

Executive summary

The World e-Parliament Report 2008 constitutes the first assessment from a global perspective of how information and communication technologies (ICT) are being employed by parliaments across the spectrum of activities for which they are responsible. It is based on the responses and comments provided by 105 assemblies from around the world to a survey on the use of ICT in parliament. It also draws on experiences exchanged during the World e-Parliament Conference 2007 and relevant publicly available information.

The World e-Parliament Report 2008 has been produced for the purpose of helping legislatures evaluate the potential benefits of ICT in supporting parliament's basic values of transparency, accessibility, accountability and effectiveness, and, at the same time, its representative, legislative and oversight functions. Its publication is intended to establish a shared knowledge base among the parliaments of the world and, most importantly, promote international dialogue on these matters.

Throughout the Report, e-parliament is regarded as a continually evolving concept that is rooted in the institutional approach to modern technologies in the complex parliamentary environment. In this context, the document outlines the definition of an e-parliament as a legislature that is empowered to be more transparent, accessible and accountable through ICT. It empowers people, in all their diversity, to be more engaged in public life by providing greater access to its parliamentary documents and activities. It is an organization where connected stakeholders use information and communication technologies to support its primary functions of representation, law-making and oversight more effectively. Through the application of modern technology and standards and the adoption of supportive policies, it fosters the development of an equitable and inclusive information society.

This definition deliberately encompasses both the institutional and organizational aspects of parliament and the inevitable broader societal impact of applying information and communication technologies to its context. Parliament is uniquely positioned to use new technologies to demonstrate the values of openness and transparency in the public sphere, and to influence the information society agenda through this approach. Because ICT are such a strategic resource, the leadership of parliament and its members need to be actively engaged in setting goals and establishing priorities.

The World e-Parliament Report 2008 addresses nine substantive areas where key issues and related findings from the survey results are analysed: a) Parliament, ICT and the information society; b) Vision, innovation and leadership; c) Implementing the vision: management, planning and resources; d) Infrastructures and services; e) Documenting the legislative process; f) Parliamentary websites; g) Building a knowledge base for parliament; h) Parliaments and citizens: enhancing the dialogue; and i) Cooperation and coordination.

The results of the survey confirm that the income level of each country plays a significant role in determining the extent to which ICT are adopted in parliaments. However, technological legacies in older legislative bodies, organizational flexibilities in younger parliaments, and the rapid evolution of technologies are all factors that can help level the playing field among legislatures. Attaining a high level of performance in the application of ICT is not only dependent on resources; it also requires strong political leadership, active engagement of members, a skilled secretariat, well-trained technical staff, and a sustained commitment to the strategic implementation of information and communication technologies in the legislative setting.

Approximately 10 per cent of the chambers and parliaments that replied to the survey have acquired extensive ICT capabilities across a wide range of key application areas. These include developing systems for managing essential documents, utilizing open document standards, creating rich websites that present information through a variety of formats and channels, and providing access to a wide range of online information linked to pending legislation. At the other end of the spectrum, many parliaments lack a strategic plan, an adequate ICT infrastructure, basic tools for members and staff, systems for managing documents and trained ICT staff. The status of the ICT systems and services of those parliaments that fall between these two groups is uneven. Many of them have implemented ICT applications that serve some of their most important functions. But many of these applications appear to be operating at the lowest level of utility and have not been enhanced to take greater advantage of ICT to improve efficiency and effectiveness, or to offer additional services.

An issue of special importance to parliaments in today's world is improving dialogue with citizens. Some chambers and parliaments are exploring new approaches using the Web, and others have plans to test new ICT-based systems. However, currently very few legislatures have any systematic capabilities for interactive communication with citizens.

The Report concludes that there is a significant gap between what is possible with ICT and what has actually been accomplished by parliaments thus far. On the other hand, survey responses clearly demonstrate that most parliaments have plans to improve their use of technology to support their goals and their work. The high level of participation in the World e-Parliament Conference 2007 and the enthusiastic response to the survey indicate that parliaments are acutely aware of the strategic importance of ICT.

Narrowing this gap will require increased cooperation and coordination among parliaments, in partnership with other stakeholders. The World e-Parliament Report 2008 highlights the many opportunities for parliaments to benefit from cooperating at the regional and global levels in the e-parliament domain. Existing and emerging parliamentary networks can sustain some of these efforts, but a worldwide dialogue is becoming increasingly essential. By offering coordinated support and training for those parliaments with fewer resources, increasing the opportunities for sharing expertise and software at a global level and providing greater access to parliamentary information resources, parliaments will be better positioned to fulfil citizens' legitimate expectations, achieve common goals and advance the principles of the World Summit on the Information Society.