

IDRC Networks: An Ethnographic Perspective

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Nancy Smyth

Networking of Parliaments in the South

Research and information networks have traditionally been associated with academia, research centres, bureaucracies, and NGOs. Rarely have parliaments been considered as a setting for establishing and supporting networks. In the mid-1990s, an initiative to establish a research and information network in selected countries of Southern Africa began. As projects start to strengthen legislatures in the South, their success in promoting democratic development can be analyzed. Because of the changing nature of parliamentary membership, their sustainability in improving the institutional capacity of parliaments, rather than individual MPs, can also be assessed.

Particularly for official government donors and those associated with the UN, the notion of supporting a network to strengthen parliamentary institutions and their operating structures across party lines may be a less political, and therefore more attractive, form of legislative development. As a mechanism that seeks to be cost-effective while maximizing and pooling existing resources, support for a network might be similarly attractive in times of declining donor funds.

The main findings addressed in the study include:

1. A network cannot be all things to all people, and experience suggests that a network must meet the needs of MPs, not create, change, or predetermine, their needs. A preference has also been expressed for a network that allows for interaction among information providers and between MPs and regional experts.
2. MPs cannot spend much of their time on the definition or running of a network; however, ideas and issues cannot be forced on them. MPs expressed reservations about a network solving all of their information and research needs.
3. A network created to provide information and research for MPs would be sustainable only to the extent that the information it provided was relevant to the needs of its users. A challenge for a network in a parliamentary setting is the anticipated turnover of its end-users on a regular basis.
4. MPs envision a series of networks or networking opportunities. Rather than hoping to achieve several objectives through one all-encompassing network, a series of networks or networking opportunities that meet more defined goals might be considered.
5. Networks in a parliamentary setting require a high degree of flexibility and must be able to accommodate changes in membership and policy.
6. Flexibility in management might be achieved through rotating membership and the involvement of outsiders. A network centre or secretariat could provide some degree of continuity during political change.

7. Once agreement has been established for a network, this should be formally endorsed by each of the participating parliaments. The development of a long-term, realistic timetable should be clearly laid out.
8. Experience suggests that involvement must take place at an early stage by senior MPs and staff.
9. Although it might be attractive from a resource and efficiency point-of-view, Southern parliaments often lack the basic infrastructure, such as computers and modems, to put an electronic information network in place.
10. To the extent that MPs in Southern Africa began to define what a regional network might look like, the option of face-to-face networking was given priority because most MPs value personal interaction and do not have experience in exchanging information electronically.
11. The network would place priority on strengthening existing research units and libraries, and on noncomputer access to information. Electronic information systems would be introduced later.
12. Linking the network into existing parliamentary libraries and research units was stressed. Balanced sources of information from outside institutes, NGOs, and other elements of civil society were also sought to represent varying political and social views within the region.
13. Networks require some structure and management. Committees may provide some of this structure, as will the topics selected for coverage. However, it must be accepted that the networking activities will require a diffused and flexible management structure. MPs have been clear in acknowledging that any management structure must involve parliamentarians, staff members, and a balanced mix of outside information providers.
14. Some parliamentary staff see a network as a way to raise the interest of MPs in information and research. Some MPs have cautioned, however, that researchers and academics may insult MPs by insisting that they are not making appropriate use of information.
15. Membership should be defined by the members themselves and there must be an acceptance from the beginning of varying degrees of participation.
16. Membership in a network that crosses national borders must be based on some degree of commonality.
17. The onus is on those who are closest to parliaments to provide an enabling environment for MPs. This should include a commitment to fund some start-up and operational costs associated with the network.

18. Legislative development must be seen as a constantly evolving process that will be subject to short-term ups and downs as political and economic developments occur. Donors need to realize that a longer timeframe may be required to start a project and to see it through.