

*Draft* **FINAL REPORT TO THE INSTITUTE FOR  
CONNECTIVITY IN THE AMERICAS**

V0.2

*Phase I Activities of the Virtual Parliament of the Americas  
Project, 2002-2004*

Prepared by Bellanet



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## **Background**

The Inter-Parliamentary Forum of the Americas (FIPA) approached the Institute for Connectivity in the Americas (ICA) and Bellanet in mid-2002 to seek support for funding and implementation of a project to establish a Virtual Parliament of the Americas (Virtual Parliament). The idea behind this project was to support not only the information needs of parliamentarians in the Americas, but also the need for ongoing communications among them around issues of common concern. It was recognized that the annual plenary meetings of FIPA were not sufficient for the promotion of an effective exchange of information and communications oriented toward collective action. Ongoing processes to support these needs were required, and the Internet and related technologies were seen as a cost-effective and practical avenue to realize such processes.

In addition to interactions among parliamentarians, FIPA's Technical Secretariat, which has the responsibility of managing documentation of a corporate nature (e.g.. outputs from plenary meetings, minutes of Executive Committee meetings, etc.) and of keeping the broader membership informed about recent and upcoming events, felt a strong need for ICT tools to help it deliver on its mandate to FIPA members. For these reasons, the FIPA corporate website, a prototype of which was being hosted by the Unit for the Promotion of Democracy of the OAS, was threaded into the conceptual plan for the Virtual Parliament project.

A proposal was subsequently developed by Bellanet and the Parliamentary Centre in consultation with the FIPA Technical Secretariat to establish a Virtual Parliament in three phases, the first phase of which was funded by ICA.

This document outlines the intentions and real developments over the first phase of the project, it describes the reasoning behind adaptations made during the implementation process, and it attempts to distil some of the learning the implementing partners underwent during the first phase, with a view to suggesting future directions for subsequent phases.

## **Project Outline**

The Virtual Parliament project's ultimate goal is to support the five objectives of FIPA, which are:

- To contribute to the development of inter-parliamentary dialogue in dealing with issues on the hemispheric agenda.
- To promote the sharing of experience, dialogue, and inter-parliamentary cooperation on issues of common interest to the member states.
- To strengthen the role of the legislative branch in democracy, and in the promotion and defence of democracy and human rights.
- To promote the harmonization of legislation and development of legislation among member states.

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- To contribute to the process of harmonization as one of the most appropriate instruments for sustainable and harmonious development in the hemisphere.

With the FIPA objectives as reference points, the Virtual Parliament project developed the following specific objectives:

- To promote inter-parliamentary harmonization and cooperation
- To facilitate new and ongoing communication and information flows among parliamentarians.
- To support preparation, follow-up and continuity around all FIPA events, meetings and conferences, especially conclusions and recommendations reached at the Plenary Meetings.
- To provide an environment for experimentation with new forms of citizen, civil society and parliamentary engagement.

These objectives form the guidelines for the development of activities over the three phases of the project. Broadly speaking, the phases are designed to provide the foundation for parliamentarians in the Americas to use online tools in a more systematic way (Phase 1), to move from the establishment of that foundation to a mainstreaming of the Virtual Parliament such that it is available and accessible in a variety of ways to the broader FIPA membership (Phase 2), and to refine and expand the Virtual Parliament, incorporating new tools and new uses as put forward by individual parliamentarians (Phase 3).

Although the implementing partners have from the beginning worked in collaborative ways, a division of labour was defined based on the relative expertise of the partners. The Parliamentary Centre's areas of responsibility were identified as:

- Advice on site design of FIPA website and Virtual Parliament of the Americas.
- Content development and management for the Virtual Parliament
- Facilitation and management of on line discussions of the Executive Committee and the Working Groups for the Virtual Parliament.
- Design and implementation of training and training materials in cooperation with Bellanet
- Support to the Technical Secretariat

Bellanet areas of responsibility were stated thus:

- Site design, maintenance and hosting for the FIPA website as well as the Virtual Parliament of the Americas.

- Design and implementation of awareness building programs, training programs, and training materials.
- Advice and assistance in the planning of facilitation and management of on line discussions of the Executive Committee and the Working Groups for the Virtual Parliament.
- Advice and assistance in the engagement of FIPA members in on line discussions of the Executive Committee and the Working Groups.

The FIPA Technical Secretariat's responsibility in turn was stated as:

- Content development and management of the FIPA web site as well as the Virtual Parliament of the Americas.
- Engagement of the FIPA members and participation in the on line discussions of the Executive Committee and the Working Groups

## **Activities Undertaken during Phase 1**

As outlined in the FIPA Mid-term Report of April 2003, at the request of the FIPA Technical Secretariat, Bellanet took over hosting of the pre-existing FIPA corporate website from the UPD in May 2002. From this point onward, the website has been instrumental in providing documentation in a timely way on past and upcoming FIPA Plenary meetings.

In July and August of 2002, Bellanet, in consultation with the FIPA Technical Secretariat and with input from the Parliamentary Centre, re-designed that site to make it more user-friendly and to prepare it to house the preliminary aspects of the Virtual Parliament. In late 2002 FIPA adopted a new corporate design and logo, and these aspects fed into a further modification of the site in early 2003.

In addition to this site design and hosting, the deliberations of FIPA's Executive Committee (EC) were supported through the creation of an email discussion list and associated web-based workspace in August 2002. This was converted to the Dgroup software in November 2002 and was a key driver for the modification of that software to support multilingual dialogues. Aside from the creation of these online tools, training sessions were organised around the EC's meetings in Buenos Aires (August 2002) and Panama (December 2002) to ensure EC members and their support staff were familiar with using the discussion list and the workspace for uploading and downloading of documents, links and news items. Given the Technical Secretariat's ongoing responsibility around the organisation of EC meetings and documentation related to those meetings, the Technical Secretariat took on responsibility for the facilitation of EC online dialogues, with background support and advice from Bellanet and the Parliamentary Centre.

The Virtual Parliament project was also set up to provide similar services to working groups created under the auspices of FIPA. The FTAA Working Group was the first to be established outside of the Plenary meetings. Advice and information concerning the availability and advantages of the use of Dgroups was provided to the chair of that group (The Honourable John Godfrey, MP), and a strong interest has been expressed in using this tool for the working group's ongoing dialogues, but the FTAA working group has not so far taken the step of actively using this tool. The Virtual Parliament project was poised to support the FIPA working groups on Women Parliamentarians and on Terrorism as well, although by the end of Phase 1 these groups had not established ongoing interactions outside of plenary meetings. To date the project has taken the approach that without 'internal' champions prepared to use and to promote the use of ICT tools, technical solutions will not be viable. Thus, there has been no attempt to force the use of the Dgroups spaces with any of the working groups created by FIPA.

In addition to the use of Dgroups in piloting support for ongoing dialogues, during the first Phase of the Virtual Parliament project FIPA's EC requested that one of its meetings be held using online chat facilities. Bellanet was tasked with the organisation of a chat session in cooperation with the Technical Secretariat. The meeting took place on January 28, 2003 and it involved participation of several EC members from Central and South America and Canada, and simultaneous interpretation in English, Spanish and Portuguese was provided by Public Works and Government Services Canada.

A second unforeseen aspect of Phase 1 was the hiring of a consultant webmaster from May to September 2003, as agreed to by the implementing organisations in consultation with ICA. This position was created as a result of the recognition of two realities:

- 1) Adding content by the Technical Secretariat and the Parliamentary Centre was being slowed down by the fact that dedicated staff were not available to add new content
- 2) The layout of the website was felt to be sub-optimal in terms of engagement of visitors, ease of navigation, and emphasis on key issues and activities of interest to the FIPA community

With the hiring of the webmaster, the Parliamentary Centre, in consultation with other implementing partners, and based on feedback received from FIPA members, undertook a significant re-design of the website to highlight the dynamic aspects of information in the FIPA context (e.g., news, working group spaces) and to provide a look and feel conducive to user engagement. In addition to hosting this new space and providing feedback on its development, Bellanet installed and customized the MNoGo search engine to allow for searching of the site.

In tandem with the re-design, a large amount of documentation was added to the site by the webmaster, including corporate documentation uploaded to the library as well as templates and html pages in four languages that make up the Virtual Parliament website. The new site was launched in mid-September 2003 as the official FIPA Virtual

Parliament platform, which provides the foundation for future online interaction among FIPA members as well as a repository of FIPA's official documentation.

In recognition of the critical and positive role played by the webmaster, and as a strategy to bridge the period between the end of Phase I and subsequent revenue generation and implementation of Phase II, the webmaster consultancy was extended (along with the Virtual Parliament end date) from December 2003 to July 2004. Annex 1 provides a detailed account of the activities undertaken during this period, but highlights include:

- Support for the FIPA Plenary Meeting in Chile, April 2004
- Implementation of an online consultation in March 2004
- Creation of an online database for FIPA contacts
- Training materials development in Spanish for the EC Dgroup
- Re-design/creation of Dgroups for the FTAA, Women Parliamentarians, Terrorism and Fiscal Affairs working groups
- Seeding of major search engines with the FIPA URL
- Continuous updating of the Virtual Parliament website (especially the document repository)
- Research into further promotion of the Virtual Parliament site, available Content Management Systems, and other tools to support greater engagement in the Virtual Parliament from parliamentarians

In addition to the content on the Virtual Parliament website itself, the Parliamentary Centre produced a concept paper on the creation of a Virtual Parliament which illustrates the key philosophical and logistical issues to be addressed in a project such as the Virtual Parliament of the Americas (see 'THE INTER-PARLIAMENTARY FORUM OF THE AMERICAS (FIPA): CREATING A VIRTUAL PARLIAMENT', Nola Juraitis and Martin Ulrich, September 30, 2003). The purpose of the paper is to improve the accessibility of the Virtual Parliament concept to parliamentarians and to provide a solid foundation for efforts at generating support for future phases of the project.

Finally, at the request of ICA, and with a view to not only having an additional resource to gauge the nature and degree of success of Phase 1, but also to provide information of relevance to potential funders of subsequent phases, an external evaluation was commissioned and conducted by The Governance Network (a private sector consultancy based in Ottawa) in July-August 2003 (See 'Virtual Parliament of the Americas Project – Phase I Evaluation Report', The Governance Network, September 2003).

## **Learning and Conclusions**

In terms of planned outputs and activities, the following were not fully achieved during the first phase:

Parliamentary Centre

- Facilitation and management of on line discussions of the Working Groups for the Virtual Parliament.

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- Design and implementation of training materials in cooperation with Bellanet

Bellanet

- Design and implementation of awareness building programs, training programs, and training materials.

FIPA Technical Secretariat

- Engagement of the FIPA members and participation in the on line discussions of the Working Groups

A variety of reasons were put forward by implementers for the difficulty of realizing some of the above objectives, and the evaluation conducted in July-August validated a number of these reasons.

In terms of the working groups, there was a fundamental issue within the FIPA context itself of moving from the creation of working groups out of Plenary meeting deliberations to the operationalization of those groups. As articulated in the project evaluation: "...activity must be happening offline for activity to take place online." Thus, opportunities for facilitation and nurturing of online dialogues among working groups were not readily available. In terms of the EC, its membership changes significantly each year so there is an element of discontinuity introduced by the EC process itself.

However, these explanations are also not complete. In the case of the EC, ongoing interactions (e.g., the face-to-face EC meetings as well as interactions during the FIPA Plenary meetings) suggest that more success could have been expected with the EC Dgroup. As it happened, there was some significant use of the Dgroup, particularly in the run-up to meetings to download relevant documentation for example, but between meetings there were also significant periods of inactivity.

There are likely four aspects to an accurate explanation for these periods of lull. First, even for Executive Committee members, FIPA constitutes a relatively small part of parliamentarians' responsibilities and workload and it can therefore be expected to be a relatively low priority outside of the actual EC meetings. Second, despite having training available, it is evident that some EC members have never become fully comfortable with using online tools for their interactions. Third, the existence of dedicated facilitation of ongoing dialogues could perhaps have improved participation and engagement. On the last point, it is true that the FIPA Technical Secretariat has facilitative responsibility with respect to the Executive Committee, but the variety of responsibilities falling on a single staff member (including managing documentation and logistics), makes it very difficult to put the required energy into this aspect. Finally, the majority of energy put into supporting the EC was directed at the members themselves, but it would likely have benefited the EC to put more emphasis on including support staff in the engagement strategy for the EC Dgroup.

In terms of awareness building, to a certain extent this has been achieved through a number of mechanisms: presentations at Plenary meetings, promotion of the Virtual Parliament website, training of EC members. More could have been done to raise awareness among FIPA members, but a key reason for not doing this was associated with the relative dearth of online interactions occurring. It was felt that extensive promotion of the Virtual Parliament in the absence of a certain threshold of dynamic interaction would be counterproductive. Until shortly before the end of the phase, most information available through the website, for example, was the corporate documentation around FIPA's structure and documentation coming out of the face-to-face meetings.

On the training materials side, again two aspects to developments during the phase made it inadvisable to embark on a program to develop training materials. First, the level of activity among the key early target audiences (the working groups) was deemed insufficient to allow for a broader engagement or a broadening of training activities. The Executive Committee was a very small pilot group on which to base the development of training materials that would be used for a wider FIPA audience. Second, the changing nature of the Virtual Parliament website itself, with two substantial site re-designs over a one-year period, constituted an unstable environment upon which to build solid training materials.

In terms of broader engagement, the evaluation exercise pointed to several possible explanations:

- The difficulty of ensuring a threshold of relevant information was available on the website of interest to parliamentarians
- Some of the translations that were done of different documents were felt to be inadequate in the eyes of some parliamentarians and support staff. This issue of language and the adequacy of translations was highlighted as a sensitive one in the FIPA context
- Some respondents to questions about EC engagement indicated that more focused facilitated dialogues on specific topics of interest would have improved engagement
- FIPA is only a small part of the agenda of participating parliamentarians
- The make-up of country delegations for meetings changes frequently, making overall engagement in FIPA processes difficult
- There are several types of information not available on the Virtual Parliament site that could be of more direct relevance to parliamentarians than some of the current information. For example, interest was expressed in having access to national legislation of various countries, to contact information for parliamentarians, etc.

## **Looking Ahead**

The above lessons and observations in themselves point to a number of possible strategies and activities to improve the Virtual Parliament website itself, as well as suggesting some

strategies for greater engagement of parliamentarians in the Americas in the use of the Virtual Parliament and the services made available through the project.

Fundamentally, the key to ensuring both the sustainability and the dynamism of the Virtual Parliament project is real engagement from parliamentarians. This will not occur without being first catalyzed by a small number of champions within FIPA who are prepared to not only use the ICT tools provided to support their activities, but also to publicize and promote the Virtual Parliament among their FIPA colleagues. The identification of such champions is critical.

From consultations with parliamentarians, we concluded that a clearer vision of what the Virtual Parliament means in practice for parliamentarians - beyond simply a good point of access for information on policy issues – was needed to encourage them to invest their time in engagement beyond face-to-face meetings. For this reason, the Parliamentary Centre prepared the draft vision paper during phase I. It has been reviewed positively by the Chair of FIPA’s FTAA working group and will be used to adjust phase II plans.

It is also critical, given its role, for the FIPA Technical Secretariat to be the driving force behind the consolidation of the Virtual Parliament. It is with the Technical Secretariat that a great deal of the continuity FIPA has is housed, and the support role the Secretariat has with respect to ongoing FIPA activities makes it a natural source for strong advocacy and support of the developing Virtual Parliament.

Based on the experience of the first phase, the hiring of the webmaster gave a substantial boost to the content-management side of the website and having such capacity within the Secretariat would constitute a significant vehicle for sustaining the Virtual Parliament and ensuring it retains the dynamic nature that is essential to its sustainability.

Although setting up the conditions for subsequent phases of the Virtual Parliament project pose real challenges, it is also true to say that the very future of FIPA depends directly on its capacity to harness, embrace and integrate the use of ICTs in support of its ongoing existence. The potential cost savings of a successful strategy of integration are enormous, but more important are the benefits associated with greater: continuity; shared identity; capacity for parliamentarians in the Americas to respond to issues of common concern in a timely way; access to relevant information for parliamentarians; knowledge sharing among FIPA members; capacity for parliamentarians to engage in a variety of ways with their respective constituencies; etc.

## **Annex 1 – Activities of the Virtual Parliament Project, December 2003 to July 2004**



### **Support to FIPA activities Chile 2004:**

The updated of the site started on January and it was completed by May (due to delays on translations)

- Registration online Four languages (77 registrants) (Enrolment forms to events)
- What's New Chile
- Working Documents online
- Database that import information from online registration and produce reports
- Chile section that includes:
  - Final Reports
  - Working Groups reports
  - Participants
  - Press releases
  - Photo Gallery
  - Working Documents
- Updated other sections: Regulations, EC members, What's New, Archives
- Total documents available: 105 in four languages

**Consultation:** it was available on March 2004

- Pre-registration
- Contact people interested
- Database with the results

### **Database**

Creation of a database to store and retrieved FIPA contacts

### **Training Material**

Creation of an Users manual for the use the EC workspace in Spanish.

**Working Groups:** FTAA, Women Parliamentarians, Terrorism and Fiscal Affairs

- New design for the working groups sections that include a user-friendlier interface.
- Design of the same Dgroups skin for the groups.
- Creation and activation of the four working group forums:
  - Creation of public and private categories of resources
  - Upload reports, recommendations, links and reference material

### **FIPA promotion**

Submissions of the FIPA URL to Yahoo and Google

### **Updates of the website**

- Regular updates of the Library
- Update and improvement of different sections of the site
- Verify third party links

### **Research**

- How to promote site
- Content Management Systems – Web services
- Engagement tools