Chapter 16

Aid Assisted Parliamentary Website Initiatives in Developing Countries: Challenges and Solutions

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ABSTRACT

Parliaments are the central institutions in the democratic forms of governments. Many parliaments, particularly in the lower middle income and low-income countries, perform poorly and tend to be closed institutions. They do not exchange timely information with the citizens. Parliamentary websites can assist the parliaments in opening up and interacting with the citizens to represent the real will of the people. Parliaments can use the websites as the means for actualizing the values of openness, transparency, and accountability. I explore a case of implementation of aid assisted parliamentary websites development initiative for four provincial parliaments of Pakistan. International development organizations may face different challenges during aid assisted parliamentary website development initiatives. I propose, by employing Information Technology Alteration Framework, that many of these challenges can be linked to the intercultural differences of values, norms, and practices between the donor and the host. This chapter also presents the lessons learned in the form of proposed solutions to overcome the challenges during the conception and implementation stages of aid assisted parliamentary website development initiatives.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Parliaments embody the will of the people in government, and carry all their expectations that democracy will be truly responsive to their needs and help solve the most pressing problems that confront them in their daily lives as the central institution of democracy (Beetham, 2006). The main functions of parliaments include legislation, scrutinizing the executive, and approving the budget. Parliaments are the representative institutions, however “[…] parliaments as institutions and politicians as a group do not rate highly in public esteem in many countries” (Beetham, 2006, p. 2). This is truer for lower middle income and low income developing countries. One of the
reasons for the low respect by citizens is that parliaments in many developing countries tend to be closed institutions and perform poorly. There are different causes for unsatisfactory parliamentary performance. Often, parliamentarians lack the knowledge and skills to do their jobs effectively, they may be more concerned with retaining their seat than with holding the executive to account, or if they do seek to hold the executive to account, they may find that they lose their seat before long (Hudson & Wren, 2007). Some of the reasons for not opening up and communicating with the citizens are related to high power distance, i.e., unequal distribution of power, and uncertainty avoidance in developing countries. High power distance and uncertainty avoidance is common in some developing countries, for example – in Bangladesh and Pakistan (Hofstede, www.hofstede-geert.com). Members of the parliament (MPs) develop misperceptions that citizens are ignorant and legislation process should be kept classified because of the high power distance. Corruption and nepotism can be observed in parliamentary functions. Members pursue their own motives or their parties’ agendas. Moreover, governments have interest in controlling the business of parliaments.

Thus parliaments become closed institutions. They do not communicate properly with the citizens, media, and other stakeholder groups. They exchange little information and provide few interaction facilities to the citizens. Usually the citizens do not have an easy and proper access to the information regarding the functioning of the parliament, parliamentary documents, and their members. The process of legislation becomes less transparent. Less transparency leads towards limited direct accountability to the citizens. It results in the closed parliaments as shown in Figure 1. Consequently, governments can control the processes in the parliaments and influence the democratic decision-making processes. Therefore, parliaments cannot act as independent institutions and do not represent the real will of the people. They do not perform their legislative, oversight and budget approval functions in an effective manner. It results in causing harm to the citizens.

Parliaments should be strengthened so that they can perform their functions as independent institutions in an effective manner. There is an urgent need for the parliaments of many developing countries to open up and exchange timely and real information with the citizens and other stakeholder groups. “[…][Parliaments] must be engaged with the citizens they represent, open to a variety of views and opinions, able to negotiate and compromise, and fully accountable for their decisions and actions” (Griffith & Casini, 2010, p. 188). Comprehensive efforts need to be made for opening up the parliaments and making them efficient, independent, open, and transparent institutions. Some of these efforts should aim at changing the values, thinking, and culture within the parliaments. Others should focus on educating the citizens. The efforts should also aim at changing the working, norms, processes, procedures, and functioning of the parliaments.

Parliaments in developing countries face lack of institutional capacity, financial means (Hudson & Wren, 2007) and political unwillingness to implement and sustain information and communication technologies (ICTs). Industrial nations have been providing support to some developing countries through bilateral and multilateral aid programs (Simon et al., 2002) in the form of financial and technical assistance. Donor funded initiatives are welcomed in developing countries (Dandjinou, 2002). The number of parliamentary institutions receiving international support for strengthening themselves in the low-income countries is 80% (Griffith & Casini, 2010, p. 184). The discussion area of this chapter is on bilateral efforts in which a donor entity provides assistance to the lower middle or low-income developing country. The development related project in which an aid donor entity signs a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with a parliament in the host country for strengthening the processes and functions of parliaments is called aid assisted parliamentary