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THE INTER-PARLIAMENTARY FORUM OF THE AMERICAS (FIPA): CREATING A VIRTUAL PARLIAMENT

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THE INTER-PARLIAMENTARY FORUM OF THE AMERICAS (FIPA): CREATING A VIRTUAL PARLIAMENT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper explores how parliamentarians from different jurisdictions can work together on common issues by using the potential of current information and communication technologies. It captures our experience from the first phase of the FIPA Virtual Parliament initiative and what we have learned from others. We seek to engage parliamentarians, practitioners, and others who see the value of parliamentarians playing their key democratic role in an interdependent world.

“Canadian MPs and Senators now participate regularly in interparliamentary activities, to such an extent that parliamentary diplomacy has become a recognized function of elected members.”¹

FIPA initiated its Virtual Parliament project to help parliaments of the Americas to become engaged on regional issues, such as the Free Trade Area of the Americas. The central idea was to provide FIPA parliamentarians with staff support, including expertise in communications and connectivity. The additional information and deliberative capacity would provide support to strengthen democracy, improve policy debate, and encourage harmonization and simplification of policy and administration where desired.

This is written as the first of the three-phase Virtual Parliament project closes. It seeks to capture our evolving vision and lessons we have learned. The following points highlight the key ideas.

- ✓ A **virtual parliament** (VP) is best thought of as composed of elected officials from different countries that are working together on policy or administrative issues. While a virtual parliament would not legislate, it would deliberate and develop consensus on issues, seek to engage the public in these matters, and try to influence executive actions. To do so, it needs information and research support services as would a conventional parliament, but also communication and facilitation services to compensate for geographic separation.
- ✓ A **website** is the key information sharing and management facility, as it provides for convenient access to a common base of information for all participants and the capacity for deliberation. To be effective, such a website needs to be ‘live’ – not an archive – and, therefore, a full time webmaster is essential. Where there are differing levels of technical and staff support provided to parliamentarians, such as is the case in the Americas, special attention must be devoted to providing a site that is responsive to differences in capacity to use information and communication technologies.
- ✓ A collection of facilitated, **email-based** dialogues, linked to complementary resources on the VP website, is critical to support the ongoing communications necessary to sustain a living collaborative endeavor such as FIPA. These virtual and asynchronous communications reinforce, but do not replace, the occasional face-to-face communications which build trust,

allow parliamentarians to focus more closely on their joint interests, and periodically inject additional energy and enthusiasm into ongoing discussions.

- ✓ Convenient ***access to a range of information*** tailored to the differing interests and roles of parliamentarians is essential and has been broached in phase one of the VP initiative. Two features, we believe are particularly important. First, there must be clear distinctions between information that is factual and descriptive (essentially non-controversial) and information and analysis that seeks to describe lessons-learned or provide the opinions or views of individuals or groups (always debatable). For analytical information to be useful to parliamentarians, there must be scope for the presentation of divergent views. Second, to help sort through the often overwhelming documentation available, there is a need to provide an organizing structure and overviews. This matter will be addressed in Phase 2.
- ✓ A ***facilitator*** is needed for effective deliberation on the Internet to assist each working group chairs in moving deliberation toward a consensus and in clarifying the essential differences among participants. In face-to-face meetings, which are of limited duration and provide a clearer sequence or thread, a chair can play this role with less assistance. For internet-based deliberation, a facilitator can assist the chair in bringing continuity and evolution to the deliberation.
- ✓ The principal challenge is the ***engagement of parliamentarians***. Time demands on parliamentarians are exceptional, and the view that “all politics is local” remains valid. Participants, therefore, are unlikely to become engaged unless they have a worthwhile input and the results of the deliberation have an impact. This places a heavy burden on the chairs and facilitators, as well as the host organization – in this case FIPA.

- ✓ There is a range of ***engagement tools***. We believe face-to-face meeting is essential to creating the trust needed for effective deliberation and consensus building. In situations where such meetings can only occur infrequently, other engagement tools provide a lower cost alternative and help ensure the sustainability of relationships formed in face-to-face meetings. Our early experience suggests that a live web site combined with active email communication are the most complementary.

Engagement Tools

- ***face-to-face meetings and informal personal contact***
- ***videoconferencing***
- ***interactive web site***
- ***webcasting***
- ***video clips***
- ***telephone***
- ***email***
- ***mail***
- ***fax***

- ✓ Building mutual trust, an essential component of effective deliberation, is a challenge for parliamentarians in all jurisdictions. As with parliamentary committees, the skill and fairness of the chair are likely most important. So is a clear understanding of ‘rules’ of deliberation. The ***rules or protocols*** for internet-based deliberation are developing rapidly, but will need to be tailored for a virtual parliament setting. A key objective of the FIPA project is to develop, articulate and test a comprehensive approach to engagement and continuing connectivity between parliamentarians at both the formal and informal levels.



- ✓ The central challenge for the next phase of the FIPA Virtual Parliament initiative is find the most *cost-effective blend* of information, website deliberative capacity, facilitation and engagement tools to respond to current environment.
- ✓ The key long term challenges are to create a *sense of ownership* of the services and web facility by parliamentarians, build credibility for the information and the protocols, and set up performance measurement, reporting, transparency and accountability practices.

INTRODUCTION

Emmanuel Castells notes the transformation of nations from sovereign states to a world of interdependent nation states sharing sovereignty. Marshall McLuhan predicted that electronic communications could return humanity to a new form of group interaction: ‘the global village’, that is, bilateral interaction regardless of geographical distance. Since McLuhan’s time the Internet has arrived as another tool to create a global village. Some have suggested that this new, invisible space could be used to better the world, to enhance democracy:

“..there is now a need for the creation of an online democratic space that is open to all and connected to real democratic institutions. The upkeep of a civic commons in cyberspace needs to become a matter of public service rather like the protection of fair elections. Trusted spaces will not emerge spontaneously or without effort..... To speak of a trusted civic space on the Internet suggestsa place for distance learning, ... the online environment also needs to provide, for the civilizing activities of discussing, voting, explaining, arguing, disagreeing, reaching consensus; not reaching agreement...but not reaching agreement in ways that are understood.”²

About FIPA

A Virtual Parliament is people, that is, parliamentarians from different countries that are working together on clarifying and building consensus on public policy issues. The word ‘virtual’ suggests that these parliamentarians, using information and communications technologies, can come together in informal and formal ways to exchange information, learn and create new agendas without relying solely on face-to-face meetings in a parliamentary chamber.

Clicks not bricks....

FIPA, although a formal entity does not have a ‘bricks and mortar’ location (e.g., the Chair of FIPA rotates through member countries.) In a sense FIPA is being ‘institutionalized’ in cyberspace, a de-localized institution.

FIPA, established in 2001, is a network of the national legislatures of the member states of the Organization of American States (OAS) that has 34 countries. The overall aim of FIPA is to strengthen good governance and democracy in the Americas.

To achieve this aim FIPA must become: more visible and credible to parliamentarians; a reliable source of expertise and learning; and an effective instrument for sharing lessons-learned and information. The Virtual Parliament initiative provides an opportunity to achieve these objectives.

The Parliamentary Centre of Canada, Bellanet, the FIPA Secretariat as well as the Institute for Connectivity in the Americas (ICA³) are undertaking the development of the Virtual Parliament.

For the proposed Virtual Parliament development phases, see Annex A.

The expectation is that the Virtual Parliament web site will facilitate information sharing and communication among inter-parliamentary working groups on key issues, such as the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), anti-terrorism and contribute to creating a special network of women parliamentarians.

PROFILE OF A VIRTUAL PARLIAMENT AND WEB SITE

National parliaments have been around for a long period of time. Their roles have evolved and become understood, (or perceived to be understood) and to a large degree accepted.

Virtual parliaments are new, not directly elected, have no legislative role and are seen as possible only because of modern information and communications technologies. The remainder of this paper therefore begins to try and articulate what are the various dimensions or aspects of an effective virtual parliament.

- ✓ *Vision and Role*
- ✓ *Core Secretariat Services*
- ✓ *Collective Learning: Information Exchange, Lessons and Best Practices*
- ✓ *Committees or Working Groups of Parliamentarians*
- ✓ *Building Trust/Engagement Strategy*
- ✓ *Accountability and Citizens*
- ✓ *Self-Assessment, Evaluation and Performance Indicators*
- ✓ *Critical Success Factors for a VP Web Site*

Vision and Role

The FIPA Virtual Parliament initiative seeks to:

- ✓ promote inter-parliamentary harmonization and co-operation by creating a working space that allows parliamentarians to discuss issues, experiences and best practices in four languages (English, French, Spanish and Portuguese) without necessitating travel;
- ✓ facilitate new and ongoing communication and information flows among parliamentarians by creating a set of tools and information services that encourage and support interaction among parliamentarians and legislative staff of the FIPA member countries to share information and harmonize legislation within the region;
- ✓ support preparation, follow-up and continuity around all FIPA events, meeting and conferences, especially conclusions and recommendations reached at the Plenary Meetings;
- ✓ help build capacity, i.e. user know-how, among Members and their support staff to optimize their use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in their work (not only the Internet and intranet but also other communications platforms such as email, on-line dialogue both synchronous and asynchronous, videoconferencing, telephone, fax, mail and in the future, web-casting); and,
- ✓ provide an environment for experimentation with new forms of citizen, civil society and parliamentary engagement as well as future opportunities for parliamentarians to engage their constituencies in innovative ways.

A priority of the project is to ensure that the information and communication resources created represent direct responses to real needs as expressed by FIPA Members and their support staff. At the same time, the Virtual Parliament initiative recognizes the need for investment and experimentation. Effective use of the internet by parliamentarians has fallen far behind businesses, governments and individuals such as trade union activists.⁴

“...the interactional processes of the Internet have been harnessed by lay trade union activists to both challenge the oligarchic practices of the formal leadership of their trade union and give voice to membership interest groups.....Existing research has pointed to the positive potential offered by new Information and Communications Technologies in terms of aiding organising and organisational effectiveness and in terms of fostering and enhancing solidarity and collective action.”⁵

Significant effort was seen as needed to provide training in various aspects of ICT use – including the facilitation of online dialogues (both synchronous and asynchronous). The aim is to develop similar skill levels and familiarity among FIPA members and their support staff – a ‘level playing field’ within FIPA.

The **web site** is the central instrument of the Virtual Parliament. The features required to play such a specialized role include:

- ✓ continuity: fully archived meetings, discussion and virtual conferencing sessions which constitute a core element of FIPA's institutional memory;
- ✓ simplicity: the tools will be easy to access and navigate, and will include interactive and personalized functions;
- ✓ access: parliamentarians from all countries need to connect – including those from countries with low bandwidth access to the Internet - and some parliamentarians and their staff might need training on how to use the Internet and intranet;
- ✓ usability: search services and content management software, the capacity to update pages and publish information in each of the four official languages of the FIPA, and the ability to manage personal or official contributions to FIPA using the website; and,
- ✓ security: an administration component for proper security authentication, and access levels depending on the user.

Core Secretariat Services

A virtual parliament needs a range services, including:

- ✓ the traditional roles of organizing and documenting meetings and supporting the Chair (in FIPA, denoted the *technical secretariat*)

- ✓ deliberation facilitation services – assisting deliberation between members in working groups, providing information and undertaking research – the range of services provided to a parliamentary committee, plus that to facilitate electronic communication; and
- ✓ a client services function.

A lesson learned from early experience is that the client service function is crucial. The services – perhaps denoted client services officer include the following roles:

- ✓ webmaster or webmistress – essential to having a live site – not only for maintenance but site evolution and pilot projects with new technologies or software as they come on the market ;
- ✓ e-mail contact and management to answer or refer queries and ensure other sites link back to FIPA;
- ✓ hot line management – it is a lesson learned from the delivery of government on-line programs that while telephone transactions go down, telephone requests for information – such as, Where do I find this? or, How do I do that? – increase (implying cost savings as latter types of questions usually take less time);
- ✓ responses to letters or faxes;
- ✓ maintenance of client and group databases including verification of user identities; and
- ✓ statistical analyses of web hits, email and other engagement trends.

Information: Descriptive, Analytical and Lessons Learned

To become effectively engaged in deliberation, parliamentarians need objective information, syntheses and/or briefings on the issue at hand – as well as access to divergent views – so that they have an opportunity to develop their own views and judgements in their discussions with equally informed colleagues.

Recent findings in the application of citizen engagement approaches also reflect this experience. Informed citizens can better participate in focus groups, learn from each other and arrive at a consensus. This was confirmed in a study designed to probe how citizen's views evolve as they work through difficult policy choices in dialogue with each other and seek to reconcile those views with their deeper values.⁶

This process, starting with detailed preparation of the participants, may be similar to what happens in a parliamentary committee and likely is essential for a productive virtual parliament. It likely should include, in addition to research and provision of access to data and divergent views, the development of syntheses of discussions and report drafting.

A web site can draw on a broad spectrum of information, such as outlined in the chart below. To help provide clarity it distinguishes three different kinds of information; the purely descriptive; the information which includes considered judgement – either collective or disciplined; and that which is highly interactive and part of a deliberative process.

Based on experience with parliamentary groups, The Parliamentary Centre suggests that a virtual parliament web site should cover a wide range of information and information access, but that

special emphasis should be placed on adding value that is focused on contemporary issues and active working groups and that is of particular interest to parliamentarians.

Types of Information in a Virtual Parliament Web Site: An Initial Checklist

Descriptive (vs. analytical or processed) Information - Internet

- ✓ List of members of FIPA and various working groups and committees
- ✓ Information about FIPA
- ✓ Annual events schedule
- ✓ Public interact – email us, feedback/comments feature
- ✓ Links to other organizations, contacts plus addresses etc.
- ✓ Use of search engines
- ✓ Reports on Plenary Meetings
- ✓ Agreements or Memoranda of Understanding
- ✓ Conventions
- ✓ Library as a database structure

Collective, analytical and lessons-learned, with syntheses and introductions - Internet

- ✓ Portals through subject themes or types of organizations (e.g. anti-terrorism)
- ✓ Recommendations, agreements and decisions made
- ✓ Case studies for lessons learned
- ✓ Guidelines, performance measures, service standards
- ✓ News bulletins, newsletters
- ✓ Evaluations and progress reports
- ✓ Virtual committee and working group reports (finalized and approved)

Interactive information – Intranet restricted to members

- ✓ Workspaces: Executive Committee, working groups
- ✓ On-line discussions with syntheses and updates
- ✓ Notices of meetings and administration
- ✓ E-voting – e.g. elections of chairs and other officials
- ✓ Working group draft agenda, minutes, reports, action plans
- ✓ Planning for events
- ✓ Personal views of members on various committees
- ✓ Documentation from parliamentarians for working purposes only
- ✓ Survey responses related to activities of member states

Virtual Parliamentary Committees or Working Groups

The principal deliberative mechanisms of the Virtual Parliament are its working groups – typically focusing on policy issues. The web site provides for access to tailored information, briefings, agenda management, deliberations and consensus building, votes and the proposal of resolutions to the FIPA Executive. The main differences from an ordinary committee meeting are the asynchronous nature and difficulty in maintaining a logical sequence to the debate. We, as have others, conclude that this situation requires an active facilitator or animator (in Spanish this is best captured by the word ‘animacion’) to assist the chair in moving the discussion forward. In addition, other factors are important, namely: a capacity to: collect evidence; synthesize evidence into lessons learned, emerging consensus and trends; and articulate resolutions and conduct votes.

In the case of the FTAA working group, it seeks to enable parliamentarians to: share the information that they possess on the progress of the negotiations; debate the issues and develop consensus of matters taken up during the negotiations; share the results of the consultations conducted with the populations of the region; and develop strategies to have the opinions of parliamentarians (and those of citizens) of the Americas heard by the executive authorities. Examples of the substantive matters they plan to address include:

- ✓ *“indicate our concerns regarding the potential benefits and negative effects that the FTAA may have in our countries considering the difference in level of development and size of the economies and inequality prevailing in the Americas;*
- ✓ *consider other integration arrangements models such as the European Union where Social Cohesion Funds were available to guarantee the effective participation and benefit of all FTAA countries;*
- ✓ *address agricultural issues in the FTAA negotiations taking into account the particular vulnerability and sensitivity of Agricultural issues for all FTAA countries and the need to eliminate agricultural subsidies and other trade distorting practices; and,*
- ✓ *take into account the particular needs and conditions of all countries when setting deadlines for implementation of the FTAA agreement.”⁷*

Engaging Parliamentarians and Building Trust

Effective deliberation requires both serious engagement by parliamentarians, comfort with the language of communication, and a degree of trust.

A central feature of the Virtual Parliament has been to treat the four official languages of FIPA equivalently. All documentation intended for hemispheric parliamentarians is in the four official languages. Working Group communication is also in as many of the official languages as are represented by the participants.

Trust, while partly a consequence of successful engagement also should be treated as a distinct matter. The principal factor often noted is the importance of direct face-to-face interaction. The FIPA process likely will provide occasional opportunities for face-to-face meetings. Active working groups can sustain these relationships. However, to build a high level of trust, interaction must extend to situations where parliamentarians talk freely with one another, learn from each other and have the opportunity to create networks.⁸ The virtual parliament project, of course, can only provide the tools and opportunities. Personal interests and energy also are required.

Trust also can be fostered by effective deliberation. In face-to-face situations, the effectiveness of the chair often is noted as a key factor. Clear and well-understood meeting protocols also help. The VP initiative has provided some experience with such protocols, but a central feature of Phase 2 would be further experimentation in this area.

There is considerable experience with engagement practices in other situations. We will cite three as being particularly interesting. The first is MISTICA, the Methodology and Social Impact of Information and Communication Technologies in the Americas.⁹ It highlights among other factors:

- ✓ *proactive animation*: The use of facilitators and animators for workspace discussions is considered to be essential for the next phase of FIPA;
- ✓ *common platform of action and understanding*: There is a need to define common principles and understandings early in the process which includes but is not limited to establishing the network culture where key elements are:
 - fast and fluent use of email;
 - respect for intellectual property and confidentiality;
 - friendly environment for constructive criticism and collective discussion;
 - strong emphasis on solidarity;
 - autonomy and self-management; and,
- ✓ *clear and democratic criteria for selecting people for face-to-face meetings*: It is noted however that in the inter-parliamentary world, the decisions of who attends plenaries and other FIPA meetings does not rest with the FIPA executive. At the same time, there may be some possibilities for establishing some criteria for the specialized working groups.

An initiative that is similar to the virtual parliament in some ways is the Global Organization of Parliamentarians Against Corruption [http://www.parlcent.ca/gopac/index_e.php]. While experience is inadequate to declare lessons learned, indications are that:

- ✓ access to expertise is essential for parliamentarians from diverse situations to deal effectively with substantive issues;
- ✓ a distinct learning and interaction period is needed prior to beginning substantive deliberations;
- ✓ differing time zones for a global organization favour asynchronous meetings;
- ✓ staff support to individual parliamentarians is extremely useful, as few parliamentarians have both the time and skill to participate regularly on line; and,

- ✓ direct face-to-face meetings seem to be an essential component.

The third area is quite different, but the detailed study of UK experience with on-line consultation by Professor Coleman et al¹⁰ provides an initial list of *practical criteria for on-line engagement* that might well be adapted for a parliamentary situation. We have taken some license to fit the current context. The criteria are:

- ✓ identify a purpose for the deliberations and clarify how value will be created;
- ✓ responsiveness -- provide a feedback mechanism to the participants;
- ✓ provide a list of questions or agenda to trigger the debate in specific areas;
- ✓ transparent moderation – always forewarn users when a comment is removed, and offer a chance to resubmit the amended message - make the rules of engagement and all chair and moderator decisions transparent;
- ✓ active moderation – consultations and discussions benefit from proactive moderation: ‘the moderator as a participant’. Moderators should post messages asking questions, probing, taking on a role as ‘a seminar leader’ rather than invigilator or referee. Positive interruptions (such as giving additional information, newspaper articles, links to relevant web sites) should be encouraged and welcomed. The moderator should aim to build a rapport with all users, so that no single participant or group of participants dominates the discussion and new entrants feel secure and confident to enter the discussion. Promoting an inclusive atmosphere is vital.
- ✓ use a guest moderator on occasion – inclusion of a knowledgeable moderator on a particular issue can add a degree of dynamism and fresh thought to a deliberative process;
- ✓ detailed recruitment – targeting of specific groups, seeking balance and including knowledgeable participants increase the odds of successful deliberation;
- ✓ thread sequence: the discussion topic order should change according to which topic was used most recently. This would direct people to participate in current discussions and build dialogue flow;
- ✓ summaries – periodic discussion summaries should be posted on the site, so that new or returning participants do not need to read all messages to find out what has been said. These summaries will help prevent old ground being re-visited, fertilise the debate, keep lapsed users up-to-date and trigger re-entry. Sending the summaries by e-mail can also help. An archive of all previous summaries should be kept on the site;
- ✓ partnerships – work with networked partners [in the FIPA Virtual Parliament this could include external organizations or regional chapters among many other permutations] to gain ideas for discussion topics and request evidence for consultation;
- ✓ web links – create links to as many relevant web sites as possible. This provides a value-added service to users and will facilitate more informed debate. Offer ‘click-throughs’ to specially created information;
- ✓ reminder emails – use reminder emails with a ‘click through’ to the web site at regular intervals during the consultation (weekly and when important events occur); and,
- ✓ help section – provide a thorough, user friendly help section, which gives ideas about participating as well as how to physically use the site (e.g. Q&A on ‘what should I write?’ ‘how much should I write?’)
- ✓ and that any consultation exercise:
 - take place over 8-10 weeks;

- send invitations to participate in the consultation well before it starts or invite participants to register in advance so that they can be informed by email when it starts;
- publish key notes from experts; and,
- provide a set of questions to stimulate the debate.¹¹

While all the foregoing points merit serious attention, we believe the most salient for VP Phase 2 experimentation include:

- ✓ seeking to work with the FIPA Executive to establish knowledgeable and balanced working groups working (with effective chairs) on issues the Executive supports and intends to pursue;
- ✓ emphasizing asynchronous (stored time) working group deliberation;
- ✓ training the participants on how to do the online discussion and providing the “rules of the game”; and
- ✓ providing a facilitator to assist the chair of at least some working groups.

Accountability and Citizens

“democratizing accountability involves turning it into a two-way conversation. Account giving must be balanced by account collecting or account receiving. From this broader democratic perspective, accountability involves much more than transparency; it calls for views, policies and actions to be explained, contextualized and related to everyday social experience. Giving account is to enter into a relationship... and such a relationship needs to be one of collaboration; it needs to be one of mutual respect...”¹²

A virtual parliament faces the same challenges as a national one in communicating with its citizens.

...“at the parliamentary level, legislatures are increasingly cut out of the process of public communication.... It is their job to voice the interests, preferences and values of the public but....parliamentarians in most countries are wondering quite what their role is...parliaments can gain by using the Internet as a channel.”¹³

With Internet, unlike previous information technologies, citizens can answer back and the dichotomy between producers and consumers of information is broken down. Citizens use the internet to both collect information and give it. This aspect would not be explored until Phase 3 of the project.

There is another lens on this situation. Better accountability means that you have something to communicate about. It has been suggested that inter-parliamentary organizations:

...“Endorse and promote a practice introduced this past year by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) that calls on member legislatures to report to the international secretariat on actions taken and results achieved by each delegation since the last annual meeting in pressing for the adoption by their government or parliament of proposals endorsed by the Assembly at

its previous meeting. If this practice were adopted by all inter-parliamentary associations it should lead participating parliamentarians to reflect more carefully on the language in resolutions calling for action.”¹⁴

Learning, Evaluation and Critical Success Factors

Learning from experience is always important, but particularly so in cases that include a high level of development and experimentation. It helps however to have a sense of what the critical factors are likely to be most important. We find the factors provided by Professor Subhash Bhatnagar of the World Bank for e-government in general serve as a starting point to guide the development of virtual parliaments and related web sites.¹⁵ These are as follows:

- ✓ strong political and administrative leadership;
- ✓ detailed project management;
- ✓ clearly identified goals and benefits;
- ✓ significant process reengineering;
- ✓ starting small and scaling up through the stages;
- ✓ managing expectations;
- ✓ adoption of established standards and protocols;
- ✓ minimizing customization;
- ✓ ownership by all countries; and,
- ✓ adequate investment and training.

In addition, our view and that of Bellanet and ICA is that any virtual parliament web site be established using ***Free/Libre and Open Source Software*** (FLOSS). Free/Libre and Open Source Software is typically released under a license that allows the software to be freely distributed, and gives all users the chance to read, modify, use and redistribute the software. Open Source is a community effort, one that has been growing in magnitude and importance in the last few years, turning it into a movement with important implications on the ICT industry in particular, and on societies everywhere. A number of governments in various regions, recognizing the benefits to self-determination possible through the use of such software, have embraced policies which require their administrations to use FLOSS in all of their operations.

The use of a FLOSS solution for FIPA’s Virtual Parliament can help to ensure that in future FIPA has the maximum control over the design and delivery of ICT tools that are critical to its continuing importance for inter-Parliamentary partnership in the Americas.

An additional factor from Professor Coleman includes the suggestion that all funding donors should be acknowledged on the web site. The site could also list donors ‘in kind’ and institutions that provide advice and moral support such as The Oxford Internet Institute.

With such learning in mind, the VP project has commissioned an evaluation to coincide with the conclusion of Phase 1. It seeks to assess member needs and ensure feedback and ongoing improvement and look back and measure what has been achieved and what were the lessons learned.

Since much of the effort during phase 1 focused on the website, we are adapting the evaluation questions from a report on the use of ICTs in Westminster and the devolved legislatures¹⁶ as an on-going assessment tool for the web site. The questions are:

- ✓ Does the site provide useful information about the purpose, history and procedures of FIPA?
- ✓ Does it provide information about the parliamentarians involved?
- ✓ Is there information about the upcoming programme and other events that may be of public interest?
- ✓ Does the site take into account differing educational levels and backgrounds of users?
- ✓ Are resources from elsewhere on the web used or linked to?
- ✓ Does this site facilitate services, such as ordering documents?
- ✓ Is public participation in the process or feedback encouraged on the site?
- ✓ How much of FIPA's business can be followed from the site through available documents, press releases and web casting?
- ✓ How accessible is this site to those possessing limited technical or computer literacy?
- ✓ Are the site instructions easy to follow?
- ✓ Is information unnecessarily packaged in applications that are difficult to acquire or require higher than minimal technical specifications from the user's system?
- ✓ Does the chosen design best support the content and mandate of the site?
- ✓ Does the site solicit the involvement of users and allow them to engage the material in a personal way?
- ✓ Does using the web site make information easier to find, and provide more information in one stop, than other sources could?

STATUS

The long-term objective of engaging parliamentarians of the Americas on hemispheric issues in a way that is satisfying to them and useful to citizens is in one sense a long way off. In another sense, it has been top-of-mind for the design team.

FIPA focuses on three "client" groups: the FIPA Organization and its Executive; its deliberative capacity – largely its working groups; and the hemispheric parliamentarians generally. Phase 1 has focused mostly on the Executive, an essential early step. It also has focused on building the capacity and developing the information for the web site. This latter is useful for both working groups and the general user. There are, for example, over x000 pages of documentation now is available on the web site in the 4 official FIPA languages.

A number of steps have been taken to prepare for active experimentation with working groups anticipated for phase 2. Substantial information has been gathered. Two continuing working groups and chairs are being formed. The technology and protocols for undertaken deliberation are in place. Initial agenda have been drafted. With phase 2 funding, facilitators will be available to assist the chairs in making these groups operational. The Executive has indicated its readiness to consider the groups resolutions and move forward on their recommendations when accepted.



The general user has not been forgotten. Much of the information should be of direct value to parliamentarians. Moreover the site provides convenient access to much additional relevant information. Use friendliness have been kept in mind, for example:

- ✓ all the pages have a print version to save paper and toner; and
- ✓ we used underlined words versus graphic style buttons to keep the downloading of the site as simple as possible.

As planned, phase 1 set the groundwork of technical capacity building and information collection, while helping the FIPA Executive to become more effective. Phase 2 highlights the beginning of working group deliberation on policy issues. Phase 3 looks to consolidate the deliberative capacity, begin to engage citizens and to integrate the VP capacity with that of the Technical Secretariat, and thereby terminate the FIPA development phase.

ANNEX A: FIPA PHASES

Phase One: Short Term Engagement and Site Redesign

July 2002 to September 2003

Summary: meet the information and communication needs of FIPA's Executive Committee and the working groups for the February 2003 Plenary Meeting, integrating these online activities with FIPA's online web presence.

Phase Two: Launch and Information Resource Development

October 2003 to September 2004 [to be confirmed]

Summary: design and launch of the Virtual Parliament of the Americas as the principle online presence of the Inter-parliamentary Forum of the Americas, expand activities to provide a space for all FIPA members to share information and promote harmonization and inter-parliamentary cooperation and expand training to all FIPA member countries.

Phase Three - Continued Implementation and Training of the Virtual Parliament

October 2004 to September 2005 [to be confirmed]

Summary: will develop the capacity to offer multiple and concurrent discussions, with users able to interact on a variety of topics. This phase will see the refinement of online fora and information resources, and the incorporation of the lessons learned from phase two in order to expand the capacity of the Virtual Parliament.

The project will also allow parliamentarians and staff to create their own online fora for discussing issues not necessarily related to specific meetings. It is also expected that this phase will include policy consultations, sub-regional dialogues as well as public communications and citizen engagement initiatives. It will also offer the FIPA members and other parliamentarians a valuable resource and communication tool for issues and legislation on the regional agenda. A possible long-term outcome may be the reduction in time allocated to travel and the overall cost of regional interaction.

A further potential outcome is the ability for parliamentarians to conduct public consultation exercises and other citizen engagement activities using the tools available through the Virtual Parliament of the Americas. This could include the provision of training for civil society and other organisations to enable greater participation in these exercises. The final results of the Virtual Parliament of the Americas will depend on the use of the tools by the members themselves.

ENDNOTES

¹ Dobell, Peter. *Parliamentary Diplomacy*. Occasional Papers on Parliamentary Government. Number 16, May 2003. Parliamentary Centre.

http://www.parlcent.ca/publications/oppg_16.pdf

² Coleman, Stephen. *Finding Our Digital Voice: Governing in the Information Age*. Crossing Boundaries National Conference. Ottawa May 7, 2003. <http://www.crossingboundaries.ca/>

³ The Institute for Connectivity in the Americas (ICA) is a hemispheric organization focused on the promotion and implementation of information and communication technologies (ICTs) for development. ICA co-funds projects, actively enables partnerships, and promotes knowledge sharing and capacity building. The Institute for Connectivity is mandated to apply ICTs in the Americas to strengthen democracy, create prosperity and realize human potential. The ICA has offices in Ottawa, Washington and Montevideo and is currently being incubated at the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). As one of Canada's contributions to the 2001 Summit of the Americas, the ICA was created and provided seed funding to build on the success of Canada's international development and ICT program.

<http://www.icamericas.net/index.php?newlang=eng>

⁴ Juraitis, Nola et al. E-Governance: Some Implications for Parliamentarians. insert url when available.

⁵ Hogan, J. et al. *E-collectivism: On-line action and on-line mobilization*.

<http://www.davidbeaumont.btinternet.co.uk/msf/hogan.html>

⁶ MacKinnon, Mary Pat et al. *Citizens' Dialogues on Canada's Future: a 21st Century Social Contract*. Canadian Policy Research Networks and Viewpoint Learning Inc. April 2003. see

<http://www.cprn.org/www.rcrpp.org>

⁷ ibid

⁸ Again another aspect that parallels citizen involvement. See *A Report on the Workshop on Evaluation of Public Involvement Activities*. Canadian Policy Research Networks. February 2003. <http://www.cprn.org/www.rcrpp.org>.

⁹ Barnola, L. et al. MISTICA : A Collective Endeavour, In Search of the Social Impact of ICT's in Latin America and the Caribbean. TechKnowLogia, July/August 2001.

www.TechKnowLogia.org

¹⁰ Coleman, S., (with Nicola Hall and Milica Howell) *Hearing Voices, The Experience of Online Public Consultations and Discussions in UK Governance. Summary. November 2002*.

<http://www.hansard-society.org.uk/HearingVoices.htm>. The recommendations are taken from Coleman and Normann, *New Media and Social Inclusion*; Coleman and Normann (2000) and Hall, N. *Building Digital Bridges* (2001). Both published by the Hansard Society.

¹¹ Interview notes by Mateo Barney, June 16, 2003.

¹² Coleman, *Finding our Digital Voice*, op. cit.

¹³ ibid

¹⁴ *Parliamentary Diplomacy*, op. cit.

¹⁵ <http://www.idg.com.hk/cw/readstory.asp?aid=20030801004>

¹⁶ *Technology: Enhancing Representative Democracy in the UK? A report on the use of new communication technologies in Westminster and the devolved legislatures*. July 2002.

<http://www.hansard-society.org.uk/publications.htm>