

The Potential of Distributed Communities of Practice for International Parliamentary Capacity Building

Prepared for:

Building Distributed Communities of Practice for
Enhanced Research-Policy Interface
An Interdisciplinary Workshop Organized by the
International Centre for Governance and
Development
University of Saskatchewan
May 28-31, 2004

Prepared by:

Bob Gardner
Senior Adviser
Parliamentary Research and Information Services
Parliamentary Centre, Ottawa

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
Focus	1
The Parliamentary Centre and International Legislative Capacity Building	1
THE POTENTIAL OF DCoP	3
Strengths – Or Starting Points	3
Weaknesses – Or Limited Resources	4
Opportunities – Or the Potential of DCoP	5
Linking Up Members and Parliaments	5
Linking Up Parliamentary Centre Staff and Activities	6
Linking Up International Capacity Building Practitioners	7
Threats – Or Barriers to Address	7
Barriers to Building DCoP in African Legislatures	7
Building DCoP within Parliamentary Capacity Building Organizations	9
CONCLUSIONS: POTENTIAL INTO PRACTICE	9
Take Up the Challenge of the Resource Poor	9
Support Capacity Building Best Practices	10
Link Up Capacity Building Practitioners	11

INTRODUCTION

I want to do four things in this talk:

- explore how Distributed Communities of Practice (DCoP) ideas and principles could support and strengthen international capacity building programmes – in particular in parliaments;
- analyze how these potential benefits could be sustained:
 - not just in the obvious resources sense of continuing investments, although that is absolutely vital;
 - but to ensure that any new practices such as DCoP become integrated into the working life of the parliaments;
- examine how DCoP could work in very specific and often quite difficult environments:
 - not just because of the unique nature of legislatures as institutions;
 - but because the countries and setting in which we and fellow practitioners work can often be very resource and technologically poor;
 - so a crucial question becomes -- can the barriers to advanced technologies such as DCoP be overcome in ways that really will support improved capacity building?
- raise a number of strategic directions and actions that funders and policy makers might consider for next steps.

Focus

My remarks focus much less than others on broadening the research agenda. Rather my emphasis will be quite concrete and practical: how DCoP could add to our repertoire of capacity building tools and practices.

While I am a long-time proponent of knowledge management in organizations where I have worked and am broadly familiar with DCoP, I have relatively little expertise in the underlying technology.¹ The unique experience the Parliamentary Centre brings to this discussion is as practitioners with extensive experience in governance capacity building in parliaments around the world. We have found that developing solid networks, information sharing and partnerships with Members and staff in the legislatures where we work is crucial. I will use some of this work as a concrete case study to explore how DCoP could be developed in particular settings.

The Parliamentary Centre and International Legislative Capacity Building

The Parliamentary Centre's:

¹ So it is a very good thing that I am last on the agenda – I have been able to learn a great deal from all the presentations and adjust my remarks as I listened.

mission is to strengthen legislatures in Canada and around the world. We work closely with the Parliament of Canada through our Canadian programs and the involvement of Canadian MPs and Senators in our overseas work.

The Centre's guiding principle is that legislatures should play a vital role in ensuring that government is accountable, open and participatory. Where legislatures fail, government is likely to be unaccountable and unresponsive to citizens.

Unfortunately, many legislatures are weak - poorly funded, inadequately staffed and with little political space in which to operate. But legislatures are struggling to have a voice, to strengthen their capacity and contribute to the building of democratic societies.

The Parliamentary Centre assists legislatures through assessment missions, capacity development programs, interparliamentary networking and , research and publications.

The kinds of capacity building work done include:

- training programmes for Members and parliamentary staff, including working visits and attachments to Canadian and other parliaments;
- organizing policy networks, conferences and forums;
- undertaking needs assessments and developing capacity building plans and programmes in many areas – my own work has been to develop research and information services and strategic planning, but the Centre provides human resources, organizational development, procedural, Hansard and administrative support and training, and many other forms of expertise to assist legislatures;
- supporting computer, technical and other infrastructure;
- linking legislatures and their specialized staff into useful international networks.

For further information see <http://www.parlcent.ca>

The Centre does a great deal of work with African parliaments. The Canadian government has made major commitments to Africa under NEPAD (the New Partnership for African Development) and other programmes and the Centre is a crucial part of the legislative components of this assistance. While there are a range of specific bi-lateral components, a major focus of this work is on several policy networks:²

- the idea is that bringing Members from different parliaments together to work on crucial policy issues – poverty reduction, anti-corruption and gender equity – will help to build up detailed expertise and share experience, and that this improved expertise will in turn lead to better deliberations and policy in the

² I will use these and related programmes in Africa to illustrate my remarks. I am most directly familiar with legislative capacity building in Africa and the Middle East, but in talking extensively with colleagues working in Asia and other areas, these points likely apply more generally.

- participating legislatures, and ultimately to progress on these issues in those countries;
- in addition, focussing in intensive ways on key issues is a good concrete way to build more general policy and legislative capacities within participating parliaments;
 - the networks are a mix of mostly Members but also some staff from a number of parliaments across Africa, plus Centre staff and other professionals to support them;
 - within some enormous technical challenges, these networks routinely keep in touch and share information and analysis on their respective policy spheres.

DCoP arose out of knowledge management meeting advanced information technology – communities of practice going virtual. Our path was a bit different: we established policy networks of parliamentarians with a clear strategic focus and then worked to gradually improve communications within them and their access to information resources – so it was more policy networks going virtual, but within severe technical constraints.

These policy networks can in effect be seen as nascent DCoPs. I now want to begin to analyze how these networks could be greatly strengthened by systematically developing the principles of DCoP, and also to highlight some of the barriers that will need to be overcome in a very difficult resource and technical environment.

THE POTENTIAL OF DCoP

Even the most sophisticated knowledge management, communications and virtual policy networks are as much about political environments, organizational dynamics and working cultures, as advanced ICT and databases. This means that solid strategic planning is the crucial starting point. One of the themes of this conference has been that effective DCoP and other policy networks must have clear objectives. The purposes of the Parliamentary Centre's African policy networks have been outlined above. Secondly, it is always vital to understand the specific environment in which programmes are based.

I am going to use an angle or lens that we are all familiar with: a SWOT-type analysis of the strategic environment for possible use of DCoP in developing legislatures.

Strengths – Or Starting Points

There are tremendous strengths within African parliaments to build upon:

- the most important – and it is an essential building block for all capacity building – is the enthusiasm and commitment of the Members and staff;
- these Members and their home parliaments value capacity building assistance highly;
- they have a real thirst for knowledge; and

- they are open to technological innovation.

Another component of sound planning is to start by defining project or organizational requirements.

- there is certainly a need for comprehensive capacity building assistance for developing parliaments;
- building the information management and communications capacities of these parliaments and increasing their access to research and information resources is a vital component of supporting strong legislatures;
- building networks of parliamentarians and practitioners to focus intensively on key policy issues seems to be an effective method of specific capacity building;
- more effectively linking up these networks, particular institutions such as legislative libraries, and parliaments in general to share experience and build skills has great potential.

How DCoP can contribute to this linking is the issue for analysis here.

Weaknesses – Or Limited Resources

The main barriers to be overcome involve resources:

- the ‘digital divide’ is well understood. There are varying, but at times tremendous technical barriers in most African countries:
 - poor or non-existent Internet connections;
 - where available, connections can be slow;
 - unreliable electricity;
 - limited hardware and technical expertise;
- parliaments tend to have very limited budgets and often rely on donors for technical and other infrastructure funding;
- one result is that most parliaments are not well connected or networked.

The Parliamentary Centre’s African team has learned that communications and policy development efforts must be very aware of the technical and resource context of the Members, networks and parliaments with which they work. For example, in most African countries connectivity problems mean that graphic-heavy material or large attachments simply aren’t going to get through. While most DCoP have all kinds of documents flying back and forth continually, network communications is far more constrained in these settings. Similarly, publishing policy documents on the Centre’s Web site or developing portals or lisservs has limited impact where Internet access is poor. Simply downloading and distributing documents can be problematic without adequate printers and copiers, let alone money for paper. Most Members do not have their own computers, offices or good connections at their parliaments, and many have to rely on Internet cafes.

The challenge then becomes how to overcome or sidestep these obstacles to ensure Members and partner parliaments are still able to get the programme information they need and the policy networks are able to function. More generally, it is also important to try to help those parliaments get the benefit of modern electronic communications to whatever extent possible.

Opportunities – Or the Potential of DCoP

I think DCoP could support capacity building efforts in some very interesting ways and will look at three possible directions:

Linking Up Members and Parliaments

I mentioned earlier that networks of Members focussing on key policy issues had been a major capacity building strategy for the Parliamentary Centre in Africa: the whole point of bringing Members from the various parliaments together to specialize in poverty reduction and other key areas was, in effect, to create strong communities of practice, and these policy networks or communities are certainly dispersed.

These networks could be seen as an already established framework, within which the application of strong DCoP technology and practices could greatly improve internal communications, information sharing and overall policy development.

We have been relying on a great deal of virtual communications – although most fairly low end such as e mail. I have been reassured that a major theme of this conference has been that technology supporting DCoP does not need to be complex; that, in fact, well organized and managed e mailing lists can be an entirely effective communications tool.

The obvious benefits of publishing the necessary background documents and developing specific portals or resource pages on the Parliamentary Centre site for the policy networks has been constrained by poor connectivity in many countries. Well-planned and focussed investments could alleviate this barrier. For example, if the problem is lack of Internet access or slow speed, then a partial solution could be funding and implementing high-speed Internet connections in an appropriate central office within partner parliaments. These bodies, whether the legislative library, Speaker's office, or offices of the Clerk or Secretary General, could then download and distribute material to network Members.

It is also important to look ahead 2-3 years to analyze how these resource and technical problems might change.

- for example, if connectivity problems could be alleviated, tools such as Web-based and other video-conferencing would be useful for training and information sharing;³

³ The productive use of video conferencing was described by our speaker from the World Bank Institute. Some African legislatures have used the WB infrastructure for capacity building purposes.

- another issue to explore would be to what extent cabling, network, electrical and other infrastructure barriers could, in effect, be leaped over by application of wireless technology.

We have also been emphasizing more specialized linkages. For example, the libraries in most African legislatures tend to be fairly small and under-resourced.

- the Parliamentary Centre has supported the establishment of regional associations of legislative libraries;
- it has funded participation of librarians in these and other international conferences;
- the Centre organizes and funds working attachments at comparable African libraries or at resource-rich parliamentary libraries in Canada;
- it has sent experienced Canadian librarians to Ethiopia to consult and train; and
- more generally, I have recommended establishing partnerships with more resource-rich parliamentary libraries or international parliamentary organizations to improve access to information.

In such ways, specific DCoP/networks of legislative libraries could be an excellent ongoing resource to help them share resources and support each others' development.

Linking Up Parliamentary Centre Staff and Activities

DCoP could also directly benefit the Parliamentary Centre's own operations:

- much of the Centre's work is carried out in teams – even when in the office, a great deal of communications and information management is necessarily virtual;
- when working with parliaments or networks abroad, it is vital that staff can still quickly draw on the resources of the Centre and other team members. Simple e mail has proven too slow and cumbersome.
- the Centre has established field offices in several countries, with more likely to come. These offices need quick and easy access to the information resources and expertise back at the Centre in Ottawa. In effect, the corollary of the Centre establishing field offices is that the Centre must itself become a virtual information resource or library to support those field activities.

All of which means that the internal information sharing and knowledge management potential of DCoP could be tremendous:

- Web-based video could allow team meetings wherever participants were based;
- threaded discussion groups could help team members – and related external partners or fellow practitioners – analyze and reflect on programme experience;
- Weblogs could allow immediate sharing of programme or mission updates;

- efficient RSS and other publishing techniques could allow easy posting of background and other policy material.

Linking Up International Capacity Building Practitioners

The third potential area I want to highlight – like the Parliamentary Centre itself – has reasonable technical and other resources and does not face the enormous barriers that African and other developing parliaments do.

The Parliamentary Centre – and, no doubt, other international practitioners and funding agencies – wants to make sure that capacity building work really is effective.

- So, we are thinking a lot more about how we can measure the success of our efforts and assess if parliamentary performance and capacities really improve as a result.
- We are also beginning to analyze what works and what doesn't in our programming. The point, of course, is to then apply the lessons learned to even better programming in the future.
- And we have also begun to think that sharing these lessons learned and best practices with fellow practitioners has great potential for all of us to improve our work. We will be publishing more of these kinds of internal analyses and reflections on our Web site and hope to work with colleagues to build dialogue on developing best practices in parliamentary capacity building.
- In this light, a key strategic goal – not just for the Centre, but for our international counterparts -- could be to link organizations and experts involved in international parliamentary capacity building in a systematic and consistent way. Developing these linkages as a DCoP could help to improve everyone's efforts.
- At best, this would be linked to parallel DCoPs involved in other areas of governance and international capacity building to share insights and experience.

Threats – Or Barriers to Address

This is not so much the threats of traditional SWOT analysis, although there are lots of them: some general -- funders pulling out, war or famine breaking out; and some unique to parliaments – governments changing, experienced Members not being re-elected. Rather, the following reflects on what might be the major barriers to successfully implementing DCoP and on some pitfalls to be avoided.

Barriers to Building DCoP in African Legislatures

First of all, there will need to be significant technological investment in most developing parliaments before they could really take advantage of the potential of DCoP. This will require not only one-time hardware and software expenditure, but training and ongoing technical assistance to assure sustainability.

Implementing DCoP should probably be seen as part of a wider strategy to improve the technical skills, information resources and related infrastructure in parliaments. Most parliaments have some form of such a strategy in place, and new initiatives such as DCoP must be carefully dovetailed into existing priorities and programmes. If there is not yet an adequate overall technical strategy then some parliaments may need strategic planning and project management assistance as well.

It will be important to have modest expectations. Implementing projects such as DCoP tends to be most effective and achievable when proceeding in small incremental steps. Significant delays are the norm in developing parliaments and funders must be prepared to be flexible. Project management techniques and programme indicators developed for complex bureaucracies in the rich countries cannot be simplistically applied in poorer environments.

It is also important to remember that this kind of transformation is about working culture as much as high technology. The partner parliaments have to define what they really need and come to 'own' the process to be able to drive it. Similarly, it is important to remember the role that technically-mediated communications plays in relation to personal contact in building networks. Successful networks require considerable one-on-one personal contact between Members and between expert staff from the sponsoring agency and Members.⁴ Building solid and productive personal relationships within the policy networks can certainly be supplemented and supported by practices such as DCoP. But ongoing personal contact will still be vital. An interesting question for international capacity building work is whether a solid network has to be in place first, onto which advanced DCoP practices are then built, or could DCoP be used to build up a network from scratch. I expect it is the former. We have found that strong personal and institutional relationships are the key building block for all programmes.

Partnerships are vital to so much of this kind of work. For example, in Ethiopia there are a number of bilateral programmes in addition to CIDA funded Parliamentary Centre activities and there is a major multi-donor UNDP programme. Local DCoP could be a tremendous way to enhance coordination among donors and with their partner parliaments.

Finally, it would be important to coordinate the development of DCoP at the donor or international level. It would be wasteful if all of a sudden DCoP projects were popping up all over the place. There needs to be careful strategic analysis of where they will have the most effect and where they have the greatest chance of success. It will be important to quickly share 'teething' difficulties and other lessons learned in implementing these projects. I'm not calling for one big project. Innovative DCoP will need to respond to local conditions and requirements and a

⁴ A consistent theme throughout this conference has been the importance of face-to-face communications to sustaining networks. This also highlights that much of the expertise and understanding such networks build up is 'soft knowledge' as seen in the knowledge management literature. How to capture and be able to act on this kind of knowledge in DCoP is a key challenge.

wide range of pilot projects is likely the best way to get this idea into practice. But let's make sure that all these projects are talking to each other from the start.

Building DCoP within Parliamentary Capacity Building Organizations

The challenge within institutions such as the Parliamentary Centre and among parliamentary capacity building organizations world-wide are familiar within the knowledge management literature: shifting working cultures to prioritize and facilitate information sharing, developing responsive and effective team structures, integrating these practices with an efficient and easy-to-use information management infrastructure, and overcoming internal hierarchical and other barriers to sharing knowledge. Reflecting on the successes and failures of capacity building programmes and sharing these insights among fellow practitioners will require far more openness and coordination than has been common. Again, while there are some excellent technical tools to help this sharing across the continents and time zones, the real challenge will be shifting institutional and cultural approaches to encourage cooperation and coordination.

CONCLUSIONS: POTENTIAL INTO PRACTICE

I have been arguing that DCoP have tremendous potential to enhance capacity building efforts within developing parliaments. I would imagine that similar potential could hold for capacity building in other spheres as well. I have also sketched out some of the enormous technical and resource barriers that would need to be overcome.

Having started out by stressing that I was no expert in DCoP, I am still going to immodestly offer a number of suggestions for next steps. I think there are three key directions this idea can be taken in the world of international political governance and parliamentary capacity building – and perhaps beyond.⁵ I am new to the Governance Knowledge Network and in no position to say who should act on these recommendations and how they should be put into practice. Rather I will pose these recommendations as strategic outcomes that if achieved would have a tremendous impact on democratic governance and parliamentary capacity building.

Take Up the Challenge of the Resource Poor

I have tried to use my own experience and that of other colleagues from the Parliamentary Centre to illustrate the potential of DCoP in developing African parliaments. While the possible benefits are significant, so too are the barriers. How DCoP could be effectively implemented in resource and technology poor environments is a complex challenge.

⁵ A final qualification: I am a senior consultant for the Parliamentary Centre but I am not part of its management team. So while I am basing my analysis on experience with the Centre and others, I am not speaking for the Centre here and the following recommendations are my own.

But I would argue that it is a challenge that should be taken up urgently. The digital divide is bound to be an increasingly significant issue in international development work. At the same time, the Canadian and other governments have made major assistance commitments to African development.

More specifically, exploring how DCoP could support the kinds of capacity building work I have been describing could be a good place to start for several reasons. Even the poorest parliaments are information and knowledge-intense environments that depend upon efficient communications, research and information, information technology and networks, and knowledge management in all their legislative, policy and representative functions. And, in fact, the Parliamentary Centre has already been building policy networks that could be transformed into DCoPs.

I would make a two-fold argument:

- first of all, exploring the potential of DCoP in resource-poor environments should be a top priority; and
- secondly, developing pilot projects in African and other developing parliaments could be a productive way to proceed.

Recommended Outcome

1: appropriately funded pilot projects to explore the development of DCoP in developing parliaments should be established.

I don't mean to sound self-interested here from the Parliamentary Centre's point of view. I would not be surprised at all if this recommendation was not equally valid for other spheres of capacity building. But I am quite sure that relatively modest investments to expand DCoP would be incredibly useful in the areas I know best.

Support Capacity Building Best

Practices

The Parliamentary Centre is fairly sophisticated organizationally, well enough connected to other key practitioners in the field, and very experienced. But it is not that aware of developments such as DCoP and is not using the most advanced IT to support its own teams and networks. Probably many other NGOs would be in a similar position.

A number of key strategic questions follow for this conference and for those who want to move the practice of DCoP forward:

- Would the effectiveness of capacity building programmes and the NGOs that deliver them be improved by the more advanced networking and knowledge sharing that DCoP could support? The answer is almost certainly yes.
- Are most NGOs sophisticated enough to be able to adapt DCoP easily enough, with adequate support and training? Probably also yes.

- Do most NGOs have the discretionary staff time and resources to implement DCoP technology and principles. We have heard at this conference that most do not.⁶
- Do most NGOs know enough about the potential of DCoP to even be considering it? Almost certainly not.
- Would investing in developing DCoP within NGOs and practitioners be a wise focus for funders? Is this an opportunity with potentially high cost-benefit ratios? I would argue that it will be.

Recommended Outcome

2: appropriately funded and well coordinated pilot projects to develop DCoP within governance or other capacity-building NGOs should be established.

As implied above, since many if not most capacity building and governance organizations will not know enough about DCoP to be able to gauge its strategic significance and potential for them, a crucial first step may be communications. The potential of DCoP needs to be promoted within the governance and capacity building worlds. This conference is an excellent first step.

Link Up Capacity Building

Practitioners

This direction can be extended beyond strengthening individual capacity building organizations. I believe DCoP could make a significant contribution to linking up organizations from around the world and allowing them to collectively identify best practices and share experience and insights.

I would urge us to think bigger at this conference: the goal could be not just to connect researchers and policy makers better, but to help front-line NGOs, field staff and other practitioners do more effective capacity building work by linking them up effectively.

The Parliamentary Centre is beginning to think about the following challenges:

- how can we continually analyze what worked and what didn't in our own programming?
- how can we build those lessons learned into continuous programme improvements;
- how can we share these lessons learned with other practitioners and equally, how can we learn from others' experience in these fields?

⁶ In a crucial related issue, we also heard that few NGOs have the capacity to effectively store and organize their and others' documents. Nor has a university, national library or other funding body undertaken the vital information management of all the background, policy, training and other documents produced by NGOs involved in governance. Not only is this knowledge not being effectively shared, but it is in danger of being lost entirely.

The Centre would like to find ways to initiate this kind of dialogue with its international counterparts. Various ideas are being considered: publishing our internal analyses of successes and failures on our Web site; trying to build networks of contacts among NGOs and practitioners in particular governance spheres or regions of the world; and a conference of parliamentary capacity building practitioners and legislators to share and consider best practices. In a virtual world, whatever networks evolve from this have to be seen as DCoPs.

Recommended Outcome

3: DCoPs and other appropriate forums should be developed to analyze and share experience among international parliamentary capacity building organizations and their partner legislatures from around the world.