

A Network Against Poverty

Parliamentarians and the World Bank join forces

Hon. Charity Kaluki Ngilu, MP, in Nairobi.

An organization of Parliamentarians concerned with development issues and the accountability of international institutions is growing into a main partner for the World Bank.

Mrs Ngilu is Kenya's Minister of Health and a former member of the Board of the Parliamentary Network on the World Bank.



Hon. Charity Kaluki Ngilu, MP.

“I’m not here to talk shop, I’m here to find out more about what we can do as Parliamentarians to reduce poverty,” said Mr Michael Woods, a Member of the Irish Parliament. Mr Woods, a Member of 25 years and Chairman of the Irish Parliament’s Joint-Committee on Foreign Affairs, was speaking from the sidelines of the fourth Annual Conference of the Parliamentary Network on the World Bank (PNoWB).

The two-day meeting near Athens in March 2003 brought together 140 Members of Parliament from 65 countries with World Bank President Mr James D. Wolfensohn, International Monetary Fund Managing Director Mr Horst Köhler and other leaders in

international development. Their shared goal as the war in Iraq loomed was getting the world’s attention for the “other war” on global poverty.

The London *Observer* described the PNoWB conference as the “green shoots of global democracy.” It wrote: “The parliamentary network now has a function to submit questions directly to



From left to right: Members of the PNoWB Board of Directors Mr Oya, MP, (Cameroon) and Mr Bert Koenders, MP, (Netherlands) meet the President of the World Bank, Mr James D. Wolfensohn.

Bank and Fund experts. The institutions have promised to answer concerns in the way that Parliament scrutinizes government. There’s a long way to go yet. But a tangible and workable scheme for democratizing globalization began here.” Later this year, a report on “Democratizing the World Bank and IMF” by the NGO Christian Aid pointed to

PNoWB as a key effort to improve transparency and accountability in the World Bank.

That is no small feat for an organization that was founded little more than three years ago as a small, informal network of Parliamentarians from a handful of countries.

Fighting poverty is about giving the three billion people around the world surviving on less than US\$2 a day the chance to improve their lives by spurring social and economic development. Parliamentarians, as the people’s elected representatives, have the means and the responsibility to push pro-poor reform, to boost spending for health and education, and to improve governance. But working for a fairer, more equal global order in local constituencies or national Parliaments is not enough. In today’s interdependent world, Parliamentarians must promote global action and progress through effective coalitions that unite rich and poor country, public and private sector, for a common purpose.

The mission of PNoWB is to advocate for development and to increase transparency and accountability in international development. The end goal is to make the parliamentary contribution to fighting poverty concrete and results-oriented. By engaging the World Bank in this process of democratic governance, the PNoWB launched a dialogue with a key development institution.

“We’re not fans of the World Bank. We’re critics when necessary, supporters when necessary,” said Mr Bert Koenders, a Dutch Parliamentarian who has chaired PNoWB’s Board since the network was created in early 2000. “PNoWB

promotes the role of Parliamentarians in fighting poverty. We're a hands-on implementation group."

For its part, the World Bank welcomes the increasing role of MPs in development. The Bank's Paris office hosts PNoWB's small secretariat and facilitates relations between the Bank and PNoWB, and other parliamentary organizations.

"Parliamentarians have an all-important representation and oversight function; they know their constituencies, what they want, what they need," said Mr Jean-Christophe Bas, Manager responsible for relations with Parliamentarians. "We know from experience that a partnership-based approach is the surest way to boost the fight against poverty. So that is why the Bank is engaging in a substantive dialogue on development issues with Parliamentarians around the world."

In three years, PNoWB has grown to include Members from nearly 70 countries of both the developed and

Parliamentary committee on HIV/AIDS.

PNoWB's flagship event, the Annual Conference, is jointly organized with the World Bank and hosted by governments. The Athens gathering was the fourth such conference following meetings in The Hague (2000), London (2001) and Bern (2002). In two separate sessions at Athens, Mr Wolfensohn and Mr Köhler had 90 minutes each to address the participants and answer their questions on a wide range of development issues.

From commitments to action

Endorsed by PNoWB members at the Athens conference, the Parliamentarians' Implementation Watch is a parliamentary initiative to promote and monitor concrete steps to be taken by governments to put their countries on track to meet the Millennium Development Goals, (MDGs). These targets, adopted by 189 nations at the UN Millennium Summit



PNoWB Members Mr Tony Colman, MP, United Kingdom, and Mr Florinis, MP, Greece, (center) in the field, at a World Bank project site in Albania.

developing world. In February this year, it was established as an independent non-governmental organization under French law. Most of PNoWB's funding come from the Dutch and Finnish governments. Its first regional chapter, in India, now counts nearly 50 MPs. An East Africa chapter, launched in July 2003 in Nairobi, includes MPs from Uganda, Tanzania, Burundi, Kenya, Ethiopia, Zambia, and Rwanda. The creation of other regional chapters are in the works.

Among PNoWB's activities are: a Parliamentarians' Implementation Watch, field visits, an online Question and Answer system about the Bank for Parliamentarians, and a global

in 2000, aim to halve poverty and spur significant improvements in education, gender equality, health care, and overcome hunger and environmental degradation by 2015.

International leaders followed up with commitments at the Doha, Monterrey and Johannesburg summits. Rich countries have agreed to do their share by boosting official development assistance, launching a WTO "development round", and harmonizing their development policies and procedures. Poor countries have said they would put in place sound policies, ensure the rule of law and invest in their people.

So we have seen a global compact emerging. But real action is lagging. As

Mr Wolfensohn noted at the recent IMF/World Bank Annual Meetings in Dubai: "There is an imbalance between what rich countries spend on development assistance – \$56 billion a year – compared with the \$300 billion they spend on agricultural subsidies and \$600 billion for defense. The poor countries themselves spend \$200 billion on defense – more than what they spend on education."

MPs play a key role. Donor country Parliamentarians can call for more and better development assistance (a doubling from today's \$56 billion is needed to reach the MDGs) and to push their governments to put the WTO trade round back on track. MPs in developing countries can establish ad hoc committees on development issues and urge their fellow Parliamentarians and the government to pass laws and approve spending that help the poor. As public figures, they can speak out on corruption and HIV/AIDS. A PNoWB committee is working closely with the World Bank to promote greater political awareness about HIV/AIDS.

"To make the Parliamentary contribution to fighting poverty more effective, we need to organize ourselves better, join those that share our aims, focus our efforts on achievable objectives, and learn from each other's experiences," reads the Implementation Watch's concept note. The goals are to help translate commitments into real action on the ground benefiting the poor and to assess the role, and increase the accountability, of governments and multilateral organizations such as the World Bank, the regional development banks, the IMF, and the UN.

Connecting Parliamentarians with other development actors and suggesting legislative actions, the Implementation Watch will collect and share best practices from all over the world on how Parliamentarians can advance the fight against poverty in concrete ways. Over the summer, PNoWB has been busy building partnerships with civil society organizations, multilateral organizations and other Parliamentary organizations.

With their own eyes

The Implementation Watch can build on the experiences of the World Bank/PNoWB field visit programme.



PNoWB Members attending the fourth Annual PNoWB Conference at the Greek Parliament.

Funded by the Finnish government, it brings small groups of Parliamentarians from donor and developing countries to projects in the field to check results on the ground and make political assessments. The field trips, which have so far been organized in Uganda, Albania, Burundi and Kenya, typically span three days to allow ample time for discussions with officials from the government, the World Bank and other international organizations, and civil society organizations, as well as the people the projects are aiming to benefit.

Said one field visit participant, Mr Alain Destexhe, MP (Belgium): "The World Bank is exerting a positive role in trying to raise these issues but reconciling government independence and conditionality in investment projects is difficult. These field visits are really a great idea, and exactly what is needed, exactly the kind of accountability that the public expects. One of the major problems for international organizations is that they are not accountable for the way they function."

Engaging Parliamentarians

The field visit programme is organized with the help of an independent rapporteur and the World Bank. Together with the PNoWB Annual Conferences, it is one of several concrete steps the Bank has taken to engage Parliamentarians: To make it easier for MPs and parliamentary libraries to access information about projects and policies, the Bank has

created an online question-and-answer system as well as a monthly electronic information service on new Bank publications and documents. And to help bridge the gap between research and policy, the Bank involves Parliamentarians in the ABCDE-Europe academic conferences as well as in consultations on flagship publications such as the *World Development Report*. A delegation of MPs attends the IMF/World Bank Annual Meetings. Just ahead of the most recent Annual Meetings, in September in Dubai, Mr Wolfensohn discussed developing challenges through video conference with Parliamentarians from Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Lebanon, West Bank and Gaza.

The World Bank Institute, the Bank's learning arm, organizes capacity-building seminars for Parliamentarians in developing countries, and the Bank's PREM Network works to increase MPs' involvement in drawing up the country-owned poverty reduction strategies.

Though PNoWB is the Bank's main parliamentary interlocutor, the institution is working with other parliamentary organizations as well, including the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, the Parliamentary Assembly on the Black Sea Economic Co-operation, the Global Organization of Parliamentarians Against Corruption, the Asian Parliamentary Forum on Population and Development, the

African Parliamentary Union and the *Assemblée Parlementaire de la Francophonie*. A partnership has been developed recently with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Assembly as well. Hon. Denis Marshall, QSO, CPA Secretary-General addressed the launch of the East Africa Chapter in Nairobi last July, and the Bank's Mr Jean-Christophe Bas addressed the CPA's Post-Election Seminar in Kenya.

For its part, PNoWB makes professional use of modern communications tools in its advocacy mission. Its continuously updated website (www.pnowb.org) includes information about the network's mission, activities, and events.

The quarterly PNoWB newsletter features articles on PNoWB's activities, interviews with Parliamentarians, and guest contributions (most recently from the U.K.'s Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rt Hon. Gordon Brown, MP).

A contact database enables the Network to reach some 1,200 MPs and parliamentary staff around the world by email and/or fax.

HOW TO GET INVOLVED

For more information on the PNoWB and to find out how Parliamentarians can get involved, please go to <http://www.pnowb.org> or contact secretariat@pnowb.org