STRENGHTENING
PARLIAMENTS' INFORMATION SYSTEMS
IN AFRICA

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"Challenges and Opportunities of Parliamentary Reform in Africa"

Address by:

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Honorable MPs,
Colleague Experts,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I come, together with my Colleague Pierre DANDJINOU, from the furthest most western tip of our continent: Dakar/Senegal, to participate, and represent UNDP, in this gathering which has assigned itself the task of discussing the "*Challenges and Opportunities of ICTs to Strengthen Democracy and Parliamentary Governance*"

Because they do have the potential for empowering ordinary people to participate and to have a say in decisions, policies and structures that surround, affect and shape their societies and lives, parliamentary institutions in Africa and elsewhere *can play a fundamental role in establishing the rule of law, protecting human rights, overseeing transparent governance processes, and ensuring compliance with international obligations*. For these reasons, UNDP considers all activities aiming at enhancing the representative, legislative and/or

oversight capacities of representative institutions as an integral part of UNDP priorities in the area of democratic governance.

Whether called upon to support Nation-Building, Conflict Resolution or democratic development, UNDP has always strived to help deliberative bodies "provide a counterbalance to the Executive branch" and "give the electorate a voice in public policy". This was the case in Benin and Mozambique where *UNDP assistance focused on improving parliamentary oversight, internal organization and strengthening the committee system*, in Niger where UNDP helped "*to train legislators and their staff to communicate more effectively with constituents*", in Rwanda where, "*in collaboration with, the IPU, UNDP has provided leadership training for women parliamentarians*. It was also the case in Uganda where UNDP worked with *the Forum for Women in Democracy to strengthen the involvement of grassroots women in the budget process*. As evidenced by these selected few examples, UNDP interventions in the

legislative realm, until recently, as was the case with most development agencies active in the legislative field, have been limited for the most part to programs of *Constitutional Reform and Support for Institutional Frameworks, Capacity –Building for Members and Staff, Strengthening of Political Parties, Institutional Development, Gender Initiatives, Working with Civil Society and the Media, Policy Development* and *Civic Education*.

But with the impressive developments witnessed, these last years, both in the area of information and communication technologies and their spread into other areas of economic, professional, social and personal lives, the world and UNDP, and Africa with them, have entered the world of e-government, e-democracy, e-governance and e-parliament.

In the face of generally low performing legislative branches against the African enormous needs in terms of legislative, representative and oversight actions, the introduction on a noticeable scale of ITC in

deliberative bodies has the potential, as anywhere else, to improve efficiency and deepen democracy for Africans. This explains why UNDP has elevated ICT to the status of a service line aptly named *ICT for development* and has posted in its Regional Service Center, SURF and Country Offices specialists to help African countries develop and implement their e-strategies. For democracy, especially participative democracy, while desirable in and by itself, is considered as a formidable enabler for Sustainable Human Development.

In a gathering like today's, devoted entirely to *Parliaments' Information Management in Africa* it is perfectly legitimate to expect hearing from UNDP what proposals and projects (groundbreaking at the time) it did put forward to the NEPAD Parliamentary Forum Executive Secretariat currently based in Cotonou, BENIN; some participants may prefer a focus on what the organization is doing in terms of ICT relative to the organization's triple-pronged strategy in response to the Southern African Development challenges known as SACI

(Southern Africa Capacity Initiative) and others still may prefer this address to rather focus on UNDP's Project to "Use ICT to empower Parliaments" in Africa and elsewhere. While recognizing both the well-founded sex-appeal and relevance of the aforementioned themes, in this very short address your presenter has instead opted for a much narrower and less glorious focus; indeed this address aims at raising some questions from past experiences borne out of trying to introduce changes/reforms into parliaments or implement parliamentarian development projects. These are questions and issues that, indeed, deserve serious attention as development partners and African deliberative institutions are now poised to embark on embracing e-parliament for African parliaments.

Said differently, in this address, we wish to focus on some of the non-ICT conditions of possibility for "*Achieving Excellence though ICTs and Knowledge Management Solutions for Information-Based Parliaments*". Today's address will limit itself to nine issues. These

issues are challenges to a successful introduction of innovation or reform into African legislative branches. Because they do as well points towards what should be done to move ahead, they are also opportunities.

<u>Issue One</u>: Past Low Impact Projects and Lack of African Involvement and Ownership

At UNDP, we believe not merely in democracy, but rather we stand for participatory democracy. In other words, it is not enough to deliver readily usable models and products to people, people's participation in the "production" and "delivery" processes is as important as the products and outputs--- if not sometimes more important. Applied to the African context, this means that Africans have to participate in the conception, design and implementation of all processes and tools to be used by in the myriad of processes that affect, run and shape their lives. Failure to do so in the past has led to lack of ownership by Africans and embarrassingly low impact of many well-meaning projects that were

believed to have been well-thought out by their foreign designers.

<u>Issue Two</u>: Affordability and Sustainability

Success of introduced reform or innovation is better evaluated over time. While a specific reform project may have a start and an end date, reform in itself should be seen as an ever continuing process. For in Africa, many vibrant reform projects have gone under after the withdrawal of the international development partner who initiated it for lack of sustainability. Therefore time and sustainability are key issues to pay attention to. Sustainability itself is a function of affordability. Will the legislative institution possess overtime the necessary financial, human and other resources for the survival of the changes brought about by the reform is a key concern that should be addressed from the very conceptual phase of the reform.

<u>Issue three</u>: Are There "*Carrier Legislators*" in African Parliamentary Institutions?

By now, almost each country has a Parliament or a National Assembly. Is it the relative novelty of democratic deliberative bodies on the continent? May be it is the obvious imbalance of power and resources in favor of the Executive Branch. Whatever the reasons, in Africa the reality is that the majority of MPs seem to be just passing through Parliament and using it as a stepping stone towards greener pasturages. A direct consequence of this situation is that *lifelong legislators are seldom*. Furthermore, not withstanding the normally political and partisan nature of legislative institutions; in Africa, the parliamentary institutions themselves, taken as an entity, rarely display an "*Esprit de Corps*" as can be witnessed in many non-African Parliamentarian institutions.

<u>Issue Four</u>: The Political Economy of Reform or "*Who gains what, who looses what from reform?*" in the Parliamentary Institution?

Well-meaning parliamentary reform or development programs may fail to attain

their anticipated results simply because they have not thought out explicitly the redistributive effects of their reform. Any reform project that is oblivious to these redistributive effects does implicitly (consciously or otherwise) assume that reforms do not make losers and/or does provide equal gains to all involved. Quite the contrary is true in reality. On average, reform creates losers and does not provide equal gains to stakeholders. Let us take, for illustrative purpose, the topic at hand. It would be crucial for the successful adoption of PAPI, or any other platform, to know in advance how the introduction of this technology will enhance the powers of the Clerk. How the enhanced possibility of greater public participation will increase the individual MPs workload and then try to see how these changes could me mitigated, if it is desirable to do so.

<u>Issue Five</u>: Are There "*Reform Champions*" in the Parliamentary Institution?

If it is well understood, as a matter of course, that without MPs or "*Deputés*" no Parliament or National Assembly could exist, concrete lessons learned in the parliamentarian field, in various corners of the world, shows that no deliberative body can fully discharge its duties without a qualified, professional and non-partisan staff[1]. In other words, to be effective any given deliberative body requires strength and efficiency in both its political and administrative processes and branches. In turn to be successful any reform program or the introduction of new ways of doing business need to clearly differentiate between these two groups of actors in parliamentary institutions. Beyond being aware of this duality, it is key to detect who, if they do exist, are the likely supporters and opponents of reform and what is the power-play between these two groups of actors and then ensure that the support of the reformers is effectively enlisted. Needless to say that failing to do so or the lack of strong pro-reform actors at the highest possible levels, in both political and administrative spheres of parliamentary

[1] While some partisan staff may work and do exist in deliberative bodies, they do wand????

institutions, is a sure ingredient for reform failure. For reform or innovation doe need internal forces within the parliamentary institutions desiring reform. For sure, innovation will not succeed until such time that innovation secures the active engagement of serious partners from within both the administrative and political structures, but more importantly from the political leadership of Parliament.

<u>Issue Six</u>: What Were the Needs for Communication of the Individual African Parliamentarian?

As far as keeping in touch with their voters, African elected officials (from both legislative and executive branches) are notorious for appearing during electoral seasons and their aptitude at performing disappearing acts between elections. In such a situation, questions may be legitimately asked about the extent to which the ordinary citizen is being "represented" into and associated to decisions that shape his or her life. In a world of absentee elected officials, hearing from one's

lawmaker, could have been the second best option. Before the electronic mail, there was the postal mail, what is disparagingly called today, snail-mail. Was this mean of communication used by Members of Parliament to reach out to and liaise with citizens from their constituencies? Likewise before the advent of high-tech means to accessing information for, let say, legislative purposes, there where stacks of books, magazines and reviews in the old-fashioned libraries and documentation centers. It may be useful to access how frequently members of parliaments or their technical staff used the documents stored in these facilities; and why or why not? With regard to their oversight functions, how easy was it for parliamentarians to have access to information controlled by the Executive? An Executive branch where every single worker in public administration, it seems, regardless of level and rank, instead of gearing their work towards the delivery of services to their citizens, equate his or her role with doing everything possible to prevent citizens from accessing information that often may belong

already to the public domain. In this context, will the mere introduction of ICT melt Executive branch resistance down when it comes to sharing information that its bureaucrats and decision-makers may perceive as potentially embarrassing or frankly compromising?

<u>Issue Seven</u>: What Is the Information Absorption Capacity of the Individual Parliamentarian?

While democratic electoral processes do open the doors of parliament and confer political legitimacy to each elected member, the capacity and willingness of elected members to effectively and efficiently contribute to the work of the institution, however, does not automatically follow. This raises the need to assess how Members of Parliament elected are: individually or as part of a party list? It is also important to know whether individual MPs are merely expected to tow the party line, or are given some creative room within the general party orientation or are rather encouraged to take independent initiative. All

these are elements that will influence the demand for information by the individual MP and hint to which uses the average parliamentarian might put the increased availability of information from a more varied set of sources. However these elements are prone to change and must not be viewed as static factors; therefore the introduction of innovations must be calibrated to these changing characteristics of the receiving institution to insure effective usefulness and use of this support.

<u>Issue Eight</u>: Support Staff or Elected Member, who is the Ultimate "*ICT Users*" in the Parliamentary Institution?

In many African contexts where, money, ethnic loyalties, party colors and political connections seem to be major determinant factors in getting elected it is not surprising to find that many elected individuals while reveling in the glamour and privileges attached to their status of elected official are either incapable or unwilling to put in the work required. Taking into account today's

makeup of African deliberative bodies, for the most part the individuals who are likely to have interface with ICT outlets are the support staff of African Deliberative Institutions in lieu and place of the Members and "*Députés*" themselves.
This reality taken together with the relatively low computer literacy rate among MPs, it might be wiser to initially target the parliamentary legislative and administrative support teams as a prudent and effective way to introduce or strengthen the user of ICT products.

<u>Issue Nine</u>: *The Budget: Moment of Goliath's Inferiority Complex?*

MPs in many African Parliaments who will claim loudly that no stone shall remain unturned when it comes to stating the reach and depth of their legislative action find it not contradictory do complain bitterly, as will your average helpless citizen, about the lack of resources their Parliamentary Institution is subjected to by the Executive branch which they tend to see as refusing to allocate the

needed resources to Parliament. To this speaker, the only possible path to explanation of this too frequently recurrent situation resides in Hegel's take on consciousness. Indeed, reflecting on the notion of consciousness the German philosopher opposed the following two types of consciousness: consciousness in itself and consciousness for itself that could be interpreted respectively as passive versus pro-active consciousness. Said differently, African National Assemblies or Parliament do have consciousness that without their vote, there is no budget for the Executive; but their actions do not seem to suggest that they have consciousness of what they can and should command from the Executive with that vote over the budget.

I would like to end by wondering aloud: are most African Parliaments stuck into a consciousness in itself phase or have they migrated to a stage of consciousness for itself?

I thank you for your attention!

Nairobi, February 11, 2005