



Accountability and COVID-19

a guidance note on inclusive processes
and institutions



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The COVID-19 pandemic:

- Is a major global health crisis that has laid bare and exacerbated massive pre-existing problems in the world's economic, social, and security order.
- Threatens to push up to 100 million people into extreme poverty in 2020 alone and unleash a human development crisis.¹
- Struck at a time of dwindling trust in representative governance.
- Can be contained effectively only through collective action based on trust in the quality and inclusiveness of governance response.

The chance to build forward better:

- The world is facing a chance — perhaps a final chance — to recommit to the 2030 Agenda and turn the greatest reversal of human development into a once-in-a-generation opportunity.
- The policy, regulatory, and fiscal choices in the recovery from the COVID-19 crisis could be the tipping points that transform our societies and our planet for the better.
- These seven tipping points, identified by UNDP, include the revitalization of a rights-based social contract; renewed pursuit of peace; decisive moves to tackle exclusion, racism, and inequality; recommitment to climate and nature-based solutions; reassertion of multilateralism; and closing the digital gap.²

The role and opportunity for parliaments:

- Acting on behalf of people as an informed critic, sounding board, and partner in governments' visions for a more equal, just, and sustainable society beyond recovery, towards 2030.
- Win back trust through finding new ways of working — on behalf of people — to hold governments to account for the quality of pandemic response and recovery efforts
- Critical role of elected representatives via parliamentary processes in the brokering of a renewed and fairer social contract, guided by the public interest and the principle of leaving no one behind.

This note, rooted in UNDP's COVID-19 crisis response,³ discusses practical ways, illustrated by examples, in which parliaments and development partners can work together with governments, civil society, and independent oversight institutions to meet the challenges and avoid squandering the opportunities presented.

1 <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/covid-19-human-development-course-decline-year-first-time-1990>

2 <https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/hiv-aids/beyond-recovery--towards-2030.html>

3 Ibid.

Accountability of immediate response and medium-term recovery

In its lawmaking role, parliament is responsible for passing the laws necessary for running the country during the pandemic and granting emergency powers to the government it needs to combat the pandemic, for example on the basis of a dedicated coronavirus law. The latter have been adopted by parliaments around the globe, at times following a declared state of emergency and other times as emergency provisions. These often give governments the flexibility needed to respond to a fast-moving situation without going through a policy-making process within government, legislative debate and approval or public consultation. They include fast-track measures — typically adopted through executive orders, governmental decrees or emergency regulations — and the use of extended financial powers to fund the public health response and economic relief measures.

In the face of the intertwined health emergency and economic crisis, many governments have been taking far-reaching decisions (including not to take action) that affect entire populations. When not debated publicly in parliament, such decisions fail to receive scrutiny and may lack national ownership. Likewise, when emergency powers are applied indiscriminately to all decisions, both related and unrelated to the pandemic, the rule of law risks being replaced by the rule of decree.

Bringing the pandemic under control does not mean things will go back to normal. Governments need to offer transparency on their handling of the coronavirus: the effectiveness of their interventions and the adequacy of underlying legislation will need to be reviewed. The threat of continuing emergency measures affecting people's rights and freedoms past the immediate threat to public health is beginning to manifest in many contexts. Informed by and supportive of the work of independent oversight institutions, civil society, and media, parliament should serve as the center of democratic accountability for COVID-19 responses.

Furthermore, the human misery of COVID-19 is now being compounded by the global economic crisis that it has provoked, and that is translating into mass unemployment, economic recession, fiscal deficits, disrupted supply chains, and food and resource insecurity. As the immediate public health considerations gradually give way to many more — and often much harder — political choices on the course of economic recovery, it will be more and more challenging to maintain the confidence of entire generations affected, especially in places where it had already been at an all-time low as the crisis hit. This in turn may risk further shocks to public trust and stability. Parliament should be the place to present, probe, and publicly debate such political choices, legitimize them by providing opportunities for meaningful participation, and provide accountability for the resources received, borrowed, and spent on recovery.

Perhaps most importantly — through its power of scrutiny, agenda-setting, public engagement, and outreach — parliament must urgently honor the 2030 Agenda's pledge of leaving no one behind. The pandemic has exposed deep-seated inequalities the world over, placing disproportionate costs on those already vulnerable, including the global poor, the informal sector, migrant laborers, daily-wage workers and refugees. Many of the most vulnerable among them are women. Engaging with constituencies and communities is essential to ensure that support reaches and does not disadvantage those already underserved by the medical system or living in poverty. So is liaising with local and municipal authorities, considering that cities have been epicenters of the pandemic. No less important — as the pandemic rapidly expands into the developing world, coming on top of extreme levels of poverty and a lack of conditions for hygiene or social distancing — parliaments in donor countries will need to defend official development assistance (ODA) and offer debt relief and flexibility on remittance payments.

Scrutiny of the immediate response

In response to the challenges of remote working and social distancing, many parliaments have found ways to remain functional through new procedures and ways of working. Whether sitting in plenary or in existing or new special committees or task forces, parliamentarians must hold the emergency response up to scrutiny to prevent abuse and excess by the executive arm, while ensuring that public health systems and social services receive adequate support and that measures are in place to protect people's immediate livelihoods.

While fast-track processes may prevent parliament from fully scrutinizing emergency legislation prior to its taking effect, it is a good and necessary practice to put in place a continuous review mechanism to ensure timely course-correcting as necessary. For effective scrutiny of emergency response, MPs need systematic access to information by the responsible government agencies, experts, constituents, and local authorities in order to consider the following:

- **Effectiveness and efficiency:** Whether public health and relief response are adequately designed, costed, and resourced; are informed by and produce new evidence; and effectively protect lives and livelihoods.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Parliament of New Zealand set up a dedicated committee which met in public via videoconference to question ministers and officials on actions taken under the notice.

→ **Leaving no one behind:** Whether measures identify and reach those especially vulnerable to the health and economic impacts of COVID-19 and who for various reasons may be excluded from healthcare services, information campaigns, economic support packages, cash transfers, or other social safety nets (such as the underinsured, the homeless, minorities, undocumented persons, refugees, elderly, persons with disabilities, LGBTI persons); whether resources are not being diverted from essential services for the most vulnerable.

In the United States, a cross-party dialogue led to the creation and adoption of a \$3-trillion coronavirus relief package, balancing healthcare, employment, and individual and business support priorities.

→ **Preventing disproportionate impact on women and children:** Whether steps are being taken to identify, prevent and mitigate adverse impacts of containment and mitigation on women and children, including an increase in domestic violence; whether resources are being diverted from life-saving healthcare services for women; and whether those caring for the ill and performing other essential services are being protected, supported, and fairly compensated.

In Georgia, the Parliamentary Gender Equality Council has been developing a gender analysis on the impact of the pandemic and economic consequences for women and girls.

In Brazil, the Congress has approved a 3-month concession of R\$ 600 (US\$ 120) to each informal worker and R\$ 1,200 (US\$ 240) to each woman-headed single-parent household.

→ **Ensuring respect for human rights and the rule of law:** While restrictions on certain rights to contain the pandemic may be justified, oversight actors — especially parliaments — must be aware of and challenge those which are discriminatory, disproportionate, non-transparent, and not clearly limited to the time of the public-health emergency. For example, at a time of intensified collection and sharing of potentially sensitive personal data, such as health or medical information, and increased surveillance, it is the role of parliament to scrutinize government measures for compliance with citizens' right to privacy and relevant data-protection legislation.

In the UK, an emergency coronavirus bill contained drastic measures to contain and slow the spread of the virus, including by strengthening the quarantine powers of police and immigration officers. In tandem, the Joint Committee on Human Rights announced an inquiry into the human-rights implications of the Government's response to the crisis.

Promoting freedom of information and transparency of COVID-19 response and recovery

It is equally important to ensure that efforts to stop misinformation and harmful content from spreading do not thwart freedom of expression and the necessary exchange of information. UN Secretary General António Guterres has referred to the COVID-19 pandemic as "a time when, more than ever, governments need to be open and transparent, responsive and accountable to the people they are seeking to protect." It is the role of elected representatives to proactively engage with the people and ensure the dissemination of reliable and evidence-based information, address misinformation, and invite public feedback. Examples of parliamentary actions to improve freedom of information and transparency of COVID-19 response and recovery include:

→ **Transparency in government reporting:** Scrutiny of the transparency of government reporting and forecasting of official epidemiological data; as well as government's regular, transparent, public and user-friendly communication on risks, preventive and containment measures, the availability and use of public resources, and public health and relief measures, including their scope and eligibility.

In Iran, the report by the Parliamentary Research Centre from April 2020 questioned and verified the numbers of COVID-19 victims reported by the government, warning of the consequences of continued weak quarantine measures and delay in extending financial support to low-income people hit by the crisis.

→ **Communications infrastructure:** Mobilizing parliamentary communications infrastructure to reach different groups of the public — including those at risk of being left behind, technologically excluded or living in remote areas — with information from official and credible sources.

In Timor-Leste, UNDP supported the Parliament with the production of videos raising public awareness about the COVID-19 pandemic and response measures.

→ **Expert information:** Creating conditions for medical professionals and relevant experts, including scientists, to speak freely and share accurate and vital information with each other and the public. This includes post-legislative scrutiny of the fitness-for-purpose of whistleblower-protection frameworks.

In France, parliament sought to learn from other countries' successes in responding to the pandemic. Speaking before the Senate's commission of inquiry, South Korea's Ambassador detailed his country's most effective actions in stemming the spread of the virus, including partnerships between the government and biotechnological companies to ramp up testing and deploy contact tracking apps. He also reflected on the country's emergency legislation, which allowed for a timely staffing and funding boost for the Center for Disease Control and Prevention.

→ **Public parliamentary debate:** Upholding, to the extent possible, the function of public parliamentary debate, to enhance the transparency and understanding of political — as opposed to public-health or economic — decisions made by government using emergency powers.

→ **Institutional transparency:** Ensuring institutional transparency through media briefings and the use of other channels. This is to keep the public informed about changes to the parliamentary process resulting from the response to the pandemic, the impact on its functions, and opportunities to engage.

→ **Communications with government:** Maintaining regular coordination and communication with responsible government departments and public health agencies, for example through a dedicated unit within the secretariat, to ensure access to up-to-date epidemiological data, policy information, and guidance.

→ **Regulatory frameworks and public access:** Especially as to COVID-19 drug and vaccine research and development, parliament should ensure there is a clear regulatory framework in place and that the related decision-making is transparent and scrutinized to safeguard public interest and access.

In South Africa, the State of Disaster that served as a basis for the country's prolonged lockdown, and which limited the Parliament's oversight powers, was challenged by opposition parties saying that it intruded on human rights without parliamentary accountability. A private member's bill tabled in October 2020 to make changes to the Disaster Management Act would allow for the introduction of states of disaster for a period of three weeks, and require a 60% vote in the National Assembly to extend them every three months.

Accountable planning and financing of crisis response and recovery

During the crisis, a sudden influx of funds — including international assistance, and an urgent mobilization of infrastructure, goods, and services — may bypass anti-corruption and transparency standards in procurement processes and create opportunities for abuse. Equally, social assistance and economic stimulus interventions such as cash transfers also present corruption risks throughout the chain, from fund allocation to government programmes, to identification and qualification of recipients, to the management by responsible agencies and the actual transfer to recipients. Finally, the urgent need for expertise and leadership to spearhead crisis responses opens the door to circumventing public appointment standards and processes.

By holding the government to account for its management of public resources and expenditures, parliament is at the center of the domestic accountability cycle. The COVID-19 response puts public bodies under intense pressure to act and may leave little time for

parliamentary deliberation. Given the unprecedented amounts of money being injected into the economy, however, decisions cannot be left to governments alone. There are ways in which legislatures can prioritize a focus on anti-corruption measures for greater effectiveness of responses and recovery:

→ **Scrutiny, authorization, and monitoring of emergency spending, procurement, and appointments:**

All budgetary spending during the pandemic should be subject to parliamentary authorization, whether ex-ante or ex-post. While avoiding delays, parliament should scrutinize spending proposals to ensure compliance and accountability for emergency expenditures, clarity of objectives, scale of expenditures, and expected impact on citizens and economic actors, as well as broad-based legitimacy of the response. This is also key to ensuring that measures reach the people and entities they are meant to serve. In any case, legislators should be aware of the use of emergency public spending, procurement, contracting and appointments, and, where irregularities are found, hold the responsible agencies to account. Likewise, through constituency links, MPs are best placed to help identify and draw policymakers' attention to the most appropriate social and economic policy responses, as well as priority areas and recipients, to make sure no one is left behind. Full social and economic support packages should be presented to, debated by, and authorized by parliament. It is important for parliament to systematically involve constituents and civil society and maintain strong professional relationships with the media, to monitor the outcomes of public health, social, and economic relief measures, and to track the feedback of end-users and recipients.

In Canada, the Government's public-health measures are scrutinized by the parliamentary Committee on Health, while the Public Accounts and Finance Committees and the Auditor General oversee emergency expenditures to ensure accountable and effective use of resources. In addition, the COVID-19 Economic Response Plan is being scrutinized by the Parliamentary Budget Officer.

→ **Recording, tracking, and reporting COVID-19 expenditures:**

It is important for parliament to call on government departments to set up a mechanism for tracking, reporting, and accounting for measures adopted during the pandemic, accompanied by performance indicators and forecasts of medium- and long-term costs and risks. Such information will help policymakers and oversight institutions, including parliament, identify gaps, shortcomings, and areas for course-correction. It will also allow for identifying and ending temporary funding arrangements at the appropriate time. Ideally, when crisis response and recovery are funded through contingency appropriations, re-allocations or supplementary budgets, for maximum accountability, tracking and recording should be done through dedicated budget lines.

UNDP has been supporting budget committees in the parliaments of Cabo Verde, Sao Tome and Principe, and Guinea Bissau by applying a standardized budget analysis framework tool applied to the 2020 budget amendments and 2021 budget proposals focusing on the impact of COVID-19 pandemic, including gendered impacts.

→ **Monitoring of public debt:**

Most of COVID-19-related stimulus financing comes from increased government borrowing. The debt loads of already heavily-indebted governments pose a threat to their continued pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). There is an urgent role for finance and public-accounts committees to monitor the government's management of public debt and borrowing and lending process to ensure compliance with any national debt-management framework, or to ensure that new frameworks are properly scrutinized.

→ **Accountability of international cooperation:**

The devastating economic impacts of the pandemic, compounded by long-term adverse trends in development assistance, threaten not only lives and livelihoods but also hard-won gains towards the SDGs. Further and sharper declines in the flow of foreign assistance to the poorest, most fragile, and conflict-affected countries can diminish opportunities for entire generations of women, youth, children, and others at risk of being left behind. Now more than ever, there is a need for parliamentary oversight and diplomacy to foster effective assistance, accountability, and coordination between countries.

UNDP's Pro PALOP-TL SAI project has partnered with the University Institute of Lisbon ISCTE Business School, to deliver a series of webinars on public debt monitoring and the parliamentary scrutiny of public expenditure and PFM in the current context of COVID-19 pandemic.

Through budget oversight, parliaments in donor countries can help ensure their governments maintain levels of ODA and earmark funds for urgent assistance, and hold them to account to fulfill their international commitments under the 2030 Agenda. They also have a role to play in ensuring domestic accountability of aid through scrutiny, as called for by the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness and the Accra Agenda for Action. They can do so, for instance, by probing whether funding is made available through existing channels that follow anti-corruption standards; whether anti-corruption measures are built into supported interventions; and whether they promote a more proactive government approach towards disaster planning and preparedness.

In recipient countries, where new ODA is proposed, it is essential that it be presented and scrutinised by parliament “on the books” in the same way as domestic revenue and expenditures. Where aid is off-budget, parliament should seek engagement in the policy cycle as a way to monitor revenue and spending. Legislators should also engage in consultations with the executive and donors to ensure recovery assistance that reaches those at risk of being left behind. In all contexts, legislators should work closely with their countries’ accountability institutions, including Supreme Audit Institutions and anti-corruption bodies, and civil society, to hold their governments accountable to taxpayers for the effectiveness and impact of such assistance on those at greatest need for it.

In the fight against COVID-19, the world needs a vaccine and medicines developed as soon as safely possible. All countries are concerned about access to a vaccine and medicines. There is a role for parliamentary diplomacy in guarding against the unsafe, premature, or unethical deployment of a vaccine. One concern within all countries will be affordability and access for all, including those most vulnerable and marginalized. This makes the need for parliamentary oversight more urgent. There is also an immediate concern that poorer countries will be left behind or priced out of the market, making the need for dialogue, solidarity, and international cooperation all the more pressing. Over the long term, with more health crises ahead, countries will need to find cost-effective ways of meeting their medication and vaccine needs and decrease dependence on global pharmaceutical business.

In 2016, the Public Accounts Committee of the UK House of Commons, on the basis of a report by the Comptroller and Auditor as well as evidence from a CSO that assists people affected by crises, investigated whether the Department for International Development’s response to the Ebola epidemic provided value-for-money to the U.K. taxpayer.

In Sierra Leone, in the aftermath of the Ebola response, the Parliament tabled the Auditor General’s Report on the Management of Ebola Funds, which found that 30% of funds for Ebola response had not been accounted for.

In a hearing with representatives of the pharmaceutical industry, academia, and medical experts, Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) from across the political spectrum emphasized the need for transparency and accountability in the development and rollout of the COVID-19 vaccine.

→ **Communicating user-friendly COVID-19 spending information:** To enhance transparency and public accountability of COVID-related spending, and where there is no such initiative by government ministries, parliaments and civil society can jointly prepare citizens’ budgets communicating easily digestible information on COVID-19 expenditures and their impact.

In Ireland, Citizens Information Board, is a statutory body which supports the provision of public information, advice and advocacy on a broad range of public and social services, including easy-to-understand overviews of the annual national budget. The budget for 2021 includes a section dedicated to COVID-19, its impact on the economy and the related spending. In the Philippines, a civil society initiative *covidbudget.ph* has produced an online Citizens’ Budget Tracker with the objective of promoting accountability for COVID-19-related spending and tracking the government’s effort in solving the COVID-19 crisis. The initiative is now working with with local government partner Gumaca, Quezon Province, to develop a local budget tracker.

Recording lessons and establishing accountability

Societies have a collective responsibility to learn from the COVID-19 emergency when preparing for future crises. In the aftermath of a crisis, parliament will have the opportunity to contribute significantly to the process of learning and applying the lessons from COVID-19 to enhance future preparedness, resilience and response:

- **Post-legislative scrutiny and retrospective review:** In the medium term, parliament will have the opportunity to exercise post-legislative scrutiny of legislation invoked by the government to respond to the pandemic, its fitness-for-purpose, impact, and consequences. Among laws which may require parliamentary inquiry are those concerned with emergency response, anti-corruption, or anti-bribery and integrity. By the same token, retrospective reviews of government pandemic responses will help parliaments assess whether evidence-based approaches were deployed, whether interventions helped, harmed, or were indifferent, and to urge action on lessons learned, including legislative amendments. Committee inquiries and reports should provide opportunities and a forum for stakeholders, including civil society, including those most vulnerable and at increased risk, to meaningfully participate.

The retrospective review will be an opportunity for countries to analyze digital approaches and investments made by governments during the crisis, including digital cash transfers, e-service delivery or digital health services, to name some. The insights into what worked and what did not will inform future strategies and help build resilient digital infrastructure to support overall crisis response. Some of the most vital issues for parliaments in countries that have seen a significant roll-out of technologies will be whether the technology's usage and innovation have succeeded in promoting greater transparency, accountability, integrity and effectiveness of pandemic response, and inclusive participation. Related to this is the question of whether such new solutions have led to digital exclusion and how to mitigate such outcomes in the future.

In Nepal, the Legislation Management Committee of the Upper House of Parliament has conducted a post-legislative scrutiny of the 56-year old Infectious Disease Act of 1964, which has served as the basis of the Government's action to contain the spread of the novel coronavirus.

- **Audit:** Tabling and following up on financial and performance audits of COVID-19 measures carried out by Supreme Audit Institutions will be useful in understanding the impact of policies, establishing accountability and drawing lessons for the future.

In the Maldives, the Parliament added an amendment to a report by the Finance Committee on the Government's relief programme for families and businesses affected by the pandemic, for a financial audit of the government spending, debt, and foreign aid during the COVID-19 crisis in the country.

AREAS FOR SUPPORT

- **Encourage and support governments** to publish timely and accurate updates on the utilization of COVID-19 emergency relief funds.
- **Strengthen technical and functional skills** of parliaments, Supreme Audit Institutions, and civil society to underlie strong public financial management systems that are capable of identifying and preventing corruption.
- **Leveraging digital technologies** for building parliamentary capacities for scrutiny and interaction with government, civil society, and the media.
- **Supporting partnerships** with civil society, academia and the private sector that could best support digital approaches.
- **Facilitating parliament and CSO access to expertise** on best-fit practices and approaches for response monitoring and post-legislative scrutiny.

Collaboration with oversight bodies

Systematic collaboration with Supreme Audit Institutions, Anti-Corruption Commissions, Ombudsmen, and other oversight entities is crucial in informing parliamentary monitoring and retrospective review of the response and recovery measures. It is important for parliament to receive, review, and respond to oversight entities' opinions, reports, and calls for inquiry.

In Scotland, the bodies responsible for oversight of equality and human rights — Children and Young People's Commissioner, Scottish Human Rights Commission and the UK Equality and Human Rights Commission — joined together to urge the Scottish Parliament's Equalities and Human Rights Committee to consider undertaking an inquiry into the equality and human rights implications of the novel coronavirus.

AREAS FOR SUPPORT

- **Support a constructive relationship** between parliament and independent oversight bodies.
- **Build and make available evidence base** on effective public health and relief responses and parliamentary good practices.
- **Promote the use of LNOB analysis model** to assist in identifying groups that risk being excluded or marginalized.
- **Support parliamentary scrutiny by collecting and sharing best practice** with a focus on public health, monetary and fiscal policy, and international cooperation.
- **Encourage and support governments to produce impact assessments** of adopted measures to enable better parliamentary and public scrutiny.
- **Encourage governments to set up digital platforms** to support data-driven decision-making.

Bridging the gap between people and the state

Apart from providing the public with reliable and up-to-date information, maintaining an inclusive dialogue and monitoring people's experiences of the pandemic is key to ensuring that measures adopted leave no one behind. To ensure public trust in — and therefore the legitimacy — of any far-reaching and potentially widely-contested emergency responses they oversee, parliament should seek and monitor feedback from citizens and engage in public debate. Where people don't trust their institutions, they are less likely to follow advice to stop the spread of COVID-19.⁴

- **Creating opportunities for engagement:** While fast-tracking immediate response measures may leave little to no room for public engagement, people's participation in the monitoring of public health and relief measures should be enabled and encouraged. In the absence of public meetings with policy-makers and legislators, it is important to replicate opportunities to contribute to parliamentary oversight in online settings, to the extent possible.
- **Tapping into new channels of participation:** It is unrealistic to expect that a parliament with no systematic feedback loops with civil society will emerge as an effective bridge between the people and decision-makers amidst a global emergency. This said, with the public debate moving increasingly online, some parliaments may be given an opportunity to tap into new channels for engagement — including those demand-side-driven — and reach new segments of the public. Examples are communities of likeminded people that have been organizing themselves online to influence decision-making.
- **Engaging those at a risk of being left behind:** Digital engagement cannot be a one-size-fits-all answer to public engagement in the time of limited social interaction, as it risks excluding entire groups based on demographic and geographic factors (i.e., people without access to the internet and those with limited digital literacy).

The Senate of Colombia held multiple virtual public hearings, hosted live on Zoom and Facebook, to discuss some of the pressing issues throughout the pandemic. Topics included pharmaceutical security; protecting health workers during COVID-19; and the situation of 1.7 million Venezuelan migrants during COVID-19. Participants in the webinar included, variously, government ministers, scientists and other experts from 11 countries, and health workers themselves. Other parliaments in the region have established virtual channels for public engagement, including through livestreamed committee hearings (Legislative Assembly of Panama, National Assembly of Ecuador), WhatsApp and email (Legislative Assembly of Costa Rica), or witness participation via teleconference Zoom (Senate of Chile).

⁴ <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/gallup/296594/trust-government-lacking-frontlines-covid.aspx>

AREAS FOR SUPPORT

- **Support parliaments in adopting new mechanisms** for participation and soliciting feedback on service delivery and policy implementation.
- **Build civil society capacity to collaborate** with parliament and media in the absence of face-to-face meetings and consultations.
- **Boost innovative approaches on public participation** in decision-making and to enhance the representation and participation of women and marginalized groups.
- **Empower communities with information via new technologies**, such as by putting public finance data online; empowering parliamentary debates and voting via video calling; and ensuring that such interactions can be realized for rural, poor, and marginalized communities.

Looking ahead:

#ParliamentsBuildingForwardBetter

The pandemic has hit the world already facing a cascade of tipping points — social, economic, and scientific — caused by complex global challenges.⁵ These are marked by growing inequalities on an unparalleled scale, unprecedented concentrations of money in fewer hands, and by an alarming increase in global temperature that is bringing one million plant and animal species to the verge of extinction. Much like these challenges, the pandemic and its consequences are affecting people regardless of class, language, and nationality, although the poorest and most excluded remain the most vulnerable.

The world finds itself at a crossroads on how to build forward from the crisis. The recovery decisions governments make now will lock in the direction of societies for years, if not decades, to come. We may return to business as usual, let the crisis leave the most vulnerable as powerless as they had been before and, over time, risk entire societies getting engulfed in a violent social strife. Or, we may seize the chance for a once-in-a-generation transformation and build forward better. Looking back at how collective dissent in the aftermath of historical plagues produced lasting social change,⁶ an alternative future is not unthinkable. But it will require transformational shift in how we organize, make decisions and act.

This means a change in traditional democratic governance that has not kept pace with the rapidly evolving global context and whose failures have been exposed and compounded by the pandemic. If they are to survive the economic nose-dive, nations around the world will need to deliver a new and fairer social contract, guided by the principle of leaving no one behind and putting the public good first.

National parliaments are facing an enormous challenge and opportunity at once to ensure that the long-term recovery does not stray from the shared global compass of the Sustainable Development Goals. To rise to this challenge, legislatures will need to reinvent and reinvigorate their ways of working. This requires them to reassert their role as a vital democratic organ that determines people's needs and ensures that these are met through government action during the volatile times ahead.

The scale of the challenge has been revealed by the current crisis, with many parliaments, including in mature democracies, either sidelined as non-essential actors or not living up to their constitutional responsibilities. At the outset of the pandemic, in March, parliaments in at least 13 countries from around the world and with a combined population of 500 million people had fully or partially adjourned, and only some of them returned or reconvened by the following month.⁷ In another 18 countries, accounting for 1.7 billion people, parliamentary work was postponed or reduced and limited to the immediate response. In still other countries, where parliaments have continued to operate, critical decisions on the immediate public health and relief response have been mired in political partisanship.⁸

At the same time, the opportunity and stakes cannot be overstated: it is hard to imagine that the status quo of worsening multidimensional inequality can be broken without the support of strong elected governance institutions providing accountability, effective representation, and real opportunities for people's participation. Because of their ability to summon stakeholders and build alliances, parliaments are uniquely placed to exercise stewardship over creating a shared vision for the future, align interest groups, and drive the demand for change. If such leadership is lacking, the promises of populist and authoritarian leaders will be an alluring alternative.

Setting expectations and standards for government-led resilience

As governments plan their way out of the crisis, it is not too early for people's representatives to think about how they can help ensure that the pathway to economic recovery reduces inequalities and improves the resilience of our social and economic structures. From local governments,⁹ to research organizations,¹⁰ to civil society,¹¹ to international organizations,^{12,13} new visions of a resilient and sustainable post-COVID world based on equality, justice, and inclusion are fast emerging. Some of the changes have accelerated new and emerging sustainable sectors and practices, such as telecommuting or locally-sourced production and consumption. There is a role for parliament to exercise stewardship on behalf of people over the participative foresight process to make sure that effective policy choices are not dominated or limited by corporate interests and a reflexive instinct to revert to the status quo ante.

Aligning the economy with the planet's natural limits

5 <https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/news-centre/speeches/2020/from-council-to-community-.html>

6 <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2020/04/coronavirus-class-war-just-beginning/609919/>

7 <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/alarm-two-billion-people-have-parliaments-suspended-or-limited-covid-19/>

8 <https://democracyspot.net/2020/04/21/virtual-parliaments-in-times-of-coronavirus-flattening-the-authoritarian-curve/>

9 <https://www.smartcitiesworld.net/news/news/global-mayors-come-together-to-lead-covid-19-recovery-task-force-5236>

10 <https://www.wri.org/blog/2020/03/coronavirus-economy-low-carbon-investments>

11 <https://www.ipsnews.net/2020/04/reimagining-post-covid-world-key-principles-future/>

12 <https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/launch-report-socio-economic-impacts-covid-19>

13 <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/how-to-build-back-better-after-covid-19/>

Without transformational action and investment in a more sustainable economic model of shared global prosperity, the root causes of inequality, poverty, and natural resource pressures will remain unaddressed. After years of rapidly rising global temperature and intensified wildfires, floods, and droughts that have caused incalculable losses across the planet, perhaps it is the current crisis that will force the world to reflect on how exceeding the planet's limits is driving it to the brink of mass extinction.

There is a growing understanding, including among those managing large economies, that the 'take-make-use-lose' industrial model has not only put people in precarious positions, but also depleted the planet's finite resources and dumped waste into the environment. There is also a growing awareness that unsustainable production and consumption — perpetuated by carbon- and resource-intensive investments and lifestyles — have all contributed to the deterioration of environmental health, accelerating the emergence and global transmission of diseases.

The World Economic Forum argues that after years of responding to shocks with the very model that caused them, governments, financial institutions, and corporate troubleshooters are now stretched past their capacity to respond to the current crisis.¹⁴ With plummeting oil prices, the glaring inefficiency of fossil-fuel subsidies, and a pressing need for more resilient livelihoods, the case for investing in a circular, sustainable, low-carbon economy based on nature-based solutions is now ever more compelling for both governments and business. The crisis has already sped up the shift among local champions of transformation. For example, the city of Amsterdam has announced a switch to a *donut economy* that respects environmental and climate limits.¹⁵

Bringing such new models to scale will require all hands on deck. Policy leadership will need to adapt to the new circumstances. This will entail the tremendous task of galvanizing societies shattered by uncertainty, soaring unemployment, and the tragedy of human loss. Through public debate, legislative leverage, good offices and outreach, parliament can play a role in forging a shared vision, understanding and alliances necessary for a fair and just transition. Effective parliamentarism and strong constituency relations can go a long way in fostering a broad-based acceptance of changes and involving groups and communities that do not otherwise see the transformational promise as of benefit to them.

In early 2020, the Parliament of Bhutan held a historic first public hearing since the country's transition to constitutional monarchy in 2008. The objective of the hearing — conducted with the participation of industry stakeholders and government representatives — was to get public inputs on the review of the controversial Mines and Minerals Bill. Following the hearing, the Parliament adopted a progressive Mines and Minerals Act 2020, setting a long-term vision to ensure more transparent and accountable mining operations, taking into account scientific, environmental and inter-generational equity considerations.

AREAS FOR PARLIAMENTARY ACTION AND SUPPORT

- **Parliamentary strengthening programming**, rooted in UNDP's leadership in fostering governance of the future: supporting legislators in understanding and localizing the shift to a circular economy and in building capacity to promote inclusive, effective, transparent, and accountable governance of transition.
- **Leveraging digital technologies** for helping parliaments hold open-ended forward-looking citizen dialogue.
- **Facilitate exchange of knowledge and good practice** among parliaments around the relationship between global health and global sustainability.

¹⁴ <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/03/a-green-reboot-after-the-pandemic/>

¹⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/08/amsterdam-doughnut-model-mend-post-coronavirus-economy>

Promoting people-centered human security

The spread of COVID-19 across the globe has been responsible for untold human misery, for those who have died or fallen gravely ill, for their families, and for everyone who has experienced its direct or indirect consequences. It is proving, moreover, to be a significant threat to human security globally, exposing and magnifying faults in the economic and social order. The global economic crisis that it has provoked is translating into mass unemployment, economic recession, disrupted supply chains, and food and resource insecurity. Fragility is already manifesting across a range of development settings, through increased authoritarianism; stigmatization; social unrest; the disruption of existing political processes; and the proliferation of misinformation. The crisis is calling into question how the long-prioritized investment in national security — or, in some contexts, regime security — benefits people in the new reality they have found themselves in.

The Sustaining Peace Agenda, the 2030 Agenda, and the Women Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda propose a consistent and people-centric vision for human security with a lens of gender responsiveness and leaving no one behind. All focus is on sustained improvements in the social, economic, environmental, and political dimensions of people's lives as the fundamental basis for stable and prosperous societies. All highlight a critical path forward for parliaments in all development and peace settings.

Parliaments can partner with civil society and serve as a democratic channel for articulating people's needs for safety and sustenance, and assess the extent to which such needs are met by their governments. In the long term, parliaments can and should press their governments to produce a vision of a more just, sustainable, and resilient society, translated into policies and programmes that draw on lessons learned from the pandemic. Fundamental to all human security agendas is a focus on the needs of women and girls: addressing the causes of exclusion, discrimination, and violence against them; and empowering them to build society forward better.

Human security represents an effort to re-conceptualize security in a fundamental manner. It is primarily an analytical tool that focuses on ensuring security for the individual, not the state. In line with the expanded definition of human security, the causes of insecurity are subsequently broadened to include threats to socio-economic and political conditions, food, health, and environmental, community and personal safety.

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During a virtual meeting of the regional Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Parliament in October 2020, MPs from member parliaments committed to prioritizing advocacy on the protection of the right to food during the pandemic. The ECOWAS Network of Parliamentarians on Gender Equality and Investments in Agriculture and Food Security gathered to examine their role in mitigating the gender-differentiated impacts of COVID-19 on food systems.

AREAS FOR PARLIAMENTARY ACTION AND SUPPORT

- **Promotion of integrated programming on the SDGs and WPS**, bridging parliamentary development programmes with those supporting government-, civil society-, and local government-led response.
- **New mechanisms for participation** in oversight processes and for soliciting feedback on service delivery and policy implementation; innovative approaches to facilitate interaction with women including from rural, poor, and marginalized communities.
- **Capacity-building for women's CSOs, activists, and rights advocates** on effective collaboration with parliament and new and old media in the absence of face-to-face interaction.

No equal future without gender equality

Building forward better from COVID-19 means realizing women's rights for an equal future. In the face of the pandemic not a single country can claim to have achieved gender equality: although there are stark discrepancies in how various groups have been affected by the pandemic, it appears that women have been particularly vulnerable across the board.¹⁶ Despite the extent to which societies depend on them for frontline response, essential care, childcare or domestic work, women continue to be undervalued, exposed to multiple forms of discrimination and violence, and their choices remain limited. In many parts of the world, COVID-19 has also increased stigma and discrimination against sexual and gender minorities, and is pushed many into poverty and life-threatening living conditions.

Today, 20 years since the adoption of UNSCR 1325 on women, peace and security, we know that empowering women and girls and addressing gender gaps is vital to effective recovery from crises. We also know that removing the systemic barriers that block women's equal participation in society is key to a more prosperous, peaceful, and fair world. Similarly, achieving the SDGs will require the inclusion of all those left behind, including those marginalized on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI).

¹⁶ <https://www.centerforfinancialinclusion.org/building-resilience-how-to-ensure-women-are-not-left-behind-as-a-result-of-covid-19>

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action offer countries a comprehensive blueprint for gender equality, spanning areas of concern which the pandemic is making more resonant than ever. These include poverty, education and training, health, violence, armed conflict, economy, power and decision-making, institutional mechanisms, human rights, media, environment, and the girl child.

Making gender equality a lived reality for all women and girls will require equal pay and sharing of unpaid care and domestic work; an end to violence and discrimination; reliable healthcare and other essential services that meet women's needs; gender-responsive financial stimuli and long-term fiscal policies; adequate social protection policies; and equal participation in decision-making in all areas of life. But gender equality must also include the rights, perspectives and well-being of LGBTQI people.

Parliaments that stand with women will place these issues at the top of the public agenda, prevent them from slipping off during future shocks, and apply a gender lens to all policies, programmes, and expenditures. Importantly, the global challenges of inequality and climate change cannot be effectively addressed without gender-balanced leadership. Emerging from the crisis into a resilient and sustainable future will be possible only if women and SOGI have a diverse representation at the table.

Since 2012, Kenya's High Court has repeatedly ruled that the country's Parliament had violated women's right to equality and freedom from discrimination by failing to pass legislation to enforce the two-thirds gender rule. This was followed by an advisory issued by the country's Chief Justice in 2020 to dissolve Parliament on these grounds. Despite Kenya's 2010 constitution stating that no more than two-thirds of any elected or appointed body can be of the same gender, women currently hold only 22 percent of seats in the country's lower house of Parliament, and 31 percent in the upper house.

Amidst the increased discrimination against LGBTQI people during the pandemic, some parliaments took action to recognise the rights of sexual and gender minorities. For example, the Parliament of Gabon decriminalised homosexuality, while in Italy, the lawmakers passed an anti-discrimination bill that makes violence against women and LGBT+ people a hate crime. Norway has outlawed hate speech against trans and bisexual people, while in the Netherlands, the Parliament voted to enshrine protections for LGBT+ people in the country's constitution.

AREAS FOR PARLIAMENTARY ACTION AND SUPPORT

- **Institutionalize channels for participation** and feedback with women's CSOs, activists, and rights advocates.
- **Reflect on whether parliamentary rules** and procedures promote active participation of women.
- **Maintain capacity in gender analysis**, mainstreaming and the use of gender-disaggregated data by parliamentary committees to ensure gender responsiveness of legislation, policies and programmes, including relief programmes.
- **Conduct legislative review and law reform** to address SGBV, harassment, promote economic empowerment, grant social protection to women in informal economy, and prevent discrimination.
- **Ensure capacity in gender-responsive budgeting** to secure adequate resources for gender-equality policies and programmes as well as monitoring and implementing agencies; ensure adequate resources for increased political participation of women at the local and national levels; and leverage fiscal instruments to promote gender equality.

Delivering on the promise of leaving no one behind

After just a few months, initial lessons from the pandemic are clear. First, the crisis has exposed how much societies depend on health-care workers but also those who put food on our tables, stock grocery shelves, make transport and other essential services possible, care for our children and the elderly, to name a few. Yet despite this dependence, they are also the ones with the most precarious livelihoods, facing disproportionate health risks, and subject to victimization and violence during lockdown. In many places, self-isolation has been an economic luxury that comes at the cost of vulnerable service workers forced to choose between confining themselves or risking infection while at work.¹⁷ There is an urgent need to rethink how we value and protect those without whom our day-to-day lives would come to a halt and who are at risk of being left behind.

Second, inequality has now become a public health issue,¹⁸ acting as a multiplier on the spread of the coronavirus.¹⁹ Without an all-of-society effort to identify and address that perpetuate cycles of inequality, poverty and exclusion, they will continue to multiply the social and economic damage caused by this and future global shocks.

¹⁷ <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2020/04/coronavirus-class-war-just-beginning/609919/>

¹⁸ <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/coronavirus-makes-inequality-a-public-health-issue/>

¹⁹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/15/world/europe/coronavirus-inequality.html>

Members of parliament are uniquely positioned to act as an interface between the people and state institutions, to ensure that government interventions and budgets are informed by the rights and perspectives of the furthest behind. Elected to represent localities or constituencies, parliament and its members are well placed to access and respond to feedback from local communities and to identify those who are vulnerable to discrimination, disadvantaged by decision-making, experiencing inequality due to socio-economic status, and disproportionately exposed to setbacks resulting from climate change, shocks and fragility.

In his written response to the Parliament's question on the COVID-19 vaccine coverage, Singapore's Minister for Health emphasized the importance of prioritizing those at risk of being left behind: the most vulnerable individuals and those most likely to be exposed to the infection, like healthcare workers.

AREAS FOR PARLIAMENTARY ACTION AND SUPPORT

- **Institutionalize citizen feedback mechanisms** so that more people may contribute their voices to public debate and discussion.
- **Create opportunities for meaningful participation** of groups less able or unable to participate in the decisions that impact them, including tools for reaching those living in remote areas, and without access to the internet or digital technologies.
- **Develop or solicit technological and analytical capacity** and partnerships to access and analyze disaggregated data and people-driven information.
- **Develop citizen audit** request system and mechanism.
- **Promote greater parliamentary involvement** in the formulation, monitoring poverty reduction strategies and budgets.

Recommitting to action on climate change

Building a new future-proof economy will need to go hand in hand with a renewed pledge to prevent climate collapse. In combination with circular economy measures — which can reduce up to 45% of global GHG emissions — a switch to renewable energy, energy efficiency innovation, carbon capture and storage, and lifestyle shifts will enable the achievement of net-zero emissions by the year 2050.²⁰

A few months into the pandemic, the world has marked an unprecedented drop in global CO₂ emissions. There is a new hope in seeing how little time it takes for air pollution to dissipate, and for biodiversity and wildlife to start regenerating. We now know that a combination of deforestation, biodiversity loss, and climate change have helped bring about the novel coronavirus, and that will accelerate the emergence and spread of dangerous viruses in the future.²¹ While the temporary economic shut-down isn't a recipe to stop climate change, rebuilding economies in a more sustainable way may be a chance for humanity to slow down irreversible climate change.

In Ukraine, where the recession caused by the pandemic had led to mass non-payments to renewable energy producers, the Verkhovna Rada passed a law reducing tariffs for solar and wind energy generation. The objective was to create long-term legislative certainty and protect investors. The change could help address current challenges and, in the long run, pave the way for a more sustainable development of Ukraine's renewable energy system and the achievement of green goals.

The UN Secretary General has proposed six different climate-related actions for countries to embark on a path that tackles climate change.²² By virtue of its responsibility for overseeing the implementation of its country's climate pledges, parliament will need to ensure that the road to recovery is guided by these pledges.

²⁰ <https://www.ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/news/completing-the-picture-new-circular-economy-and-climate-change-paper-presented-at-the-cop25>

²¹ https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/2018/02/WGIAR5-Chap11_FINAL.pdf

²² <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1062752>

UNSG ACTIONS FOR A CLIMATE-POSITIVE RECOVERY

1. Deliver new jobs and businesses through a green and just transition while accelerating the decarbonization of all aspects of the economy.
2. Use taxpayers' money to create green jobs and inclusive growth when rescuing businesses.
3. Shift economies from grey to green, with using public financing that makes societies more resilient.
4. Invest public funds in the future, to projects that help the environment and climate.
5. Consider risks and opportunities for national economies as the global financial system works to shape policy and infrastructure.
6. Work together as an international community to combat COVID-19 and climate change.

Empowering public participation and protecting civic space

Free and vibrant civil society is a necessary partner for decision-makers in making progress towards the SDGs. Although civil-society actors and social movements have been long engaged in systems-change, during the pandemic they have emerged as champions of effective local response, filling in for slow and unprepared governments, identifying and meeting the needs of communities, protecting democratic rights, and fostering innovation.²³ Free civic space will need to be at the heart of the new model of governance. Through oversight and legislative action, parliament can re-empower civil society by overhauling long-term dangerous trends in restricting civic space, including restrictions on civic freedoms introduced as part of COVID-19 response.

ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights is a regional network of current and former parliamentarians with a mission to advance human rights and democracy in Southeast Asia. During COVID-19, the network and its members have produced reports and resources, including a series of webinars, to keep MPs in the region aware of the impact of COVID-19 response on human rights, including sweeping free speech restrictions under the pretext of combating the spread of false information.

AREAS FOR PARLIAMENTARY ACTION AND SUPPORT

- **Establish new and stronger forms of systematic relationship** with civil society, communities and social movements to cultivate a collective ownership of the post-COVID transformation.
- **Promote and restore citizen oversight** by scrutinizing laws and challenging those which interfere with the right to freedom of association, freedom of speech, and the right to protest.
- **Renew the commitment to individual privacy**, data protection, and transparency of the surveillance systems by scrapping and investigating surveillance mechanisms deployed during COVID-19 response.
- **Promote constructive relationship** between parliamentary committees and NHRIs for the promotion, protection, and monitoring of human rights and civic freedoms.

Overseeing crisis and disaster preparedness

The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction and WHO's International Health Regulations (2005) classify biological hazards, such as the novel coronavirus, among sources of risk whose underlying factors, vulnerabilities, and impact go beyond the health sector and threatens entire systems. The COVID-19 disaster reflects the main message of the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR): risk is systemic, and crises are cascading. By the use of systematic analysis to identify and reduce exposure to risks, a country can greatly reduce the impact of disasters.

²³ <https://mailchi.mp/un/civilsocietycovid-19>

Parliament has a role to play in promoting disaster risk reduction (DRR) and preparedness strategies and in ensuring that a robust system is in place to reduce exposure to multidimensional disasters. Areas for parliamentary action include the development of disaster-planning and risk-response legislation and the amendment of existing laws to capture lessons learned both from COVID-19 and scrutiny of the current response. Funding being the ultimate indicator of government's preparedness, parliament must ensure that taxpayers' money is being directed to building resilience to future crises. Through public debate, parliament can build awareness and ownership of such priorities.

UNDRR Africa offers a set of preliminary recommendations in response to the current pandemic, and these can guide legislators in their early action.

Bangladesh has been praised for its wide-ranging climate-change adaptation measures and coastal-resilience planning, which have significantly reduced cyclone casualties. The Parliament has established a Standing Committee on Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief. Strong leadership and partnership between the government and parliament have been vital in making climate-change adaptation and disaster preparedness the country's development priorities. In 2019, the Bangladesh parliament unanimously passed a motion declaring a "planetary emergency," calling on the world to work "on a war footing" to combat climate change.

UNDRR AFRICA, KEY RECOMMENDATIONS:

ADDRESSING DISASTER RISK REDUCTION OF MULTIPLE HAZARDS DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS

- Use risk as an opportunity for transformative action.
- Harness the role of the youth and young people in creating innovative solutions.
- Prioritize psychosocial support, as some communities face the 'triple-whammy' of multiple disaster impacts.
- Health pandemics must be mainstreamed in disaster preparedness and contingency planning, as they are often neglected.
- Support local frontline response organizations that have limited financial resources.
- Leverage COVID-19 as an opportunity to strengthen collaboration and 'integrated' actions across different sectors.
- Prioritize long-term solutions that are climate-smart, as climate-change impacts combine with COVID-19 to disproportionately affect the most poor and most vulnerable.
- Advance stimulus packages for COVID-19 response that provide an opportunity for initiating a transformational and green recovery with the creation of green jobs.

Parliaments fit for purpose

The extent to which parliament can ensure the long-term development, stability, and resilience required to address the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic is ultimately a matter of its strength and vitality, technical and expert capacity, and the quality of its processes. Public health and public trust call for governance institutions that embody the essence of SDG 16: effectiveness, accountability, and inclusion. To function as fit-for-purpose providers of democratic accountability during response and recovery, parliament should consider the adequacy of its rules and procedures. The responsibility for this task rests with all parliamentarians, all political parties, other groups from which members are drawn, and senior members of the parliamentary administration. It requires them to consider the following factors.

→ **Robust, secure, and user-friendly processes and mechanisms for effective delivery of the parliamentary mandate during emergencies:**

The current crisis and the looming threats of future shocks expose the need for parliament to develop new working methods to be able to continue debating legislation and voting, protect their members and staff, and maintain the quality of the democratic process. This may mean the establishment of a legal basis for teleworking and remote or alternative voting, which in some countries requires a constitutional amendment (e.g., Chile, Ireland). Parliaments which had developed, tested, and rolled out digital tools and voting tools before the pandemic hit, such as those in Brazil and Spain, were able to deliver their democratic mandate without disruption. Realistically, developing a digital infrastructure and working guidelines are outside the means of many parliaments; an important opportunity lies in broad-based partnerships with development partners, the private sector, and civil society innovators.

In Samoa, UNDP provided the Parliament with ICT equipment necessary to continue its work online during lockdown. The initiative allowed remote working by MPs and parliamentary staff, including virtual parliamentary committee meetings. In Timor-Leste, MPs and staff received Zoom licenses to ensure continued business and communication during lockdown.

→ **Systematic ways of engaging the public:** Systematically integrating public engagement into their work is critical for parliaments to remain accountable to their people. Meaningful opportunities for citizens participation, mandated by the parliament's rules of procedure, can enhance their legitimacy and quality of parliamentary processes, and are a critical component of effective representation.

'Regulatory Frameworks for Citizen Participation in the Legislative Process in the American and the Caribbean' developed by ParliAmericas provides a comparative analysis of frameworks for engaging the public in legislative processes found in the laws and regulations of 35 countries in the region, including consultation, citizen legislative initiatives, public hearings and the appointment of citizens as members of parliament or as committee members.²⁴

→ **Institutionalization and ownership of the SDGs:** The intersectoral nature of the blueprint for building forward better — the SDGs — and the systemic nature of today's risks require parliament to break the silo mentality of committee systems and ensure coordination and coherence among portfolios. A mechanism for building national ownership of the SDG process is essential for promoting the legitimacy and ownership of post-COVID-19 recovery. Such mechanisms can include presentation of post-COVID-19 national sustainable development planning or long-term recovery roadmaps for debate and discussion; and public hearings and consultations with a broad range of stakeholders.

'Parliament's Role in Implementing the Sustainable Development Goals: A Parliamentary Handbook'²⁵, produced by the Global Organization of Parliamentarians Against Corruption, the United Nations Development Programme, and the Islamic Development Bank, is an easy-to-use resource that can help parliamentarians and parliamentary staff members play an effective role in implementing the SDGs. It introduces Agenda 2030 and lists good practices and tools from around the world that can be adapted to the national context, including on effective forms of engagement of parliaments in national development planning.

→ **Prevalence of the common interest and public good:** There are a number of issues parliament should consider when reflecting on how and whether its rules and procedures serve the public interest. This includes, for instance, rules on asset and conflict-of-interest declarations by members, lobbying, and the transparency of parliamentary proceedings. Effectiveness of defending the public interest is also related to ensuring members' freedom of speech.

²⁴ 'Regulatory Frameworks for Citizen Participation in the Legislative Process in the American and the Caribbean', ParliAmericas (2018) https://parliamericas.org/uploads/documents/Regulatory_Frameworks_for_Citizen_Participation.pdf

²⁵ https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/democratic-governance/parliamentary_development/parliament-s-role-in-implementing-the-sustainable-de-

→ **Rights and resources of the opposition:** When deliberating on emergency response and forward-looking political choices that will shape societies, economies, and societal and planetary health for decades to come, it is crucial that parliaments make room for the participation of all elected representatives. To fulfil their representative mandate, opposition MPs must enjoy fair and equal access to material and technical resources and facilities. Balancing the interests of government, opposition, and non-aligned parties brings about more accountable and legitimate outcomes. Serving as a space for debate where the opposition has the right to raise issues and the governing party has the right to defend its record will be crucial to managing conflict and promoting national dialogue and inclusiveness. It is a necessary practice for parliament to ensure fair representation of opposition within their leadership and key structures.

In New Zealand, the cross-party Emergency Response Committee is chaired by the Leader of the Opposition, providing 'a valuable chance for constructive scrutiny of the government, that will make the nation's response to COVID-19 better and stronger.'²⁶

→ **Autonomy and efficacy:** Information asymmetries vis-à-vis the executive branch and overreliance on government-produced information obstruct the effectiveness of oversight, while working in a silo squanders relevance, responsiveness, and legitimacy. Access to expertise and resources, including disaggregated data and evidence, allow MPs to become more effective representatives and promote evidence-based development planning, so that no one is left behind as countries build back from the pandemic.

In August 2020, the Parliament of Bangladesh launched the country's first constituency-based data platform, "My Constituency," accessible both via web and mobile app. The platform was developed with the support of UNDP and the Government of Bangladesh, in response to a request by MPs to have up-to-date, SDG-aligned national development data.

AREAS FOR UNDP SUPPORT

- **Facilitating and supporting an international network of parliamentarians** with a commitment to developing strategic foresight activities within their national contexts.
- **Facilitating and supporting fitness-for-purpose assessments** and self-assessments of parliaments and institutions with which parliaments (should) regularly collaborate in the exercise of their core functions, so as to ensure a coordinated and evidence-based approach to oversight. Such institutions may include, for example, the Supreme Audit Institution, Ombudsman, NHRI, National Statistics Agency, and Judiciary and Anti-Corruption Commission.

Role for parliamentary development partners

Well-informed and capacitated parliaments can examine the government's COVID-19 response, recovery, future policies, and resource allocations, including from the perspective of human rights and the rule of law, gender-responsiveness, conflict sensitivity, and leaving no one behind. Overlooking their role in the system of democratic controls risks undermining the support provided to other governance and oversight institutions and civil society. However, many parliaments worldwide have been sidelined as non-essential actors by governments and development partners, exposing capacity gaps and power differentials between governance institutions. There is a clear and time-sensitive need for development partners to support parliaments in building their capacity as SDG 16 institutions.

UNDP assists partners from across the governance landscape in laying the foundations for a fair and just transition to the future. As part of the broader post-COVID-19 integrated governance offer, UNDP must support parliaments in assuming their role in reviving the social contract to reflect people's agency, build trust in institutions, and close the gap between people and the state.²⁷

[velopment-go.html](#)

²⁶ <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/political/412520/special-committee-set-up-as-parliament-is-adjourned>

²⁷ <https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/hiv-aids/beyond-recovery--towards-2030.html>