parliaments involved of the accrued experience that comes with members serving for long periods of time. Freedom of information legislation is an important tool for improving access to information by citizens and parliaments.

Financial independence would also enable parliament to recruit the necessary capacity and expertise (including well-trained, resourced and impartial staff) to deal with the increasingly complex issues involved in its work. Participants underscored the importance for parliament to forge strong partnerships with other institutions that contribute to transparency. These include national audit institutions, the office of the ombudsperson, the media and civil society organizations.

A major impediment also faced by parliaments was that of a poor public image partly due to a widespread lack of understanding of the role of parliament. Parliaments should be more proactive in designing and implementing public education campaigns in order to make the people more aware of the role of parliament. The media would be a strong ally of parliament in this regard.

In many instances, overwhelming party majorities in certain parliaments and the strict discipline imposed by the parties involved restrict parliamentarians' capacity to criticize and hold government to account. Participants emphasized the need for political parties to adopt more democratic internal procedures and to allow member space for in-depth debate of State policies. Parliaments should strive to be more inclusive in their functioning and to provide adequate opportunities for all members to participate and contribute effectively to the work of parliament. In this context, opposition parties should be allowed enough space to participate in parliamentary debate and in the governance of parliament. They should also be properly resourced.

For parliament to be able to secure transparency in government, it should also be transparent in its own functioning. This means that it should open its proceedings to the public not only for observation but also for inputs. Parliaments should publish their proceedings, including those of their committees.

Parliaments and their members should be shining examples of integrity if they are to stand in good stead to promote government accountability. In this regard, registers of members' assets and disclosure of their remuneration could be particularly useful instruments. In general, what is required is a code of ethics that ensures that members do not use their public office for private gain.

The budget and gender

Regarding the role of parliament in budget oversight, it is not enough to examine the volume of public expenditure, and how public resources are spent but also the differential impact State policies and expenditure have on men and women, it being understood that gender budgeting does not mean segregation. Rather, it is an effort to take into consideration the respective roles and situations of various component of society, men and women, when devising such policies and programming the attendant budgetary resources.

Gender budgeting and gender mainstreaming in general should become a routine feature of State policies. Mechanisms for increasing women's contribution to decision-making processes include quotas and reserved seats. These affirmative action measures could be taken on a temporary basis. Political parties should also be more gender proactive by implementing policies that allow more women to stand a good chance of being elected to public office, including to parliament.

Of course, parliament's own budget should be gender-sensitive.

Overseeing the security sector

By its very nature, the security sector is at variance with the role of parliament. The latter seeks increasing transparency and accountability in the former while the former is reluctant to disclose information on its operations. Long gone are the days when the doors of the security sector were closed to parliaments. The security services should not be at the service of any particular sector of society but should serve society at large. Democracy requires that they should be subject to civilian control. All the aspects thereof are included: intelligence, procurements, and declaration of states of emergency. Indeed, parliament should have oversight over the structure and budget of the security sector as well as over equipment and the deployment of troops. The military's interference in politics in some countries should be frowned upon and resisted. Legal provisions as well as international pressure should be applied to discourage the military from dabbling in politics.

The global effort to combat terrorism should not be subject to abuse by the military and should not undermine democracy by violating human rights.

Protecting parliamentarians in the performance of their duties

The key requirement for an effective parliament is freedom of expression and action. Members of parliament ought to be able to express themselves without fear of victimization or other arbitrary action by external actors, including members of the Executive.

In this regard, parliamentarians need protection for what they say or do in the performance of their duties. For this reason, many countries have put in place a system of immunities and privileges for members of parliament. The scope of these provisions varies from jurisdiction to jurisdiction but they should be as wide enough as possible to offer adequate protection to parliamentarians.

These protections are not intended for members individually *per se*, but to enable the entire institution of parliament to function without let or hindrance, especially from the Executive. Parliamentary immunity should therefore be used in a responsible fashion by members.

Strict party guidelines and discipline hinder members' ability to perform their duties in full freedom. It is important to build a culture of democracy characterized by tolerance and respect for each other's opinions. Moreover, political parties should adopt more democratic modes of operation to allow members to act according to their conscience.

Opposition party members are more vulnerable to abuse than governing party members. Legal provisions enshrining the rights and responsibilities of the opposition can be a useful means to address this concern in some circumstances.