Workshop on Parliamentary Agriculture Committees
4-6 March 2014
Lilongwe, Malawi

Background Discussion Paper

How can Parliamentary Agriculture Committees increase their effectiveness?

The intention behind this paper is to stimulate your answers to this question. Two important developments frame this work: Firstly, after many years of neglect of the topic by the World Bank, donors and African countries, the World Bank published “Agriculture for Development” in 2008 and proclaimed that “Agriculture … offers great promise for growth, poverty reduction and environment services.” Secondly, it also said “…realizing this promise also requires the visible hand of the state – providing core public goods, improving the investment climate, regulating natural resource management and securing desirable social outcomes. To pursue agriculture for development agendas, local, national, and global governance for agriculture need to be improved.”

There is now increasing recognition of the importance of agriculture, but you will struggle to find studies that look at how Agriculture Committees as an important part of national governance can raise their game. It is hoped that this Workshop can bring together leaders such as yourselves to provide such a stimulus.

But before we look at the specific role of your committees, we have to recognise that Agriculture Committees cannot act independently of the rest of Parliament. Agriculture Committee members have to work for a supportive framework for Parliament as a whole and also a response from government that respect the role of parliaments. Here are just a few of many examples:

a) What is the actual remit of the Agriculture Committee? Is it a sensible division of parliamentary labour? For example, does it both act as the Committee Stage of a Bill and also hold the government to account? What is the position of local government?

b) Does parliament have financial self-government so that there is some credible separation of powers between it and the executive? Does the government recognise its duty to respond to a Committee’s concerns?

c) Who selects the Committees? Do the Ministers come from Parliaments? What is the status of a chair of Committees?

d) How well developed are political parties in their policy making?
e) How well does Parliament deal with cross-cutting issues such as Climate Change or property laws?
f) What is the relationship between the media and parliament?
g) Is it a bicameral or unicameral parliament? What difference does it make?

How do these factors affect the working of your committee? Are there any particular factors that badly affect the effectiveness of your committee?

The roles of departmental parliamentary committees such as Agriculture
Traditionally, there have been seen to be three strands to their work. But they vary enormously in their operations.

A The consideration of legislation
In almost all parliaments, a committee plays a role distinctive from the full chamber of parliament in considering legislation? But is it the same committee as the one that holds the government to account on its performance? Does expertise build up? How effective are the committees in changing legislation? Can the Committee or individual members initiate legislation? What access does the Committee have to outside expertise? Is there a culture where it is OK for an MP to vote against his or her party’s legislation in committee? What changes would you make in the consideration of legislation by Committee?

B Holding the Government to account for its performance on Agriculture
Many of the points made above also apply to this role of the committee. It is particularly important that the committee should have expert resources or access to them in order to evaluate government performance? It is also important that Committees have parliamentary sovereignty to summon Ministers or that there be a duty on government to respond to Committee reports within a given timescale. It is also important that the Committee goes out from Parliament to the grassroots to see how policy and performance are working there.
Committees often miss out on very big issues such as climate change or the poor performance of commercial banks in supporting agriculture. They may also find it difficult to deal with issues that overlap with other committees such as Trade, Finance and Legal issues such as property laws. Sometimes sub-committees will be formed to deal with the business of the Committee.
Again, how would you strengthen your Committee?

C The Representation Function
A well-functioning Parliament with its Committees is central to society. There are messages that must be sent out from Parliament and in-coming messages that must be received and responded to from all sections of society whether these are powerful stakeholders in commercial agriculture or subsistence farmers or scientists. How does your Committee organise these links? Some countries have set up Constituency Development Funds so that individual parliamentarians can have an important role in deciding upon constituency initiatives – including in agriculture.
How does your committee organise this representation function? Can it be strengthened?

Another aspect that overlaps all the above is how the Agriculture Committee deals with issues that are the central concern of other committees but are of crucial importance to
agriculture. Such committees would include Finance, Trade, Legal Affairs, Education and Health. In all these areas, huge benefits could follow with the right policies but how can the Agriculture Committee have influence?

Finally, the Agriculture Committee may wish to interest itself in agricultural affairs at a higher level than the national. For example, African governments signed up to the Maputo agreement with a commitment that at least 10% of government resources should go to agriculture. It would be appropriate for the Agriculture Committee in each country to monitor progress. Similarly, the Agriculture Committee may want to keep in touch with and make representation to the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP).

The Agriculture Committee will also want to keep lines open to agricultural activities by Regional Parliamentary Groups and the Pan-African Parliament. It would want to monitor the activities of the donors in its country to ensure that full account is being taken of agricultural needs since the MDGs are unattainable without improved agricultural performance. Similarly, UN organisations such as FAO and the organisations of the Consultative Group of International Agriculture Organisations (CGIAR) should be tracked, particularly those concerned with major crops in the country.

Obviously much more can be said than in this deliberately short paper. It is hoped there is a valuable framework here whereby Agriculture Committees can consider what they are doing and how it might be developed.

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