RECOMMENDATIONS ON THE ROLE OF SMALL ISLAND DEVELOPING STATES’ PARLIAMENTS AND CLIMATE CHANGE
RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE STUDY GROUP ON THE ROLE OF SMALL ISLAND DEVELOPING STATES’ PARLIAMENTS AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Introduction

The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA), the World Bank Institute (WBI) and the Commonwealth Secretariat convened a study group hosted by the Zanzibar House of Representatives from 17 to 19 May 2011, in Stone Town, Zanzibar. The study group formed a component of a broader process, led by the CPA and WBI, aimed at ascertaining how Parliaments could play a more constructive role in addressing the challenge of climate change.

Small Island Developing States (SIDS)¹ are characterized by being geographically remote, on the whole more prone to climate-related natural disasters with the subsequent damage such as natural disasters forming a larger percentage of its GDP. Small populations mean that SIDS have limited capacities and economies of scale, while a small land mass and internal market create challenges in diversifying the economy and may result in competing demands for land use. SIDS’ economies are amongst the most open in the world, which exposes them to external shocks. Furthermore, their key economic sectors, such as agriculture, fisheries, and tourism are based on climate sensitive natural resources.

Stone Town, Zanzibar, Tanzania.
SIDS Parliaments similarly possess distinctive characteristics, including limited capacity and fewer human resources, smaller membership, a focus on using a more limited selection of accountability mechanisms, with a tendency to rely on hearings, and a propensity to engage with civil society organizations.

Recognizing the unique qualities of both SIDS and their Parliaments, the objectives of the study group were to:

1. Assess the knowledge and needs of SIDS Parliaments regarding climate change – its risks, responses to better manage these risks (adaptation); and on efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions (mitigation);
2. Develop a body of knowledge focused on how SIDS Parliaments can better contribute to the formulation, implementation and oversight of climate policies; and
3. Provide guidance on the role Members of Parliament from SIDS can play in facilitating implementation of climate change policies and strategies.

A cross-section of SIDS Parliaments from across the globe participated in the study group. The outcome of this broader process will be a body of work, developed from the perspective of SIDS, to be shared with Parliaments and parliamentary strengthening organizations with a view to enhancing their knowledge on the topic.

The study group recognizes that climate change is one of the biggest challenges to humanity this century. Acknowledging the important role MPs should play in enhancing the awareness of constituents as to the impact of climate change, the study group endorsed the parliamentary definition of “climate change” adopted by the earlier Sub-Saharan Africa Study Group on Parliament and Climate Change.

Therefore, the study group agreed that the term “climate change” can be expressed to mean more unpredictable rainy
seasons, shorter rains, prolonged droughts, floods, and sea level rises. Further, that climate change is caused directly and indirectly from human activities including fossil fuel use, deforestation and forest degradation and agriculture which result in increased carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide in the atmosphere. For their constituents, climate change means the loss of crops, declining productivity, reduced food security, increased water scarcity, increased challenges to energy access, risk to poverty alleviation, inability to produce some valued crops, loss of houses in flood prone areas, increased occurrence and expansion of diseases like malaria, and less water for irrigation. Climate change also adds to ongoing challenges such as land degradation, coastal erosion, sand mining, trans-boundary issues especially water management, and transmigration. It impacts many of the MDGs, adding to the cost and challenge of meeting these goals. 4

Acknowledging, the distinctive characteristics and challenges facing SIDS the Study Group noted that in addition to the impacts referred to in the working definition above, SIDS also face the threat of higher tide waters, storm surges, coastal erosion, increased water scarcity, salt water intrusion into fresh water lenses, coral bleaching, challenges with trans-boundary issues, especially fisheries management, urban growth, and/or rural to urban and island to island migration. All of these problems are exacerbated by limited or lack of land use management.
Climate change is occurring now and if the world as a whole does not reduce the greenhouse gas emissions, the threat to development will worsen. However, climate change also provides opportunities for sustainable and green development and to strengthen governance. The high level of inherent vulnerability of SIDS makes it especially critical to ensure effective policy responses to the challenges which build the long-term resilience of SIDS’ societies, economies and ecosystems. Effective governance and law making is a critical component in a national development that incorporate climate change issues.

This issue provides practical opportunities for moving towards sustainable development in a prompt and urgent way by mobilizing responses anchored in both the public and private sectors with active involvement of the civil society. This entails ensuring that biodiversity is valued, natural resources and water are managed, and that there is development that meets the needs of individuals and communities. Climate change is a political risk and therefore it is imperative to act now, act differently, and act together.
The study group made the following recommendations:

**Leadership**
A response to climate change requires a national strategy. MPs can leverage their leadership role in the community in order to champion a national platform for discussing a sustained multi-sector and multi-stakeholder agenda; MPs can draw upon the experience of their constituents, technical experts, and civil society groups to help frame the national debate and ensure that climate change remains at the forefront of a broader national dialogue focusing on sustainable development and attainment of the Millennium Development Goals; and MPs should seek to mentor their peers in order to assist in strengthening parliamentary engagement on climate change.

**Representative function**
By definition SIDS are countries with smaller populations. This means that Parliaments are naturally closer to the communities they represent. In order to capitalize on this advantage the study group noted that it was vital for SIDS Parliaments to strengthen the performance of their representative function in order to address climate change issues. Specifically,

- MPs need to adopt and use an accessible definition of climate change when undertaking outreach activities in order to raise community awareness around this issue;
- MPs should seek input from multiple external authoritative sources and then, tailoring outreach to specific audiences, disseminate the information to their constituents with the assistance of and through civil society networks, including climate change organizations, the media, think tanks, private sector etc;
- MPs should seek to represent not just specific constituents, but issues related to sustainable development;
- Use the working definition of climate change endorsed by
this study group and the earlier Sub-Saharan Study Group on Parliaments and Climate Change to engage in a conversation with other MPs in order to build a broader coalition within parliament for action on climate change; Parliaments should exercise their representative responsibilities in order to ensure government-led efforts to design and implement adaptation and mitigation plans that reflect the interests of the community; To raise awareness amongst MPs on climate change issues and to provide an inclusive parliamentary mechanism through which likeminded Parliamentarians can engage on climate change issues and internally coordinate the parliamentary response, a cross-party group should be formed within Parliament focuses on climate change; and Parliamentary leadership need to ensure adequate human and financial resources are allocated to enable MPs to undertake constituency outreach and/or MPs should work with partners to cover financial costs associated with effective outreach without impinging on the independence of Parliament.
Legislative function

Where possible, MPs should use their legislative function as an opportunity to draft climate change legislation and provide the regulatory regime (Regulatory regimes include by-laws, delegated legislation and devolved powers to sub-national and local authorities), with specific emphasis on land use and maritime policies;

MPs should support the policy, legal and institutional framework to enhance mitigation and adaptation actions;

A precursor to ensuring the formulation of effective climate change strategies is the availability of relevant information. Accordingly, Parliament should ensure the passage and implementation of access to information regimes;

Parliament should work with the executive to pass legislation in order to domesticate international climate change obligations and commitments; and

MPs should ensure that the legislative framework for climate change and transparency is implemented.

Oversight function

Acknowledging the challenge of providing arms-length oversight over the implementation of government policies in small and closely connected communities, SIDS Parliaments should explore innovative approaches for improving accountability using parliamentary institutions. Specifically,

Recognizing that one of the primary mechanisms SIDS Parliaments use to hold the executive to account is hearings, the committee system should be strengthened and emboldened to provide constructive input into climate change related bills and to provide effective oversight over the implementation of climate change policy;

An All-Party Group could be formed in Parliament in order to examine the multifaceted aspects of climate related issues;

Effective oversight presupposes effective monitoring and evaluation systems are in place and the presence of agreed
indicators by which parliamentary oversight committees can hold public officials to account. Accordingly, MPs should encourage government ministries to develop comprehensive indicators during the policy formulation stage, which are endorsed by parliamentary oversight committees, in order to assess impact;

In order to ensure MPs are able to fully engage on climate change issues, capacity building should be provided to new Members;

Parliament should hold public hearings on pending legislation and to oversee policy implementation and invite/solicit inputs from civil society groups, academics, research institutes, the private sector etc;

Public hearings should be open not only to the broader public, but the media specifically and they should be encouraged to report on deliberations; and Committee reports should be made public on tabling in Parliament.

**Financing climate change mitigation and adaptation**

MPs should request information from the relevant government departments or in accordance with the standing orders of various territories about potential climate financing mechanisms and keep the Parliament informed when the government applies for financing from these mechanisms;

MPs recommend that funds from climate change financing mechanisms should be reflected in the national budget;

MPs should ensure Supreme Audit Institutions are adequately funded to undertake audits of climate change programmes and provide the audit reports to the Parliament;

MPs and parliamentary committees shall get regular updates on the progress of climate change projects and programs from the executive; and Parliamentary committees shall engage with the budget
process so as to facilitate funding for mitigation and adaptation; specifically local agencies must be adequately funded to carry out their functions.

**Executive-legislative relations**

MPs should liaise with ministries or sectors to understand specific mitigation and adaptation actions at the local level and facilitate the involvement of civil society and other stakeholders in these actions.

**Green economy and growth**

Actions on climate change should be viewed in the context of the broader sustainable development and green economy agenda and disaster risk reduction. Green growth can provide a framework for MPs engaging on climate change issues during the performance of their parliamentary functions. Issues covered under a green development agenda include energy security, energy mix to help move towards low carbon and clean air, waste management, agriculture and forest management (especially for soil carbon and decreasing erosion), land use, planning and land tenure issues, better preparedness and management of climate related disasters along with policies, strategies and actions that would allow people and economies to live in a rapidly changing world, especially in terms of changing climate and extremes. Specifically,
MPs should seek to reduce the dependence of their economies on fossil fuels, especially considering the volatility of fossil fuel prices. Other sources of energy (e.g. wind) are better options over the medium-to-long term. However, given the small size of SIDS, capital financing becomes a critical issue along with access to technology.

**National, regional and international networking**

A majority of SIDS are island states that due to their size are increasingly looking to regional approaches in order to address multi-dimensional, intrastate issues such as climate change. National, regional, and international networks, such as the CPA Global Task Force on Climate Change, provide a platform for knowledge exchange and for Parliamentarians to coalesce and coordinate across regions on sustainable development issues and the LDC agenda. Specifically,
The Global Task Force on Climate Change should seek to address the needs of CPA members by adopting a dual track, namely:

(a) Providing a platform for knowledge exchange in the form of policy notes, learning products, and periodic briefings on topics of relevance to Parliamentarians, including MPs from SIDS; and
(b) Use the community of practice to build a consensus around a framework that MPs can put forward during CC negotiations.

MPs should encourage the CPA to develop a framework for international negotiations.8

Endnotes
1. The United Nations (http://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/sids/sidslist.htm) and the Commonwealth Secretariat use population as the benchmark for defining small states; however, there is no consensus as to the population threshold. Currently the Commonwealth Secretariat uses a population of 1.5 million people as a guide to determine which nations should be classified as small states, with a number of larger states with similar characteristics, such as Papua New Guinea and Jamaica, also being included in this grouping.


3. Abuja, Nigeria – May 11-14, 2010

4. Climate Change Formal Definition: Climate change refers to a statistically significant variation in either the mean state of the climate or in its variability, persisting for an extended period (typically decades or longer). Climate change may be due to natural internal processes or external forcings, or to persistent anthropogenic changes in the composition of the atmosphere or in land use. The
United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), in its Article 1, defines “climate change” as: “a change of climate which is attributed directly or indirectly to human activity that alters the composition of the global atmosphere and which is in addition to natural climate variability observed over comparable time periods.”

5. An All-Party Group is an informal grouping of an unlimited number of Parliamentarians within Parliament who are personally interested in a particular subject. An All-Party Group performs best when under the patronage of the Speaker. Such groups can undertake briefings or hearings and provide guidance on parliamentary engagement on select issues, such as climate change.

6. ‘Adaptation’ is any adjustment in societies and ecosystems in response to actual or expected climate change and ‘Mitigation’ refers to efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in order to minimize the effects of climate change.

7. As defined by United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction, the five priorities for action are: 1. Ensure that disaster risk reduction is a national and local priority with a strong institutional basis for implementation; 2. Identify, assess and monitor risks and enhance early warning; 3. Use knowledge, innovation and education to build a culture of safety and resilience at all levels; 4. Reduce the underlying risk factors; and 5. Strengthen disaster preparedness for effective response at all levels.

8. Upcoming negotiations include Durban and Rio.
Participants

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