



Virtual Parliament of the Americas Project – Phase I Evaluation Report

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1.0 Context of the Evaluation

The Virtual Parliament of the Americas Project (Virtual Parliament):

- ❖ Was established by the Inter-Parliamentary Forum of the Americas (FIPA), in cooperation with Bellanet and the Parliamentary Centre, in order to promote inter-parliamentary harmonization through strengthening dialogue and interaction between and among parliamentarians and legislative staff in FIPA member countries. In addition to the primary project implementers, the Institute for Connectivity in the Americas (ICA) has been an initiating funder and promoter of the Virtual Parliament.
- ❖ Is about far more than a website or online forum; it is about the engagement, dialogue, information sharing, capacity building, relationships and interactions among its beneficiaries.
- ❖ Has adapted to reflect the evolving needs of FIPA, turnover of key players, ongoing needs assessment and continual learning on the part of implementers and beneficiaries.



1.1 Objectives of the Virtual Parliament

The Primary Objectives of the Virtual Parliament are:

- ❖ 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 Plenary Meetings.
- ❖ To provide an environment for experimentation with new forms of citizen, civil society and parliamentary engagement.



1.2 Objectives of Phase I

1. Meeting the information and communication needs of FIPA's Executive Committee (EC) and the working groups established for the 2003 plenary meeting.
2. Engagement, training and support of the EC and effective use of the forum.



1.3 Purpose of the Evaluation

- I. **Progress/Outcomes:** To provide an indication of the degree to which the Virtual Parliament and its past and current activities have contributed to the Phase I objectives.
- II. **Lessons Learned:** To gain some insight into the experiences and perceptions to date of selected stakeholders and intended beneficiaries of the Virtual Parliament in terms of unexpected outcomes, challenges, and things that could have been done differently.
- III. **Directions for the Future:** To identify current gaps in meeting the needs of beneficiaries and to determine directions or areas for for adjustment in possible future phases of the project.



1.4 Evaluation Methodology

- ❖ An Evaluation Advisory Committee (EAC) oversaw the evaluation and provided ongoing feedback and direction in terms of evaluation participants, interview protocols and draft evaluation findings.
- ❖ The EAC consisted of representatives from the Parliamentary Centre (PC), Bellanet, the FIPA Technical Secretariat, and the Institute for Connectivity in the Americas (ICA).



1.4 Evaluation Methodology

- ❖ Reviewed documentation, including the previous and current FIPA websites and the December 2002 Virtual Parliament proposal, to provide the evaluation context.
- ❖ Conducted 18 interviews (15 – English; 2 – Spanish; 1 - Portuguese) with stakeholders from the following groups (please see Appendix for a list of interviewees):
 1. Project Implementers/Funders (ICA, FIPA Technical Secretariat, Bellanet, and PC) - 4
 2. FIPA EC and Support Staff (past and present) - 8
 3. Other Stakeholders (e.g., DFAIT, CIDA, IDB, etc.) - 6



1.5 Evaluation Challenges

Challenges of Analysis:

- ❖ It is critical that the findings are interpreted within the context of being based on 4-6 individual responses within each stakeholder group (interviewees were selected based on varying levels of involvement with, or knowledge of, the Virtual Parliament).
- ❖ The individuals within the three stakeholder groups had varying levels of involvement and knowledge of the Virtual Parliament. Each interviewee, therefore, provided a unique perspective, which resulted in many of the findings being based on individual comments.
- ❖ FIPA has evolved considerably since its inception and, therefore, the Virtual Parliament has had to remain flexible to accommodate the changing needs of FIPA. This has had an impact on some of the activities that the Virtual Parliament set out to accomplish in Phase I.



2.0 Review of Evaluation Findings



2.1 Presentation of Findings

The Evaluation findings are presented as follows:

- ❖ Overview of high-level findings across the three stakeholder groups, where commonalities were evident
- ❖ Summary of planned versus actual activities/outputs
- ❖ Findings related to three focus areas broken down by stakeholder group:
 1. Progress/Outcomes (in two areas):
 - ◆ Meeting Information and Communication Needs of the EC
 - ◆ Engagement, training, and support of the EC (and effective use of the forum)
 2. Lessons Learned
 3. Future Directions
- ❖ Overview of recommendations for future directions



2.2 Overview of Findings

- ❖ Generally positive feedback about the Virtual Parliament in terms of its purpose and potential.
- ❖ The Virtual Parliament successfully completed a majority of its planned activities and is viewed as making progress toward its larger objectives.
- ❖ Engagement of the EC was less than originally anticipated. Lack of engagement was attributed to:
 - ◆ Technological barriers, lack of time to commit to FIPA or the Virtual Parliament, lack of awareness, comfort level with communicating virtually, turnover of members, need for a moderator.
- ❖ The website was in need of additional information, more frequent updating and quality assurance (e.g., translation) in order to better meet the information needs of the EC and FIPA members.
- ❖ The pilot online EC meeting was viewed as a learning experience with opportunities for refining the process.



2.3 Summary of Planned vs. Actual Phase I Activities

Planned Activities/Outputs	Actual Activities/Outputs
1. Temporary hosting of website.	Ongoing.
2. Design and development of new web presence.	The Virtual Parliament redesigned the original FIPA website and has recently developed a newer version that incorporated feedback from various stakeholders. The evaluation findings pertain to the previous website.
3. Design and development of EC online forum.	The online forum was created in October 2002 for the EC meeting in Panama in November 2002. Six EC members (or their staff) have used the forum to post documents or provide comments.
4. Engagement, training and support of the EC and effective use of the forum.	Two EC training sessions took place; however, the online forum was not used as effectively as hoped. Messages were posted by several EC members but very few substantive comments were made or discussions held. Lesson: Engagement of EC members was a greater challenge than anticipated for the Virtual Parliament.



2.3 Summary of Planned vs. Actual Phase I Activities

Planned Activities/ Outputs (cont'd)	Actual Activities/Outputs (cont'd)
5. Further development/adaptation and expansion of the forum to include working groups and development of training materials for all members.	Additional forums were not developed – attributed to the fact that only one active working group has been formed and the Virtual Parliament is currently creating an online forum for this group. Lesson: activity must be happening offline for activity to take place online.
6. Pilot project tested with one working group.	Online EC meeting took place with four participants in three different countries. Testing revealed that two members (Argentina and Panama) were unable to participate due to technological barriers. Participants viewed it as a learning experience, although cumbersome due to delays and the need for translation. The Virtual Parliament has begun brainstorming ways of improving the process.



2.4 Progress/Outcomes: EC and Staff

1. Progress/Outcomes related to *Meeting the Information and Communication Needs of EC* reported by EC and Staff
 - ❖ Two EC members were unable to participate in the online meeting due to technical difficulties. This meeting was also viewed as cumbersome due to translation and delays in communication; however, it was also viewed as a learning experience and as having potential to be refined in the future. At least one of the four participants had no previous experiences with online meetings and found it to be a very useful tool.
 - ❖ The website was viewed as valuable but could provide additional information on topics of interest to FIPA members, links to appropriate information and organizations (e.g., Global Legal Information Network), and events or developments in FIPA member countries.
 - ❖ Members had used the website on occasion to access reports and information.
 - ❖ One interviewee stated that a combination of an occasional inability to access the Internet, lack of understanding or capacity to use the technology, and lack of awareness have hindered participation by members and their staff.



2.4 Progress/Outcomes: EC and Staff

2. Progress/Outcomes related to *Engagement, training and support of the EC (and effective use of forum)* reported by EC and Staff

- ❖ All interviewees were positive about the potential of the Virtual Parliament as a means of facilitating dialogue among countries on areas such as terrorism and trade.
- ❖ One interviewee stated that he/she learned how to have ongoing or daily interactions with people through the Internet by participating in the Virtual Parliament and another credited the Virtual Parliament with strengthened skills in virtual communications.
- ❖ EC members (or their support staff) have used the online forum to download or post documents, and/or provide comments to prepare for meetings; however, engagement has been minimal. One interviewee was unaware of the online forum.
- ❖ Two interviewees felt that a training guide would be helpful to support Virtual Parliament participation.
- ❖ Several interviewees felt that engagement would be increased if discussions were focused around specific topics of interest.



2.4 Progress/Outcomes: Implementers/Funders

1. Progress/Outcomes related to *Meeting Information and Communication Needs of EC* reported by Implementers/Funders
 - ❖ Website was revamped and is currently undergoing further improvements to better meet the needs of beneficiaries – as a result of feedback and lessons learned to date.
 - ❖ Awareness of the benefits of the Virtual Parliament has been raised – EC members and staff have suggested online meetings as a means of communication within the EC.
 - ❖ Online chat was viewed as cumbersome due to technological difficulties and translation; however, it was also viewed as a learning experience and as having potential to be refined in the future.



2.4 Progress/Outcomes: Implementers/Funders

2. Progress/Outcomes related to *Engagement, training and support of the EC (and effective use of forum)* reported by Implementers/Funders

- ❖ The online forum was implemented and used by EC members – though not to the extent expected.
- ❖ There were signs of engagement within members of the FTAA working group – this could provide a pilot test for collaborating online.
- ❖ Difficult to engage EC members in the training as well as outside of meetings.
- ❖ Approximately half of EC members change each year, therefore, there is a challenge of conducting training with new members without wasting the time of those who have already participated in training sessions. As well, some EC members were unable to attend meetings and sent replacements instead – challenge of transferring skills acquired through the training to either the EC members or their staff.



2.4 Progress/Outcomes: “Other” Stakeholders

Note: Interviewees in this group were only indirectly involved in the Virtual Parliament and, therefore, the extent of their knowledge of progress/outcomes of the Virtual Parliament was related to the former FIPA website. The Virtual Parliament has already addressed some of these issues in the latest version of the website.

Experiences included:

- ❖ The website not being found when searching FIPA on the Internet (instead the original and outdated version was found).
- ❖ Improper translation.
- ❖ Dead links and site unavailability.
- ❖ Time lapse between posting outcome reports from FIPA meetings.



2.5 Lessons Learned

Engagement:

- ❖ Fipa is only one small part of the agendas of these individuals.
- ❖ Engaging a group virtually is difficult when a group is just forming offline. Question: Is it best to encourage virtual communications at the outset or is it better to wait until relationships have been built?
- ❖ Flexibility is key in engaging parliamentarians.
- ❖ A successful pilot project would help to demonstrate the potential of the Virtual Parliament (e.g., an active working group on a topic of widespread interest).
- ❖ Turnover of members as well as absenteeism at meetings have made it difficult to engage members – need a more sustained user group.
- ❖ It is important to ensure that members' first experiences with the Virtual Parliament are positive or else the Virtual Parliament will risk losing support and engagement.

"The Virtual Parliament has a real potential to make FIPA into a stronger organization as long as it has the power and content to keep parliamentarians interested in talking to each other."



2.5 Lessons Learned

Language:

- ❖ Language is a barrier to discussions in face-to-face meetings as well as virtually. There is a cultural divide that has to be overcome in order to open the lines of communication.
- ❖ At a minimum, all materials and discussions need to be available in appropriate languages.

Website:

- ❖ Since the website is a primary method for FIPA to communicate with stakeholders and to attain buy-in, it should have the following attributes:
 - ◆ Regular updates;
 - ◆ High quality text (e.g. translation);
 - ◆ User-friendly and built with the purpose of saving time;
 - ◆ Relevant content representing various perspectives;
 - ◆ Links to other parliaments, parliamentarians and relevant organizations and events; and
 - ◆ Clear information on FIPA's origins and support structures (e.g., how did it originate, who has been involved, funding partners, collaborative partners, supporters, etc.).

"If there are mistakes in translation, people won't come back. People are very sensitive about language."

Virtual Communications:

- ❖ There is a need to determine what technology is best suited to the needs of the Virtual Parliament. The EC suggested holding the online meeting; however, given the experience, real-time chat is not likely the best approach for this group.
- ❖ While accessibility of the Internet is an issue for a few members, the comfort level of parliamentarians with using the technology is a more widespread hurdle for the Virtual Parliament to overcome – might need to target support staff first.
- ❖ A forum moderator might be useful to keep discussions on track, interesting, and relevant. This person could do research on the issues so that information is always flowing and updated regularly, as well as summarized for those who cannot participate.
 - ◆ Note: A recent Bellanet evaluation also found that a designated moderator was viewed as an effective means of increasing engagement and participation in online communities.

"Before dialogue and relationships can work virtually, they have to be happening offline."



2.5 Lessons Learned

Implementation Process:

- ❖ The proposal process was prolonged due to miscommunications and unclear roles/responsibilities – needed to clarify roles/responsibilities of partners from the outset.
- ❖ Could have benefited from better communication and coordination among partners.
- ❖ More time/effort should have been invested in building relationships with potential funders in order to diversify the funding base.
- ❖ Virtual Parliament has become a tangible achievement of FIPA:
 - ◆ Has been used to promote and attain buy-in for FIPA.
 - ◆ Serves as the institutional memory of FIPA.
- ❖ Required a webmaster to design and up-date the site.



2.6 Future Directions – Engagement

Recommendations to Increase Engagement:

- ❖ Conduct a needs analysis to determine areas of interest.
- ❖ Focus discussions on select topics of interest, such as FTAA, terrorism, hemispheric security, parliamentary ethics.
- ❖ Virtual conferences with experts could help members keep up-to-date on information and to spark discussion on key issues. They would have to be short and periodic due to time constraints.
- ❖ If FIPA representatives are attending an event, feedback/input from members could be collected in advance.
- ❖ As soon as there is evidence of a willingness to work outside of the meetings, encourage this with an online forum.

"Participation is dependent on two areas – interest and convenience."



2.6 Future Directions – Website

Recommendations to Improve the Website:

- ❖ Invest significant resources into updating the website and collecting relevant content. Several interviewees suggested a full-time position dedicated to maintaining the Virtual Parliament – including moderating discussions.
- ❖ Provide links to all parliaments and parliamentarian email addresses.
- ❖ Provide information that is directly relevant to their work:
 - ◆ Events taking place in different countries in the form of a calendar of hemispheric activities with links to official sites.
- ❖ Ensure that views of different parties are presented.
- ❖ Report on developments of working groups that might be working on similar topics in different countries.
- ❖ Provide more information on legislation in different countries – need to demonstrate how horizontal information can be managed to mutually benefit FIPA countries.



2.6 Future Directions – Support

Recommendations to Better Support the EC:

- ❖ Develop a basic training guide for the EC and their staff to reference.
- ❖ Distribute a monthly newsletter/email highlighting new information on the site, announcements, and events. This could help staffers to become more involved as well.
- ❖ Involve the local business community and/or NGOs in working with the parliamentarians to help improve their skills and comfort levels.

"This is going to be a tool that will help us to make informed decisions and provide support between our annual conferences."



2.6 Future Directions - Process

Recommendations to Improve the Implementation Process:

- ❖ Clearly define the implementation partners' roles and responsibilities.
- ❖ Focus on building trust within the parliamentarians group before branching out. Keep the group small - do not want to create an unmanageable "mega-parliament" due to too many participants.
- ❖ Move forward slowly and steadily in order to gain support and buy-in. Better to go slow and achieve successes than push quickly and make mistakes.
- ❖ Seek out support and build relationships with trusted, neutral bodies (such as the Inter-Parliamentary Union and Latin American Parliamentarians Against Corruption). It would also be beneficial to have links to the speakers' offices and perhaps IT departments of various member countries.
- ❖ Allow for flexibility for EC participation in discussions – real-time exercises are not as convenient due to busy schedules and delays in translation.
- ❖ Investigate translation software.
- ❖ Manage expectations. One interviewee felt that the name "Virtual Parliament" might be setting up unrealistic expectations for the project.



2.7 Overview of Recommendations

- ❖ A proper *needs analysis* would provide feedback on key areas of interest in each country and information that would be beneficial to parliamentarians.
- ❖ Seek out and build *partnerships*.
- ❖ *Website* should contain information relevant to parliamentarians and be linked to appropriate sites, well translated, user-friendly, and up-to-date in order to meet information needs of stakeholders.
- ❖ Engage parliamentarians by *focusing* discussions on a few key areas/topics and establishing a formal moderator to keep the discussion flowing.
- ❖ Establish *Support* mechanisms for EC members.
- ❖ Overarching theme of *flexibility*:
 - ◆ Timelines for participation in online meetings or discussions should be flexible to allow parliamentarians to participate in virtual discussions at their convenience.
 - ◆ Website content should be flexible and responsive to be able to incorporate emerging issues/topics of interest of FIPA members.



A Vision for the Virtual Parliament

"The Virtual Parliament should aim to be the place that parliamentarians go when they're faced with uncertainty. It should not aim to be an alternative to parliament. Neither should it aim to be a place of agreement, but of understanding. It should be a place of sharing information and raising questions and discussing current progress in areas of interest with other parliamentarians in different countries."



3.0 Potential Next Steps

- ❖ Review findings and determine how to incorporate into future activities.
- ❖ Secure and diversify funding base.
- ❖ Seek out and build partnerships (e.g., IDB, Oxford Internet Institute)
 - ◆ Look for ways of leveraging complimentary initiatives.
- ❖ Conduct a needs analysis – focus on key areas of interest to parliamentarians.
- ❖ Re-establish momentum by focusing on achieving small but concrete successes (e.g., FTAA working group, fully functional and informative website).
- ❖ Watch for groups to form around topics and facilitate their interactions with virtual tools.
- ❖ Identify methods of sustaining progress – extend training and awareness beyond the EC members. Establish support mechanisms (e.g., training guide).
- ❖ Distribute/communicate evaluation findings and next steps with evaluation participants and broader key stakeholders.



Appendix – List of Interviewees

Parliamentarians and Support Staff	Implementers/ Funders	Other Stakeholders
<p>Senator Céline Hervieux-Payette (Canada)</p> <p>John Godfrey, MP (Canada)</p> <p>Senator Anthony Johnson (Jamaica)</p> <p>Jill Anne Joseph (Canada)</p> <p>Alejandra Bolaños (Costa Rica)</p> <p>Deputado Federal Luiz Carlos Hauly (Brazil)</p> <p>Ana Memelsdorff (Argentina)</p> <p>Ana Vega (Mexico)</p>	<p>Shady Kanfi (Bellanet)</p> <p>Randy Zadra (ICA)</p> <p>Sharie Currie (former PC)</p> <p>Mateo Barney (FIPA Secretariat)</p>	<p>Delmer Bjorklund (CIDA)</p> <p>Warren Kidd (CIDA)</p> <p>Caroline DesRochers (DFAIT)</p> <p>Professor Stephen Coleman (Oxford University)</p> <p>Blayne Haggart (Library of Parliament)</p> <p>Guillermo Castillo (IDB)</p>