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1. INTRODUCTION

“The basic idea is that voters who share cultural traits of generalized trust and respect for others are more likely to hold politicians accountable to high standards of behaviour, and are less tolerant of moral hazard or misbehaviour by their political representatives.”

According to one definition, democracy is a political system in which all the members of the society have an equal share of formal political power. Democratic governments are therefore “those in which fundamental human rights of individual citizens are protected by the collective and in which the views of the population-at-large, not just a ruling elite, are reflected in the actions of government.” The genesis of democracy can be traced back to the Greek city-state of Athens, where the democratic idea of a government responsible to the governed, evolved and rose at the centre of Greek history.

The Ancient Greece’s idea of government gave emphasis to liberty and the studies related to man were the main tenets of ancient Greece. It was their sense of liberty and independence, individual and collective, which inspired them to profound accomplishments in philosophy, politics and science. The Greeks therefore gave to mankind the idea of politics as the business of citizens as opposed to the arbitrary rule of the dictators.

However, the democracy advocated by the Greeks enjoyed a short span of life, due to the rise of a Roman democratic order, who were the successors to Greek ideas and institutions, with a mixture of kingship, aristocracy and democracy. The Roman’s idea of a democracy was the collective welfare of the society. Conversely, the exigencies of

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2 http://www.icpd.org: The Social Origins of democracy
governing an expanding empire led to the demise of individual rights by the power and pragmatism of monarchy and aristocracy.

For a few hundred years, the Empire of the well-disciplined rule of roman legions ruled Europe and maintained peace and security through a means of power attached to the Roman Empire. Nonetheless, with the decline of the empire, Europe's security conditions declined and the country became vulnerable to increasing incidents of brute attacks. Due to the absence of the legions as the empire weakened, fear and ignorance compelled local populations to the submission to arbitrary authority. Consequently, seeing the feudal system as a way to protect their interests and wellbeing, as horse soldiers and warlords protected the local populations in exchange for loyalty. This gave rise to the purchase of physical security and subsistence level existence at the cost of individual freedom.

‘The people’s existence was made subordinate to the rights and arbitrary rule of monarchs, feudal lords and priests. Surrounded by an infallible Pope on one side and a divinely ordained monarch on the other, the population was denied fundamental rights and privileges4.’ This state of affairs gave rise to a rigid structure of governance economic activity controlled by feudal lords and thoughts which were defined by a religion ruled society. Economically, land was the basis of wealth and socially, heredity determined ones position and power. While intellectually, the theological doctrine became the sole arbiter of truth. However, at the core of democracy were the economic, religious and civil liberties, and these were suppressed by forces of religious and political absolutism, and did not re-emerge until the 15th century.

However, today's governance and development challenges have become so varied that authoritarian approaches of governance have proven ineffective in dealing with these. Due to this variance, civil society organizations have become important role players in

4 The Social origins of Democracy
the process of governance and in the strengthening of public policy in South Africa and around the world. This is often achieved by strengthening the participation of civil society in governance and fostering public pride in the matters that concern them. In fact as eloquently expressed by Robertson (2004) “distrust of and despair in democracy are widespread and addictive, and lead to vicious circles of cynicism seen as a universal picture of low voter turnout, low participation in political process and approval ratings for politicians”. Thus lack of effective engagement between parliament and civil society will invariably lead to cynicism.

Regular and shared norms of behaviour contribute towards heightened levels of trust. In the words of Francis Fukuyama “trust is the expectation that arises within the community of regular, honest, and co-operative behaviour, based on commonly shared norms”⁵. Thus trust is the bedrock of sound and legitimate governance.

This approach to governance has proven to be effective as the underlying understanding is that good governance requires the interaction and collaboration of a number of role players in order to curb the multiple problems that exist in society. ⁶.

The varied and complex nature of partnerships is one that needs not to be taken lightly as role players; power and politics surrounding these relationships have a bigger effect on the outcome. The United Nations Development Programme⁷ presented principles of good governance with the argument that ‘good governance exists where those in positions of power are perceived to have acquired this power legitimately and there is appropriate voice afforded to those whose interests are affected by decisions”. Given this logic, this paper presents a discussion on the significance of government–civil society partnerships, and the importance of the roles of representation and inclusivity in

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⁷ UNDP Governance and Sustainable Human Development 1997.
government, as a means of fostering civil society partnerships and promoting an inclusive and representative government that responds to the needs of the people.

This paper locates parliament and civic engagement within the context of social capital. Robert Putnam defined social capital as “networks, norms and trust that facilitate collective action”. Therefore forging a relationship between civil society and parliament should be seen as the sum total of collective action in pursuit of good governance and efficient economic and political outcomes.
1.1. SOCIAL CAPITAL, CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND PARLIAMENT

At the outset it is quite appropriate to state that democracy depends on social capital. In other words democracy depends on a well-defined reciprocal relationship between parliament and civil society. Thus the ease with which parliament fruitfully engages with civil society lies in well-defined channels of information, norms and sanctions. This therefore makes social capital an important determinant of the functioning of institutions and the economic development of countries.

It is important to underscore the point that parliament’s relationship with civil society is not an end in itself but largely meant to induce efficient political outcomes. As such social capital is important for building and sustaining development. Research evidence suggests that political misbehaviour is well punished in electoral districts with high social capital. A study investigating the impact of social capital on political accountability, using data on Italian members of Parliament in the post-war period found that social norms of trust amongst voters are an important factor in accountability and making elected officials accountable for their actions. The theory and practice of government is increasingly concerned with placing citizens at the centre of policy decisions that affect their wellbeing, not just as the target of government service delivery, but as active participants in the policy process.

In 2001, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development reported that while progress has been made in citizen engagement, many OECD countries remain lagging behind when it comes to citizen consultation. In addition, very few OECD countries undertake efforts to engage citizens in policy-making initiatives. Notwithstanding, parliaments engagements with citizens has expanded in many countries the reality remains that citizens engagement take the form of established routines and experiments.

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In many democracies around the world, civil engagement has been attempted and debated, but not frequently well realized as genuine engagement in the co-production of policy and services has required that parliaments consider shifts in their current operations. Citizen centred public services requires genuine engagement from the part of both the citizens and the political support that advocates for genuine transference of power to front-line public servants and Ministers with a genuine compulsion to engage citizens and stakeholders. Social capital should be at the centre of parliaments and government as this is about relations among people, which includes trust, channels of information, norms and sanctions amongst others.

2. THE MEANING OF BEING AN ELECTED REPRESENTATIVE

Representation is the first main component of governance and without proper understanding of its importance; a government may fail in its endeavours. In this regard social capital lays itself out in the representatives. According to Nannicini et al (2010) “an environment of low social capital might breed political representatives who are more opportunistic and less likely to internalize true social welfare”.

In South Africa, civil society as the drivers of change in their communities has a constitutional right to be part of the decisions made by government as these have an impact on their lives. Given this relationship, representation and inclusivity are therefore two sides of the same coin. While this may be a clear analogy to comprehend, parliaments have much to learn about ways of building fair representation that is inclusive to all spheres of civil society. Inclusive representation involves ensuring that there is a wide spectrum of representation within the civil society and governance and that this representation broadens the policymaking approach.

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Racial, gender and cultural diversity have always been important political topics in South Africa. And while this is the case, representation of all spheres of society have had its challenges, with some groups feeling left out of the equation when it comes to representation in government and in government decision-making processes. This is due to the current practise of proportional representation as opposed to direct representation. For example, it has been argued that *South Africa has successfully drawn its many players into its democratisation process and has significantly strengthened its ruling party in order to deal with programmes of social and economic reform*\(^\text{10}\), nonetheless, what remains is for democracy to be adequately aligned with public participation.

### 3. CURRENT PRACTICES OF PARLIAMENTS WITH REGARD TO CIVIL SOCIETY ENGAGEMENTS

Parliament and public engagement highlights important initiatives of good practice that enhance public participation and civil society engagements. A report on public engagements and Parliament\(^\text{11}\) highlighted that while there is still a lot to learn from good practices around the world, the Westminster Parliament is one of the most innovative parliaments when it comes to engagements with the public. Over the last decade, parliaments have had to grapple with the broader political problem of citizens who are neither knowledgeable of the work legislatures are doing nor satisfied with them.

This is a problem that exists in many countries and in broader political spectrums. Examples of good practice in legislatures as noted from the Westminster Parliament include amongst others “a range of thematic tours and visits in the German Bundestag and on Canada's Parliament Hill; open days and night sittings in Switzerland, the Parliament of New South Wales and the Estonian Riigikogu; the Capitol Hill visitor

\(^{10}\) Electoral Institute for sustainable democracy in Africa (2002). *South Africa: Proportional representation. Pros and cons.*

\(^{11}\) Hansard society (2011). *Parliaments and Public Engagement: Innovation and Good Practice from Around the World*
centre in the USA; online forums in the Chilean Senate; and educational programmes such as the Norwegian ‘Mini Ting’ and the Danish ‘Politician for a day.” The report also highlights important areas to consider when engaging the public and the focus of the engagements. These areas include:

- Information provision: for example, education and training materials, website presence
- Parliament as public space: visitor facilities, access tours and exhibitions
- Education: activities and initiatives on- and off-site for teachers, students, and the wider community
- Outreach: civil society links, community partnerships and social inclusion programmes to engage with hard to reach groups
- Facilitation: support platforms for parliamentarians and/or officials to engage with the public, particularly through e-forums or other online, digital democracy mechanisms
- Media: initiatives with print media, broadcasting and new media platforms - both promotional and partnership work\(^\text{12}\).

3. CONCLUSION

This paper discussed the principles of placing the citizen at the centre of parliament and policy making initiatives. The idea of social capital is clearly an important factor for Parliaments to consider as it provides the basis for citizen engagement within parliament and public administration. Citizens who are satisfied and informed and who are increasingly involved in the collaborations with government are more readily able to hold

\(^{12}\) [www.hansardsociety.org.uk](http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk), Parliament public engagement, How’s Westminster doing?
governments accountable to them. While there is widespread challenges in citizen engagements, government and legislatures have improved in their engagements with citizens, but a lot still needs to be channelled into citizen participation and information networks.