



The Impact of Parliamentary Oversight on Governance: A case for increased involvement of national legislatures in the implementation of the SDGs

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Effective parliaments are critical to promoting democratic governance and are a pivotal component of a country's broader governance framework and checks and balances. While there are differences between government and political systems, democratic parliaments, through their constitutional mandates, must fulfill three basic functions: representation, legislation, and oversight.

These functions are key for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at the national level. Parliaments are pivotal for drafting and enacting the legislation needed for incorporating the SDGs into national legal frameworks, including the required state budget appropriations. Parliaments are also fundamental for overseeing the implementation by the government of the SDG targets and the public expenditures resulting from it. Moreover, parliaments are essential for ensuring that marginalized groups' needs and views are represented in the laws and budgets derived from their work.

Yet, in many countries, there is an urgent need to reform and improve the functioning of parliaments, making them more representative, open, and accountable and able to respond to the urgent needs of people and the planet. Capacities for oversight and legislation are limited or under-utilized, laws and budgets are not in sync with national development plans, women, youth and

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vulnerable groups are under-represented, and individual SDGs are still dealt with in silos. Furthermore, parliamentary engagement in the efforts to implement the SDGs has been weak and institutional challenges remain.

We are now at mid-point in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and it has become clear through the limited data gathered worldwide that only about 12 per cent of the SDG targets are on track and some 30 per cent have either seen no movement or regressed below the 2015 baseline (UNSG SDG progress report, 2023)³. With the achievement of the SDGs by 2030 in real peril, the world needs “all-hands-on-deck” and the effective engagement of parliaments has become paramount. In December 2022, the United Nations General Assembly recognized this again fact when it adopted a resolution entitled *Enhancing the role of parliaments in accelerating the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals*⁴.

The SDGs and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change call for deep transformations in every country that require complementary actions by governments, parliaments, civil society, science, business, and other sets of actors. These transformations are linked with priority investments and regulatory challenges calling for actions by well-defined parts of government working with business and civil society. How can parliaments navigate this complexity bringing their big political power to the table for enabling the 2030 Agenda and the operationalization of its SDGs? The 2022 Global Parliamentary Report (IPU; UNDP, 2022) highlights that parliaments have a vital role to play in addressing the challenges of today’s rapidly changing world, but they need to connect with people and enable them to participate in the law-making, policy formulation, and oversight processes that impact their lives⁵. It is through public engagement and work with critical actors and institutions that parliaments can fulfill their mandate well.

Governance principles of accountability, effectiveness, transparency, and inclusion are directly related to the three essential parliamentary functions. Parliamentary oversight, when effective, ensures that the executive and its agencies, or those to whom authority is delegated, are open/available and accountable. For this reason, UNDP support to parliaments has gone beyond traditional institutional strengthening to focus on supporting more constructive and systematic partnerships with executive governments, civil society, independent oversight

³ <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2023/>

⁴ <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N22/756/15/PDF/N2275615.pdf?OpenElement>.

⁵ <https://www.ipu.org/impact/democracy-and-strong-parliaments/global-parliamentary-report/global-parliamentary-report-2022-public-engagement-in-work-parliament>.

bodies, and new and old media. Lessons from this engagement show that governance systems that result from such partnerships are demonstrably more inclusive; leading to more effective oversight of how services are delivered; and to laws and budgets that look beyond the interests of the elites.

An interesting example in this regard is the work that UNDP has done on budget oversight with parliaments and multiple actors in the public finance management in all six Portuguese-speaking African countries and Timor-Leste. Through the UNDP longest and biggest EU-funded multi-country and south-south triangular cooperation programme in Africa region for consolidating Economic Governance and Public Finance Management Systems (PFM) in the PALOP-TL Countries (Angola, Cabo Verde, Guinea Bissau, Mozambique, São Tomé and Príncipe, and Timor-Leste)⁶, UNDP empowers parliaments, government ministries (particularly ministries of finance/planning and gender equality line ministries), independent oversight bodies and civil society on a systemic basis for more open, transparent, and accountable public finance management. This whole-of-society model has proven to boost the overall governance transparency and openness - key ingredients to build democratic accountability and trust.

Because *“words don’t change policies, but budgets do!!!”*⁷, this innovative programme has worked with legislatures in 6 countries to *“follow the money”* and render the government accountable towards its sustainable development commitments, including the Agenda 2030 and its SDG targets. Since 2014, MPs and parliamentary staffers have been systematically immersed with other PFM actors in budget analysis and gender-responsive budgeting workshops, communities of practice and advanced studies programmes in public finance management. One of the most prolific and relevant community of practice facilitated by our programme has been the High-Level Working Group of Legislative Budget Committees bringing to the table, annually, presidents of these important parliamentary standing committees to share views, built capacities, access best practices that benefit legislative budget oversight.

In Angola, Cabo Verde, Mozambique and Sao Tome and Principe, this systemic work has developed an internationally acknowledged methodology for effective oversight of public expenditures and policies focused on gender inequalities – with parliamentary processes as an entry point⁸ – and has given teeth to gender equality

⁶ <https://agora-parl.org/pt-pt/pro-palop-tl-sai>.

⁷ <https://agora-parl.org/pt-pt/pro-palop-tl-sai/articles-publications/orcamentacao-sensivel-ao-genero-e-possivel-metodologia>.

⁸ file:///C:/Users/Ricardo.GGomes/Downloads/EJLR_2019_21_02.def_1.pdf.

policies and more gender-equal economies⁹. Today, not at all coincidentally, out of the six PALOP-TL countries, four have elected a woman as speaker of Parliament (67% of this community of countries, against 20% global average, 25.5% in sub-Saharan Africa or 29% in Europe)¹⁰. Three of those Speakers of Parliament, woman, were immersed in the systemic initiatives carried out in the context of the Pro PALOP-TL programme considered impactful by an independent evaluation in 2021¹¹ and by its beneficiaries¹².

As we stand halfway to the 2030 deadline for achieving the SDGs, it is essential to strengthen democratic governance systems that accelerate progress towards all the SDGs. Governance systems need to adapt and respond to the rapid changes in our societies while putting the rights and needs of people at the center.

Parliaments will continue to be the House of Representatives of the public; they will never be think-tanks or research cabinets. Legislation and oversight will continue to be subjected to the politics of representation.

In the current global context and its impact at national level, parliaments need to partner with other actors to enforce checks and balances in today's Volatile-Uncertain-Complex-Ambiguous world and navigate the complexity of operationalizing and accelerating the implementation of the SDGs.

The many transformations needed to accelerate the operationalization of the SDGs will require increased capacities of oversight over Domestic Resource Mobilization instruments and frameworks, but also an easy access to open, timely and accurate/granular data on sustainable development at local/national/regional/global levels. Governments need to provide these services and parliaments need to be able to make them accountable for it and use such data effectively.

About the Authors

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Since 2010, Ms. Aleida Ferreyra is serving as the Global Lead, Democratic Institutions and Processes in a Digital Era, Governance Team at UNDP. She has been a Policy

⁹ <https://www.undp.org/dfs-publications/durable-transformation-and-structural-changes-gender-equality-through-pfms-and-budgetary-circles>.

¹⁰ <https://data.ipu.org/speakers>.

¹¹ https://www.agora-parl.org/sites/default/files/pdf/2022_03_Relatorio_Final_de_Avaliacao_Intermedia_ProPALOPTL.pdf.

¹² <https://lookerstudio.google.com/reporting/2ad63ab8-6797-4375-a28f-036acac173a2/page/ulffc>.

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From 2005 to 2010, Ms. Ferreyra worked for UNDP as an electoral specialist and research analyst in the area of inclusive participation and elections. She was involved with policy development and the research, writing and production of several publications and training courses, including Elections and Conflict Prevention: A Guide to Analysis, Planning and Programming; UNDP Electoral Assistance Implementation Guide; Electoral Financing to Advance Women's Political Participation: A Guide for UNDP Support, and the Electoral Systems and Process module of the Virtual Development Academy, among others.

Prior to her work at UNDP, Ms. Ferreyra taught Comparative Political Systems and Institutions at the New School University in New York and worked as programme coordinator of the Janey Program for Latin American Studies. She has worked as Regional Coordinator and Electoral Observer for several electoral missions with the Organization of American States from 1996 to 2002. She holds a M.A. and an MPhil in Political Science and Government from the New School for Social Research in New York and a B.A. in International Relations from the National Autonomous University of Mexico.

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Ricardo Godinho Gomes is the Chief Technical Advisor of the PALOP-TL Programme. He is a political scientist with significant experience in the international arena with the United Nations family as a development practitioner and leadership experience, supervising and coordinating complex multi-country programmes in democratic and economic governance.

He has extensive first-hand experience in dealing with host governments, national parliaments, supreme and constitutional courts, supreme audit and other independent accountability and transparency watchdogs, as well as local non-governmental organisations, UN country teams and the donor community.

Since 2014, Mr. Godinho Gomes has been working in the field of Economic Governance (public finance, budget transparency, parliamentary budget oversight and legislative and government openness) as Chief Technical Advisor. The Pro PALOP-TL SAI initiative is an important strategic partnership in the region between UNDP and the European Union aimed at enhancing transparency and anti-corruption through South-South and triangular cooperation involving all the relevant actors in public finance ecosystems.

Spanning five countries in Africa Region and Timor-Leste, involving also Brazil and Portugal, he has been responsible for senior policy advisory to high-level political officials. Ricardo Godinho Gomes has experience working with a wide array of United Nations Country Teams and agencies in different country contexts.

Between 2006 and 2013, Mr. Godinho Gomes provided expert advice and technical assistance to Electoral Management Bodies and all the relevant governance and electoral actors (mainly in Africa region) as an electoral expert and one of frontline responders of the EC-UNDP Joint Task Force on Electoral Assistance. During this period, I liaise closely with senior political national officers and judiciary, but also with the donor community, political party and civil society organizations' leaders.