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The Power of Parliamentary South-South Learning

Fighting small arms in the Great Lakes Region and Horn of Africa

BY JEFF BALCH

FEW OTHER REGIONS in the world have been hit so hard by so many wars and domestic conflicts as the countries in the Great Lakes Region and the Horn of Africa over the past fifteen years. Traders and brokers of small arms cool-headedly spotted the opportunities in these regions. Local demand was huge as many militia and rebel groups needed weapons and didn't particularly care about international trading regulations or conventions. As a result, Northeast Africa and the Great Lakes Region are awash with small arms and light weapons. It will take many more years before this problem will be brought under control completely. Members of Parliament (MPs) have plans to continue to devote their unique capabilities and mandates—to make laws, monitor their implementation and give a voice to people who suffer from the impact of small arms—to the struggle against this scourge.

African MPs are dealing with issues that cross borders, and that affect constituents who cross borders, including the promotion of regional public goods and the containment of what can be referred to as regional public "bads." They need to make decisions with the knowledge of what neighbors are doing, sometimes also requiring joint decisions and policies. They also need to take policy debates outside the political sphere to be able to reach consensus on innovations and in order to take bold steps. Parliamentarians are strengthened in their knowledge and their resolve through South-South sharing of experiences and lessons in a peer learning environment, as this case story illustrates.



A Congolese woman militia fighter gives back her gun during a gun exchange.

Building South-South exchanges into parliamentary agendas

AWEPA, TOGETHER WITH UNDP, has been supporting parliamentarians and parliamentary leaders in South-South Cooperation for a number of years, including within the framework of the International Conference for the Great Lakes Region. Familiarizing parliaments with the Regional Pact on Stability, Security, and Development has contributed to curbing the scourge of illicit small arms.

According to the Millennium Project Report (January 2005), the priority for successful peacebuilding is an early and sustained investment in a long-term Millennium Development Goals (MDG)-based development framework, with attention to healthcare services, education, and income-generating opportunities. Also, in the aftermath of armed conflict, the weapons need to be collected and destroyed. *Experience from the Great Lakes Region of Africa demonstrates that government decrees alone are insufficient to make a success of small arms reduction programs.* In order to implement the Nairobi Declaration on small arms reduction, which sat on a shelf for four years after government signature, parliaments had to take action. This work was coordinated by the UNDP-AWEPA program, which developed a special handbook for MPs, launched it in multiparty political forums, and introduced it in both national and regional parliamentary workshops. Thereafter, parliamentary action, including the harmonization of legislation, was supported and monitored for progress. The fruits of these collaborative efforts were incorporated into the Nairobi Parliamentary Action Plan for Peace in the Great Lakes Region (April 2005), and helped secure a joint parliamentary arms reduction initiative by the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, and Rwanda.

Motivation and incentives—The South-South momentum for Africa’s parliamentarians

THE STRUGGLE AGAINST the proliferation of small arms and light weapons in Africa can claim a number of recent successes. The cooperative efforts of African parliamentarians can take credit for several of them. The Nairobi Declaration and Protocol, for instance, were signed in March 2000 by most countries in the Great Lakes Region and Horn of Africa and are internationally renowned and accepted as far-reaching instruments for curbing the use and illicit trade in small arms. MPs passionately supported these international agreements, the ratification of which hinges completely on the legislators’ commitment and consent. In a related development, parliamentarians from Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda have made headway in harmonizing their countries’ laws against illicit small arms trade, making it much more difficult for illicit traders to find a safe haven. This initiative is seen as a source of inspiration for similar harmonization efforts elsewhere in the region and a prime example of the role MPs can play in South-South Cooperation.

Parliamentary SSC helps create space for the voice of the people in regional policy development. Without the participa-

tion of this key stakeholder, there is a democratic deficit in central planning. Because the development of mutual trust through confidence-building measures is a prerequisite to further regional harmonization, the benefits can be significant in the area of peace-building. Engagement with parliamentarians in North-South and triangular cooperation has the added potential benefit of exerting peer-to-peer Southern influence on Northern policy priorities. Parliamentary SSC can enhance North-South policy dialogue, by amplifying Southern voices and perspectives, and motivating Northern MPs to influence regional policies of donors.

Although it is impossible to generalize across different parliamentary systems and unique political environments, democratic processes appear to be strengthened when parliamentary SSC helps insufficiently informed MPs to gain knowledge, experience, and support networks. Such cooperation can also create a better working environment for parliamentary engagement by stimulating progressive dialogue and the countervailing voices of a broader spectrum of interest groups. Both bilateral and multilateral SSC tend to transcend domestic political constraints and open up policy space where little was previously available. These instances serve not only to stimulate new and innovative ideas for policy change but also to build the confidence of individual MPs and create incentives to strengthen checks and balances in the national context.

Effectiveness, a natural mandate for South-South parliamentary learning

THE EFFORTS MADE by African parliamentarians to cooperate with their regional counterparts have had positive spin-off effects for transparency and accountability in governance in general, and in relation to overseas development assistance (ODA) more specifically. Through regional and cross-national cooperation, parliamentarians are strengthening both formal and informal regional institutions, including Regional Parliamentary Bodies, such as the Pan-African Parliament (PAP) and the East African Legislative Assembly (EALA), and networks of, for example, women MPs. Their increasing knowledge, vigilance, and oversight of executive action have increased a sense of accountability, crucial for successful aid reform.

National leadership and ownership were demonstrated in this case by the leading role taken by the elected leadership of the national Parliament. After reaching regional agreement on issues related to the proliferation of small arms, parliamentarians were able to take the discussion forward in their countries with a renewed sense of urgency and legitimacy. *In the absence of parliamentary SSC, the bedding down of new policies, laws, and initiatives takes longer and entails more risk because of diminished ownership, transparency, and accountability.* Parliamentary and civilian oversight of military operations, and the external assistance for them, is an area where further attention is needed in this regard.

Through interparliamentary dialogue, exchange of experiences and cooperation, Africa’s parliamentarians have grown to know the Paris Declaration and to appreciate their role in

implementing the Accra Agenda for Action (AAA). To these ends, the Pan-African Parliament, Regional Parliamentary Bodies, a growing number of national parliaments, and African parliamentary networks in Africa are consolidating action plans to ensure their proper involvement in the aid reform agenda, both nationally and internationally. Others are becoming better informed and preparing to follow this lead. Working jointly and in cooperation with AWEPA and donor MPs, these parliamentary partners are expanding the democratic credentials of the new aid architecture. This indicates that South-South and South-North parliamentary cooperation, particularly if accompanied by sufficient resources for capacity building and networking, bodes well for future increases in aid ownership, accountability, and effectiveness.

The way forward for parliamentary South-South knowledge exchange

AS THIS CASE ILLUSTRATES, parliamentarians from the South can elicit important policy changes when working together toward common goals. Given that regional scourges and the need for cooperative efforts to address cross-border challenges will remain relevant for years to come, strengthened communication channels between MPs of the South, particularly on a regional basis where the incentives for cooperation are strongest, could prove to be a powerful platform from which to launch other initiatives. Going forward, it will be important to monitor developments in the South-South parliamentary context to better understand how to unleash the potential synergies that exist, as scant evidence has been collected on this topic. Additional points of engagement and constellations are also worth exploring. These may include the systematic integration of MPs in relevant South-South executive-level cooperative efforts in country, or cross-continental exchanges, such as those between African and Latin American MPs. Given MPs' close proximity to their constituents, parliamentarians are well placed to address a variety of citizen concerns, and have a distinct value-add that is unique to their mandate. Moreover, MPs can act as information conduits, communicating with citizens on good practices and lessons learned, thereby amplifying the spread of the initial South-South exchange. That said, parliamentary South-South cooperation must be monitored and supported if its potential is to be reached. Key components for success include a balance of strong incentives on the part of the MPs themselves, and sufficient international support and encouragement for collaborative parliamentary action. If given proper attention, critical space can be made available for the constitutionally mandated representatives of their citizens to make important strides together toward common goals.

Jeff Balch is Director of AWEPA, an international association of European Parliamentarians. It works in cooperation with African Parliaments to strengthen parliamentary democracy in Africa, to keep Africa high on the political agenda in Europe, and to facilitate African-European Parliamentary dialogue.

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