

**G3ict Global Forum, Monday March 26, 2007
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I'm very pleased to join the panel for this very timely discussion. I would like to address the topic from the perspective of parliaments and the role they can play when it comes to legislation and enforcement – fostering greater awareness, innovation and compliance for ICT accessibility. I would also like to talk a bit about the work that the Inter-Parliamentary Union is doing in this area.

For those of you who are not familiar with the IPU, let me just say that it is a global organization of national parliaments, which has been around for quite some time – over 100 years – and which has served primarily as a forum for dialog, interaction and cooperation among legislators from around the world on issues of mutual interest and concern. As part of its work, the IPU has developed standards and norms in areas relating to parliamentary democracy and free & fair elections, and thus has lent quite a bit of attention to the question of accessibility, including accessibility for persons with disabilities.

Now, I think we all agree that in order to be able to develop sound policies, it is important for parliaments and MPs to engage as willing and active partners. And I think the premise is a good one, because indeed parliaments have shown that they are keen to make the most of the opportunities that ICTs provide. Statistics show that today, almost every parliament in the world uses ICT – and this is a very recent development. In 2000, around two-thirds of national parliaments had their own web site. By 2006, more than ninety per cent of parliaments published a web site on the Internet, often following the IPU's own guidelines on good practice for parliamentary web sites¹.

Parliaments are using ICT for two main purposes: /1/ to be more transparent, accessible and accountable to the public (and thus improve their outreach to the constituents that they are elected to serve); and /2/ to be more effective in their parliamentary processes. To give only two examples: In Viet Nam, the parliament is preparing to publish draft laws on its web site, so that citizens can read and comment on them, and this input can be taken into account during the legislative process. In Austria, the Electronic Law system offers one continuous electronic production channel for legislation. All stages of a law, from the proposal to promulgation, can be tracked in a fully transparent process.

¹ Inter-Parliamentary Union (2000). Guidelines for the content and structure of parliamentary Web sites. Available at <<http://www.ipu.org/cntr-e/web.pdf>>

This is a system designed to invite greater involvement by citizens in the legislative process; in very practical terms, it is also calculated that the new system will save sixty tons of paper annually, a saving of more than one million Euros. The question, of course, is to what extent these tools are also accessible to persons with disabilities – and here, I think we all agree, there is quite a lot that still needs to be done.

Now that UN Convention on the Rights of persons with disabilities has been formally adopted, we are moving ahead, in cooperation with UNDESA and OHCHR, with the finalization of a guide or **Handbook for parliamentarians**– to analyze and explain the main provisions of the Convention, while at the same time look at practical issues such as how a State becomes party to the Convention, the ratification process, the legislative aspects of implementation, responding to questions such as

- what are the main steps to be taken towards early ratification?
- can the convention be used directly at the national level?
- what new legislation is needed?
- which laws need to be reviewed?
- And even - how can the main principles of the Convention be reflected in the Constitution of a state?

Each chapter concludes with a checklist for Parliamentarians – the type of measures that they as lawmakers can undertake in order to

- implement the provisions of the convention;
- make sure that national strategies are in place for the promotion and protection of the rights of persons with disabilities
- make the necessary budgetary allocations,
- allow Parliaments to exercise their oversight function and ensure the enforcement of all relevant legislation in this field.

The Handbook, as I said, is in the making and – before publication -will be reviewed by an editorial board with includes a group of prominent MPs with experience in the field, some of whom are themselves persons with disabilities – Once finalized, the Handbook will be

- launched at the global level, at one of the IPU Statutory Assemblies;
- submitted to all national parliaments, with the recommendation that it be translated into the national language and integrated as a tool in the work of the legislative body;

On a case by case basis, we also envisage starting a series of training sessions and seminars, at the national and regional level, so as to assist in building capacities and implementing the provisions of the convention.

As a practical recommendation, we should make sure that Article 9 on accessibility is well covered – and accompanied by a menu of good practices and policy recommendations - with a particular focus on

- promoting appropriate forms of assistance and support to persons with disabilities to ensure their access to information,
- promoting access for persons with disabilities to new information and communications technologies and systems, including the Internet,
- promoting the design, development, production and distribution of accessible ICTs and systems at an early stage, so that these technologies and systems become accessible at minimum cost.

Another tool that can be used in promoting inclusive ICTs is, we believe, the new **Global Centre for Information and Communication Technologies in Parliament**, which was launched in November 2006 in Rome, under the joint auspices of UNDESA and IPU, as one of the tangible outcomes of the second phase of the World Summit for the Information Society (WSIS) held in Tunis.

The idea behind the Global Centre is to help parliaments and their members, especially in developing countries, acquire and effectively use the most advanced information and communication technologies (including, but not limited to, the Internet) both as a way of improving their methods of work internally and of affording citizens more direct access to their elected representatives. Its objectives:

- to improve the capacity of parliaments with regard to their constitutional functions, the law-drafting process and the general parliamentary procedures,
- to increase citizens' access to Parliamentary activities and documentation,
- to increase the level of international cooperation among parliaments,
- to increase the coordination of the international community in supporting ICT in parliaments and legislative development issues.

The Global Centre, therefore, intends to act as a catalyst and clearinghouse for information, research, innovation and technology, as well as a hub for technical assistance. We feel that the lessons learned within parliaments over the last 10-15 years about the implementation of ICT projects potentially form a tremendous knowledge base when introducing or developing ICT in other parliaments in developing countries.

So, the Global Centre provides a framework for pooling information and resources and linking the broadest possible number of initiatives in this field. What we should also have in mind, and this is an area where we would welcome a closer cooperation with you and the Global Initiative, is to identify relevant ways and means to integrate the commitment to inclusive ICTs, into the work of the Center.

Thank you -