



From Helsinki to Nairobi: African Parliamentarians Confront Climate Change

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One of the biggest environmental challenges faced by humanity today is climate change. Whether one lives in Africa, Europe or the Americas, severe environmental effects occasioned by changes in climatic conditions are becoming visible and real on a daily basis. From changes in rainfall patterns and drought in the South to severe winter storms in North, weather conditions have become highly unpredictable and have wrought havoc on wealthy and poor nations alike. These conditions are playing a fundamental role in shaping natural ecosystems, and the human economies and cultures that depend on them.

Against this background, this scientific issue has now become a global issue that needs to be tackled by both science and policy. Today, climate change is a development issue – it causes poverty, affects food security and has a severe impact on the global economy. In a message on June 5, 2011 – World Environment Day - the UN Secretary General, Mr. Ban Ki-Moon noted that in past two decades, “hundreds of millions of people in Asia, Latin America – and, increasingly, in Africa – have risen from poverty. Yet, evidence is also accumulating of profound and potentially irreversible changes in the ability of the planet to sustain our progress... We will not build a just and equitable world unless we give equal weight to all three pillars of sustainable development – social, economic and environmental.”

Thus, for us at the Parliamentary Centre, we believe Climate Change has moved from being a scientific to a policy issue. That is why we think Members of Parliament (MPs) as representatives of the people have an important role to play.

To be sure, the way climate change affects us all depends on where we find ourselves on the global map. As with most things, the hardest hit population group are poor people, the inhabitants of developing countries who are predominantly farmers, depend on rain-fed and rudimentary mechanisms for tilling the land and earning a livelihood. These are people who are far removed from negotiations in Copenhagen and Cancun and who through no fault of theirs, are at the receiving end of the actions of ‘global polluters’. The only way their conditions can change is if there is a policy shift, if there is action on the part of policy makers and the people who represent them.

In order to get MPs inserted right into the Climate Change policy debate, in the last couple of months, the Parliamentary Centre has taken a keen interest in this issue. From May 23-27, 2011, the Parliamentary Centre, together with the World

Bank Institute (WBI) and the Parliament of Finland, jointly organized a seminar on the role of MPs in Climate Change. The activity was hosted by the Parliament of Finland in Helsinki and brought together MPs and their Committee Clerks from some of our partner countries - Ghana, Uganda, Kenya and Zambia. The seminar also attracted government officials from Finland, Norway and Estonia as well as officials from the World Bank.

The meeting was an opportunity for MPs and their staff to interact and learn, first amongst themselves and second, with officials from Finland, Norway, Estonia and the World Bank. Among other things, they learnt first-hand, about how to conduct environmental audits, the various kinds of institutional frameworks that could be used to push for action on climate change at the country levels; and above all what role MPs can play in climate change dialogue. The seminar was also a learning opportunity for Parliamentary Centre staff – as we continue to build its own capacity in the area of climate change.

The key outputs of the meeting included: (a) sharing of best practices; (b) sharing of challenges; (c) learning new institutional approaches to tackling climate change; and (d) emphasizing the important role of MPs, particularly when it comes to budget allocation for climate change and other environmental issues.

From Helsinki, we moved to Nairobi. From June 7-9, 2011, immediately following the events of World Environment Day, the Parliamentary Centre, in partnership with the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) organized another seminar on Climate Change for MPs from Benin, Ghana, Kenya, Senegal, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia under the framework of our CIDA-funded Africa Parliamentary Strengthening Program for Budget Oversight (APSP).

Building on the knowledge acquired in Helsinki, the Nairobi event focussed mainly on bringing MPs to speed on the current developments on the Climate Change agenda. Most importantly, the seminar was an effort to motivate MPs them to take action in terms of policy responses from their various governments with regards programs and project that address the Climate Change challenge.

Against this background, MPs were given an opportunity to have a first-hand practical feel of efforts by the Kenyan government to tackle Climate Change through the use of renewable energy. Officials from UNEP organized a visit to the Olkaria Geothermal Field, home to Africa's first Geothermal Power station. Situated within Hell's Gate National Park around Lake Naivasha in Kenya's Rift Valley, the station produces 150MW of renewable and environmentally benign energy. This contributes 12% of Kenya's electricity needs.

Impressed by what they saw at Olkaria, MPs probed officials at the station extensively on the processes that led to this important African innovation. They left Olkaria with the effect that we intended the visit to achieve – motivate them to begin to take concrete, practical steps to emulate the Kenyan example.

The Parliamentary Centre will continue to push the Climate Change agenda. We urge MPs around the world to take a keen interest in climate change issues, to ensure that governments ratify and act on the various global agreements on climate change. They also will need to commit national resources where necessary in order to address the phenomenon and its negative effects, particularly on poor farmers who constitute the majority of developing country populations.

The poor and vulnerable need help and we hope that MPs will rise to the challenge in order to reduce the impact of what has now clearly become a global development challenge. The role that we envisage for Parliaments within the climate change agenda stretches from national, regional to the global levels. It has to be clarified that ultimately the power to mitigate and adapt to climate change lies with the public, but parliament plays an essential role in representing short and long-term interests, leading the public in change, promoting green policies, and holding the Executive accountable.