

Strengthening the capacity of Commonwealth parliaments through South-South co-operation

The Parliamentary Internship Programme in Sri Lanka

Mohammad Jasimuddin, Adviser (Asia Region), GIDD

Context

Sri Lanka has recently emerged from a civil war that lasted 25 years. One of the legacies of the conflict has been an increasing centralisation of power in the hands of the executive and the weakening of the legislature, even though the country is formally a parliamentary democracy. Elections are regularly held, but in recent years, in the face of intense political fragmentation and inter-party competition, they have been marked by violence, often carried out by activists of the party holding power at the time. Parliament in particular has not been an effective institution that can channel citizen demands and expectations and hold the executive to account. Public disillusionment with parliament and the political process more generally has become increasingly

evident in an environment of growing institutional decay (Uyangoda and Bastian, 2008).

It is in this context that the Government of Sri Lanka actively sought donor support to strengthen the capacity and effectiveness of its parliament and upgrade the knowledge and skills of its parliamentary officials. However, several different donors were not in a position to provide such assistance. For many, larger, donors, the level of support being sought in monetary terms was relatively small compared to the kinds of programmes they usually fund. In addition, despite its importance, parliamentary support remains a relatively rare area of international donor engagement (Power, 2008; Hudson, 2007) (see Box 1). It is against this backdrop that the Commonwealth Secretariat, through its Governance and Institutional Development Division (GIDD), became involved, highlighting important characteristics that have helped the Commonwealth Secretariat add value in its development work. These characteristics include the ability to:

Box 1

Why has international development assistance to parliaments remained rare?

Although this has begun to change in recent years, in general, a wide variety of donors have been reluctant to provide parliamentary assistance for many different reasons. Some of the most prominent reasons include:

- A lack of clarity about exactly how to engage with a complex body and whether the entry point for support should be the speaker, parliamentary committee chair and/or other parties.
- Perceptions that parliamentary assistance is 'too political'.
- The low regard in which the public may hold parliaments and political parties in countries where support is needed.
- A lack of capacity on the donor side to understand and adequately support parliaments.
- The fact that support to parliaments is a long-term process that may take some time to show results when donors are under pressure to demonstrate quick value for money and return on investments.

Sources: Power 2008 and Hudson 2007

- Act quickly and flexibly to support areas that may be considered too small or marginal by other, bigger, players.
- Engage with issues that more mainstream donors consider too difficult because of their politically sensitive nature.
- Promote South-South learning and co-operation.

Concept

This programme of parliamentary support is situated within GIDD's mandate of developing more sustainable, accountable and democratic systems of governance across the Commonwealth through technical assistance and the promotion of South-South co-operation. The Commonwealth Secretariat has partnered with the Bureau of Parliamentary Studies and Training (BPST) and the lower parliamentary assembly – the Lok Sabha Secretariat – in India to support the training of a small group of Sri Lankan parliamentarians who were identified, selected and nominated by both the ruling party and the opposition.

This pairing of India and Sri Lanka makes a lot of sense given their geographical proximity and similar colonial legacy. One of the advantages of this approach is that the



Parliament building, Papua New Guinea. Parliamentary links and knowledge transfer are central to the Commonwealth

Indian parliamentary system is more accessible and historically and culturally more relevant to Sri Lanka than a Western democratic model. Through its ability to promote such South-South collaboration and learning, the Commonwealth Secretariat is also able to circumvent one of the main weaknesses that has characterised more traditional forms of democracy assistance, which is precisely their reliance on idealised Western institutions that are of little relevance to the context at hand (Rocha Menocal et al., 2006).

BPST has been organising the Parliamentary Internship Programme since 1985. Since then, the Bureau has trained nearly 500 parliamentary officers from around the world, including Africa, Asia and the Caribbean. The objective of the programme is to convey a deeper understanding of the working of India's parliamentary democracy and of the practices and procedures of the parliament, such as executive accountability, scrutiny of public expenditure, and the role of the opposition, the media, electoral systems and local self-governing bodies. The programme is attended by senior and middle-management-level officials from diverse political and constitutional systems, including political parties, who undergo a period of intensive study and practical training. Held annually in November, the programme was initially seven weeks long, and has by now been scaled down to four.

During the programme, participants gain a thorough knowledge of the parliament and state legislatures in India through interactions with senior parliamentarians and parliamentary officials, who form part of the Bureau's faculty. Visits to the Chambers of the Houses of Parliament to observe parliamentary proceedings, meetings with parliamentary functionaries and study visits to relevant institutions and agencies are also part of the programme. Through short-term attachments with branches and services of the two Houses of the Indian Parliament, participants obtain hands-on experience of how these agencies work. During the programme, each participant is also expected to present a paper on his/her country's constitution, political system, parliamentary practices and procedures, as well as to participate in a week-long study tour of one of India's state legislatures, in order to familiarise themselves with India's legislatures at the provincial level. In this way, the training has a focus on particular processes and issues, rather than adopting a more generic approach.

Commonwealth support has been in the form of sponsorship of nominated participants, covering the subsistence costs of the parliamentarians during the training. Since 2001, 44 Sri Lankan parliamentarians have been sponsored to attend the programme at a total annual cost of £5,000 for each cohort of participants. In keeping with the Commonwealth spirit of sharing costs, the Government of India covers the training for the Sri Lankan officials, while the Government of Sri Lanka contributes to their return travel. This division of expenses ensures that costs to any one party remain low.

Impact and value-added

There is a broadly shared perception that this Parliamentary Internship Programme has contributed to making the workings of the Parliament of Sri Lanka more effective. While the evidence for this remains anecdotal, it does help convey the sense that the programme has been important and is valued by relevant stakeholders. For example, the Secretary-General of the Parliament of Sri Lanka has expressed his appreciation for the type of skills-enhancement and learning that the programme has supported. The overall impression is that the programme has contributed to the strengthening of systems and processes, and to the simplification of procedures.

The intervention is an important illustration of many of the characteristics of the Commonwealth Secretariat that make it a unique and vital development partner that is able to make a difference. Among other things, this example of the Parliamentary Internship Programme shows the Secretariat's ability to provide assistance when other donors do not or cannot, to act quickly and in a flexible manner, and to address issues that other donors may seem less well suited to because these are of a politically sensitive nature. The experience also demonstrates the *esprit de corps* that binds Commonwealth members together, whereby different countries are willing to do their part and share costs in order

to help promote development. The programme also highlights the advantages of South-South co-operation, not only in terms of reduced cost, but also in terms of exposure for the Sri Lankan Parliament to a geographically closer and more relevant parliamentary model than the Western, 'Westminster' paradigm. Finally, through its role in helping to develop this programme, the Commonwealth Secretariat has also leveraged its status as a trusted partner able to bring stakeholders from different countries together.

References

- Hudson, A. (2007). 'Parliaments and Development'. *ODI Briefing Paper no. 18*. London: Overseas Development Institute (ODI).
- Power, G. (2008). *Donor support to parliaments and political parties. An analysis prepared for the Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA)*.
- Rocha Menocal, A. et al. (2007). 'Assessing International Democracy Assistance and Lessons Learned: How can donors better support democratic processes?' Background Note prepared for the Wilton Park Conference on Democracy and Development, 23-25 October.
- Uyangoda, J and Bastian, S. (2008). State Responsiveness to Public Security Needs: The Politics of Security Decision-Making. Sri Lanka Case Study. *Conflict, Security and Development Group Paper no. 15*. London: King's College, University of London.