

DEVELOPMENT DIALOGUE SERIES
THE GPRS AND MULTI DONOR BUDGET SUPPORT (MDBS):
STRENGTHENING THE LINKS OF ACCOUNTABILITY-THE ROLE OF
PARLIAMENT

Dr. Chairman,

Hon. Ministers and Members of Parliament

Distinguished Participants

Ladies and Gentlemen

I am expected to make a ten minutes remark on strengthening the links of accountability, I believe in the GPRS and MDBS programmes, the role of Parliament. I believe the purpose of my presentation is to tickle not just the minds of participants but also to assist in refocusing Government's efforts in the management of the economy. However the time at my disposal may only permit me to agitate your minds.

Parliament, as you all well know, is a critical arm of Government, in fact, a symbol of democratic Government, a critical instrument of good governance, and an assurance of stability and a solution to violent revolutions, disorders and chaos.

It is the duty of Parliament to make Government open, transparent, accountable and responsive to the needs and aspirations of the people.

Dr. Chairman, Parliament performs this role through deliberative, legislative and critical examination of the activities, policies and programmes of Government.

The instruments employed by Parliament to hold Government accountable to the people are the committee system, vetting of Presidential nominees, questions to Ministers, the budget process, statements and motions. The critical committees in the performance of the accountability function in the Parliament of Ghana are the Public Accounts Committee, Finance Committee and the Committee on Government Assurances. On the subject of poverty reduction the Parliament of Ghana established a special committee on poverty reduction to consider and report to Parliament on the content, focus and adequacy or otherwise of the strategy. The committee is also expected to lead Parliament to outline in detail the role of Parliament in the formulation, implementation, monitoring, evaluation and review of the strategy. This is a very tall order and Parliament could only do this if supported, enhanced, invigorated and resourced by the state.

Dr Chairman, Parliament in its current form is far from having the capacity, both human and material, to deliver on this commitment. The capacity of Members will have to be improved the institution will have to be resourced, equipped and linked to other accountability institutions such as the Constitutional Commissions, Auditor-General Department, the Media, Private Sector and civil society to be able to perform this duty.

I am aware some efforts are being made in this direction. And I will want, Dr. Chairman, to single out for mentioned the support given Parliament by the World Bank through its institute together with CIDA, both administered by the Canadian Parliamentary Centre under the Ghana Parliamentary Committee Support Project.

Let me once again stress the importance to build linkages with civil society organizations and independent policy-advisory institutions, on local and national levels, so as to strengthen information inputs, widen numbers of allies that can help in achieving transparency/participation/accountability goals, and deepen sources of political credibility that parliaments have by improving local-level perceptions of the institution.

Developing sources of expertise for communities, by improving systems of information resource access through skilled staff personnel, through broader societal linkages and through international connections via the Internet and regional networks.

Establishing institutional and legislative mechanisms to open up transparency, including strong Freedom of Information laws, improved staffing and more regular reporting from Auditors General, (AG's office not included in the current programme) and greater institutional independence for public statistical agencies.

As an elected body of representatives of the citizens, Parliament informs and educates the public on government policies. This means that Parliament should be involved in the development of all policies at the "production" stage. In processing laws and policies, Parliament involves civil society, private sector, political parties and the media. This gives all stakeholders the opportunity to make final inputs into public policy formulation.

It is however important to mention in passing that Parliament has not been able to strengthen the links of accountability with the other stakeholders due mainly to constitutional inelegance. The provision on the appointment of the majority of Ministers from Parliament runs counter to the spirit of the separation of powers and works as a stumbling block in the establishment of an independent Parliament. Together with the present economic circumstances, the institutional deficit and the changed international political environment, Parliament has not been able to perform this role creditably well.

What then is the way forward? I believe strongly that to begin to ease the situation for Parliament to assume a more responsible position in the governance equation and linkages, on behalf of the people, it is important to consider the following:

1. The 1992 constitution needs to be reviewed to strengthen parliamentary autonomy. Articles 78 and 108 as they stand now infringe on the independence of parliament, as this body has no control over its annual budget.
2. Civil society organizations should be encouraged to play an active role in the formulation of policy. This role can be performed effectively through the holding of public forums, debates, workshops and conferences to discuss draft policies from the Executive. Also, the services of policy experts and think tanks could be useful in this direction. Their inputs could streamline and shape policies to ensure that they reflect national interest.
3. Political parties also have a role to play. The habit where political parties come unto the political scene only during election time is highly improper and should be discouraged. Parties can perform effectively in this matter through the creation of policy groupings, which will ensure that parliament is sensitive and responsive to the aspirations of the electorate. The parties can educate the electorate to advocate for a review of Articles 78 and 108 of the Constitution.

Conclusion

As has been argued the role of the Ghanaian Parliament in policy development in this era of globalization is limited thanks to the 1992 Constitution. Relations with multilateral institutions and indeed the formulation of international trade agreements that are later signed by the State remain largely the preserve of the Executive branch of government. International agencies prefer not to deal directly with Parliament but they have an almost unimpeded access to the Executive and the President.

Though the Constitution grants so much power to the President of Ghana and his Executive for effective and decisive governance, the same privilege seems to make the Legislature play second fiddle. This state of affairs is less than satisfactory if we desire effective checks and balances to sustain our democracy.

While it is true that the national interest can be better protected if the legislators and civil society as a whole take a second look at the disabling Articles in the constitution, it is also important to let the multilateral agencies and the international community know about the harm they are causing the governments and the peoples of the developing nations for not effectively involving their legislatures in the formulation of visions and programmes for those countries.

Dr Chairman, I am grateful for the opportunity.