

The OECD and Parliamentarians

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Introduction

Parliamentarians are at the heart of democratic systems. They pass laws and hold government purse strings. Because of their important role in national policy-making, it is only natural that the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) co-operate with parliamentarians when formulating its policy advice. So keeping parliamentarians informed of its activities and getting their feedback is a high priority for the Organisation.

The OECD has long-standing relations with parliamentarians of the Council of Europe and the NATO Parliamentary Assembly. More recently, the OECD has strengthened relations with national parliaments in its 30 member countries. This is part of a general movement to increase institutional transparency and see that the work carried out at the OECD is better known and understood by the Organisation's stakeholders.

This *Policy Brief* looks at these initiatives and other tools the OECD is using to bring its work closer to parliamentarians. ■

Why reach out to parliamentarians?

Since the OECD offers policy advice to governments on issues which may well end up being debated on the floors of parliaments, it is important that the lawmakers be well-informed of the OECD's policy analysis. ■

What are the OECD's institutional relationships with parliamentarians?

The OECD has institutional ties with parliamentarians of the Council of Europe dating from 1962, and with the NATO Parliamentary Assembly dating from 1976.

The Council of Europe played an oversight role to the predecessor of the OECD, the Organisation for European Economic Co-operation (OEEC). When the OEEC evolved into the OECD in 1961, taking on new member countries beyond the borders of Europe, the Council of Europe retained its role for the new Organisation. The relationship has evolved significantly over the years from one of oversight to mutually beneficial exchanges.

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) was created in 1949 and is the oldest international parliamentary assembly. It is made up of democratically elected members of parliament from its member countries. The two core organs of the Council of Europe are the Parliamentary Assembly and the Committee of Ministers.

The Council of Europe began with ten member states and now has 46. Its aim is to achieve greater unity among its members through common action, agreements and debates. The conditions for membership are pluralistic democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights. Despite their different missions and memberships, the OECD and the Council of Europe deal with a range of common topics including economics, health and education, governance, science, migration, agriculture and the environment which are subjects of mutual co-operation and enrichment.

Each autumn, the PACE debates the work of the OECD based on an annual report prepared by the PACE's Committee for Economic Affairs and Development. On that occasion the OECD Secretary-General addresses the Assembly and answers questions from the parliamentarians. Since 1991, parliamentary delegations from OECD member countries that are not members of the Council of Europe have been invited to join the debate as full participants.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), like the OECD and the Council of Europe, grew out of the post-World War II era. NATO is composed of 26 member countries from North America and Europe committed to fulfilling the goals of the North Atlantic Treaty signed in 1949. The fundamental role of NATO is to safeguard the freedom and security of its member countries by political and military means. NATO plays an increasingly important role in crisis management and peacekeeping.

The Economics and Security Committee of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, formerly called the North Atlantic Assembly, brings together members of parliaments throughout the Atlantic Alliance and provides a link between NATO and the parliaments of its member nations, helping to build parliamentary and public consensus in support of Alliance policies.

Since the end of the Cold War, the Assembly has assumed a new role by integrating parliamentarians into its work from countries in Central and Eastern Europe and beyond who seek a closer association with NATO. This integration has provided both political and practical assistance and has contributed to the strengthening of parliamentary democracy throughout the Euro-Atlantic region, thereby complementing and reinforcing NATO's own programme of partnership and co-operation.

The NATO Parliamentary Assembly visits the OECD annually for a briefing by the Secretariat. Parliamentarians from non-NATO OECD countries have been invited to this meeting since 2001.

Both of these meetings provide the OECD with an opportunity to become aware of the parliamentarians' concerns. At the same time the parliamentarians have the opportunity for direct contacts with the OECD and to become better informed of the nature of issues and work undertaken by the OECD. ■

What other regular meetings with parliamentarians?

Twice a year (in February and October), the OECD holds high-level parliamentary seminars at its Paris headquarters to exchange views on specific topics of mutual interest. Over 50 parliamentarians attend the seminars, drawn from the parliamentary committees in OECD countries that deal with the issue under discussion.

The first parliamentary seminar in 2003 was on the theme of “Policy Coherence for Development”. Subsequent seminars have taken up other aspects of OECD activities: health, education, corporate governance, China, trade in services, the policy implications of ageing populations, and employment. ■

What are the OECD's other contacts with parliamentarians?

The OECD regularly receives visits by groups of parliamentarians, often at the initiative of member country delegations in Paris. The visiting groups usually are interested in learning about a particular topic, such as OECD work on tax or education. Each of the four OECD Centres in Berlin, Mexico City, Tokyo, and Washington conduct outreach to parliaments in their capitals. They also suggest and arrange for visits with parliamentarians by OECD secretariat staff.

The OECD Secretary-General and the Deputy Secretaries-General frequently meet with parliamentarians on visits to both member and non-member countries. In addition, each OECD specialist department maintains contacts with individual parliamentarians in member countries. Research for OECD economic surveys and other country studies often include discussions with parliaments.

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HOW DO PARLIAMENTARIANS SEE THE OECD?

Parliamentarians are increasingly looking to the OECD to play the role of “honest broker” between governments and civil society. They also see a role for the OECD in working out policy solutions to some of the challenges raised by globalisation. Participants in OECD events with parliamentarians frequently invite OECD experts to their countries to present the same topic to their home parliaments. And they are often impressed by the sheer breadth and depth of OECD activities that they discover through these events.

Participants at the first OECD high-level parliamentary seminar:

- emphasised the important role of the OECD in tabling issues and keeping the policy debate open until action is taken;
- warned against taking political constraints into account in OECD's analytical work. Otherwise no worthwhile goals will be set;
- encouraged the OECD to take up research on controversial issues, especially where policies serve special interests at the expense of overall welfare;

Parliamentarians are regularly invited to the OECD Forum, a two-day annual public conference organised on the eve of the annual Meeting of the OECD Council at Ministerial level (MCM). The Forum offers a platform for citizens to publicly debate the issues to be taken up by ministers at the MCM. Ministers debate side by side with CEOs, NGOs and academia. The Forum now features on the annual programme of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly.

The OECD also provides a range of public information products of potential interest to parliamentarians. They include the *OECD Observer* magazine, Annual Report, Ministerial Key Information booklet and *Policy Briefs*. In some countries, parliamentarians have access to the same internal Internet system that is available to governments which provides subscribers with easy online access to OECD documentation. ■

How is OECD work of practical use to parliamentarians?

The OECD's experts also work directly with parliamentary committees in a number of areas to help them deal with policy issues at a practical level, or to seek their input on a particular area of work.

In the area of *budget and public expenditures*, for example, the OECD has created a Network of Parliamentary Budget Committee Chairs, a forum which allows MPs to address budgeting concerns and policy options, and discuss how parliaments can best use their "power of the purse" in the budget process. The meetings are hosted on a rotating basis by the parliaments of member countries. The first meeting was hosted by the Finance Committee of the French Senate in Paris; subsequent

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- stressed that the results of policy research should be systematically communicated not only to Parliamentarians, but also to NGOs and the business community;
 - found the OECD parliamentary consultations useful because the OECD has a wide store of lessons learned and best practices from reform experience, including with non-OECD counterparts.

In its 2006 resolution on "The OECD and the World Economy", the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly said the OECD is "uniquely positioned to serve as the hub for global economic policy co-ordination, bringing together its expertise and experience across the spectrum of economic policy" and called on the OECD "to facilitate discussion among key member countries, the European Union, leading non-OECD economies and developing countries with the goal of reaching agreement on the core elements of a new global economic agenda. This agenda would be based on the OECD's mandate, namely the promotion of sustainable economic growth, trade liberalization and development".

meetings have been hosted by the Budget Committee of the US House of Representatives in Washington, and by the Budget Committee of the Italian Chamber of Deputies in Rome.

The OECD's budget and public expenditures experts also conduct peer reviews of national budgeting systems. All of the reviews include a special chapter on the role of parliament in the budget process. These chapters describe the political environment, the constitutional framework and any restrictions on parliament's ability to modify the government's proposed budget. They outline the parliamentary timetable for approving the budget including a description of major milestones and voting mechanism, the role of the budget committee and sector committees, the independent analysis capacity of the legislature and the role of the supreme audit institution.

In co-operation with the World Bank and other international financial institutions, the OECD maintains a comprehensive database providing comparable information on over 300 individual aspects of the budgeting system, including the role of parliament. Information in the database covers areas similar to those listed above for peer reviews. Senior staff of parliamentary budget committees or specialised parliamentary budget offices have taken part in meetings of the OECD Working Party of Senior Budget Officials.

The OECD also consults parliamentarians when carrying out work on a particular country. The OECD's Programme on *Regulatory Reform* has carried out reviews of regulatory reform in 21 countries since 1997. All of the missions to each country under review have included a meeting with parliamentarians in order to understand the needs and pace of regulatory reform in the national context.

Another OECD project will assess the different co-ordination mechanisms for regulatory reform between the State and the Regional Executive and Legislative assemblies in Italy, and identify key elements of regional capacities to produce and implement high-quality regulation based on a study of three Italian regions.

An "OECD Report on Parliamentary Procedures and Relations" was tabled at the annual meeting of the Conference of Presidents of EU Parliaments in Rome in 2000.

The OECD also works intensively on **Governance** through the Sigma Programme (Support for Improvement in Governance and Management), a joint initiative of the European Union and the OECD. Created in 1992, Sigma supports partner countries in their efforts to modernise public governance systems by assessing reform progress and identifying priorities.

Sigma works with the ten “new” EU Member States, plus Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia, Macedonia, Turkey, and, in the Western Balkans, with Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia and Montenegro.

Sigma has worked extensively with the Romanian parliament in strengthening its administrative capacity and, in 2004, assisted the Senate in preparing a future European project (Phare).

Sigma collaborated with the Kosovo Assembly by providing comments on the draft Law on External Trade Activity and the draft Law on Public Financial Management and Accountability in 2002-03. In 2003, Sigma met with members of the Bulgarian Parliamentary Committee on Legislation to discuss the main policy issues at stake in the modification of the 1999 Law on Civil Service.

Sigma also participated in a workshop on Law Drafting for civil servants and members of parliament of Bosnia and Herzegovina aimed at improving skills for drafting laws and developing assessment skills. ■

For further information

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For further reading

CivilSociety/Parliamentarians, OECD Public Affairs Division:
www.oecd.org/civilsociety

OECD Directorate for Public Governance and Territorial Development
(GOV): www.oecd.org/gov

OECD Report on Parliamentary Procedures and Relations,
www.oecd.org/civilsociety

SIGMA: www.sigmaweb.org

Discussion highlights of the 2003 OECD Parliamentary Seminar on Policy
Coherence for Development:
www.oecd.org/dataoecd/0/27/18272211.pdf

Speech of OECD Secretary-General Angel Gurría to the Council of Europe,
4 October 2006:
www.oecd.org/document/51/0,2340,en_2649_201185_37486323_1_1_1_1,00.html.

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www.oecd.org/bookshop

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www.SourceOECD.org

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