

Participation of Society

Accountability flourishes when a healthy balance of power exists between the state, civil society, marketplace and international arena with no one institutional sphere being in absolute control.¹

Context

Without diminishing the overwhelming importance of the periodic election of representatives to parliament as a key element of democratic governance, the on-going engagement of citizens and civil society on public policy issues is an essential complement. The United Nations Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC), in Article 13, addresses the participation of society in the fight against corruption. It states that each state will take appropriate measures within its means and laws to promote the active participation of individuals and groups in society in the prevention of corruption. It also refers to the state raising public awareness regarding the existence, causes and gravity and the threat posed by corruption. It further suggests that the participation of society may be strengthened by measures such as:

- enhanced transparency and promoting the contribution of the public to decision-making processes
- public access to information
- public information activities that contribute to non-tolerance of corruption such as public education programmes, including school curricula
- respecting, promoting and protecting the freedom of information related to corruption
- ensuring that the public is aware of anti-corruption bodies set up as part of implementing the UNCAC in a particular country

Communications links between government (including parliament) and citizens may be seen as operating in at least four different ways:

- providing information, such as through web sites;
- hearing complaints, seeking corrective action;
- participation, seeking citizen input on legislation or policies; and
- engagement, involving citizens in solving problems and mutual learning.

Position Statement

Although the executive branch of government engages citizens directly in many different ways – its head in presidential systems being elected directly – the executive typically is required to report to parliament and seek parliamentary approval of legislation, including to obtain and use public resources. Parliament therefore, in GOPAC's view, has a critical role in engaging citizens on all public policy issues. This is particularly important for integrity in governance, since the locus of the majority of corruption is associated with the financial and administrative aspects of government, matters handled by the executive branch. Therefore in addition to strengthening its capacity and performance in carrying out its legislative and oversight roles, it also needs to consider its capacity and performance in engaging citizens – its representation role.

¹ GOPAC. Controlling Corruption: A Parliamentarian's Handbook August 2005.

In view of rather consistent citizen survey results that indicate a low level of trust in parliaments, GOPAC believes its members must look at all areas of communication – providing information, receiving and acting on complaints, seeking input on policy issues and actively engaging citizens in addressing corruption.

It also believes its members must examine the main mechanisms available for connecting citizens with parliament – media, civil society organizations, and political parties. In many countries where corruption is considered a major problem, one or more of these mechanisms might be particularly weak.

Although a resolution to look at such issues was accepted at the 2006 GOPAC Global Conference, a global task force to lead this work remains to be established. Regional and country chapters have engaged in related work, such as reaching out and working with complementary civil society organizations and actively seeking to work with the media to develop a better understanding among citizens of the nature and impact of corruption as well as initiatives to combat corruption.

The key features of the GOPAC position on participation of society include:

- agreement with the UNCAC Article 13 on the need for participation of society to help prevent corruption;
- the importance of parliaments and parliamentarians in working at all levels noted earlier, i.e. providing information, providing for receiving and responding to citizen complaints; seeking citizen input on legislation and policy, and involving them in mutual learning (societal learning);
- parliamentarians should help in providing information by their own oversight activities, but also in seeking to ensure effective government practices regarding regular reporting and provision of access to government administrative and financial information, and by seeking to provide a legal and economic environment where an independent media can function openly and effectively; and
- parliamentarians should engage experts and civil society in parliamentary deliberations on legislation and policy, with particular attention to the provisions of the UNCAC and related governance issues.

Resolution

Aware of the above Context and GOPAC Position Statement, GOPAC resolves to:

- encourage all its members and chapters to take steps to pursue the position; and
- undertake to create a global task force to:
 - support efforts of chapters and individual members in pursuing action consistent with its position statement, and synthesize interesting practices and notable impediments to engaging citizens;
 - support the further development of the GOPAC website, in conjunction with expert agencies and related civil society organizations to highlight important ideas and practices;
 - develop a Handbook for parliamentarians on citizen and civil society engagement; and
 - encourage chapters to work with expert agencies and other partners on pilot projects, including mentoring arrangements, and monitor and report on their results.