International Conference

Parliaments' Information Management in Africa:
Challenges and Opportunities of ICTs to Strengthen Democracy and Parliamentary Governance

Nairobi 9-11 February 2005

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Ladies and Gentlemen

It is an honour for me to be here today to represent the Chamber of Deputies of the Italian Republic. I bring greetings from the President of the Chamber, Pier Ferdinando Casini, who had hoped to participate in person but was prevented from doing so by other commitments.

The Chamber of Deputies actively pursues inter-parliamentary cooperation both at the European and global level. As regards the present Conference, I would recall that the Chamber was among the first promoters of the UNDESA project "*Strengthening Parliaments' Information System in Africa*", and helped it obtain financing from the Italian Government. Starting with the seminar held in Rome on 28 January 2004, the Chamber has always actively supported the project. Specifically, it has prepared a number of contributions as requested last year in Rome and has also sponsored the present Conference.

The UNDESA project is of strategic importance owing to the growing impact of information technology on how government operates and on the daily lives of people throughout the world. Information technology is now

the leading governance and development tool. One of the main challenges of our times is therefore to ensure the elimination of the digital divide, transforming a potential new source of inequality into an extraordinary opportunity to narrow the distance both between different societies and cultures and within individual countries.

Initiatives such as that now under way are important opportunities to share the knowledge gained by those countries that have been using IT tools the longest, thereby fostering more rapid and effective dissemination while avoiding errors and reaping the benefits of the past experience of other parliaments.

We are convinced that parliaments have a special role to play in the uptake and spread of IT in their countries, for a number of reasons.

First and foremost, Parliament, as the symbol of national sovereignty and the locus of democratic representation and control, can equip itself with the most advanced technological tools that enable it to perform its high functions most effectively. I refer in particular to the essential capacity to make its work transparent and accessible to all citizens, to gain access to the most current and sophisticated information, and to link with other government bodies and civil society organisations at the national, regional and international levels.

In each country, parliaments' information systems can become a key arena of technological innovation and a place for experimenting with new public services, which can help drive technological development in the entire national community.

The exchange of knowledge and experience on parliamentary information systems – as is already happening here at this Conference – can be extremely fruitful, especially if political representatives are able to lend far-sighted support to innovative technological developments.

With an adequate political stimulus, parliaments can create a permanent, high-quality circuit of technology transfer and capacity building, which in time will help governments, public administration and society as a whole. In the afternoon session, the ICT technicians of the Chamber of Deputies will be describing the path that our administration has taken in this direction.

The second reason that Parliament is an essential source of technological innovation is its very legislative function. Together with the executive branch of government, Parliament is called upon to approve the laws that regulate technological development.

The world experience that the Chamber of Deputies has documented and collected in the CD-ROM prepared specifically for this Conference demonstrates that the best results have been achieved where technological development has occurred within the framework of a general policy. This generates a broad vision of interconnections and interdependencies, while selecting needs, identifying priorities and creating appropriate organisational structures.

All representatives of political institutions know that one of the most important components of any policy is the creation of a consistent set of legislative rules and norms, without which many otherwise valid initiatives would lack continuity or fail to develop fully their positive effects. The experience of the countries that have long been involved in developing the information society, including Italy, shows that this general principle is especially true for new technologies, where high costs and technical complexity magnify the risk of wasting resources.

One very important issue is the ways in which parliaments can help promote a policy that, alongside their own technological development, also fosters the technological development of the entire country.

All of these elements underscore the close link between technology and politics as the key to success. They prompt parliaments to take an active role in the promotion of the knowledge society, not only in the developed countries but also and above all in the developing world.

However, if we are to attain these objectives, it is essential that the processes for disseminating information technology be adequately governed, a task that can be facilitated by a careful comparative study of solutions adopted elsewhere. Of course, in developing one's own instruments it is also essential to take account of the characteristics and needs of each country.

And who better than the individual national parliaments can foster cooperation among the various institutions in pursuing a technological development policy?

Our role here today, the role of the parliaments in other countries and, in our specific case, the role of the Italian Parliament, is certainly not to usurp a task that would be impossible to perform. Rather, it is to share with you the methodologies that we have developed over decades marked by mistakes and successes. Studying the experience of others is important, since each of us can learn from what our neighbour is doing.

Over the course of the last century we have witnessed the unprecedentedly rapid spread of technological achievements. This development has completely changed our habits, multiplied our opportunities, accelerated processes and, in general, wrought an epochal change in lifestyles.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this process is the possibility we have to interact with IT tools, adapting them to our needs. Technology is at the service of man, not the other way around.

This awareness must inspire the action of legislators, in Europe as in Africa, in the United States as in the Far East. Parliament must be a protagonist in a process that melds the global and the local, that adapts the most advanced technologies to the most modest of circumstances, exploiting the available tools in the most cost effective way.

The challenge we face as politicians and legislators is to adapt this instrument to the reality of our own – unique - country and transform it into a powerful vehicle for development and democratic participation.

Firm in these convictions, the Italian Parliament has expended great effort in these last few months to bring to Nairobi a range of tools and knowledge to be made available to our African friends so that you might make the best use possible of them.