



Parliamentarians from rich countries take on development challenge

MPs, World Bank officials meet for informal exchanges

March 8, 2005—Parliamentary leaders from donor countries have committed themselves to making 2005 a true Development Year.

Meeting in Naples, Italy last week, 35 parliamentarians from Europe, Canada, Japan, New Zealand, and the United States agreed to coordinate their efforts to promote the fight against poverty.

The seminar—jointly organized by the Bank and the Parliamentary Network on the World Bank (PNoWB), an independent association of 800 parliamentarians from 110 countries that mobilizes parliamentarians for development—was timed to coincide with the High-level Forum on Harmonization in Paris, the first in a string of high-profile development-related events this year.

“This is a unique gathering,” Bert Koenders, the Dutch Member of Parliament who chairs PNoWB, told participants. “For the first time ever PNoWB has assembled key parliamentarians from donor countries to formulate a political strategy on aid, debt, and trade. It is imperative that our governments’ commitments on the Millennium Development Goals, on finance for development and on harmonization of aid become reality. The goal/implementation gap must be bridged!”

Koenders added: “We will form a group of donor-country parliamentarians who will monitor government implementation on development commitments in our respective countries.”

The year has started with the world’s largest-ever international relief operation in the wake of the Asian tsunami, demonstrating to politicians there is a real constituency of people in rich countries who care about poverty.

In addition, development has moved to the top of the international policy agenda during the United Kingdom’s G8 Presidency in 2005. The fight against poverty will be highlighted at July’s G8 heads-of-state meeting in Scotland and at September’s UN summit on the Millennium Development Goals in New York. Africa’s development challenges are commanding particular attention. The Commission for Africa is preparing to deliver its report on March 11.

In Naples, Hugh Bayley, a British Member of Parliament, proposed a “Parliamentary Implementation Watch on the G8” to keep the leaders of the world’s leading industrial nations to account on their commitments.

“Government leaders go to international meetings, make beautiful speeches but sometimes forget about their promises,” said Eveline Herfkens, the UN Secretary General’s Executive Coordinator for the Millennium Development Goals Campaign and a former Dutch Development Minister and Member of Parliament. “Parliamentarians can make a difference.”

Seminar participants exchanged ideas on how to raise awareness about development issues in their parliaments. In December 2003, for example, Sweden’s Riksdag passed a “coherence bill” that requires all relevant policy

areas—defense, development, environment, migration, trade, agriculture, culture—to pull in the same direction and reinforce each other. The overall objective is to create conditions that will enable the poor in developing countries to improve their lives.

“As parliamentarians from donor nations we need to understand one another and work together to make our development assistance more effective,” said Betty McCollum, a member of the U.S. Congress. “Some great ideas were put forward at the conference that I will share with my colleagues in Congress.” McCollum serves on the Subcommittee on Africa in the U.S. House of Representatives.

Addressing the seminar by direct video link from Paris, Bank President James D. Wolfensohn said: “You as donor-country MPs provide a vital link between the development organizations and your constituencies’ grass roots. You can help build the awareness that we live in one world, help build the necessary public support for development.”

The interactive seminar sessions covered recent proposals to increase aid levels (such as the British-proposed International Finance Facility), international trade issues, the loans versus grant debate, as well as debt relief.

Parliamentarians noted that donor fatigue is a concern. Some called for more efforts from recipient countries to demonstrate the positive effects of development assistance. To justify increases in the foreign aid budgets, we need to be able to show our voters that development assistance works and that aid is not wasted, they said.

Jean-François Rischard, the World Bank’s Vice President for Europe, recalled some spectacular (but little-known) success stories. For example, donors helped spur the Green Revolution in India; the World Bank in 1979 recommended that China liberalize agricultural prices, laying the foundations for that country’s economic take-off; and a 1992 Bank-sponsored conference on telecommunications inspired India and Korea’s high-tech advances in recent years.

“Knowledge-sharing is often as important as is development finance,” he told the Naples seminar.

Despite the high profile of poverty issues in 2005, many development-minded parliamentarians find themselves in a challenging policy environment.

Japan, the United States and many European countries are struggling to address lackluster growth and/or fiscal deficits.

Voters generally have an inflated perception of the size of foreign aid budgets. For example, a majority of Americans believe that around 20 percent of the Federal Budget is spent on development assistance (in reality it is less than 1 percent). And on the eve of the Naples seminar, a new Eurobarometer poll found that 88 percent of Europeans had never heard of the Millennium Development Goals.

“Public opinion on aid effectiveness is 10-15 years behind reality,” noted Ian Goldin, World Bank Vice President for External Affairs.

The Naples seminar was sponsored and hosted by the regional government of Italy’s Campania region.

Founded in 2000, the Parliamentary Network on the World Bank has grown to include 800 parliamentarians from 110 countries. The independent association employs three staff based in Paris, Nairobi and Cairo, maintains four active chapters in India, East Africa, MENA and Japan, and has an a work program focusing on HIV/AIDS and international trade.
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What is being said about PNoWB

Forget the UN Security Council . . . Last week in Athens [at the fourth Annual PNoWB Conference], hopes of a genuine democratisation of global governance were beginning to emerge ."

- The Observer, London, March 2003

PNoWB regional groups seem to be seen as examples. Already the IMF, OECD and the WTO are working on their own strategies aimed at parliamentarians, inspired by the PNoWB.

-Le Monde, Paris, February 2004

Together with the Inspection Panel, PNoWB is a major effort to improve transparency and accountability in the World Bank.

- Christian Aid, in the September 2003 report 'Struggling to be heard: Democratising the World Bank and the IMF'

"One option [to improve the IMF's democratic governance] might be to involve the Fund more with the World Bank's Parliamentary Network (sic), a group whose goal is to bring legislators into more contact with officials of the Bretton Woods institutions."

- Devesh Kapur (Harvard University) and Moises Naim (Foreign Policy magazine) in a January 2005 Journal of Democracy article on the "The IMF and Democratic Governance"