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Connected Parliaments: harnessing digital dividends to increase transparency and citizen engagement

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I. Executive summary

Now more than ever, digital transformation has become essential for parliaments. Such transformation can have a significant impact in making parliaments more transparent and accountable and can enable them to leverage greater public interest and engagement in the legislative and electoral processes.

Good external digital engagement requires parliaments to review their own internal digital structures, assess where development and investment are needed, and how digital improvement will assist in achieving their goals. Differential priorities in the needs of the parliament or societal actors can form a guide, according to which specific areas for digital development might be prioritised. These steps require long-term investment, which should go in parallel with the digital transformation of the Executive. However, because a country's digital transformation is primarily the preserve of the Executive, it can bypass the legislature and may be almost disproportionately influenced by the ruling party. Uneven digital transformation between public bodies and the legislature may weaken the profile and legitimacy of the legislature itself. Furthermore, governments that effectively restrict digital development within the legislature are essentially restricting democratic integrity.

Besides the long-term process of building and developing infrastructure, short-term pilot projects can be useful to test approaches and begin building the digital infrastructure of the future. Properly targeted funding, to achieve specified digital transformation goals, agreed in collaboration with the development agencies operating in target areas, can yield significant dividends in improving the digital democracy ecosystem. This approach can neutralise harmful, short-termist and wasteful approaches to digital deficiency, and remove the ability of the more unscrupulous parliaments to play development agencies off against each other to leverage greater rewards or resources.

Digital transformation of parliaments requires better strategy, funding and cooperation on the part of donors and implementers as parliaments are enthusiastic and willing to take the opportunities offered by digitalisation.

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II. Introduction

Digital is desirable. Many citizens interact with each other and with the private sector digitally. They want to be able to interact with their governance institutions through the same medium. Politicians want to be heard and seen working for the benefit of their citizens. They can promote their work cheaply and instantly through digital means. Parliaments as institutions want to be seen as relevant, legitimate and modern. They understand that they need to develop digitally in order to be taken seriously.

While digital offers an abundance of opportunity in creating more open, accountable, and engaged parliaments, many such institutions suffer from a chronic lack of experience and expertise in approaching digital ways of working. Open governance principles are increasingly being adopted within public institutions, thanks in part to the Open Government Partnership (OGP)¹ and related open data initiatives; however, these are often restricted to the executive level of government, while parliaments have lagged behind in their approach to digital transformation and openness. Modernising and digitising activity could have significant positive impacts on institutional transparency and accountability and could leverage greater public interest and engagement in the legislative and electoral process.

There are a number of NGO-led parliamentary monitoring and digital openness projects operating around the world, a nascent Open Parliament e-Network² developed through the OGP initiative, and some support from the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU)³ on the concept of 'e-parliaments'. There is, however, a lack of coordinated support for parliaments wishing to improve their digital infrastructure and offering to citizens. Parliaments are vulnerable to piecemeal advice lacking strategic breadth or to pursuing inappropriate digital projects, at great financial cost to themselves, and with the risk of further eroding the trust of citizens and civil society.

Against the background of the global COVID-19 pandemic, the need for parliaments to adopt the agility and flexibility afforded by digital tools in order to maintain their operations has been brought into sharp focus. Parliaments have recognised this need and have experienced an increase in political and administrative interest in harnessing digital tools and reforming previously stubborn embedded attitudes to novel ways of working. This newfound amenability to digital presents a window of opportunity to make meaningful progress in parliamentary digital development.

Currently, there are a variety of parliamentary digital initiatives operating around the world that both support good internal digital practices, and provide more participative, informative and integrated communications to external stakeholders. While many parliaments invest heavily in their online presence, and curate a range of online materials for citizens to learn more about their operation and powers, others are more content to support technically advanced but content-lean websites with a lot of open data available for reuse, and other parliaments are reticent to invest in a strategic web presence or publish any data at all. Many parliaments lack the skills and capacity to enjoy the benefits of digital or implement meaningful and realistic digital strategies.

This paper discusses the importance of digital transformation for parliamentary engagement. The first part of the paper reviews current parliamentary digital activity, including the need to structure and embed internal digital processes for increasing transparency, promoting engagement and widening external information, participation and engagement. The second part of the paper discusses how digital parliamentary development can contribute to broader governance objectives through more collaborative and strategic approaches within the context of existing development strategies. Finally, the paper provides some conclusions and recommendations for organisations willing to support parliamentary digital transformation to increase transparency and citizen engagement.

1. <https://www.opengovpartnership.org/>

2. <https://www.openparliamentenetwork.org/>

3. [Inter-Parliamentary Union](#)

III. What is the current parliamentary digital activity?

There is currently a wide spectrum of digital activity being conducted by various parliaments around the world, and significant potential for this digital migration to proliferate and become embedded in standard parliamentary procedure. The term 'e-parliament' is now often used to describe how parliaments are already practising, or are aspiring to migrate to, a truly integrated digital way of working. The IPU has been examining e-parliament work over the last 13 years, reporting biannually on progress, and the most recent report,⁴ published in 2018, currently defines an e-parliament as follows:

'An e-Parliament places technologies, knowledge and standards at the heart of its business processes and embodies the values of collaboration, inclusiveness, participation and openness to the people.'

This definition speaks to a wide range of activities and infrastructure united underneath a digital and modernising aspiration, with an embedded, open and participative mission as a key pillar.

Digital development towards this e-parliament model therefore means not only digitisation and modernisation of existing structures, but its integration with the progressive and pro-active opening of parliamentary activity to wider society. Work towards such a goal will necessarily require significant internal and external digital development, coupled with sufficient political and institutional will to reduce the real and perceived distance between parliament and the people.

Digital developments of parliaments are longer term projects, which should be considered side by side with the digital development of the executive. However, besides the long-term process of building infrastructure, shorter term pilot projects can be useful to test approaches and begin constructing the digital infrastructure for the future.

1. The price of digital

All modernisation will have associated monetary, human and opportunity costs. Parliaments must live within their financial means, and in progress towards an e-parliament model, they should be opening up official data on their spending and budgeting. A key issue for developing parliaments is the decision to invest in digital development at the expense of other priorities, and how to carry it out with prudence. Parliaments have overwhelmingly recognised that digital offers economies of scale and increases in reach compared to traditional methods of communication, and so are more eager to reap the benefits of social media. However, increased digital engagement also means providing people with what they want to know, which in turn means being able to account for parliamentary activity. This cannot be done effectively without good internal digital systems, and this tends to be the aspect of digital which is more time consuming, more expensive and potentially more politically risky.

4. IPU, World E-Parliament Report, 2018: <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/reports/2018-11/world-e-parliament-report-2018>

The most common cost reductions and increases associated with developing digital capacity are:

Cost reductions	Cost increases
Publishing/distributing information	Human resources in emerging tech/ admin/strategic comms roles
Broadcasting/live-streaming	Licenses and support for software
Interacting with citizens	New hardware
Internal storage and document access	Improving digital literacy
Time/resources spent on organisation, research and administration	Formal procedural/legal changes to accommodate digital practices
Human resources in legacy roles	Security

The long-term cost savings of digital development in parliaments outweigh the short-term investment, but include a level of institutional change and commitment in the short term that is often jarring to longer serving individuals within the institutions, and which can manifest in a resistance to the more fundamental changes. In the short term, funds saved on previously paper based activities can be reallocated to software license and support, funds saved on legacy administrative activities can be reallocated to more skilled digital roles, and funds saved on the wide array of general efficiencies of digital can be reallocated to hardware and training. Once digital skills are embedded and the software and hardware is established, budgets can be allocated to further development.

In order to explore the range of digital interventions and their related objectives and impacts, these tools can usefully be split into two overarching categories - internal, where digital is being used to create efficiencies in the operation of the parliamentary body, and external, where interventions are implemented to broaden the reach and deepen the relationship between the parliament and society.

2. Digital parliaments - structuring and embedding internal digital processes to increase transparency and promote engagement

The digitisation of public bodies has been slower and more uneven than in similarly sized private enterprises in developing countries. This is an important factor in understanding the perception of a gulf between parliaments and the people, as society is increasingly able to interact with large companies and organisations digitally but is hindered in doing the same with its political administration. Before good external digital engagement can be rolled out, parliaments must first order their own internal digital structures, assess where development and investment are needed, and how digital improvement will help to achieve their goals. The IPU and its partners established the Centre for Innovation in Parliaments⁵ in 2018, which supports parliamentary administrators in conducting a basic assessment of their needs. Within the framework of this Centre, the European Parliament has established a hub which provides an online learning platform to guide parliaments in improving their IT governance practices through self-assessment of digital maturity and good practice approaches.⁶ There are, however, several key factors that are essential to the digital transformation for parliaments.

5. For more information, please visit: <https://www.ipu.org/our-impact/strong-parliaments/setting-standards/centre-innovation-in-parliament>

6. ITEC IT Governance Hub: <https://ipu.secure.europarl.europa.eu/home.html>

Skills Deficit

In many countries, there is a significant digital skills deficit within parliaments, often hampered by strict limitations within the established recruitment framework for civil servants and public officials. This throttles the ability of the parliamentary administration to lever high level skills into existing hierarchies. For example, many parliaments recruit only at very junior levels, with the expectation that those employees will gradually rise in seniority throughout their career. Many also recruit into narrow, long-established specialisms, which may include standard business functions such as accounting or 'IT' but would not encompass emerging skills needs such as digital development and innovation. This means that current senior officials will likely have very low levels of digital expertise, and that any employees within parliaments who do have contemporary digital skills are likely to be very junior and outside of meaningful decision-making forums. One parliamentary employee in Myanmar (met during a previous mission) explained:

'They [senior Hluttaw administrators and representatives] ask for things that are not possible, because they don't understand how a lot of it [the digital tech] works and speaks to each other. When we can't do what they ask, they think we are no good at our jobs, or that digital things are not useful.'

Public sector wages can also be very low in comparison to private sector remuneration, and this creates another barrier to integrating individuals with in-demand digital skills into parliamentary administrations. These factors combine to reinforce a digital skills deficit within parliaments, and reduce their ability to develop and innovate, and to create a stable parliamentary digital service for parliamentarians and society. A key area for digital development within parliamentary administration is in investment in the right human resources, without which much other digital development will inevitably be superficial, expensive and short-term. This may require much more fundamental changes in recruitment methods, remuneration standards and embedded institutional attitudes and values concerning hierarchy, expertise and seniority, and therefore it would be beneficial to link development projects on human resources, modernisation and digitisation. More recently, some parliaments have organised hackathons, to develop software solutions to specific problems. These events do not offer longer term solutions, unless they are accompanied by measures which allow developers to fully develop the software and integrate them into IT structures over a number of months. As such, they do allow the parliament to hire younger and more creative workforces over a certain period of time.

Administrative systems

Parliamentary administration structures around the world are generally very similar, with key comparative differences and nuances emerging between parliaments that are bicameral, federal, devolved or utilising another unique system, such as Myanmar with its third chamber. Organisational structures generally include departments for finance, facilities, communications, research, IT, human resources, and chamber and committee support services. Running alongside the parliamentary administration and within the estate, there will also generally be support and administration staff working for political parties and elected representatives directly.

Whereas IT departments 10-15 years ago were establishing mostly closed networks of desktop computers with limited internet access, these departments are now required to have significantly advanced skillsets in enabling mass connectivity inside and outside the estate across a range of devices and operating systems, and across a number of different codebases. Good internal systems can run on open source or commercial software, and parliaments can choose to support that software in-house with existing employees, or contract support out to a commercial vendor. The IPU 2018 e-parliament report⁷ notes that open source software can be a more attractive option for smaller parliaments and those working to a tighter budget, but it does generally require a greater investment in in-house staff for maintenance. Regardless of whether support is in-house or commercial, and whether software is open source or licensed, all software has a support cost. Digital tools being developed for parliaments are also migrating to include mass participation elements, with greater levels of security and functionality required, along with a need to be powered by parliamentary data.

7. IPU, World E-Parliament Report, 2018: <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/reports/2018-11/world-e-parliament-report-2018>

Parliamentary data and information are created constantly, and because information that cannot be located or ordered is almost useless, the necessity for good record keeping becomes ever more vital. At the most basic level, parliaments require good internal data management and record keeping processes to ensure that representatives can access the most up-to-date and relevant information.

Good internal data management and record keeping should include the following features:

- centralised control of, and standard implementation of, appropriate software
- compulsory use of organisational platforms (for example, official email)
- standardised 'naming conventions' for documentation employed to enable searchability
- version control within naming conventions ensuring that the most current documents are visible
- accessibility across devices and operating systems necessary to meet personal preferences
- unification of security across parliament devices and portals
- streamlined access/logins
- production of all documentation/data in open/raw formats which will power further useful interfaces (such as Plain Text, CSV, HTML, XML)

This is not an exhaustive list but highlights some areas where a solid digital foundation should be established before more advanced digital democracy tools can be implemented. Once these basic elements are in place, the ability to produce more data can progress, and the publication of that data externally can be made much easier. For instance, data and information useful to representatives, parties, the media, civil society and individuals could include:

- plenary records (for example, Hansard)
- attendance records
- committee membership, papers and transcripts
- legislation
- representative contact details and registers of interests
- access to the parliamentary estate
- financial records and asset registers
- research reports produced by the parliament research service
- register of official and diplomatic visits

If this information is collected and stored digitally (and logically) internally, it becomes easy to standardise its publication for wider society. Currently, according to the IPU 2018 e-parliament report,⁸ 84% of parliaments worldwide are now, at the very least, producing plenary minutes digitally. However, publication generally hinges on the quality of web-based skills and capacity that the parliament holds.

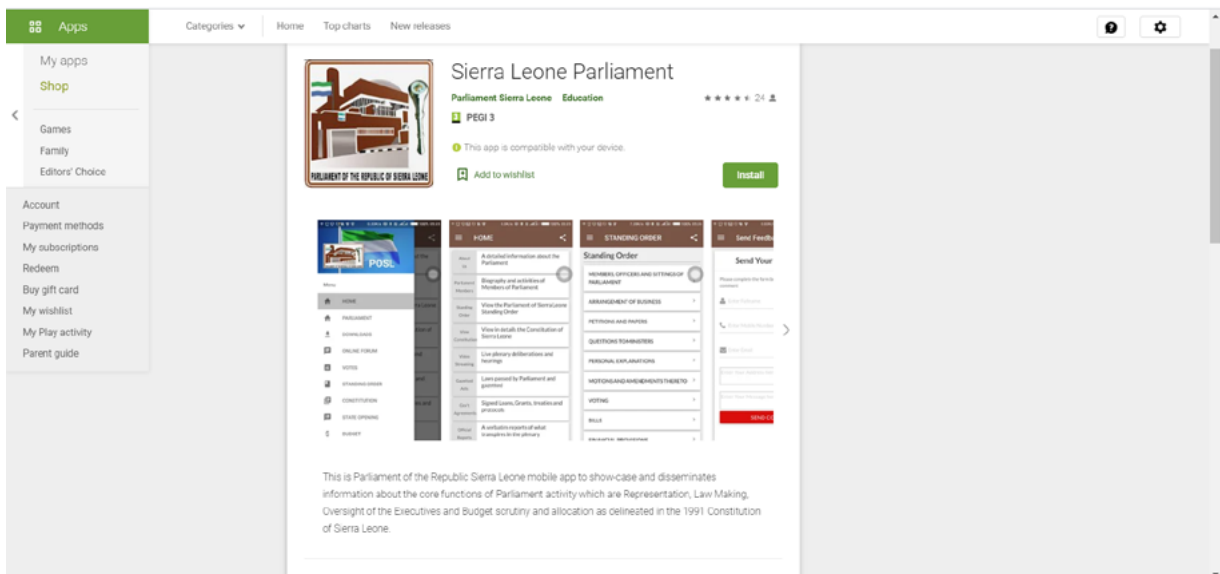
In order to make information available in accessible and useful ways to those outside parliament, its publication must adhere to similar logical standards and structures. Many parliaments choose to publish raw datasets in different repositories to their general websites to reduce noise for normal users. Providing information is structured logically and published openly, more advanced digital tools can be developed to make use of that data. Based on the list above, legislation trackers, parliamentary monitors, expenditure trackers, MP contact portals, keyword alerts, and many more digital tools can be developed and automated.

8. IPU, World E-Parliament Report, 2018: <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/reports/2018-11/world-e-parliament-report-2018>

Case study: Sierra Leone parliamentary app

The Sierra Leone parliamentary digital project with WFD has been discussed as a game-changing initiative in bringing much needed transparency to the national parliament. The development of an app for parliamentarians and the public in Sierra Leone has proven relatively popular; it has been downloaded over 1,000 times from the Google Play Store, and has demonstrated that digital shortcuts and innovations, where mobile technology is king and laptops or desktops are scarce, can be a catalyst for transparency and accountability. Importantly, this digital innovation was very context-based, responding to the nuances and preferences already held in Sierra Leone in terms of technology use and preference.

The app concept is simple in its aim to provide information on parliamentary business, and almost replaces the need for a conventional website. Indeed, it actually does replace the need for many of the more primary informational functions. The app has some bugs and potential privacy issues, and requires a lot of files to be downloaded in PDF format (which over time may have a significant opportunity cost), but demonstrates a novel approach to transparency in a country where apps are preferable to browser-accessed websites, and where such a project has never been attempted. A clear challenge is understanding its uses and impacts, and whether it is being embraced beyond the parliamentary/policy 'bubble' of people directly interested in parliamentary business; however, the enthusiasm for the app conveyed the significance of its production as an important achievement and first step in improving transparency and accountability.



Source: WFD website: <https://www.wfd.org/2019/10/04/the-sierra-leone-parliament-theres-an-app-for-that/>



Open data

The production and publication of information as open data is one of the most important actions a parliament can take in improving its transparency. Open data has transformative potential because it allows the publishing of data that can be freely used, reused and redistributed by anyone. For parliaments, it represents a relatively low outlay for a relatively high gain. As parliaments are engaged in public work representing the people, it stands to reason that as much information on their activities and decisions should be as open as legally and technologically possible. If this information is in open data formats, then it enables a raft of digital tools to be built using the information. These kinds of tools can be developed internally by the parliament, externally by civil society, or could also be developed by political parties to track the activities and effectiveness of their MPs.

Did you know?

Criteria for open data⁹ should include:

Accessibility: the data must be publicly available and 'whole' (that is, comprise a full data set without information subtracted) and should not have a significant reproduction cost (that is, the cost should preferably only be that of downloading the data over the internet). The data should also be made available in a convenient and modifiable format.

Reuse and redistribution: the data should be provided under terms that permit reuse and redistribution, which includes the ability to mix the data with other datasets.

Universal participation: no discrimination in the use of the data should be made against specific policy or interest fields, or against persons or groups. For example, 'non-commercial' restrictions that would prevent 'commercial' use, or restrictions of use for certain purposes (for example, only in education), are not allowed.

9. Open Knowledge Foundation, Open Data Handbook: <https://opendatahandbook.org/>

Clarity on what the term 'open data' means, and why this definition is used, is important because it provides interoperability. This refers to the ability of diverse systems and organisations to work together (inter-operate). In this case, it is the ability to interoperate - or intermix - different datasets. Interoperability is vital because it allows for different components to work together. This ability to create components and to fit them together is essential to building large, complex systems. Without interoperability, efficient operation becomes near impossible, as without the ability to communicate, the system falls down. A common standard is therefore key to realising the main practical benefits of 'openness': a dramatically enhanced ability to combine different datasets and thereby to develop more and better products and services. As an example, separately held parliament attendance data, expenses data and voting data could be 'intermixed' through a website or app to show that a specific MP only attended parliament on days when votes on a certain piece of legislation were scheduled to happen, and did not attend on any other days. The combination of datasets on parliamentary activity can therefore help anyone interested in the conduct or efficiency of their MPs, and this information can be useful in shaping candidate selection or reselection, who to vote for at an election, and which MPs to approach about specific policy areas and so on.

Providing a clear definition of openness ensures that when two open datasets from two different sources are acquired, they can be combined seamlessly, and it ensures that incoherence is avoided, where lots of datasets are available, but there is limited ability to combine them together into the larger systems where the real value lies. Several open formats exist; however, the most popular tend to be .CSV and .XML, and information can be relatively easily converted into these formats, or automatically created in these formats where new data is being recorded.

Making data publicly available is key to leveraging greater outcomes from the data and enabling useful tools for parliaments and society. One of the easiest and most effective ways of doing this is via an Application Programming Interface (API). APIs are typically connected to a database which is updated in real time through internal databases. This means that making information available via an API can ensure that it is up to date, and this automation reduces the need for individuals to repeatedly download the same datasets. In this method, there is no dependency on the original provider of the data, meaning that if sites are restructured, the data are still available. This provides some certainty to external groups building and maintaining parliamentary monitoring tools, as changes or disruptions to the parliament's own digital presence will not automatically derail their own work.

Example: Civil Society Organisation (CSO) builds a tool to link parliamentary transcripts to MP votes

A parliament begins recording all plenary transcripts and all MP votes in an open data format, and publishes that data online, accessible through an API. An external civil society group with digital skills accesses the data via the API, and builds a simple tool that enables the transcripts to be searched and to compile results according to specific MPs, and to see how those MPs voted on specific issues. This would be time consuming to do if each different file had to be searched, opened, read and cross referenced, but the ability to use open data enables it to be done within seconds.

Digital equality considerations

Parliaments are increasingly invested in strengthening representation, participation and positive outcomes for women and minority groups. There has been significant programmatic investment from international development agencies in supporting this work, and initiatives such as the Open Government Partnership and Sustainable Development Goals have commitments on equality embedded in their frameworks. The recent 'Black Lives Matter' global protests¹⁰ have brought the structural inequality in many systems even more to the fore, demonstrating how much more work needs to be done in this regard to improve real and meaningful representation and enfranchisement.

10. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/07/10/from-the-george-floyd-moment-to-a-black-lives-matter-movement-in-tweets/>

Migration towards digital inclusion within the parliamentary system would significantly benefit women and minority groups in a number of ways and contribute to achieving those programmatic outcomes.

First, for individuals within parliament working as elected officials, improved data standards would enable them to more accurately record and publish their work, and to become more visible online and in the media. Improved human resource data collection and analysis would enable parliaments to monitor and publish their demographic data, which can then be easily compared with population ratios to identify where equality is not being achieved. Improved recording of attendance in parliamentary activity could enable the public to identify when certain parliamentarians are absent due to illness or caring leave, rather than being seen to be simply absent for no reason (a common misunderstanding by the public when politicians visibly miss key votes - they are often identified as lazy when they are actually on maternity leave). In terms of raising their profile and their public visibility, women and minority representatives could more efficiently share their speeches, questions and committee work if parliamentary transcripts, calendars and other data was produced as open data and repurposed in social media shareable formats. Having more extensive information available can also demonstrate how varied and heavy an MPs' workload is in reality, and what their key working interests are.

Digitalisation can also break down barriers for people with disabilities to become members of parliament as they are able to perform their role more easily. The use of online materials can facilitate their work as members of parliament as it is easier to access and interact with these materials. Virtual parliamentary procedures allow elected officials with disabilities to participate in online parliamentary proceedings without needing to access parliamentary estate.

All of this information is not only useful in making the institution more transparent, it is key in being able to identify patterns of disadvantage or exclusion. Being able to see a list of all the previous Chancellors of the Exchequer in the UK may not seem terribly interesting, until it is visible in one list, and it is suddenly very clear that a woman has never in history occupied that role. Having photos on MP profile pages might be seen as irrelevant, until it is clear that, taken together, they are predominantly from one ethnic group, which does not reflect the breakdown of ethnicities in the general population. Despite the obvious risk of profiling, which will need to be carefully considered, the benefits of collecting and publishing such information in raw data form are extremely valuable as it is otherwise hard to identify other than through collecting photos. Such demographic indicators will be very different in each country; however, it is important to collect and publish these numbers if parliaments wish to reduce inequality and improve outcomes for women and minority groups.

E-voting in parliamentary debate

E-voting for MPs in parliamentary debate may not be considered the most burning of issues; however, it feeds into the above concern on improving equality, and also provides increased capacity for MPs to engage with their constituents. While there are a number of ideological and institutional arguments against the implementation of electronic voting within the parliamentary chamber, e-voting has gained traction slowly around the world, with several smaller parliamentary institutions introducing it as a measure to increase clarity, efficiency and accountability and reduce some of the drama that often accompanied the voting process. Digital elements in parliamentary voting can go from the very simple, such as electronically counting or registering the votes, to using a fully digitised system that requires minimal hardware or can be done remotely. In most cases, these reforms need to be accompanied by a revision of the rules of procedure. In the 2018 IPU e-parliament report,¹¹ only 28% of parliaments had no form of electronic process integrated into the plenary voting system, with only 8% of those stating that they had no intention at all to modernise the system. Another 11% of parliaments responding to the report had retained manual voting, but with electronic counting and recording methods. At the other end of the scale, only 1% used technology to enable remote voting.

11. IPU, World E-Parliament Report, 2018: <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/reports/2018-11/world-e-parliament-report-2018>

The arrival of COVID-19 and the closure of physical parliamentary buildings in early 2020 has now meant that many parliaments have had to quickly turn to electronic means of business as a stop-gap approach, including registering plenary votes electronically. In undertaking this shift, it is likely that attitudes to increasing digitisation in the process may have changed. The most basic but clear benefit from the electronification of voting is the speed with which it can be conducted, counted and published. Secondly, recording how individual MPs have voted is vital for society to hold their representatives to account. The recording and publication of this is again achieved more efficiently in a digital system, reducing the likelihood of human error or tampering.

E-voting systems within parliamentary chambers currently tend in most cases, but not all, to be implemented only where there is sufficient space for each member to have their own desk with an integrated e-voting console. This is the case in Scotland,¹² Wales,¹³ and the European Parliament,¹⁴ where individual representatives plug in a personal ID card to register their vote on the system via three button choices (for the motion, against the motion, and to abstain from the vote). Many parliamentary chambers, such as the UK House of Commons, cannot implement physical electronic voting in this manner, due to a lack of space. There is also the issue concerning attendance, where representatives need to be physically present in the chamber in order to press the relevant e-voting button. There is therefore scope for more digital innovation in this area for parliaments worldwide.

In the new age of normalised remote working, e-voting may take voting to a completely remote form, even once parliaments are sitting normally again, and this is likely to be more convenient for many parliamentarians. The 'green recovery' concept of attempting to keep reduced emissions during the COVID-19 crisis low, plus the increasing desire for parliamentarians to be more present and visible in their own communities, means that representatives who are based far from their parliamentary institutions will likely want to find new digital ways of working that reduce their travel. Staying in-constituency would enable MPs to engage more frequently and more meaningfully with their constituents and be more visible to them.

The ability to work and vote from their own constituencies may also in many cases benefit MPs with caring responsibilities, which are known to disproportionately affect women and which are often cited as a significant reason why they would not stand as an MP. Compounding this was the fact that the UK Parliament did not collect release data showing when they were on maternity leave, so external systems calculating their votes or absence of votes, were accurate, but not representative of the real situation.

Visibility in-constituency is also important in tackling the common public perception that politicians exist in the 'Westminster bubble', having no understanding or knowledge of the 'real world' that their constituents live in. In a complementary fashion, this assists with the 'green recovery' and progress in the 'environmental democracy' spheres of work, where asking hundreds of MPs to travel significant distances to sit in a chamber to vote, when that action could be done via an app, becomes absurd and environmentally harmful.

Case study: The UK parliament developing a voting app

In response to the COVID-19 crisis, the UK Parliament very quickly implemented an app, built on top of its central digital platform for members, that would enable voting in key debates as well as giving access to materials and enabling them to schedule their speaking slots. Such digital tools are not without security risks; however, the recent crisis has demonstrated that plenary votes can be conducted electronically where necessary, and a custom built digital solution such as an app may be the future of parliamentary plenary votes (although in the UK case, this has now been reversed).

12. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-37450323>

13. <https://senedd.wales/en/bus-home/plenary/business-plenary-information/types-of-plenary-business/Pages/voting.aspx>

14. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RULES-9-2019-07-02-RULE-192_EN.html

Committee meetings and evidence gathering

In addition to conducting plenary debate and voting electronically, committee work is another area that could be migrated online, or at least benefit from the integration of some digital aspects. Committee work, as with plenary debate, tends to keep parliamentarians tied to the physical estate, and therefore away from their constituencies for longer periods of time. This echoes some of the problems and opportunities raised in the previous section in terms of the public feeling distant from their MPs, and in how this form of work is indirectly excluding individuals, often women, who have caring responsibilities that require them to spend more time close to home.

Committees are where much of the legislative development happens, and where external actors are often able to influence how that legislation is shaped through contributing written or oral in-person evidence. This is also where lobbyists may attempt to have influence on the process, through meeting with one or several members of the committee in person to press their views, and this is easily achieved when the whole committee is regularly sitting in the same place.

While external participation in the legislative process is an aspirational goal, the limitation of access related to the physical parliamentary estate, and closed committee processes in general, mean that this process is often opaque and excludes any form of equal input. Migrating some committee meetings and evidence sessions online may therefore increase transparency (in reducing the private access that lobbyists have to committee members) and improve the quality and breadth of evidence received (through equalising the ability of people to give evidence remotely via written submissions, surveys, audio or video chat). This could significantly increase representation of rural, remote or minority voices in contributions to the development of high-quality legislation. Publishing all committee business, such as minutes, meetings, agendas, submissions and visitors can also reduce the influence of powerful lobbyists, once their engagement with committee members must be conducted in the open. While standard remote video tools are suitable for the conduct of meetings online, additional digital tools can be implemented to gather a wider range of evidence. The Welsh¹⁵ and Scottish¹⁶ devolved parliaments in the UK have both established outreach teams to bring greater relevant knowledge and experience into evidence-gathering committee sessions, which includes making videos, developing visual submissions and taking audio recordings of interviews with relevant individuals who would not be able or confident enough to attend a committee meeting in person.

Case study: Outreach team at the Welsh Senedd

In Wales, a specific outreach team has been established within the communications directorate. Whenever a new bill is being prepared, or when a committee is conducting a Post-Legislative Scrutiny (PLS) exercise, the team is notified, and identifies the civil society groups interested in that thematic area. They work with these groups to identify citizens that have experienced or could possibly experience being limited, liberated or in any way significantly affected by the legislation in question. They travel to meet those citizens, and film their discussion, which is edited down and played in the committee meeting to inform how the legislators approach and draft or review the legislation.

Being able to track progressive developments in legislation and scrutiny at committee stage is an important activity in making parliament and lawmaking more transparent. The publication of details of the individuals invited to give evidence to committees, what they said, and how that affected legislative changes can meaningfully illustrate where influence sits. Access to multiple iterations of legislation in development matched to that information can pinpoint that even further. The ability of civil society to access and cross reference data in this way reduces the space available for corruption or for unfair influence in the legislative process. It can also highlight deficiencies in the spread of submissions, so that where, for instance, consultation responses have all been from men, the committee can actively seek out female voices to ensure that they are not inadvertently gendering legislation.

15. <https://senedd.wales/en/gethome/get-assembly-area/Pages/senedd-outreach.aspx>

16. <https://www.parliament.scot/gettinginvolved/100079.aspx>

Example: CrowdLaw - improving the quality of legislation through participation

CrowdLaw is the practice of using technology to tap the intelligence and expertise of the public in order to improve the quality of lawmaking. Around the world, there are already over two dozen examples of local legislatures and national parliaments turning to the Internet to involve the public in legislative drafting and decision making. These ambitious crowdlaw initiatives show that the public can, in many cases, go beyond contributing opinions and signing petitions online to playing a more substantive role, including proposing legislation, drafting bills, monitoring implementation, and supplying missing data. Through such processes, the public become collaborators and co-creators in the legislative process to the end of improving the quality of legislative outcomes and the effectiveness of governing. The NYU GovLab created a Crowdlaw Playbook¹⁷ for Congress and teach citizen engagement techniques to Members. This can improve the two-way communication between parliament and citizens as citizens play an active role in the law-making process.

3. Digital democracy - widening external information, participation and engagement

Currently, there are a variety of parliamentary digital initiatives operating around the world that both support good internal digital practices, and provide more participative, informative and integrated communications to external stakeholders. Official parliament websites serve a key function in producing and publishing information on parliamentary activities, from schedules of sittings and meetings, to information on representatives, to information on accessing the parliamentary estate. While many parliaments invest heavily in their online presence, and curate a range of online materials for citizens to learn more about their operation and powers, others are more content to support technically advanced but content-lean websites with a lot of open data available for reuse, and other parliaments are reticent to invest in a strategic web presence or publish any data at all. Many parliaments lack the skills and capacity to understand the benefits of digital or implement meaningful and realistic digital strategies. In the wake of the COVID-19 crisis, parliaments are rapidly adopting new ways of digital working, and in many cases are rushing through new legislation to respond to the crisis. Keeping society properly informed of and engaged with these fast-moving changes is more important than ever in ensuring meaningful accountability. Fundamentally, the less information on parliamentary activity that is available online in any format, the less likely it is that society will be able to engage with it.

External communications

There is significant value in having a sophisticated communications strategy for a parliamentary body. Parliamentarians are generally eager to be visible and to be seen to be working for the benefit of their voters, especially around election time. While political parties and individual MPs' employees will generally provide communications support, this messaging tends to be political in nature, rather than including a focus on the work conducted in the parliamentary process. Parliamentary administrations are keen to demonstrate their abilities, their legitimacy and their relevance to the public; however, parliamentary investment in communications is often low and good strategies are often lacking or absent, mainly because of skills deficits (again, in part due to embedded institutional barriers to recruitment), rapidly changing communication norms and monetary limitations. WFD has supported a number of high-quality missions across its portfolio that focus directly on developing the communications capabilities of parliaments (with much success); however, communication is increasingly done digitally, across a range of platforms, operating systems and hardware. Communication therefore needs to be integrated with the broader digital development programmes of the parliamentary body in order for these systems to have interoperability, access and compatibility across a range of devices, the right features to achieve the objective and the contextual suitability for the audience to be engaged.

17. NYU Gov Lab, Crowdlaw Playbook (2020): <https://congress.crowd.law/>

While a communications strategy can include a specific objective to elicit 20% more responses to a committee consultation through using a digital portal, it cannot encompass or govern the work necessary to seamlessly identify, build, manage, collect, analyse and extract information from that digital portal. Simply inviting responses via a common email or social media user would overwhelm that particular account, so an embedded web portal or survey accessed via the website or social media feed would provide a better quality experience for both the external contributor and the internal analyst and reporter.

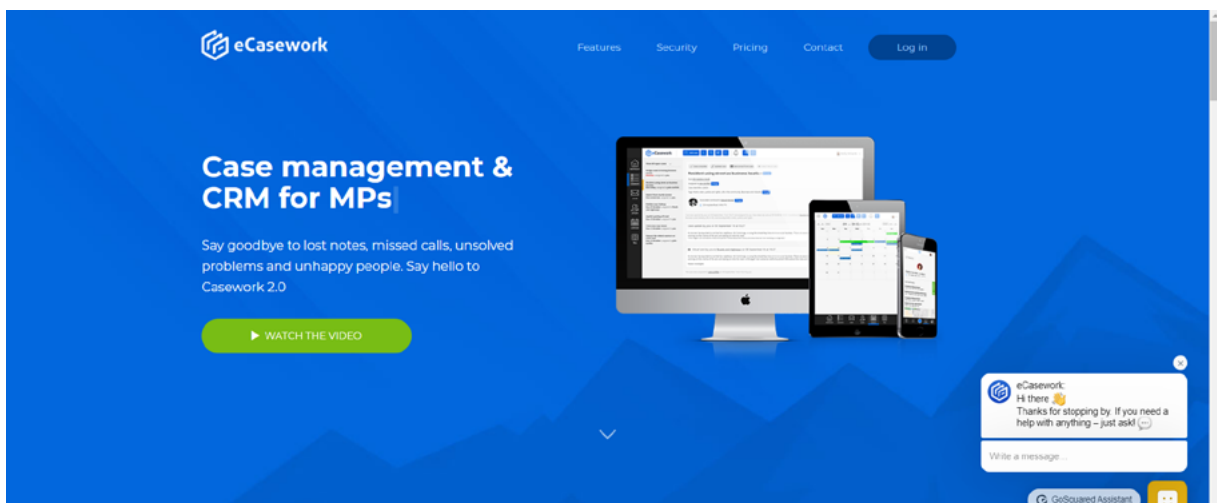
Integration of certain communications and digital development objectives would enable parliaments to better unify their development goals, streamline projects, and reduce waste from investments of time and money in conflicting, unrealistic or incompatible activities or platforms.

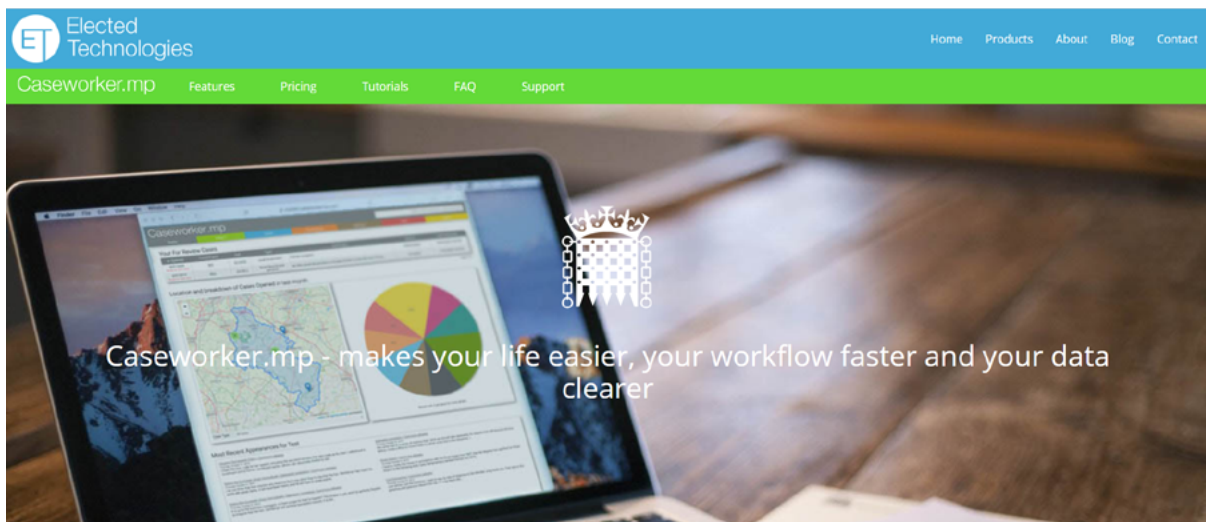
Involving the public

Many parliamentarians would like authentic, direct interactions with the people they represent, in order to gauge the mood of the public and to demonstrate their usefulness to their constituents. Individuals themselves would like to be able to interact with their MPs online and through more informal channels than email. There is definitely appetite in society for providing opinion. Migrating to digital forms of interaction means that parliamentarians are able to interact directly with high volumes of constituents over multiple platforms, but this means that the quality of those interactions may decline if volumes are too large to respond to meaningfully. There is therefore a tension between reaching more people, and quality of engagement, and such engagement initiatives should be well-planned to minimise the appearance of superficiality and maximise responsiveness. This is where purpose-built engagement platforms become useful. While parliamentarians may have a preference for conducting ad hoc opinion-gathering exercises on social media, they cannot be responsive when 5,000 of their constituents comment on each post, and nor are they likely to read each comment and record it for further use.

Example: Tools to enhance casework of MPs

In order to help MPs enhance their constituency outreach and deal with a casework load more effectively, some MPs are using different ad hoc systems, which have proven to be more or less helpful. Existing systems include Casework.MP, shown below, which is a cloud-based Case Management System requiring a subscription, and eCasework (shown bottom), which is similarly based on a case management and workflow model situated in the cloud. These are relatively small-scale solutions, with no clarity on how many representatives actually use them, or how effective they are considered to be. However, a well-built web-based system could be a very efficient tool if a critical mass of representatives were to embrace it, as it could allow MPs to receive, respond, track progress and keep records on casework and provide automated analysis of recurrent requests. It would support MPs to act within the remit of the data protection legislation. Much innovation seems to be needed in this regard.





Many parliaments around the world invest in technology that can run a consultation or survey digitally, gathering standardised data that can be manipulated and analysed to produce clear and aggregated results. Where a controversial bill is being debated, parliament is able to digitally involve citizens in deliberation online, meaning that individuals in remote communities can have their voices and concerns heard. In working towards increasing accountability and inclusion in programmes, digitising methods of participation is one of the easiest methods of significantly increasing input; however, this is only true if such systems are implemented alongside other information openness measures, and if the information gathered is analysed properly to reduce bias or assumption.

From a parliamentary perspective, any method of standardising and operationalising engagement with the public should be more useful in extracting useful intelligence, and will be more legitimate, than ad hoc or MP driven exercises; and will better inform legislation for the ultimate benefit of the people. Digital means of doing this kind of engagement reduces the cost, time and risk associated with consultation, and broadens the potential pool of engaged citizens. Digital engagement also enables automated methods of future communication, including keeping individuals updated on the themes they expressed an interest in. Many citizens feel that they have not been heard if, after engaging with parliament, they receive no indication of how their participation made any difference. Digital engagement means that people can automatically receive updates, and this reinforces a belief that parliament is responsive and values their opinion.

Case study: Canada's participatory online budgetary tool

Parliaments, such as the Canadian House of Commons, use the online budgetary tools¹⁸ developed by Institute of Fiscal Studies and Democracy (IFSD) to raise awareness of citizens on the budgetary process and collect their inputs to prioritise certain issues during the budget formulation stage.

Bespoke parliamentary systems for external engagement can also be used to target and bolster the involvement of women, minority groups, young people and rural communities. While paper-based consultation responses should not be consigned to history just yet, online systems can more easily and more accurately be targeted at specific groups, and can collect better demographic data on individuals contributing. As discussed earlier in this paper, consultation that collects demographic information can highlight (automatically if desired) where respondent demographic ratios are significantly different to general population ratios, and therefore prompt increased effort to acquire opinions from individuals from underrepresented groups allowing parliamentary activity to be more representative.

18. <http://citizenbudget.ifsd.ca/surveys/on2018/index>

Civil society as a critical friend

The ability for civil society to perform a 'critical friend' role to parliament is a key strand in the majority of transparency, accountability and participatory programmatic goals. One of the key functions of a plural and independent civil society is its ability to contribute to good quality policymaking and legislative development. Civil society organisations can only provide relevant expertise to improve legislation or scrutiny if they are aware of the activities of parliament, the legislative and committee timetable, specific opportunities for engagement and the ability to access both the estate and the members (either physically or digitally) in order to do so. The majority of this information can reasonably be published on a parliamentary website, with integrated calendars to show timings, dates, locations and access or participation opportunities. The provision of this basic business information should form a core pillar of any external digital platform or website meant to meaningfully involve civil society, onto which further information and tools can be added over time. This information, provided in a digitally accessible format, enables civil society to organise around relevant policy themes and decide how or what to raise in reference to planned legislation. This gives them the opportunity to: gather information more widely from their beneficiary and supporter base; time their interventions appropriately; target the right MPs to engage with; and produce high quality information with which MPs can make informed and timely decisions in the drafting of legislation.

Beyond basic parliamentary business information, digital portals can also provide civil society with Hansard or transcripts of plenary and committee meetings. These can be used to assess more clearly how individual MPs feel about certain issues, and, if published in an open format, can be easily searched and have easily extractable quotations that can be shared widely online. Digital publication of the minutes of committee and other meetings; of research reports produced by the parliamentary research service; and of other business information such as budgets, workplace policies and expenses would go a step further in enabling civil society groups to scrutinise the work of parliament. While some parliaments do produce hard copies of these documents, these are not easily accessible or accessible without visiting official buildings and providing identification - processes that are time consuming and intimidating in many cases. Without the digital publication of these items, it is almost impossible for external actors to hold the institution to account, or for the parliament to claim that it is transparent in its activities.

Digital publication is not one thing, nor is it as easy to achieve as it is to suggest, and it ties in closely with the internal digital systems that parliament uses to record and store information. As noted in the previous section on internal digital development, where good internal digital standards are established, the ease, timeliness and accessibility of external publications can be realised, and in many cases, can be mostly automated. It is not enough to simply put a large number of files onto a website or portal; they need to be logically and sequentially saved and named in order to enable searchability and ensure accessibility.

Example: The difficulty of finding relevant information on a parliamentary website

On the parliament website, a page titled 'committee meetings' has a number of .PDF documents saved in a list. One is called 'March 2011', another is called 'Finance', and another is called 'Unsaved32'. The rest of the documents also have assigned filenames that do not fit any pattern. All of the documents contain an Agenda for a different meeting of the Finance Legislative Committee, saved in no particular order, and spanning five years of meetings. While, in principle, there is an element of transparency in the publication of these agendas, in reality, they do not achieve any level of meaningful transparency, because it is not possible to identify from looking at the information on the webpage or the filenames, what the documents pertain to. If there are 205 documents, it becomes overwhelming to open each one in order to find out what it is and whether it is what is being sought.

Good digital practices in publishing information online can represent huge leaps forward in achieving meaningful transparency and widening the opportunities for society to engage with parliament in an informed and positive manner. It also means that an already under-resourced civil society can save time and effort in its monitoring and engagement of parliament and work more effectively on its focus policy areas.



Civil society as an infomediary

A key bridge or 'infomediary' between parliamentary information and the citizen is civil society. Civil society groups are a key pillar of parliamentary scrutiny; however, parliaments themselves are generally more interested in engaging 'real' and 'normal' citizens. While parliamentary information can be difficult to search and digest, civil society groups are able to translate official information into more bite-size and understandable language, and present it in a more consumable and accessible format for average citizens. In the analogue age, this was done by national and local media and journalism outlets. In practice in the digital world, this can mean simply reporting through different formats, such as ParliamentWatch¹⁹ in Uganda, who live tweet plenary sessions, or the Elephant²⁰ in Kenya, which curates and provides analysis on political content that is easily shareable on social media. More structured and reliable data availability coming from parliaments would enable civil society groups to develop more automated digital tools to get important parliamentary information in front of ordinary citizens in a language that they understand.

Leading examples in Kenya (Mzalendo²¹), South Africa (PMG²²) and the UK (TheyWorkForYou²³) demonstrate how good data practices from within parliaments can leverage greater information resources for citizens, and reduce the distance between parliaments and the people that they serve. More information publication means more potentially useful information for society; however, civil society groups are still very necessary in processing that information into consumable formats. Even digitally mature parliaments that release a lot of data and information generally structure that data or information in a manner and language that is logical to the institution itself, but not to normal citizens. Opening up this data enables civil society groups that do understand the parliamentary language to automatically repackage it to be logical, clear and quickly accessible.

19. <https://parliamentwatch.ug/>

20. <https://www.theelephant.info/>

21. <https://info.mzalendo.com/>

22. <https://www.pa.org.za/>

23. <https://www.theyworkforyou.com/>

Parliament websites with less desirable and non-user-friendly features demonstrate digital pitfalls and/or purposely installed roadblocks, which throttle the capacity of external actors and citizens to engage with parliament in any meaningful way. Lack of expertise, lack of political will, lack of infrastructure and poor relationships between parliaments and civil society intermediaries are the main barriers to improved digital engagement between parliaments and citizens.

Some civil society groups are making heroic efforts to pick up the slack where parliaments are not producing the right kind of data for effective monitoring, but this consumes significant human and financial resources and is often not able to be automated. This also leaves civil society groups vulnerable to claims that they are misrepresenting officials or incorrectly reporting.

Case study: Kenya's flourishing ecosystem of engagement and participation

The work that WFD conducts with the Kenyan parliament, Kenyan devolved mechanisms, and civil society represents good practice in establishing and normalising the use of digital tools for parliamentary accountability within a thriving civil society and engaged public. The close links between the parliament, the Mzalendo civil society-run platforms and the WFD country representatives demonstrate a flourishing ecosystem of engagement and participation, which is nourished by good data, in turn produced by a parliament that both recognises the importance of digital and has taken steps to integrate it effectively. While there are many aspects of business in the Kenyan parliament that remain analogue and opaque, the normalisation of modernising internal systems, recruiting individuals with the right skills, and producing and publishing open data, mean that this institution is well positioned to continue its digital development progress.

Key to this success was Kenya's investment in the development of digital skills in the population, and the support it gave to start ups, mobile technology and large data corporations. The success of Mzalendo²⁴ is an example in this regard. It has been able to develop innovative approaches to collecting citizen feedback on legislation and policy, which has been extremely valuable for MPs. Through the #BongaNaMzalendo platform, Mzalendo regularly sends SMS messages to Kenyan citizens to seek their inputs on policy issues or draft legislation. Citizens are also able to provide feedback through the Dokeza²⁵ platform. This provides huge value and power to MPs who can use citizen opinions as a counter to the more significant technical or specialist skills the executive have through large bureaucracies and budgets.

While Kenya can be held up as a best practice model, it cannot easily be replicated in countries where digital skills in the population are significantly lower or less prevalent.

See Appendix A for more case studies of parliamentary monitoring from the UK, Kenya, Uganda and South Africa.

Navigating the tech world

A key difficulty increasingly experienced by parliamentary institutions is how to navigate the mushrooming civic and private tech sphere so that the best solutions can be identified. While it is relatively simple to identify which word processing software to license, or which video-conferencing system to implement, choosing the right civil society or private organisations to work with on digital interventions can bring much higher risk. Parliaments must decide how much control they wish to have over their data and its usage, and balance what they wish to do in-house with what they would like managed externally. They must also decide how they feel about their data being used freely to power other digital tools that can enable citizens to see more clearly what the institution has been doing.

24. <https://info.mzalendo.com/>

25. <https://dokeza.mzalendo.com/>

Listing votes in multiple files on a website may mean that it is difficult for people to see generally how an MP has voted on a certain issue over many years; however, that data in a machine readable format can automatically show this at the click of a button. Digital transformation is a long-term process, and one of the most useful resources parliaments could draw on as part of a longer term approach is civil society and civic technology organisations operating within their own country.

Producing data in open formats enables civil society to build handy tools such as TheyWorkForYou or Mzalendo that can make sense of data quickly and in ways that citizens can understand. The Dokeza project with Mzalendo went further than monitoring what had already happened in parliament and enabled the annotation of legislation in development. This is a useful tool for legislators eager for public buy-in on new laws. The Kenya example demonstrates that civil society organisations running parliamentary monitoring projects are not working in opposition to parliament but are working with them to improve engagement and outcomes. This level of trust does not come immediately, but it is worth parliaments nurturing relationships with civil society groups that have the skills and the motivation to use data creatively for wider benefit. In the UK, mySociety created TheyWorkForYou without any relationship with parliament; however, parliament recognised that the site was useful for both MPs and the public, and consulted with mySociety on how they could help with providing data, and whether mySociety could suggest improvements for their own internal processes. In developing parliaments, current relationships with civil society groups can be poor; however, bringing civic tech groups into parliament to talk with MPs and ICT and engagement staff can break down barriers and quickly create a more mutually beneficial arrangement.

Good practice: Key 'good' civic tech factors

Reliable civic tech groups are likely to be poorly resourced and lack 'official' networks in-country or with the parliament, but will usually have the following characteristics:

- at least two-three individuals with advanced developer skills in a current language (Django, Java, Python, C#, Ruby etc);
- will likely be doing a lot of the work for free or with limited funding from international donors (such as Open Society Foundations²⁶, Luminate/Omidyar Network²⁷, Indigo Trust²⁸);
- will have an interest in politics (but not necessarily be partisan); will have a relationship with other civil society interest groups;
- will have international relationships with the global civic tech community (possibly being a member of the Code for All²⁹ community, or having attended conferences such as the IO DC³⁰ or TICTeC³¹);

and will have attempted to build some tools with the data available to them. Where parliaments are willing to reach out and talk to them, they are likely to be receptive.

26. <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/>

27. <https://www.omidyargroup.com/pov/organizations/luminate/>

28. <https://indigostrust.org.uk/>

29. <https://codeforall.org/>

30. <https://opendatacon.org/>

31. <https://tictec.mysociety.org/2020>

Case study: M-Open project in Myanmar

WFD has provided support and advice to parliaments on engaging with civic tech groups in civil society. The ongoing work in Myanmar with the M-Open project and the OpenHluttaw³² / Ananda Project³³ civic tech group is a positive model of improving both digital tools for citizens, and upskilling the parliament and parliamentarians, through facilitating closer relationships between the two sectors. These initiatives are, however, often vulnerable to incoherence in programmatic activities across agencies. Where there are overlapping interests and activities between agencies, it is in the interests of all to cooperate where possible.



Digital colonialism

Systems developed in western cultures and exported into development contexts may operate differently, create dependencies, and catalyse unexpected, egregious practices. Against the backdrop of the recent global 'Black Lives Matter' protests and associated discussions in the UK concerning institutional racism,³⁴ it is important to ensure digital development work is empowering for all. Care must therefore be taken to ensure that development support for digital transformation in parliaments is sensitive to the domestic context.

*Digital colonialism is the 'technological domination of social, economic and political processes of a sovereign state by a foreign power. Through the combination of cloud centralisation, hardware production and distribution and proprietary software use (including Free / Open Source), Big Tech corporations are reinventing colonialism through the centralised control on the Internet. A feature of this is "data extractivism" that fuels the development of AI and enhances the dominance of established multinationals, while creating a dependency for their services that users cannot easily escape.'*³⁵

32. <http://openhluttaw.info/>

33. <https://theananda.org/en/about>

34. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/06/03/uk-tackling-racial-injustice-should-begin-home>

35. International Journal of Human Rights: <https://sur.conectas.org/en/digital-sovereignty-or-digital-colonialism/>

While this definition can appear somewhat alarmist in reference to assisting in the development of inclusive, stable and accountable governance mechanisms, it is an issue that should be considered in any digital development work which will inevitably be approached through a western lens. Embedded institutional constraints will exist in any system; however, the desirable outcome is one tailored to the local context and as independent as possible of external assistance or infrastructure.

Many developing countries will already have some level of technological dependence on Big Tech organisations. Most individuals will have phones and computers that rely on software built in the US, Asia or Europe, and most will rely on applications such as Facebook and WhatsApp to undertake both personal and professional activities. In developing capacity, it is important to reduce the dependencies as much as possible, for instance, in donating smarter or ensuring the parliament builds its own technical capacity, rather than relying on standard but expensive software licenses.

Example: ICT projects creating reliability on Big Tech organisations

A development agency is able to donate 400 computers to a parliament to replace their old stock. The computers are PC models running Windows 360. An international organisation has offered to pay for the Windows licenses for the first year, as it can secure a good price on a bulk purchase that it is making for other organisations as well. Once the first year is up, the parliament is dependent on hardware and software it cannot afford to maintain, and the computers are gradually no longer used. MPs and administrative staff return to using their personal phones for communication and administration. The digital transformation and staff upskilling built on those systems is undone.

Open source software can be a much lower cost solution for parliaments, and one that can reduce dependency on expensive Big Tech software. However, it requires significant capacity building within the parliamentary institution, hiring people with the right skills, enabling them to feed into decision making, and being strategic about digital priorities. This knowledge and capacity are vital in implementing digital tools for engagement and accountability. Tools built for parliamentary democracy in the UK will not necessarily be useful if they are parachuted into the systems of the Myanmar Hluttaw. If they are open source, they can provide a useful roadmap and save local developers time and effort in replicating desirable features, but they must be adaptable to local context and need.

This is another key reason to involve local civil society and civic tech groups in parliamentary digital development. Tech must be rooted in local need, and these needs are best understood by those organisations and individuals with the closest interest in, and understanding of, the parliamentary process and procedure. Local tech groups will have a much keener understanding of the nuances of the local digital ecosystem and its needs.

Example: Coding in different local digital ecosystems

In Myanmar, the Burmese script is not easily automated or translated via machine, because it was not originally supported by the Big Tech organisations based in the USA that were writing the code that supports software development. The local civic tech group in Yangon were aware of this and had developed a unique work-around to the issue; however, this was not understood within the parliamentary estate (nor easily searched and explained anywhere online). The local tech group had been able to automate data processing where the parliament had not, because they were using open source software, and building their own where it was more appropriate, whereas the parliament had been relying on older, licensed software that did not support the script well and created inefficiencies in data processing due to frequent errors.

Institutions will not work the same everywhere, and the software and digital structures that support them should not either. While it is understandable that many countries are looking to the UK Government Digital Service (GDS) as well as the relevant development agencies, to assist in their digital transformation, it is important to ensure that this is not seen as a one-size-fits-all approach, as this will only digitally embed what may be inappropriate, cumbersome or exclusionary practices into the systems of sovereign states. And once those digital structures are institutionalised, it is very difficult to dismantle them. Therefore, any support to developing and using software and digital structures should factor in long-term sustainability and local contexts.

IV. How can digital parliamentary development contribute to the broader governance objectives?

Significant programmatic funding on a global level is allocated to themes such as democratic transparency and accountability, inclusion in public life, strengthening governance institutions, improving legislative quality, and capacity building. These themes necessarily straddle the improvement of parliamentary functions, and investment in the digital infrastructure and wider democratic accountability ecosystem should therefore be paramount. It is impossible to work meaningfully towards those outcomes without it. Digital is not going away, and the world is becoming ever more connected. Recent events surrounding the COVID-19 crisis have demonstrated clearly that digital resilience is a vital tool to sustaining good governance, particularly in the context of emergencies. Digital development is necessary, and will happen organically and likely in a dysfunctional manner, if parliaments are not supported to do it well. A rush to intervene is already taking place, and incoherence of response will hinder an open and inclusive recovery if collaboration and considered strategic planning is not prioritised.

There are approximately ten development agencies that currently undertake significant work towards developing stable, productive, accountable and transparent governance institutions that include parliamentary development (the US Agency for International Development (USAID), Department for International Development (DFID), Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD), Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), National Democratic Institute (NDI), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Interparliamentary Union (IPU), European Commission's Directorate for International Cooperation and Development (EuropeAid), Australian Aid, World Bank), as well as a range of NGOs, foundations, and smaller development organisations targeting specific countries. Key to developing good governance practices are the underpinning beliefs in: the rule of law, the reduction and eventual elimination of corrupt practices and poverty, the strengthening of human rights, and in progress towards environmental sustainability. A free and plural media and civil society ecosystem forms an integral feature of such good governance landscapes. Much work on these themes contributes to complementary global initiatives and goals, such as the Sustainable Development Goals,³⁶ the Open Government Partnership,³⁷ the Extractives Industry Transparency Initiative,³⁸ and the International Open Data Convention,³⁹ to name but a few.

In an ideal world, progress towards the country-level goals set out as part of these initiatives would be effectively measured by large volumes of multi-level, relevant, and high-quality data. Such data would be ideally published in raw and open formats available to all, and able to be used by governments, and also by the public and civil society to hold their institutions to account. The concept of 'holding institutions and public leaders to account', however, is completely dependent upon the ability of the individual or organisation to see the decision-making processes of governance institutions, and their ability to engage with them. Similarly, increased inclusion and the improvement of representational and

36. <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/?menu=1300>

37. <https://www.opengovpartnership.org/>

38. <https://eiti.org/>

39. <https://opendatacon.org/>

policy-related outcomes for women and minorities can only be achieved through the implementation of visible and meaningful processes that are shaped by those for whom they are constructed and monitored for effectiveness.

1. Global digital priorities and strategic aims for 'Governance'

Most global development organisations display overlapping goals encompassing necessary digital transformation for 'governance'; however, few make a clear distinction between digital development in a public administration/civil service/service delivery capacity, compared to parliamentary/legislative governance. These two spheres of activity are heavily linked but are in many ways very different. There are very few strategies or frameworks that deal only with parliamentary environments, and as such, this section more broadly considers the more general and overarching 'governance' objectives. The table below displays a selection of the relevant overarching 'governance' priorities of the leading global development agencies:

FCDO	Strengthening global peace, security and governance - Empower citizens to hold governments and other institutions to account.
USAID	<p>Democratic governance - Building open, responsive, and accountable institutions and processes that serve the needs and preferences of the public.</p> <p>Participation - Ensuring that all have the opportunity to participate and have a voice in how they will be governed.</p> <p>Fair Competition - Promoting free, transparent and fair political competition so that citizens' preferences are represented.</p>
NDI	<p>Democracy and technology - Sharing proven strategies, peer-to-peer connections, and practical tools to improve transparency, accountability and citizen input.</p> <p>Democratic governance - Helping codify emerging global and regional norms and standards; facilitating collaborative dialogue between government, civil society, and the private sector.</p>
UNDP	Governance for peaceful, just, and inclusive societies - Helping countries expand spaces for people's participation, and improving how their institutions work.
EU	<p>Democratic governance - Principles for good governance are participation, inclusion, transparency and accountability. Support to democratic governance also encompasses the non-state actors that contribute to a functional democratic system.</p> <p>Parliaments and political parties - New and wider forms of citizen engagement are emerging, including through the increasing use of digital technologies. These areas have been relatively underfunded in recent years, and the recent EIDHR Mid Term Review highlighted the importance of stepping up EU support.</p>
World Bank	GovTech Partnership - Developing digitally advanced governments, innovation in local tech, leveraging leading global tech companies in modernising governance.

OECD	Digital Governments - Capturing the value of digital technologies for more open, participatory and innovative governments.
IPU	Digital Parliaments - Helping parliaments harness the power of new technology through the Centre for Innovation in Parliament, a partnership between the IPU and parliaments to develop and share good practices in digital innovation and tools such as social media.

With one or two exceptions, parliaments as unique aspects of governance are not included within these objectives, nor are they treated as a distinct sphere of activity within the full text bodies of some of these strategies. This is a problem, because digital transformation in general governance that is primarily the preserve of the Executive can bypass the legislature and may be almost wholly influenced by the ruling party. Uneven digital transformation between public bodies and the legislature may weaken the profile and legitimacy of the legislature itself. Furthermore, governments that are effectively restricting digital development within the legislature are essentially restricting democratic integrity. The overarching goals cited within developmental strategies should encompass a specific and discrete programmatic element for parliamentary digital transformation, understanding that this is distinct from more general digital development in the administration and delivery of public services, in policymaking and in the increased integration of civil society and marginalised groups.

The World Bank's recent GovTech Global Initiative⁴⁰ (launched in 2019) demonstrates a clear commitment to the development of digital in economic and administrative governance spheres, but does not talk about the legislative or representative role in supporting the development activities, or the need for the engagement and collaborative aspects to be conducted through the passage of legislation. The commitment to *'promote the use of technology to transform the public sector, improve service delivery to citizens and businesses, and increase efficiency, transparency and accountability'* could theoretically encompass parliamentary digital transformation, but this is not at all explicit. The OECD treads a similar path, focusing very strongly on 'digital government' in its recent strategy⁴¹ and again citing public administration and policy-making mechanisms where digital transformation should be targeted to achieve open and inclusive governance. Different levels of government are identified as necessary to include, and legal frameworks are mentioned in terms of framing the work, but the legislature as a distinct entity is not identified as distinct.

Funders and development agencies pumping millions of dollars into these themes should take the transformative, efficiency and participatory potential of digital very seriously in the context of achieving these objectives within a parliamentary setting. Where all of these agencies are targeting similar themes and programmes, it is possible to leverage greater interest in, and compliance with, improved democratic channels. USAID has a comprehensive digital strategy⁴² that references the multi-stakeholder digital ecosystem and the necessity of digital development encompassing the whole, using good digital design principles. Given its significant budget and influence, the priorities identified in the strategy could provide a good basis for collaborative digital transformation of parliaments, in particular with regard to the emphasis on civil society and inclusion of minority and underrepresented groups.

The IPU, as a specific parliamentary organisation, has one of the only parliament-focused digital programmes of work,⁴³ and supports this activity through collaborative action with larger agencies, but does not have the resources to pursue its own programme of digital parliamentary transformation. Conversely, the UNDP, a significant operator in developing parliamentary capacity in its target areas and an agency that often works with the IPU to conduct parliamentary development activities, has

40. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/governance/brief/govtech-putting-people-first>

41. <https://www.oecd.org/gov/digital-government/recommendation-on-digital-government-strategies.htm>

42. <https://www.usaid.gov/usaid-digital-strategy/06-annex-i>

43. <https://www.ipu.org/our-impact/strong-parliaments/setting-standards/centre-innovation-in-parliament>

published a very high concept strategy⁴⁴ for digital transformation that is very future facing and technologically advanced, but potentially very distant from the often basic digital development work that parliaments require.

Digital transformation is not overwhelmingly expensive to achieve in monetary terms. A short, sharp investment in new technology, training, and new human resources is minimal in comparison to the funds expended on relentless short missions repeated by multiple agencies, and empowers the institution to be sustainable in the longer term. This kind of activity is an obvious priority for meaningful investment.

A significant issue is the lack of cooperation between these agencies. Not only is investment in digital development absolutely vital to achieve the overarching goals that each one has with regard to good governance, so too is coordination between them to ensure coherent and value-for-money programmes are implemented. All of these donors, when interviewed, discussed the importance of digital transformation in strengthening democratic institutions, but each one admitted to digital projects being 'afterthoughts' or being done on an ad hoc basis because spare funds had been identified.

2. Parliaments within improved governance objectives

Properly targeted funding, designed to achieve specified digital transformation goals and agreed in collaboration with the development agencies operating in target areas, would yield significant dividends in improving the digital democracy ecosystem. This approach would neutralise harmful, short-termist and wasteful approaches to digital deficiency, and remove the ability of the more unscrupulous parliaments to play development agencies off against each other to leverage greater rewards or resources.

Many donors, such as the EU Commission and FCDO,⁴⁵ recognise the significant potential of digital in developing high quality governance, and acknowledge that there are also risks inherent in migration to digital forms of governance, in particular with regard to creating or reinforcing exclusion, or with regard to concerns around supporting specific political parties or ideologies. This view is shared by USAID and the World Bank, and their digital development strategies target the underlying infrastructure and societal weaknesses that contribute to creating a digital divide, while steering clear of the more political structures. The work within each country is, as a result, different in this regard.

Digital development work with parliaments, appropriate to each individual context, should therefore underpin the strategic goals identified by development organisations, and provide a solid base from which to achieve broader goals. Good digital practice in parliaments can amplify positive outcomes around inclusion, participation, openness and accountability. What is key in this work is ensuring that digital interventions are context-appropriate, user friendly, integrated seamlessly and coherently into the broader parliamentary administration, and impactful.

The EU has specifically cited parliaments and digital transformation within its 'Democracy'⁴⁶ investment strand as a key area for development noting, importantly, that parliamentary digital democracy activities were underfunded by programmes targeting improved democratic legislatures and that *'the recent EIDHR Mid Term Review highlighted the importance of stepping up EU support'*.

DFID devoted between £6-10million per year to parliamentary strengthening between 2015-18 across approximately 30 different programmes, and later committed to providing £12million to the Open Government Partnership programme (see DFID Update Note⁴⁷). Digital development for transparency and accountability is a key pillar of the work of the OGP, and as such, support in this area would amplify potential positive outcomes.

44. <https://digitalstrategy.undp.org/strategy.html>

45. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/786751/Governance-Position-Paper2a.pdf

46. https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/topics/democracy_en

47. <https://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons-committees/international-development/DFID-Support-to-Parliamentary-Strengthening.pdf>

The development of digital strategies and interventions is a significant piece of work at the interface between parliaments and their citizens and encompasses institutional digital transformation which is a long-term programme of work for each individual administration. The development support for this work must receive similarly meaningful and enduring investment in order to achieve overarching programmatic goals on parliamentary accountability, scrutiny, inclusion and civic engagement.

3. Parliamentary digital development as a discrete 'improved governance' objective

Common use of language in these overarching goals offers an opportunity for greater precision in considering areas for digital transformation specific to parliamentary settings. Where common terms have been used across these governance objectives, for parliaments, they could reasonably be expected to mean the following in practice:

An Open/Transparent Parliament - Digital publication in open data format of all parliamentary business (plenary and committee meetings; papers, votes, calendars, reports and so on). Live broadcast and archival footage of proceedings online. Changes to parliamentary rules of procedure may be required to support these developments in some cases.

An Accountable/Responsive Parliament - Digital means through which two-way communication can be conducted (whether through social media or other public means), digital opportunity for civil society groups, journalists and other stakeholders to comment and secure answers on parliamentary business, digital consultation processes for legislative and post-legislative scrutiny, commitment to establish and observe digital communications and responsiveness standards.

An Inclusive/Participative/Collaborative Parliament - Standard, ongoing programmes of digital outreach, regular iterative user research on digital tools, information publication and communication, analytic and demographic analysis of users and engaged stakeholders, precise targeting of underrepresented groups, digital production and publication of targeted materials for underrepresented or minority groups, standardised relationships and consultations with civil society and civic technology groups with online organisation-specific digital tools to shape interactions and enable mass participation.

4. Strategic fit with the UK

The 2018 Single Departmental Plan⁴⁸ committed DFID to 'promote effective, accountable and inclusive institutions and champion British values around the globe: freedom, democracy, tolerance and the rule of law' and DFID's 'Governance for Growth, Stability and Inclusive Development'⁴⁹ (Governance Position Paper) references the reduction in civic space in many developing countries, and the need for increased and broadened inclusivity in governance activities, in particular from underrepresented groups and minorities. A key feature of such activity is the need to reduce the distance between the governed and the governing, and to equip both institutions and individuals with the tools necessary to interact fruitfully.

The Governance Position Paper notes that there are opportunities presented by improvements in digital and online democratic tools, but does not explicitly identify what those tools are or, importantly, the necessary digital work required to underpin the development, operation and sustainability of digital interventions to improve democratic engagement. The work that underpins digital infrastructure is even more essential in developing countries in order to address the existing and potential digital harms identified by the DFID paper, which include concerns for national security, social security and harms directed at specific groups and minorities. As discussed in the previous section, the most effective digital tools are those that are, in at least some small way, facilitated by the governing institutions, and their willingness and ability to publish reliable and timely data.

48. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/department-for-international-development-single-departmental-plan/department-for-international-development-single-departmental-plan--2>

49. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/786751/Governance-Position-Paper2a.pdf

DFID published a discrete digital strategy in 2018, 'Doing Development in a Digital World'⁵⁰ for the period 2018-2020, in which it focused more closely on potential digital interventions for development. This strategy also convened a small Digital Advisory Panel⁵¹ composed of external experts in development and digital fields, the role of which was to guide the implementation of the strategy. The official FCDO Development Tracker portal⁵² currently lists 30 live projects with a digital component, but does not explicitly link these projects to the digital outcomes they are programmed to deliver.



5. Principles for digital design

The lack of coordination across digital development programmes is not a new issue. Over ten years ago in the late 2000s, donors and development organisations began to recognise that programmes were fragmented, operating in isolation, and mostly unsustainable. In addressing these challenges, organisations identified a need to understand and share best practices in the use of digital tools in international development and to embed a digital component in their strategic priorities. These conversations inspired the UNICEF Innovation Principles of 2009, the Greentree Principles of 2010, and the UK Design Principles, amongst others, which again presented a problem of multiple standards and approaches (all similar, but still fragmented). The currently recognised 'Nine Principles for Digital Development'⁵³ attempted to unify those previous principles and create standards and guidance for the development of effective digital implementations. Organisations that collaborated on the Principles included The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), the UN's Children's Fund (UNICEF), UNDP, the World Bank, USAID, and the World Health Organization (WHO).

The Principles are 'living guidelines' designed to help integrate best practices into technology-enabled programmes and are not static, but intended to be updated and refined over time. They include guidance for every phase of the project life cycle, and are part of an ongoing effort to embed the sharing of knowledge and support for continuous learning in digital practice. The Principles were created collaboratively, as a result of many lessons learned through the development and use of digital tools in development projects. All are encouraged to use them. In considering how to digitally implement the open, accountable and inclusive parliamentary activities discussed in the previous section, the Principles provide a guide for design and maintenance.

50. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/dfid-digital-strategy-2018-to-2020-doing-development-in-a-digital-world>

51. <https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/dfid-digital-advisory-panel>

52. <https://devtracker.dfid.gov.uk/>

53. www.digitalprinciples.org

The nine principles are:

Design with the User	<p>Digital tools will have multiple user profiles and multiple stakeholders, should be informed by how the users are naturally inclined to interact with the system, and should produce information appropriate to the stakeholder and user needs.</p> <p>Processes and user journeys should be as quick and seamless as possible, and language and imagery should be appropriate to the user. Iterative design development will produce the best results.</p>
Understand the Existing Ecosystem	<p>Tools should be designed with an awareness of where within the relevant ecosystem they fit or belong. An awareness of other organisations operating in the same space and using the same data / building on the data is important.</p> <p>The tool must comply with existing technological, legal and regulatory policies and norms.</p>
Design for Scale	<p>Tools should be planned and designed for scale from the outset. Designs should be simple, flexible and modular, with potential partners identified.</p> <p>The cost of any potential scaling activity should be understood, and evidence of impact should be gathered before attempting to scale.</p>
Build for Sustainability	<p>The sustainability of the tool, including maintenance costs and resources, and longevity of the code or tech should be calculated at the outset. In-house or local information technology service providers and civil society groups offer greater sustainability.</p>
Be Data Driven	<p>Design data collection so that impact can be measured continuously and analysis can be granular. This can also help identify bias. Use can be made of integrating existing data, including open data sets.</p> <p>Real-time data can be used to support rapid decision making as well as to fuel external digital tools and analysis.</p> <p>Data in formats that are easy to interpret and act on, such as data visualisations, are most useful for non-technical actors.</p>

Use Open Standards, Open Data, Open Source, and Open Innovation	<p>Define and communicate what being open means for the tool or organisation.</p> <p>Share as much non-sensitive data as possible in open formats to encourage open innovation, and do not place restrictions on data use.</p> <p>Use existing open platforms where possible to help to automate data sharing, connect your tool or system with others and add flexibility to adapt to future needs.</p>
Reuse and Improve	<p>Identify the existing technology tools (local and global) and how these could be re-used, modified or extended for use in your programme.</p> <p>Develop modular, interoperable approaches, and foster internal expertise to engage with the global technical development community.</p>
Address Privacy and Security	<p>Explicitly identify how data is collected, processed and stored, in line with domestic and international regulation, as well as established norms and user expectations. Perform risk analysis and establish ongoing data housekeeping protocols.</p> <p>Be transparent with individuals whose data are collected by explaining how your initiative will use and protect their data. Protect data by adopting best practices for securing and restricting access to data.</p>
Be Collaborative	<p>Understand how the tool fits into the global development landscape. Identify others working on the same problem in other geographies, and determine if there is a community of practice. Find the technical leaders in global and regional organisations (such as the World Bank, the World Health Organization, and so on) who can help you disseminate your work to other teams, regions and countries.</p> <p>Define how your project will contribute locally. Collaboration is the first step in interoperability; define how your work can connect with local systems and which standards you need to adopt to make these connections. Engage with organisations that support these standards, and participate in local technical strategy groups and roundtables to ensure that you are a part of the larger whole.</p>

The Principles are increasingly referenced within development agency strategies, such as the current USAID digital strategy,⁵⁴ which indicates an ongoing commitment to ensuring that they are 'living' guidelines.

54. <https://www.usaid.gov/usaaid-digital-strategy/06-annex-i>

6. Key areas for priority and investment globally

There are a range of distinct areas of activity and investment for the development of parliamentary digital capacity. While these are described in general terms for overall improvement, it is timely to recognise that any investment or intervention will bolster the ability of legislators and society to respond to the COVID-19 crisis, as well as future crises, whether that is in the monitoring of representatives, the ability of representatives to properly hold the executive to account, or the ability of society to challenge government and parliamentary responses to the crisis.

Priority areas

As outlined in the first sections of this report, digital development must occur internally, as well as externally, to ensure that good information and participative opportunities are functional and meaningful. No two parliaments are the same, as they have differing structural, resource and societal factors influencing their priorities, and therefore a wholly standardised approach to development across multiple parliaments is impossible. There are, however, common steps that can be taken to develop digital capability in a logical manner, dependent upon the ambitions of the parliament, and the existing resources and expertise held. The table below provides a very general outline of where existing parliamentary digital capacity can be judged to operate based on basic internal and external activities.

High	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• High level of digital literacy amongst all staff, with a range of digital tools in use in the majority of roles.• Official email accounts used 100% of the time with a high level of security.• Standardised ICT equipment (<7yrs old) and software able to run any necessary programme or software.• Excellent, fast connectivity internally and externally with high level security and modern servers, cloud services and subscriptions.• Range of specialist ICT staff with external experience and ongoing learning opportunities, with expert-level representation at senior decision-making level.• ICT strategy integrated into other relevant departmental strategies with measurable outcomes, and regular cross-departmental ICT needs/services committee.• Digitisation of all possible parliamentary support processes, and digitisation of 50-100% of MP-specific processes.• Publication of a wide as possible range of parliamentary business, finance and administrative information and data in open data formats.• Responsive online presence across multiple platforms, updated daily, with opportunities to meaningfully engage with parliamentary business or individual MPs.
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<p>Med-High</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reasonably high level of digital literacy amongst staff, most able to use range of current cloud-based systems and software relevant to their roles, all use official accounts with secure logins. • Standardised ICT equipment (<10yrs old) and software, equipment able to run current operating systems and use recording/video/graphics functions. • Good connectivity internally and externally with high level of security and modern servers, cloud services and subscriptions. • Range of specialist ICT staff with external experience, with expert-level representation at senior decision-making level. • ICT strategy that distinguishes discrete streams of activity, linked to objectives, with clear lines of responsibility and with clear pathways to achievement. • Digitisation of the majority of parliamentary support processes, and digitisation of up to 50% of MP-specific processes such as in-chamber voting. • Publication of a wide range of parliamentary business information and data, some of which is in open data formats. • Online presence includes a website with regularly updated information and documentation, and a social media presence. • Online portals include some participative elements, such as opportunities to provide opinion or complete surveys.
<p>Med</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moderate level of digital literacy amongst staff/MPs, who primarily use official equipment and software/logins. • Standardised ICT equipment less than 15 years old with standard software such as Microsoft Office, Outlook and Adobe. • An ICT strategy that recognises and plans for internal and external digital tools. • ICT representation at senior level with reasonably current ICT skills. • Good internal connectivity and basic records management, with sufficient storage, reasonable speed levels and security. • An online presence that is regularly updated as a one-way information tool, but not used for meaningful engagement. • Digitisation of all administrative processes, and digital records of meetings, research and calendars. • Digital publication of some parliamentary business information such as calendar of issues to be discussed, committee meetings, agendas, minutes, votes, mostly in non-open formats.

Med-low	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some uneven digital literacy, most staff and MPs have encountered basic mobile and desktop tools and social media. • Standardised but outdated ICT equipment and software with employees and MPs using their own devices. • Some online presence such as a basic website or social media feed with limited updates or current information. • A basic ICT strategy. • Some ICT representation at senior level, but often without up-to-date ICT skills. • Networked ICT system but with poor data and record storage or access. • Some efforts have been made to move away from 100% manual methods, hindered by the lack of effective ICT processes in place and a lack of skills. • Limited publication of parliamentary business information in digital but non-open format. • Some digitisation of administration, but without record keeping structures or naming conventions.
Low	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low levels of digital literacy across the administration and chamber. • Poor and non-standardised ICT equipment, software and infrastructure. • Low to no digital security. • No meaningful ICT strategy. • No ICT/digital representation at senior level. • MPs do not use official digital facilities. • Low or no officially managed online presence. • Manual and paper processes dominate. • Low or no publication of information.

The table represents a generalised idea of the extent of a parliament's digital development, but it is likely in many cases that the institution may be more advanced in some areas than others. Much of the time this is down to external factors, such as digital infrastructure, access and societal preferences. In the mySociety report 'Parliament and the People: How digital technologies are shaping democratic information flow in Sub-Saharan Africa'⁵⁵ it is demonstrated how simple factors such as the basic technology available, the skills in the general population, and the way in which connectivity is packaged and sold, can have far reaching effects on how parliaments can digitally develop.

55. <https://research.mysociety.org/html/parliament-and-the-people/>

Example: Myanmar's parliamentary digital development

Parliamentary digital development is currently at the lower end of the above scale; however, civil society digital capability is significantly more advanced. Civil society has the capacity to open up parliament data if (a) it can be produced by parliament in an open format, and (b) parliament is willing to publish it. The parliament is now doing this, and is, therefore, becoming more advanced in this one area which would fit with a medium to medium high parliamentary digital capacity. It is, however, limited digitally in the majority of other areas, and risks developing unevenly with legacy emphasis on specific open data, rather than on other valuable digital features.

Priorities for Myanmar will clearly not mirror priorities in Kenya, where digital development in the parliament administration is much more advanced, but where electronic processes relating to MP activities remain low. Priorities can usefully be considered in the context of what parliaments and their societies need, and are trying to achieve:

Internal needs	External needs	Civil Society (CS) and society needs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • general modernisation for economy and efficiency • reduce carbon footprint • better working practices / remote opportunities • political will for modernisation • MPs/administration need better information • MPs want to make better laws • MPs/administration need to meet external commitments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MPs/administration need society to know who they are, what they do and why • MPs/administration need to provide clear information on laws and lawmaking to society • MPs need to be seen to represent their constituents • MPs need to be able to engage with society • MPs need societal actors to hold them to account, to enable them to hold the executive to account 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CS/individuals need to know what lawmaking, scrutiny and committee analysis is happening in parliament, who is doing it, and when • CS needs access to parliamentary business and financial information • CS/individuals need voting and attendance information • CS needs open data to build parliamentary engagement and monitoring tools

Different priorities in the needs of the parliament or societal actors can form a guide to which specific areas for digital development might be prioritised. However, in meeting the needs of civil society and individuals in a sustainable, meaningful and reliable way, parliaments will always need to undertake the basic and intermediate steps in internal digital development. Without these embedding and normalising steps, attempting to provide civil society with the necessary information will always rely on a lot of manual administration that will be vulnerable to human error.

Where a newly elected parliament is focused on improving the engagement of civil society groups and citizens in legislative development and scrutiny, the priority may be judged as needing a new digital portal through which civil society and individual views can be solicited on a specific piece of legislation. The link to the portal could be tweeted out, put on the Facebook page, and put on a page on the website. Despite these communications efforts, the portal could receive very few responses. This is because most people do not follow the parliament social media accounts, and even where they do, they missed the posts because their social media feeds are constantly filling with new content. Most people do not check the parliament website because the last few times they went to it was out of date. The responses received were mostly irrelevant to the specific piece of legislation being consulted on, because neither the draft legislation itself, nor any related policy or research items informing the legislation, were included or linked to from the portal. The lack of internal digital infrastructure in both communications and in the production and publication of parliamentary information like draft legislation and research, meant that this kind of initiative was likely to either fail or be of low quality. The priority should have included first (a) digitising basic record keeping and publication functions, and (b) integrating the digital portal idea into the communications strategy to build awareness and interest.

Distinct areas for investment for parliaments

Internal digital capacity and expertise: Developing parliaments may require assistance in identifying the right kind of skills and experience, such as when recruiting ICT infrastructure staff, and in ensuring existing staff are well trained and appraised of the range of digital solutions on offer. Without these key staff members, parliaments will be unable to support the production, analysis or publication of good quality data and information.

Digital literacy: Developing parliaments may require training or support to improve the digital literacy of both parliamentary staff and administrators to enable them to use the most effective digital platforms for their needs. This will vary across countries, but may range from very basic email and social media, up to the use of more advanced platforms for data analysis. Without an appropriate level of digital literacy, MPs will be unable to effectively engage with their constituents or with civil society and the media.

Digital tools: A wide range of digital components are available that can enable parliaments to publish information in a useful format, analyse data, produce shareable information on key parliamentary activities, enable a wider and higher quality range of interactions with society, and support the ability of MPs to effectively scrutinise the executive. The identification of key areas where digital tools could be useful in achieving a parliament's aims has the potential to significantly improve openness, accountability and engagement.

Digital landscaping: Elected representatives, as well as parliamentary administrative bodies, should be well appraised of the wider digital democracy landscape within their country. There should be an obligation placed on representatives and relevant administrators, upon occupying office, to develop links with the wider CSO and democracy community, and to develop a clear understanding of how information and data produced in parliament is used to power external accountability tools and initiatives.

Distinct products and services for parliaments

Digital Democracy Audits: Basic scoping exercises conducted with parliament and relevant stakeholders to identify the current digital capacity and literacy, the existing level of openness and engagement, the political will for specific interventions and the needs of the wider policy ecosystem. Produces tailored advice and guidance on areas for development.

Digital Parliaments Playbook: Production of a generic handbook for parliaments containing step-by-step guides to assessing digital readiness, key areas for development, potential solutions and how to maximise the benefits of digital initiatives. Provides a basic overview of digital solutions for parliaments.

Common tools and off-the-shelf solutions: As noted earlier in this document, there are a number of open source and paid-for digital solutions appropriate for parliamentary use. Specific software such as Pombola can be used for parliamentary monitoring, Alaveteli for Freedom of Information monitoring or WriteInPublic or WriteToThem for structured interactions between MPs and individuals. Delib can be used for deliberative exercises, and Consul can be used for participatory exercises. Social media can also be used as a lower spec solution if it is most appropriate in-country. These tools provide very tailored and targeted solutions that require specific levels of support and expertise, but provide far more meaningful interactions.

Holistic research and development: Digital solutions for specific parliamentary issues or activities can be built from scratch and to the parliament's or WFD's own specification. Such solutions would require sufficient time for user research, testing and technical development, but would be the most tailored to the needs identified. This provides the highest intensity of support and targeting at the highest financial cost.

V. Conclusion

This paper has comprehensively outlined the importance of digital transformation in the parliamentary context, and how that might be achieved within current development strategies, and through more collaborative and strategic approaches. It has provided detail to demonstrate that digital development in parliamentary settings is currently very necessary, but lacks strategic coherence and cooperation, and that lack of such strategic support will likely be to the detriment of parliaments already struggling for sufficient resources and skills, and thus to the citizens who are governed by them. This paper has also made the reasonable point that parliamentary capacity building should not be rolled into one large goal concerning 'improving governance' without making a distinction in the strategic framework identifying the nuances of working with and developing such institutions, which are outside of Executive control.

Priorities and recommendations have already been discussed in terms of specific interventions at the parliamentary level; however, the development sector, in working on developing the digital capacity of parliaments, should also be mindful of:

1. making a distinction between parliaments and public bodies governed by the Executive
2. working at cross purposes with other development organisations
3. manipulation of purpose in digital development activities
4. applying multiple overlapping strategies and activities to develop digital capacity

These considerations could be best observed with more structured cooperative relationships between agencies.

The overarching argument of this paper is that parliamentary digital transformation is a relatively underfunded area of work, but a vitally important one in achieving the very common overarching goals of open, accountable, inclusive and participative government. Improvements in how parliamentary digital capacity building can be done better are possible with better strategy, funding and cooperation, and when parliaments are enthusiastic and willing to take the opportunities offered to them to improve themselves.

Appendix A: Case studies of digital tools for parliamentary monitoring

UK: TheyWorkForYou

The UK Parliament has, over the last 15 years, improved the quality and quantity of open data it publishes on parliamentary activity, and has recently implemented a new public facing website design. The production and publication of parliamentary open data is efficient and timely, and provides significant opportunity for multiple external uses. The digital function is the responsibility of the Parliamentary Digital Service, which has an overarching brief to make parliament more digitally accessible, and which works to an agreed [digital strategy](#) for the whole of parliament. The parliament [website](#) itself remains, however, primarily structured and organised in such a way as to require users to possess a reasonable baseline knowledge of parliamentary function in order to locate anything more than very simple information.

[TheyWorkForYou](#), a website run by mySociety, was developed to tailor the experience of locating and using parliamentary information to the general public, many of whom have very low levels of democratic literacy, and who would struggle to recall the names of their MPs or even the formal names of their constituencies. The user-centred approach, coupled with the organisation of parliamentary information to be easily searchable, understandable and shareable, makes for a higher quality and more seamless web experience. Research has demonstrated the value of this website not only to users from the general public, who overwhelmingly believe that the site enables them to better hold their representatives to account (93% of those questioned), but also to parliamentarians themselves, with significant traffic to the site originating from the parliamentary estate.

There are several key reasons why TheyWorkForYou has been a successful digital democracy tool:

- The data necessary to power it exists in suitable open data formats, and is reliably published. This is data produced by parliament itself, and without such data, platforms such as this are extremely difficult to maintain.
- It has a user-centred design, easily navigated by individuals across the spectrum of political knowledge.
- It enables a straightforward, seamless user journey; for example, finding an MP and then instigating email contact with them takes only two clicks.
- It employs algorithms to produce useful content in an accessible and shareable manner; for example, grouping votes to demonstrate whether an MP is generally for or against certain issues.
- It prompted a parliamentary review into the institutional digital practices, and in taking on the [recommendations made by mySociety](#), catalysed the creation of the Parliamentary Digital Service.

The screenshot displays two examples of the 'TheyWorkForYou' shareable speech function. Each example consists of a profile picture, the speaker's name and title, a short excerpt of their speech, and a set of sharing options. The first example is for Kevin Brennan, Shadow Minister (Digital, Culture, Media and Sport) (Arts and Heritage). His speech excerpt discusses the Liaison Committee and the proposal to create a new piece of prime ministerial patronage. The second example is for Lindsay Hoyle, Speaker of the House of Commons. His speech excerpt discusses the Liaison Committee Chair and the matter for today. Both examples include sharing options for 'In context', 'Individually', 'Tweet', and 'Share', along with a citation: '(Citation: HC Deb, 25 March 2020, c1359)'. The sharing options are accompanied by small icons for each platform.

Example of TheyWorkForYou shareable speech function

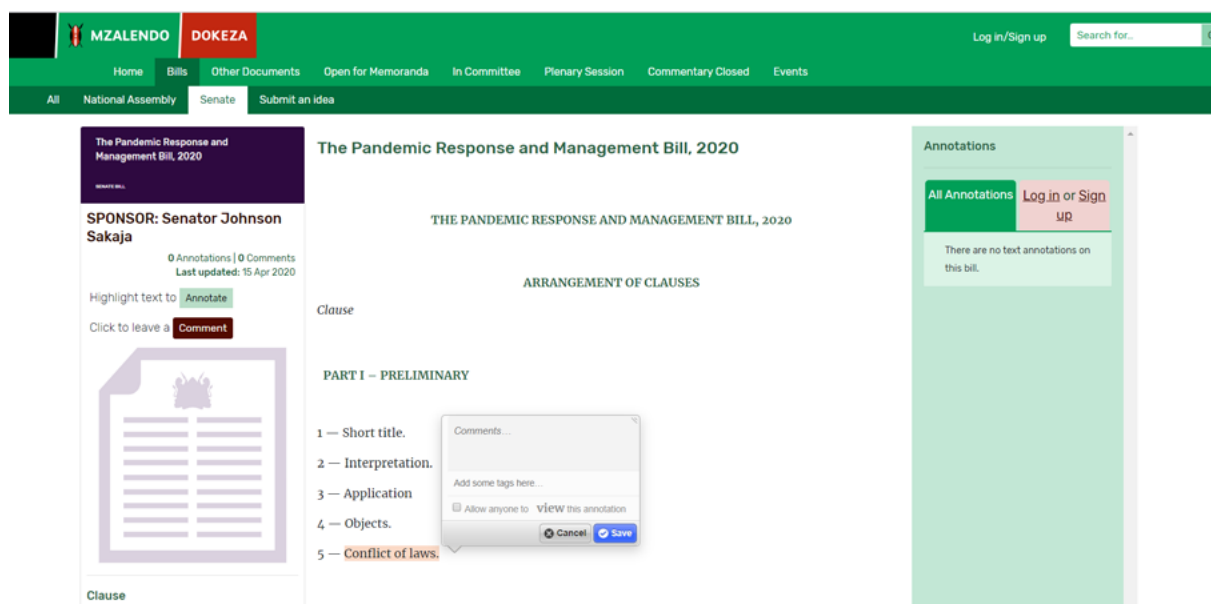
Kenya: Mzalendo

As in the UK, the Kenyan Parliament's own website has improved significantly over the last 10 years, but has not kept pace with external web development or user-centred design. The Parliament has an ICT department sitting within its Joint Services division, and produces open data which sits on the Kenya Open Data Portal. Kenya's parliamentary monitoring website Mzalendo operates on the same open source software as TheyWorkForYou in the UK, but is managed locally and structured differently to be most appropriate for the local context. Whereas, in the UK users often need to use the postcode function to identify their local MP or constituency, in Kenya, the vast majority of individuals know this information and can recall it without the need for assistance. There is therefore no need for a postcode or other form of lookup function on Mzalendo. What Mzalendo has done extremely well is to engage with the Kenyan parliament to develop both the institution's output, and Mzalendo's services, resulting in the development of the Dokeza digital tool for engaging with the development of legislation, and the SMS feature that can support short surveys to interested citizens.

Key features on this webtool include:

- An SMS engagement function, enabling people to have their say via SMS, whether through opinion polls and surveys, or through the solicitation of views on current affairs.
- The Dokeza function, which allows individuals to comment on and annotate legislation passing through parliament.
- The blogs and curation of expert opinion around key areas (such as women and equality).
- The MP scorecards displaying basic collated information on attendance and participation.
- The significant shareable items and social media presence necessary to be relevant in Kenya.

These features enable an interactivity that is missing from the parliament's own website, and are provided in a user friendly and accessible format. The social media presence is sustained and significant in a country in which many individuals prefer to use social media for information sharing rather than using browsers to go to individual websites.



The screenshot displays the Mzalendo Dokeza interface for the 'The Pandemic Response and Management Bill, 2020'. The top navigation bar includes 'MZALENDO' and 'DOKEZA' logos, a search bar, and a 'Log in/Sign up' button. Below the navigation, there are tabs for 'Home', 'Bills', 'Other Documents', 'Open for Memoranda', 'In Committee', 'Plenary Session', 'Commentary Closed', and 'Events'. The main content area shows the bill title and 'ARRANGEMENT OF CLAUSES'. A sidebar on the left identifies the sponsor as 'Senator Johnson Sakaja' and provides options to 'Annotate' or 'Comment'. A 'Comments' dialog box is open over the 'Conflict of laws' clause, allowing users to add tags and view annotations. A right-hand sidebar shows the 'Annotations' section, indicating that there are no text annotations on this bill.

Example of the Mzalendo Dokeza legislation annotation/comment function

Uganda: ParliamentWatch

In Uganda the parliament does not produce any open data at present, and the [website](#) is difficult to navigate and sparsely populated, often with out of date information (indeed, at the time of writing, the website was not live at all). The civil society group [ParliamentWatch.ug](#) was formed to conduct parliamentary monitoring activities, and to encourage the wider public to engage with parliamentary business and debate.

Because there is no open data coming from parliament, and because there are rarely records of proceedings published in a timely fashion, one of the primary activities of this group is to live tweet the plenary debate on its Twitter feed. The large majority of individuals in Uganda access news via social media, rather than via a browser, so this format is suited to the local context, and the group works with local radio station DJs to discuss the plenary live tweets live on air to their listeners. This amplifies the number of people hearing about the subject and progress of plenary discussion significantly. Whereas the Twitter feed has around 78,000 followers, the radio stations have between five and seven million citizens tuning in to their shows. This service meets a demand for parliamentary information, but suffers from a lack of support from the government. If the government produced data and transcripts in a timely fashion, the civil society group could divert resources away from being present in every plenary and towards analysis and content creation.

There is also the issue of the social media tax now implemented in Uganda, an initiative specifically targeted to reduce the level of dissent experienced by the government on social media feeds. This has nudged public behaviour away from frequent phone-based use of social media sites, and towards the use of computers and browsers to get news previously accessed via social media apps. The full impacts of this shift are yet to be studied, but demonstrate how small changes in the digital landscape within a country can shift behaviours and the way in which people choose to engage with parliaments.

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Latest Bill Updates

- PASSED BY PARLIAMENT**
- WITHDRAWN**
- SECOND READING**
The Administration of Judiciary Bill, 2018
- SIGNED INTO LAW**
The Constitution (Amendment) (No. 2) Bill, 2017
- RETURNED BY PRESIDENT**
The National Biotechnology And Biosafety Bill, 2012

REPORT
This Month in Parliament (1st – 31st of May, 2020)
Published 2 weeks ago - Msobor Chemonges Timothy

Latest Meetings

- 12 FEB, 2019**
Parliament Committee on Finance meets Minister on the Macro-Economic and Fiscal Performance Report 2017/18 (Including 2016/17).
- 25 SEP, 2018**
Meeting with the Uganda Law Society who presented on the Administration of Judiciary Bill No.2 of 2018
- 25 SEP, 2018**
Meeting with Ministry of Justice and Constitutional Affairs and other stakeholders on LDC pre-entry exams
- 12 JUL, 2018**

South Africa: PMG / People's Assembly

The PMG group in South Africa run both the [PMG](#) and [People's Assembly](#) websites, and have been established for many years. PMG have been very successful, establishing good relationships with the parliamentary administration and representatives, and consulting widely with civil society groups and the private sector on how they can provide good informational services. In many ways PMG is a victim of its own success. Its model of employing individuals, students and volunteers to attend every parliamentary committee meeting and take detailed minutes of the discussion has made it a necessary resource for anyone in policymaking in South Africa. Its subscription service for making this information public is paid for by private and public bodies, and one of the most prominent subscribers has been the parliament of South Africa. PMG performed such a high quality, vital service, that the parliament chose to subscribe to their content, instead of producing its own. At one point, when the parliament's own subscription lapsed, the official parliamentary researchers paid for the subscription out of their own salaries. This is arguably data that should be produced by the parliament itself, given that committee meetings are the place in which material policy decisions are made in South Africa. Without the need to pay for minute takers for each committee meeting, PMG would be able to invest resources in more research, analysis and outreach to normal citizens. A limited amount of other parliamentary data is produced and published, such as the names and details of Members of Parliament, some of which is used to underpin the People's Assembly website; however, much of that site remains reliant upon automated scrapers, which in turn, are reliant upon stable and regularly updated content elsewhere.

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- Transport**
National Assembly
Implementation of level 3 of Covid-19 regulations: follow-up meeting, with Minister & Deputy Minister
- Finance Standing Committee**
National Assembly
Digital Economy and Taxation Policy: National Treasury, PBO & SARS input

Appendix B: References

- [Using technology to 'co-create' EU policies](#), European Parliament, (2020)
- [IPU Innovation Tracker 1-4](#), Inter-Parliamentary Union (2020)
- [E-Participation: A Quick Overview of Recent Qualitative Trends](#), David Le Blanc UN (2020)
- [Digital Technologies, Online Engagement and Parliament-Citizen Relations in Nigeria and South Africa](#), Temitayo Isaac Odeyemi, Tunde Abioro (2019)
- [World E-Parliament Report 2018](#), Inter-Parliamentary Union (2018)
- [Parliament and the People: How digital technologies are shaping democratic information flow in Sub-Saharan Africa](#), mySociety, (2018)
- [ICT and Citizen Efficacy: The Role of Civic Technology in Facilitating Government Accountability and Citizen Confidence](#), mySociety (2016)
- [Who Benefits from Civic Technology? Case studies from the US, UK, Kenya and South Africa](#), mySociety (2015)
- [Inside the troubled, glitchy birth of parliament's online voting app](#), WIRED (2020)

Other related mySociety research reports:

- [Participatory Budgeting: a meta-level review](#) (2018)
- [Developing transparency through digital means: Examining institutional responses to civic technology in Latin America](#) (2016)
- [Digital tools for democratic participation](#) (2019)

Other key documents:

- [DFID's governance strategy](#)
- [WFD's Inclusive and Accountable Politics](#) programme

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