



**Asia-Africa Videoconference on
"Parliamentary Oversight of Poverty: Gender Implications"
September 9, 2005**

Background

In October 2004, parliamentarians from Africa and Asia gathered in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, under the aegis of the Poverty Reduction Network of the Africa-Canada Parliamentary Strengthening Program (ACPSP) and the Cambodia-Canada Legislative Support Project (CCLSP), to discuss parliamentary oversight of poverty reduction. Effective parliamentary oversight is expected to contribute not only to reorienting development policies and programs in favour of the beneficiaries and in particular the poor, but also to improving the cost-effectiveness of these initiatives, as well as enhancing democratic governance in respective communities. The purpose of the Policy Dialogue was to bring together African and Asian parliamentarians to share experiences on the role of parliaments in promoting accountability while seeking to advance the use of evaluation as an instrument for good governance, accountability and learning.

With the upcoming UN Millennium Review Summit as well as the 5-year PRSP review, the time was right to follow-up on discussions and recommendations from the Policy Dialogue in order to provide an assessment of poverty reduction initiatives undertaken in various African and Asian countries. It was also an important time to reflect on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) while highlighting the specific roles of Parliament in ensuring that these initiatives are favorable to the poor and that they address the gender divide.

Therefore, a "Videoconference on Parliamentary Oversight of Poverty: Gender Implications" was carried out on September 9, 2005 which involved participants from Asian and African countries. This videoconference was part of a series of videoconferences examining issues related to gender organized by the Parliamentary Centre with the support of the World Bank Institute.

Objectives

The main objectives of the "Videoconference on Parliamentary Oversight of Poverty: Gender Implications" were as follows:

- Review conclusions and recommendations from the Phnom Penh Policy Dialogue and provide an assessment of the progress to date in each of the participating countries
- Review experiences in Southeast Asia and Africa on the role of Parliament and parliamentarians in monitoring poverty reduction and achieving gender equality, specifically as these relate to the MDGs
- Identify concrete actions that parliamentarians can undertake to ensure oversight of poverty reduction and gender strategies, examine the potential challenges in achieving these actions and investigate methods that can be used to overcome the challenges

Participants

Originally, there were four participating countries, two from Africa (Nigeria and Uganda) and two from Southeast Asia (Cambodia and Thailand), as well as Parliamentary Centre staff who facilitated and participated in the videoconference from Ottawa, Canada. However, on the date of the Videoconference, participants from Nigeria were unable to attend. Therefore, there were three participating countries from Africa and Asia, along with the Parliamentary Centre in Canada.

The participants included parliamentarians as well as Civil Society representatives. Please see the attached Annex A for a full list of participants.

Preparation for Videoconference

A certain amount of preparatory work was conducted by participants in order to make the sharing during the videoconference more effective. Documents were provided to participants prior to the videoconference. These included the Asia-Africa Policy Dialogue Report and Recommendations; an overview of the MDGs and the Ten Recommendations of the UN's Practical Plan to Achieve the MDGs; MDG Plus (best practices) country case studies from Thailand and Ethiopia; and questions to guide the discussion. Furthermore, each country team met prior to the videoconference to prepare their country presentations and to reflect on the guiding questions.

Activity Agenda

The videoconference took place over 3 hours and the agenda was as follows:

1. **Welcome and Introductions**
2. **Background:** Summary of the Phnom Penh Policy Dialogue, including recommendations – Ms Sandra De Moura, Program Officer, Africa, Parliamentary Centre
3. **Presentation on Millennium Development Goals:** The presentation included critical gender issues that need to be addressed in order to achieve MDGs and practical strategies to achieving the MDGs – Mr. Imran Arshad, Senior Program Officer, Asia, Parliamentary Centre
4. **Participating Country Presentations:** Each country provided an overview of the parliamentary initiatives related to poverty reduction and gender equality undertaken in their respective countries, as well as a brief assessment of country-specific MDG priorities. Presenters for each country were as follows:
Cambodia: H.E. Ms Khoun Sodary – MP, Member of Protection of Human Rights and Reception of Complaints Commission
Thailand: Hon. Mrs. Malinee Sukavejworakit – Senator, Chief Advisor to the Committee on Public Health & Advisor of the Committee on Foreign Affairs.
Uganda: Hon. Rwamirama Bright - Member of Parliament
5. **Open Discussion on the Role of Parliament in the Oversight of Poverty and Gender Implications**

6. **Next Steps:** Identification of a number of specific concrete actions and follow-up strategies that parliamentarians can undertake, as well as the challenges faced in implementing these strategies

Results

The videoconference started with welcome and introductions. Then Ms Sandra De Moura provided a summary on the Asia-Africa Dialogue on Parliamentary Oversight of Poverty, held last October 2004 in Phnom Penh. This was followed by a presentation on the gender implications of MDGs by Mr. Imran Arshad.

Following the introductory presentations, all countries provided a very informative overview of the various parliamentary initiatives on poverty reduction and gender equality being undertaken in their respective countries, as well as providing an analysis of what is being done in terms of meeting their country-specific MDG targets.

Her Excellency Ms Khoun Sodary of Cambodia talked about key challenges to implementing the country's Gender Strategy, which includes reducing the gender gap in the education sector, eliminating domestic violence and increasing the access of women to financial capital. Despite these challenges, H.E. Ms. Khoun Sodary indicated that there has been an increase in women's participation in the formal and informal sectors, including a steady increase of women in Parliament from 5.5% in 1993 to 17.8% in 2003. Furthermore, Parliament is seeking to address various gender equality challenges through ensuring effective debate on various draft bills, such as the Trafficking of Women and Children and Domestic Violence Draft Laws. H.E. Ms Khoun Sodary also indicated that Cambodia will be unable to achieve their MDG targets without effective gender mainstreaming, which demonstrates how gender implications are tied into all other MDG goals.

The Honorable Mrs. Malinee Sukavejworakit of Thailand indicated that the country had been fighting poverty over the past twenty years and that the strategies taken over that time have developed in such a way that they have been able to achieve much success. Through analyzing the data, it was realized that poverty came from a lack of education, insufficient healthcare and low income from farming and that meeting the basic minimum needs for Thai people was key if they were to combat poverty. In order to reduce poverty, Thailand had to reformulate its rural development plan and integrate it into the national economy. With respect to addressing the gender issue, the formation of women's groups in each community was encouraged; and at the administrative level, a Chief Gender Officer was put in place to ensure that gender discrimination issues are addressed. Senator Wiboon Shamsheun also indicated that quotas on women's participation in Parliament should be implemented because if we rely only on the electoral system to ensure that women get elected to Parliament, it won't work. In order to double the rate of women in Parliament, Thailand is undertaking various strategies such as implementing decentralization policies at the local levels and focusing on women's and family education, as well as ensuring that a budget is allocated to address these issues.

Among the 8 MDGs, poverty eradication remains a priority for the Government of Uganda and in order to address the challenge of tackling poverty and improving economic growth, the country has developed and implemented a Poverty Eradication Action Plan based on 5 pillars: Economic Management; Enhancing production, competitiveness and incomes; Security, conflict

resolution and disaster management; Good governance; and human development. Honourable Rwamirama Bright of Uganda indicated that Uganda expects to achieve poverty eradication, as well as halting and reversing the spread of HIV/AIDS and achieving gender equality, by 2017 instead of 2015. The conflicts taking place in the North of the country have halted many of the efforts and for that reason a few more years will be necessary to achieve these MDGs. With regards to gender equality, Uganda has taken various steps to reduce the gender gap. The country has equipped itself with a gender sensitive constitution which allows for affirmative action such as the need for each district to produce one woman MP. Women in Parliament, which have 23% of seats, are very active on gender issues through the Women's Parliamentary Association. While at the local level representation of women has been encouraged through the local government act, with all committees of local governments including women among their members. Partnerships between Parliament and civil society organizations have also been strengthened especially with regards to generating useful gender analysis. In order to empower women and achieve gender equality as expected, Uganda is focusing on the education of young girls and has created various incentives such as bursaries to encourage women to attend university.

Following all country presentations, the videoconference participants entered into a discussion, focusing on issues that were communicated in prior presentations, as well as asking questions of their colleagues on various areas of interest in terms of poverty and gender-related issues. Various salient issues were raised, including the following:

- In Cambodia, after 4 or 5 years, the MDGs will be achieved, however, they will only be achieved in small communities because policies are not implemented uniformly (i.e. pilot based projects are being implemented as opposed to a uniform approach being employed)
- In Cambodia, the domestic violence and trafficking laws have a long history and have actually gone through Parliament in various versions, but have not been passed yet. It is imperative that these types of laws get passed soon (Note: One week after this videoconference, the Domestic Violence Law was passed by the National Assembly of Cambodia).
- Thailand shared their experiences of the One Village One Product initiative and it was indicated that further information would be sent out with respect to this.
- In Thailand, it was indicated that it is not fair that women have to fight to get elected because they do not have the same access to capital and networks as men do, therefore a quota system must be put in place as a sort of affirmative action measure in order to ensure a higher representation of women parliamentarians. Legal provisions should be put in place to have seats for women in Parliament that are filled either by election or appointment or both.
- In Uganda, it was indicated that Parliament has focused on how they can make the budget process more transparent, inclusive and participatory and there has been a review of the Budget Act where they set priorities through consultations with various stakeholders. Gender mainstreaming has been incorporated into the budget as well.

Unfortunately, due to time constraints, we were unable to address the final item on the agenda with respect to identifying specific concrete actions and follow-up strategies that parliamentarians can undertake, and the challenges faced in implementing these strategies. However, we were able to solicit some feedback on future videoconference topics, including:

- Situational analysis tools that will help parliamentarians discover the root causes of poverty
- Affirmative action and legal provisions for disadvantaged groups
- Education, e-learning and education for disabled people
- Conflict and security
- Economic development priorities and reforms (i.e. how can agriculture be promoted as a key economic sector?)

Observations and Feedback

Despite the fact that we had three hours for the Videoconference, we ran out of time in the end. The reason for running out of time was partially related to the fact that we could not form a connection between all participants until 15 minutes after the intended start time. Fortunately, Cambodia and Thailand were able to establish an earlier connection, which allowed them to exchange some information prior to the start of the videoconference. In the end, all participants were able to address many of the issues on the agenda and resulting questions within the required time-frame. However, we were unable to discuss much on the next steps and potential action plans.

The videoconference allowed for much sharing of information and elicited a desire for further cooperation between countries. Thailand and Cambodia participants discussed developing some form of cooperation in terms of education (i.e. Cambodian students going to study in Thailand). Also, following the videoconference, some of the Cambodian women parliamentarians expressed an interest in going to Thailand to exchange more ideas of the challenges and successes of women parliamentarians. There was also a desire for all participants to share contact information so that they could learn more from each other. One example of how such contacts could be beneficial was the offer by Thai parliamentarians to send out more detailed information on the One Village One Product initiative to their colleagues from Uganda and Cambodia. Following the Videoconference, it was expressed that more activities such as these should be held as they are a useful and cost-effective way of sharing experiences.

Annex A: List of Participants

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Cambodia (7)

- **H.E. Mr. Ung Bun Ang** – Senator, Sam Rainsy Party
- **H.E. Ms Khoun Sodary** – Member of Parliament, Member of Protection of Human Rights and Reception of Complaints Commission (Cambodia People's Party)
- **H.E. Ms Pum Sichan**, Senator, Vice-Chair of the Finance and Banking Commission (CPP)
- **Ms Chantou Boua**, Director, Padek (Partnership for Development in Kampuchea)
- **Mr. Sok Hach** - Director, Economic Institute of Cambodia
- **Mr. Bunleng Men** – Project Field Manager, Cambodia-Canada Legislative Support Project
- **Mrs. Mom Sokhayouk** – Deputy Field Manager, Cambodia-Canada Legislative Support Project

Thailand (4)

- **Hon. Mrs. Malinee Sukavejworakit** – Senator, Chief Advisor to the Committee on Public Health & Advisor of the Committee on Foreign Affairs.
- **Hon. Dr. Wiboon Shamsheun** – Senator, Vice Chairman for Higher Education of the Committee on Education, Religion, Arts and Culture, Third Vice Chairman of the Committee on Environment & Member of the Ad Hoc Committee on Senate Affairs
- **Hon. Dr. Kriengsak Chareonwongsak** - Member of Parliament (Democrat Party), Vice-Chairman of the Standing Committee on Economic Development
- **Hon. Mrs. Ladawan Wongsriwong** - Member of Parliament (Thai Rak Thai Party), Chairman of Committee on Children, Youth, Woman and the Elderly

Uganda (4)

- **Hon. Jalia Bintu** - Member of Parliament, Executive Committee Member of the Uganda Women's Parliamentary Association (UWOPA)
- **Hon. Rwamirama Bright** - Member of Parliament, Chair of the Finance, Planning and Economic Development Committee
- **Hon. Beatrice Rwakimari** - Member of Parliament, Member of the Finance, Planning and Economic Development Committee
- **Ms Harriet Amodoi** – Office administrator for UWOPA

Canada (3)

- **Ms Sandra De Moura** – Program Officer, Africa Programs, Parliamentary Centre
- **Mr. Imran Arshad** – Senior Program Officer, Asia Programs, Parliamentary Centre
- **Ms Annie Gingras** – Program Officer, Africa Programs, Parliamentary Centre