

PARLIAMENTARY MONITORING ORGANIZATIONS: PARTNERS IN PARLIAMENTARY STRENGTHENING

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, parliaments have taken significant steps to make their work more transparent, responsive and accessible to the public. Yet, despite these advances, they remain among the least trusted institutions worldwide.

To address this challenge, a growing number of parliaments are partnering with civil society organizations (CSOs) to better inform, engage and involve citizens in parliamentary processes. These collaborations reflect a shared commitment to building stronger, more effective and truly representative institutions.

This paper, produced by Inter Pares | Parliaments in Partnership—the EU's flagship project to strengthen parliamentary capacities—explores the relationship between legislatures and parliamentary monitoring organizations (PMOs). The paper provides a brief overview of the different types of PMOs and outlines how these organizations can support parliaments in the areas of transparency, accountability and participation. It concludes with a series of recommendations on promising ways forward for partnerships between PMOs and the bodies they monitor.

The ideas and practices presented in this paper stem from ongoing conversations between Inter Pares' partners—both among parliaments and civil society. The paper aims to encourage reflection on opportunities for more effective collaboration between parliaments and PMOs in the shared effort to strengthen democracies.

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1. WHY PARLIAMENTARY MONITORING ORGANIZATIONS?

In the past decade, parliaments have taken significant steps to make their work more transparent, more responsive and better understood. Websites and visitor centres have been built, engagement and education units have been set up—likewise petition systems and other platforms of participation. As a result, many parliaments now operate to a level of transparency that hitherto would have been unthinkable, both practically and politically. Legislatures also invite and interact with the citizens they represent more openly and more frequently.¹

Despite important gains, however, progress has been patchy. Whereas some parliaments are embracing the potential offered by new technologies and a more demanding citizenry, others are hesitant to open their doors. ‘Open washing’—opening up certain processes and (past) records of limited relevance, while keeping a lid on others—remains a common refuge.

Few parliaments, it would seem, have fully cracked the code. Not least because they continue to rank among the least trusted institutions in the world (Bovend'Eert 2020; Wike, Silver and Castillo 2019; OECD 2025). This poses a significant and persistent challenge to the health and sustainability of our democracies; scholars have found that low trust in parliaments can have a negative impact on voter turnout and other political participation (Cruz 2023). Growing lack of trust on the part of young people, in particular, presents a worrying trend (Foa and Mounk 2016). A recent study on trust and the European Parliament supports this picture, indicating an emerging generational gap in public attitudes towards the institution (Bauer and Morisi 2023). Parliaments themselves are not blind to this: respondents to the survey for the 2022 Global Parliamentary Report on representation identified ‘lack of trust’ as a common challenge (IPU and UNDP 2022).

These trends influence the day-to-day work of parliamentary institutions. The adoption of parliamentary codes of ethics in a growing number of countries is driven in no small part by a desire to (re)gain trust, although how successful these measures have been is debatable (Bovend'Eert 2020). Similarly, the evidence base for an increasingly large suite of open parliament measures remains weak, making it difficult to draw firm conclusions on their efficacy with regard to building public trust (Neuman 2024).

Explanations abound for parliaments’ low levels of public approval. A lack of resources for engagement, the challenge of conveying complex procedures and outcomes, the difficulties that come with multi-level governance, and of course the stains of corruption by a few (or more) bad seeds all test the public’s faith (OECD 2021, 2025; Krahl et al. 2024; Neuman 2024). Others suggest that low public trust is an unfortunate yet understandable byproduct of parliamentary democracy itself: ‘In most democratic regimes, the public often dislikes and distrusts parliamentarians. This should not surprise: the

¹ For more on this, including a wide range of examples, please consult the Inter Pares e-learning course on Representation by Professor Cristina Leston-Bandeira, <<https://learn.agora-parl.org/course/index.php?categoryid=3#representation>>, accessed 30 September 2025.

public likes neither compromise nor conflict, both of which are legislative hallmarks' (Convery et al. 2021: 207–26). Finally, a more subtle argument posits that, unlike its members, parliaments as institutions are not (yet) used to beating their own drum: they are, quite simply, 'not geared up to present a parliamentary corporate identity' (Walker 2019). If so, that is perhaps not merely to do with ingrained habits but also core, constitutional functions:

As an administration, we have to be neutral. We cannot get into politics, and we do not want to. This can be a bit of a challenge when it comes to social media. The Bundestag is active on Instagram and LinkedIn now, and our President has her own institutional Instagram profile. But the problem is that on social media, people expect us to share opinions, to agree or disagree with them. My colleagues will respond that we are neutral, and that we are not entitled to take a position on anything. That is the role of the politicians, not us at the administration. We are not there to take stands or to make ourselves popular.

—Jochen Guckes, The German Bundestag, 2020

There is some truth to all of these points. But research suggests that parliaments are viewed as highly partisan institutions that fail to offer a level playing field: that some members are, in effect, more equal than others (Holmberg, Lindberg and Svensson 2017). The same study also suggests that low levels of trust in parliament cut across social groups, differing little by gender, social class or education. A notable exception is level of interest in politics. People with a stronger interest in politics appear to place greater trust in parliaments (Holmberg, Lindberg and Svensson 2017). This, in turn, reinforces the argument for legislative openness. When citizens are informed and engaged in the workings of legislative institutions, they develop not just a better understanding of them, but a stronger appreciation:

For a parliament to have a truly impactful role as oversight of the executive branch, truly representative of its citizens, and for it to gain the necessary legitimacy both from the people and other institutions, it first needs to create the right conditions for gaining trust. After all, how can an institution be trusted to perform oversight when the institution itself is not trustworthy?

—Stefanos Loukopoulos, Vouliwatch, 2020

Members and staff of parliaments across all continents have made significant investments in public information and communication; they are understandably frustrated when their efforts do not (immediately) garner higher levels of trust. Disappointment is greater still when parliaments perceive that their efforts are used 'against' them: excessive expenses claims by a few members of parliament (MPs) may lead all members to be tarred with the same brush, for example. Similarly, many MPs reject the idea that a scorecard—a simple count

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of the number of hours of member sits in session, or the number of questions they ask—captures the impact or quality of their work.

In a political landscape increasingly marked by populism and polarization, parliaments are looking for ways to provide context. They recognize the importance of investing in civic education and engagement, but exactly how to get that right is not quite so clear-cut. Transparency is necessary for engagement, yes—but it is not sufficient.

This is where PMOs can prove invaluable partners. PMOs have a wealth of experience and expertise on what citizens wish to know, how to collect and share that information, and how to shape targeted engagement. In strengthening their own efforts in these areas, parliaments stand to benefit from drawing on the work of PMOs. Engaging with PMOs also enables parliaments to help the latter design and implement more discerning indicators of parliamentary performance.

Box 1. Profile: Directorio Legislativo

Directorio Legislativo (DL), headquartered in Buenos Aires, is dedicated to strengthening democracy and promoting transparency across Latin America and beyond. With over 15 years of experience, DL specializes in legislative monitoring and civic engagement, empowering parliaments, government bodies and civil society to foster inclusivity, openness and responsiveness to citizens.

DL conducts real-time legislative intelligence, monitoring key bills and proposals while identifying stakeholders, enabling effective engagement between civil society and parliamentarians. An expert team of 18 policy analysts tracks, evaluates and reports on national, regional and global regulatory developments across various sectors. A key area of focus is identifying and monitoring legislative changes that could affect civic space. Through the Civic Space Guardian initiative, DL provides alerts on emerging political threats and offers actionable insights to inform advocacy efforts and responses.

As a founding member of the Open Parliament e-Network (OPeN), DL has led both regional and global efforts to promote parliamentary transparency. It works alongside influential partners like the National Democratic Institute (NDI), ParlAmericas, and the Westminster Foundation for Democracy to strengthen parliamentary oversight and accountability. DL's leadership in fostering cross-sector collaboration ensures that efforts to improve transparency are inclusive and impactful.

DL has also played a pivotal role in shaping parliamentary engagement strategies for the Open Government Partnership (OGP), spearheading a major overhaul of the OGP's parliamentary strategy. Through these initiatives, DL has advanced open parliament efforts in diverse regions, including Africa and East Asia. DL's Global Executive Director, who has previously served as Chair and Co-Chair of the OGP, continues to champion the integration of citizen engagement with legislative processes, driving democratic reforms globally.

DL's flagship project, the Directory of Legislators, fosters legislative transparency by providing comprehensive and regularly updated information on lawmakers, promoting accountability and building public trust. With a history of successful collaborations with organizations like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), DL remains at the forefront of efforts to enhance parliamentary monitoring and civic engagement worldwide.

The remainder of this publication will outline what PMOs do, what they have to offer, and how they can contribute to parliamentary strengthening.

2. WHAT ARE PARLIAMENTARY MONITORING ORGANIZATIONS?

Former Canadian Speaker John Fraser said that if the institutions of parliamentary democracy are worth preserving, the duty to explain them to the people they are meant to serve becomes vitally important. And essentially, that's the role PMOs get to play. You're actually helping to clarify what parliament is about and how it works.

—Jessica Musila, former Executive Director, Mzalendo Trust, 2020

PMOs aim to strengthen democracy by making parliaments more accountable, more representative and more approachable. They typically view themselves as 'parliament watchdogs', delivering monitoring and tracking activities that often go hand in hand with an advocacy agenda. Taking this one step further, many PMOs seek to facilitate engagement between legislative institutions and the citizens they represent.

Globally, hundreds of organizations carry out some form of monitoring or tracking of parliamentary activity (Krahl et al. 2024). An even larger number engage with legislative institutions for advocacy, much of which tends to include some sort of tracking as well. For the purposes of this publication, PMOs are organizations whose core activity consists of parliamentary monitoring, and for whom parliament is (or would ideally be) a key interlocutor. As mentioned, PMOs also typically seek to encourage and facilitate engagement between parliament and civil society. This definition includes organizations who may also have other areas of focus, while excluding those who engage with parliament on an intermittent basis only.

With this in mind, PMOs can be grouped by their main (stated) purpose or activity. This is helpful when exploring potential partnerships, in particular between PMOs and parliaments at national level:

1. *Classic PMOs engage in parliamentary monitoring—but often expand their remit to other relevant institutions.* They tend to be driven by a thematic focus, often transparency (e.g. Transparency International chapters) but sometimes also natural resources, public services and so on. Like most CSOs, they have an office, a staffing and internal governance structure, and a formal online presence. Classic PMOs typically aim for institutional reforms, looking to change (aspects of) parliamentary processes. In a

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growing number of countries, they do so by pushing for open parliament plans, often in collaboration with the Open Government Partnership (OGP).

2. *Process-focused PMOs monitor parliamentary processes.* They track legislation, monitor inputs and assess opportunities for public participation. They focus on who attended what meetings, who asked questions or developed amendments, who voted how, and so on. A significant area of work for these PMOs concerns the integrity of members as well as staff: they track and publish asset declarations, public expenditures and personal expenses. Importantly, they also foster dialogue between parliament and wider stakeholders by making that information available and by providing online opportunities to engage in Q&As (question and answer sessions) with members, for example.
3. *Data-driven PMOs monitor specific legislative activities and translate them into more accessible, engaging content for citizens.* These PMOs have a more informal way of operating and tend to draw heavily on volunteers and/or students. It is worth noting that several established PMOs started out as volunteer projects, and that their focus can shift from data only to more sustained and substantive advocacy campaigns.

Naturally, these categories are fluid rather than fixed, and many PMOs straddle different types. The size and scope of PMOs varies widely, and as mentioned, an individual PMO will likely develop over time.

Finally, it is important to note that PMOs should adhere to the principles they advocate for. Transparency of activities, partnerships and funding is key to their credibility. It will also support more and deeper engagement with the parliaments they partner with (see the recommendations in 4: Recommendations: Partnering for parliamentary strengthening).

3. HOW CAN PARLIAMENTARY MONITORING ORGANIZATIONS SUPPORT PARLIAMENTARY STRENGTHENING?

It is no secret that there is a trust deficit. PMOs are a sort of bridge: they can help us address the representation gap, collect evidence, support our research pursuits. Of course, parliament and its MPs can be apprehensive about the monitoring side of things. But they are open to engagement. In our case, it has been a constructive and valuable collaboration.

—Prosper Hoetu, Senior Research Officer and head of the Citizens' Bureau, the Parliament of Ghana, 2024

Box 2. Profile: Parliamentary Network Africa

In a world where governance is increasingly scrutinized, and a continent witnessing a decline in democratic principles, PNAfrica stands as a beacon for transparent and accountable parliamentary practices.

Parliamentary Network Africa (PNAfrica) is an international civil society organization that convenes and connects civil society parliamentary monitoring organizations (PMOs) and journalists towards promoting open parliaments across Africa.

Established a decade ago, and headquartered in Accra, Ghana, PNAfrica has emerged as a reputable PMO impacting the parliamentary development ecosystem in sub-Saharan Africa. PNAfrica serves as a network and platform that brings together African parliaments, civil society, and other stakeholders to gain knowledge and experience, collaborate and advocate to enhance parliamentary engagement and the oversight role of parliaments across the continent.

PNAfrica's work cuts across four core areas under its strategic plan: strengthening parliaments to be more open and responsive; empowering civil society and strengthening media's role in promoting parliamentary transparency and accountability; facilitating multi-stakeholder accountability platforms for citizen-parliament engagement on public service delivery; and creating, managing and promoting knowledge on the work of parliaments in Africa.

PNAfrica has been deeply involved in strengthening parliamentary capacity across Africa by providing technical assistance through research and training to enhance law-making, oversight and representation across national and regional parliaments. PNAfrica's work birthed the Africa Open Parliament Index (OPI), a groundbreaking legislative transparency tool that assesses parliamentary openness and drives reforms for greater transparency, accountability and citizen participation. PNAfrica collaborated with, among others, the parliaments in Benin, Cabo Verde, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Nigeria and Sierra Leone, playing a key role in spearheading parliamentary reforms and open parliament initiatives using the OPI after it was first launched in 2022. Currently, PNAfrica provides sub-grants to six national PMO networks in West Africa to advocate for open parliament using the OPI.

PNAfrica's collaboration with national parliaments has led to producing such results as a 'Legislative Compendium' for the Parliament of Sierra Leone and the creation of a Citizen Bureau, the maiden 'Open Parliament Day' and a full-fledged Open Parliament Action Plan in Ghana.

Since 2019, PNAfrica has convened both national and regional-level PMO networks that have engaged national and regional parliaments across Africa. In West Africa, PNAfrica coordinates the West Africa PMO Network where it leads 11 national PMO networks to advance the open parliament agenda in the subregion. Continental-wide, PNAfrica serves as the secretariat for the Africa Parliamentary Monitoring Organizations Network (APMON), a network of non-governmental organizations and coalition of CSOs engaged in the monitoring and engagement of parliaments across Africa.

In equipping PMOs with the requisite skills and knowledge to effectively engage their national and subnational parliaments, PNAfrica through APMON created a Parliamentary Resource Hub which serves as a learning platform for the parliamentary community to access e-courses and other learning resources at no cost.

PNAfrica is also dedicated to strengthening media capacity and promoting access to parliamentary information across the continent. Recognizing the critical role of journalists in legislative analysis and reporting, PNAfrica created the African Parliamentary Press Network (APPN), a network of journalists reporting from national and regional parliaments across Africa. The APPN provides strategic support to the Media Bureau of the Pan-African Parliament, strengthening the capacity of over 200 parliamentary journalists to effectively monitor, analyse and report parliamentary work through learning and practice.

Contact PNAfrica:

Email: info@parliamentafrica.com

LinkedIn, Facebook and X: Parliamentary Network Africa

Box 3. Profile: Vouliwatch

Vouliwatch ('Vouli' means Parliament in Greek) is a non-partisan parliamentary monitoring and democracy watchdog organization set up in Athens in March 2014 in response to the rising disillusionment of a large segment of the Greek population towards parliamentary democracy and the broader Greek political system.

In the wake of the economic crisis and in a country where politics has all too often been beset by scandals and corruption, Vouliwatch aims to contribute towards the establishment of an open and accountable political system that uses innovative digital technology to promote citizen participation in the political process and to rebuild trust in parliamentary democracy. In the heyday of Ancient Greek democracy, citizens actively participated in political dialogue, and Vouliwatch aims to revive this essential aspect of a democratic society through the use of digital technology.

Vouliwatch has established itself as the leading advocacy and campaigns organization in Greece in the fields of transparency, open parliament/government and the freedom of access to information. Its campaigns, research, advocacy and strategic litigation work have resulted in legislative change as well as the exposure of political misconduct.

The organization's main goal is to bridge the gap between citizens and their political representatives while promoting a culture of transparency, accountability and active citizenship.

Specifically, Vouliwatch has developed the following tools:

- **Member of parliament (MP) profiles:** Vouliwatch has created digital profiles for each MP through which citizens can monitor all their parliamentary activities as well as browse their CVs, political course and asset declarations. MPs may also upload their own content on these profiles, such as press releases, speeches and announcements.
- **Public questioning ('Ask your MP/MEP'):** In a moderated platform, citizens can publicly ask questions and receive public replies from MPs and members of the European Parliament (MEPs). To prevent misuse of the platform, all citizens' questions and politicians' answers are cross-checked according to a published code of conduct that is aligned with the principles of open government ethics.
- **Votewatch:** This tool allows users to keep an eye on the voting behaviour of each MP while informing the public of the details and background information of each piece of legislation put forward for voting.
- **Voulidata:** The application in question allows users to actively monitor the legislative as well as the parliamentary control process via the presentation and visualization of relevant data. Additionally, users can compare their findings according to parliamentary season, month or year. The tool in question provides information with regards to the number of bills voted in parliament and all means of parliamentary scrutiny (questions, petitions etc.) as well as listing the most active MPs, political groups and the topics of the questions/petitions tabled.
- **Policy Monitor:** The Policy Monitor is a digital tool which allows users to explore and compare what the main political parties' positions are on given issues.
- **Asset Declaration Monitor:** The Asset Declaration Monitor allows citizens to monitor, compare and analyse the asset declarations of individual MPs as well as MEPs from 2012 onwards through visualization and graphs.
- **The Observatory:** The Observatory is Vouliwatch's parliamentary news section with daily updates on the latest developments in parliament from the organization's own parliamentary correspondent.

Vouliwatch is a co-founder of the ParliamentWatch Network and is member of the United Nation's Coalition Against Corruption (UNCAC), ALTER-EU, the Open Spending EU Coalition and the Right to Information Network. Additionally, it works regularly with international and supra-national institutions and organizations such as the European Parliament Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE), the European Commission, the Group of States against Corruption (GRECO) and the Open Government Partnership to advance and safeguard the principles of democracy, the rule of law and open government.

Box 3. Profile: Vouliwatch (cont.)

Vouliwatch's innovative approach to promoting transparency and active citizenship extends beyond its primary activities through several noteworthy side projects:

- Govwatch: A dedicated platform that tracks and reports on issues of the rule of law in Greece (including breaches in parliamentary rules and codes of conduct).
- Arthro5A: Named after article 5A of the Greek Constitution, which enshrines the right to access information, this civic tech project focuses on promoting the use of freedom of information requests as a tool for transparency.
- Localwatch: Aimed at monitoring and improving transparency, citizen engagement and accountability at the local government level, Localwatch enables citizens to engage with and scrutinize municipal authorities.

Vouliwatch is financially independent; it does not accept financial support from political parties, politicians or corporations and does not wish to generate income through advertising on its website. It values its independence as it believes it to be one of its greatest assets.

All the services and valuable data, information and research that Vouliwatch has been producing since its launch are free and open to the public. Access to information after all is a right, not a privilege!

PMOs are uniquely positioned to support parliaments in developing and deepening their efforts towards transparency, accountability and citizen engagement. They can offer technical expertise and, through a well-connected global community, they have access to experienced reformers and open-source tools. Most importantly, they can support parliaments in thinking through the core questions that underpin their efforts in these areas. The following sections will explore what this might look like in practice.

3.1. Transparency

Transparency is a cornerstone of open government and efforts to improve transparency are being taken by a growing number of legislative institutions. But while most parliamentary actors agree that citizens should have access to information, exactly what they should have access to is less clear. It also remains a source of contention between parliaments and civil society, including PMOs.

To an extent, this contention can be attributed to a muddled understanding of transparency. In an institutional context, transparency is often confused with communication (sharing with the public what parliament is doing) or e-government (digitizing parliamentary processes and services). Both of these are pertinent, but neither amount to transparency.

Communication, naturally, is a prerequisite for transparency: people need to find their way to the institution and be kept informed of its activities. Relatedly, e-government has fundamentally changed how many parliaments operate—and communicate. Today, it is relatively common for parliaments to employ e-signatures, to publish and archive parliamentary records on much-improved websites, or to livestream meetings.

These are important building blocks, but transparency goes considerably further. Transparency involves the timely release of records that, within reason, should be accessible to the public. Beyond making and storing such records appropriately, this involves publishing the raw data in machine-readable format, so that it is available for use by others. Publishing a PDF offers information; publishing the underlying data offers access.

Parliamentary committees: To open or not to open?

Jeremy Bentham's early calls for 'publicity' to 'constrain members of the assembly to perform their duty' and 'secure the confidence of the people, and their assent to the measures of the legislature' (Bentham [1816] 1999) enjoy support in many quarters. Most parliaments offer public access to plenary hearings, and transcripts or summaries are made available either by default or on request. PMOs, as will already be clear, consider public access to parliamentary proceedings an absolute necessity. The evidence on the impact of such measures remains mixed (Neuman 2024).

While there is fairly strong consensus that parliaments' plenary sessions should be held in public, a significant number hold fast to the principle that their committee work is better conducted behind closed doors. Germany and Sweden are among those that consider private deliberations more conducive to consensus-building and compromise, by removing incentives for the type of political posturing that is often present in plenary sessions. Closed committees can also allow for complex and sensitive issues to be discussed in a calm and collected manner, without pressure from private or public interest groups. This is particularly important in post-conflict states, where constructive collaboration between different political factions can be very difficult in a public setting—where political leaders feel obliged to play to their supporters, rather than seek the often messy compromises that are the only way out of conflict.

Last but not least, transparency involves clarity on the membership of the institution. To tackle and prevent nepotism, misuse of public funds and other forms of corruption, a transparent parliament: (a) is forthcoming about the political, financial and personal associations of its members; (b) provides full details on the benefits its members receive, from salaries to allowances and expenses; and (c) shares full details on who enters its premises and on what grounds.

Accountability is not possible without transparency, but greater transparency does not of itself guarantee greater accountability.

In exploring what transparency measures to pursue, parliaments face difficult questions. Few MPs or parliamentary staff will support 'absolute' transparency, but many do recognize that they fall short of the expectations citizens hold today. PMOs can be valuable conversation partners, helping to frame potential options.

3.2 Accountability

Accountability is not possible without transparency, but greater transparency does not of itself guarantee greater accountability. The latter means a genuine commitment to agreed rules and regulations—and a willingness to be held

Box 4. Profile: Mzalendo Trust

Mzalendo Trust is a non-partisan parliamentary monitoring organization dedicated to promoting open, inclusive and accountable parliaments in Kenya and Africa. The organization was established 20 years ago, with the aim of fostering effective and responsive legislative and political processes. The organization leverages various instruments, including civic tech tools, research and advocacy, to bridge the gap between citizens and their elected representatives. Mzalendo's current strategic plan expands its scope to subnational and regional parliaments.

Civic tech tools are at the core Mzalendo Trust's work towards parliamentary monitoring, hosted and actualized on the website, and further complemented by its social media pages. The 'Parliamentary Hansard' and 'Dokeza' platforms enable timely access to parliamentary activities, including reports of various plenary debates, committee reports and legislative proposals, among other documents. The platforms are crucial in fostering informed citizen engagement, especially during the public participation processes.

In its accountability efforts, Mzalendo Trust has initiated several initiatives and tools that help it reach its objectives. The 'Parliamentary Scorecard' is a research tool that analyses the performance of parliament as an institution and individual members annually. This empowers citizens to hold their representatives accountable and fosters citizen-driven advocacy for legislative reforms that address pressing societal issues. It also manages a 'Promise Tracker' that monitors commitments made by political parties and governments, within election periods.

In addition to these efforts, Mzalendo Trust actively engages in capacity-enhancing initiatives aimed at strengthening parliaments' functions. The organization collaborates with policymakers, civil society and other stakeholders to curate sessions that enhance the technical expertise of not only parliamentarians but also secretariats of different committees.

At the national level, Mzalendo has engaged parliamentary committees and caucuses (the Kenya Women Parliamentary Association (KEWOPA), the Kenya Disability Parliamentary Association (KEDIPA), the Kenya Youth Parliamentary Association (KYPA)) to enhance the inclusion of special interest groups in the Kenyan Parliament. Further, it has been instrumental in the entrenchment of Open Government Initiative in the Kenyan Parliament by supporting the establishment of an OGP Caucus in Parliament and currently leads the Legislative Openness Cluster in Kenya's OGP National Action Plan V. At a subnational level, Mzalendo works with county assemblies, committees, caucuses (i.e. the Kenya Young Members of County Assemblies (KYMCA)) and designated local organizations to enhance transparency accountability and inclusion.

The organization conducts the 'Shujaa Awards' to recognize parliamentarians who champion various issues of public concern. To date, Mzalendo Trust has published 32 research reports, 10 scorecards and 7 Shujaa awards, which are available on its website.

With regard to partnerships and network building, Mzalendo Trust co-hosts a Civil Society Parliamentary Engagement Network (CSPEN) as a platform through which 35-member civil society organizations collaborate, network, strategize and champion transparency, accountability and inclusive parliamentary processes. Thus far, CSPEN has been crucial in organizing forums and hosting spaces that scrutinize legislative processes and proposals and generating requisite strategic and advocacy measures that reflect and respond to citizens' aspirations.

At the regional level, Mzalendo's Executive Director Caroline Gaita serves as the Chairperson of premier PMOs from West, East and Southern Africa under the umbrella of the African Parliamentary Monitoring Organizations Network (APMON), which was launched in 2022 with the intention of promoting parliamentary openness across Africa. Under her leadership, APMON is developing critical structures that include hosting subregional chapters such as East African Parliamentary Monitoring Organization Network (EAPMON) conferences, as well as various engagements with the East African Legislative Assembly (EALA) and Pan-African Parliament (PAP).

Mzalendo Trust's current social media reach on X (formerly Twitter) is 61,500; LinkedIn 1,700; Facebook 21,000; Instagram 1,900—these average over 1.3 million engagements monthly, a community that trusts the organization's leadership on parliamentary matters.

to account for meeting, or failing to meet, those standards. The complex and often poorly understood nature of parliamentary work makes it difficult to translate those standards into meaningful measures of performance. Can we measure the effectiveness of an MP by counting how much time they spend in plenary or committee meetings? Do more parliamentary questions signal more commitment, more work, more contributions? How to account for the hours spent shaping and reviewing legislative proposals, brokering agreements, or dealing with constituents? And what to make of parliamentarians who spend their time studying substance rather than sharing on social media?

These questions underline the difficulty of monitoring parliamentary performance, both of the institution as a whole and of its individual members. They also explain why many parliamentarians do not welcome the largely quantitative score cards produced by PMOs and the media. Score card reviews tend to favour the visible over the less visible, missing out on more qualitative measures and analyses that would offer a nuanced view of the institution and its work.

Underlying these concerns are deeply held principles of institutional independence that seemingly run counter to the notion of 'external' accountability. The ability of a legislature to do its work without interference and without repercussions is a cornerstone of its effectiveness—anchored, in most cases, in (diverse) legal immunities known as parliamentary privilege. These are important principles, and they must be adhered to if parliaments are to remain free to play their law-making, oversight and representative roles (Venice Commission 2014).

A modern parliament, however, must acknowledge that independence from executive interference and accountability to citizens are not mutually exclusive—indeed, they are very often complementary. Institutional independence does not necessarily imply secret voting records, for example—and certainly not unchecked expenses. The simple injunction to act 'in good faith' has given way to new, better defined accountability standards: parliamentarians are asked to demonstrate that they do, in fact, work on behalf of the citizens they represent, and that parliamentary staff provide impartial and informed support.

Aligning independence and accountability requires a change in mindset. PMOs can support parliaments as they navigate possible means to strengthen their internal and external accountability. Engaging PMOs will also allow parliaments to identify why certain reform measures might be counterproductive or otherwise undesirable, and to explain this constructively to a wider audience; the feasible limits of accountability should, like all democratic decisions, be reached accountably.

A modern parliament must acknowledge that independence from executive interference and accountability to citizens are not mutually exclusive—they are very often complementary.

Box 5. Ireland's Houses of the Oireachtas: Open parliament in practice

'In Ireland, we have invested in open data. We use the Creative Commons license and have a number of APIs [Application Programming Interfaces] to extract key data, such as bills and legislation, debates and members. You can go to our website and see how many questions a member has asked, what they have contributed to a debate, and so on. We have a little bit more work to do to get to the really good standards of linked data you would expect in a modern parliament, but we are working towards that. For now, citizens can access who does what.

We haven't stopped there. We have put a lot of emphasis on the new generation of voters. We have recruited an education officer and offer parliamentary workshops for students who come in. Our speaker makes video calls into school classrooms: he speaks, takes students' questions, engages with them. We also offer well-developed lesson plans for schools, workbooks for teachers, access into teacher networks, and so on. We're putting a lot of investment into the next generation of voters.

In addition, and while I do not speak for them, we have a Standards in Public Office Commission which registers all of the assets of a member of parliament and they are published every year. The Standards Commission can investigate if a member refers a complaint about another member, or if a citizen refers a complaint about a member. When that happens, an investigation is launched, and those are run completely independently.

Lastly, we have an active community who use freedom of information (FOI) and whistleblower legislation. Much of that is aimed at detecting fraud or maladministration. That's what it's there for, and it works well. On the FOI side, the basic presumption is that a state body will disclose information... There are a number of exemptions under FOI—around commercial sensitivity, personal information and so on—but the presumption is that all of the information will be published. Over the past number of years, we as a parliament have stepped up the level of information we have voluntarily disclosed. We have a few journalists who run informed and effective news stories based on released information. Where stories are on fairly well-known issues such as, for example, parliamentary expenses, we try to openly engage with them to put the facts out accurately.'

—Derek Dignam, Former Head of Communications, Houses of the Oireachtas, 2020

3.3. Citizen engagement

A growing number of parliaments run citizen engagement and/or civic education initiatives. These efforts are typically geared towards making parliament better understood and involving citizens more closely and consistently in parliamentary processes. Tried and tested formats include school visits, youth parliaments, public petition systems and legislative tracking platforms.² Parliaments are investing significant time and resources in citizen engagement initiatives, in an effort to educate, inform and engage the public.

In Ireland and New Zealand, school curricula—complete with teacher guidance and testing materials—have been made available free of charge. Young people are invited to take a seat as members of Youth Parliaments, designed to spark interest and offer hands-on experience of what parliament is about.

Estonia's Rahvaalgatus platform invites citizens to submit legislative proposals to parliament, half a dozen of which have made it into law. Similarly, Croatia's

² For more on this, including a wide range of examples, please consult the joint Inter Pares/IPEN Guides on Citizen Engagement for Parliaments, <<https://www.inter-pares.eu/en/publications/guides-on-citizen-engagement-for-parliaments>>, accessed 30 September 2025.

crowd-law platform discloses high-quality information and empowers citizens to monitor and contribute to the drafting of legislative proposals.

While many of these initiatives are well received, they do not always have the intended impact. As parliaments continue to search for more effective ways to engage citizens in their work, important lessons can be learned from experiences to date. Broadly, these suggest that meaningful engagement of citizens by parliaments centres on three pillars: (a) education; (b) inclusion; and (c) accountability.

Education, first and foremost, is the basis for constructive engagement. As mentioned earlier, research shows that people with a better understanding of the role of parliaments are more likely to trust them. They are also more likely to invest their time in engaging with their members and staff, and to take an interest in their work.

In light of this, the importance of civic education cannot be understated—particularly (but not exclusively) in countries with a growing youth population. Concerted efforts to provide both informal and formal civic education should be at the heart of all parliamentary engagement initiatives. Critically, this should leverage the non-partisan expertise of teachers, youth workers and other educators concerning why and how young people learn and develop.

Closely connected to this is inclusion: the commitment to engage with all voices, not just those that are most educated, loudest or physically closest to capital cities. Many opportunities offered by parliaments—public hearings, petitions, consultations—remain opaque to citizens who lack the financial means or literacy skills to use them. Digital technologies have made it easier to connect with citizens across geographies and languages, but targeted outreach continues to lag behind targeted disinformation.

To truly strengthen citizen engagement, parliaments must carefully balance their resources. Is a state-of-the-art crowd-law platform a better investment than regular in-person consultations? Is livestreaming of committee hearings more valuable than training journalists on parliamentary procedure? Would a new visitor centre reach more young people than school-based initiatives? None of these questions are likely to have easy answers, and different circumstances will call for different solutions.

This is where accountability comes in. Engagement, unlike communication, is a two-way street. Citizen engagement opportunities might start with a call for consultation, but they must end with feedback on the outcome of that process. Where inputs are invited, the convenors owe a specific, measurable and time-bound response. This does not mean that every interaction should land on staff who are already overburdened, or necessarily on MPs—who cannot possibly respond to each and every request in person. It does mean, however, that every engagement opportunity offered should have a built-in feedback mechanism to ensure that inputs do not go unseen or unanswered.

Lastly, it is important to recognize that citizen engagement builds on transparency and accountability; it does not replace it. Efforts to engage the public on individual pieces of legislation while leaving MPs' or parties' financial dealings shrouded in secrecy will do little to strengthen parliaments' reputation or impact. The same is true of opening the doors to the public once a year or, as mentioned, leaving citizens' inputs unanswered.

Meaningful citizen engagement requires a willingness to listen, and to take into account what has been said. PMOs can support parliaments as they explore new and improved ways to do this.

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4. RECOMMENDATIONS: PARTNERING FOR PARLIAMENTARY STRENGTHENING

The agenda is a shared one. In some ways, it has been built by consensus: we all push for the same issues. In one country a PMO might focus some more on the accountability for members, and in another on legislative tracking. But all in all, this is it. We want transparent, accountable and responsive parliaments. No more and no less.

—Maria Baron, Global Executive Director, Directorio Legislativo, 2020

The previous sections have illustrated how the experience and expertise of PMOs can support parliaments in their drive for transparency, accountability and citizen engagement. It must be recognized, however, that parliaments face practical and political barriers to partnerships with PMOs. Moreover, resources—both financial and human—are limited.

Even where resources are available, and where a political commitment exists to strengthen transparency, accountability and inclusion, parliaments might be reluctant to work with organizations that have been critical of them in the past.

In exploring a potential partnership, the following questions can guide reflections on what is feasible and desirable:

- What are the values and objectives of the PMO? Are they complementary to yours? Do you see opportunities to identify shared goals?
- Is this PMO in a position to offer expertise, resources or access that parliament would benefit from?
- Is this PMO transparent about its own methods? What do you know about its track record and/or its previous dealings with parliament?
- How does the PMO fund its work? Does it have financial ties to other organizations, or can it function independently?
- What, if anything, do you risk by sitting down for a conversation?

With these questions in mind, parliaments can set out to explore what might be possible. To inform those discussions and strengthen connections between all concerned stakeholders, the recommendations offered here draw on input from parliaments, PMOs and Inter Pares' partners.

PMOs are well placed to support parliaments in adopting open data standards that will streamline their internal functioning and facilitate their engagement with citizens.

1. **Open data standards.** PMOs are well placed to support parliaments in adopting open data standards that will streamline their internal functioning and facilitate their engagement with citizens. Many parliaments still fail to publish information in user-friendly formats and continue to invest time and resources in information materials that cannot be readily used by third parties or on mobile devices. PMOs can offer technical expertise or connect parliaments to experts in those areas.
2. **Staff training.** Parliaments can invest in staff training on transparency (including freedom of information requests), accountability standards and citizen engagement, to better equip the administration as a whole on these issues. This will allow relevant requests to be dealt with more efficiently, enabling parliament to streamline who deals with these issues and how—so that the administration can act more promptly and decisively where appropriate.
3. **Access to information.** Access to information or freedom of information laws govern how citizens can access information held by government. These laws are important: the right to request and access information affords citizens protections—and enables the work of journalists, PMOs and civil society more broadly. The strength and implementation of these laws vary widely, and many countries still lack legislation in this area.³ Parliaments can invite PMOs to discuss how existing access to information legislation or its implementation falls short.
4. **Civic space.** Civic space exists where governments uphold basic freedoms of expression, assembly and association. In recent years, civic space has come under increasing attack: research by Civicus (n.d.) suggests that less than four per cent of the world's population enjoys open civic space. This makes it much more difficult—and, in a growing number of countries, dangerous—for civil society to function. A natural point of departure for parliaments is the protection and promotion of these basic freedoms through their legislative and oversight powers. Beyond that, by engaging with PMOs and wider civil society, parliament recognizes basic rights and the role of civic space in a functioning democracy.
5. **Research.** An evidence-based understanding of how parliament is perceived by the people it represents is necessary when shaping strategies for better inclusion and representation of vulnerable groups. How best to work with CSOs, including PMOs, should be part of that; building research capacity, and investigating how to include civil society, women and youth in

By engaging with PMOs and wider civil society, parliament recognizes basic rights and the role of civic space in a functioning democracy.

³ For further information, see the Global Right to Information rating: <<https://www.rti-rating.org>>, accessed 30 September 2025.

parliamentary processes, are of vital importance. PMOs can help identify the strategic questions and support parliament in reaching a wider and more diverse audience.

6. **Financial sustainability.** Sustainable funding is one of the key challenges for PMOs today. While parliaments cannot and should not fund the work of their watchdogs, they can help create an enabling environment for PMOs to seek and obtain funding. Constructively collaborating with PMOs signals the legitimacy of their work to potential partners and donors, both public and private. Finally, implementing open data standards and inviting PMOs to take part in parliamentary engagement initiatives will allow PMOs to focus on the quality of their oversight, without being bogged down in data collection.
7. **Dialogue.** Moving from communication to dialogue is a challenge for most political institutions, and parliaments are no exception. Some PMOs have developed innovative and effective ways to inform, engage and connect with citizens. They can act as a sounding board for parliaments looking to develop new initiatives or test new channels, and they can facilitate access to established networks and platforms. They can also, should parliament be open to it, offer mediation or facilitation services.
8. **Innovation.** It is difficult for parliaments to innovate when they are not aware of successful practices elsewhere. PMOs are at the frontline of parliamentary and democratic innovations more broadly; they can highlight strong practices that allow for maximum internal and external oversight, for example. PMOs have knowledge of the latest trends and technologies allowing parliaments to move forward—whether on asset declarations, regulation of lobbying, social dialogue or inclusion.

Box 6. Profile: The Open Parliament e-Network

The Open Parliament e-Network (OPeN) is a global consortium designed to promote parliamentary openness and strengthen democratic governance worldwide. Through collaboration among international organizations, non-governmental organizations, and regional or global civil society networks, OPeN works to advance the principles of transparency, accountability, ethics and citizen participation in parliaments.

OPeN's key objectives include improving the responsiveness and effectiveness of parliaments, supporting civil society's role in parliamentary oversight, promoting cross-party dialogue, and encouraging transparency and participation in legislative affairs. OPeN also advocates for the development of standards and frameworks to advance parliamentary openness globally.

OPeN is open to various partners with a proven track record of advancing parliamentary openness. Partners engage in joint activities and resource mobilization, and share a commitment to the mission of promoting open, transparent legislative processes. Affiliates, including smaller civil society organizations, can also associate with OPeN to contribute to the open parliament movement.

Finally, OPeN supports joint resource mobilization efforts among its partners to fund activities related to parliamentary openness. By bringing together diverse stakeholders, OPeN seeks to create an inclusive platform for promoting parliamentary reforms and ensure that legislative processes are open, accountable and accessible to all citizens.

Box 7. Profile: The Open Government Partnership (OGP)

The Open Government Partnership (OGP) is a global initiative that brings together governments, parliaments and civil society to co-create Action Plans for open government reforms. Launched in 2011 by 8 founding countries, the OGP includes 77 countries and 150 local governments—representing more than 2 billion people—and thousands of civil society organizations.

Parliaments engage in the OGP by bringing critical support to the implementation and oversight of Action Plans and through the co-creation of their own Open Parliament Plans. In doing so, parliaments send a clear signal that they are serious about making their institution more inclusive, more accountable and more open. Open parliament commitments cover everything from asset declaration to youth parliaments and minority reports.

For examples and best practices, please visit: <<https://www.opengovpartnership.org/policy-area/open-parliaments>>.

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ABBREVIATIONS

APMON	Africa Parliamentary Monitoring Organizations Network
CSO	Civil society organization
DL	Directorio Legislativo
MP	Member of parliament
OGP	Open Government Partnership
OPeN	Open Parliament e-Network
OPI	Open Parliament Index, Africa
PMO	Parliamentary monitoring organization
PNAfrica	Parliamentary Network Africa

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Lotte Geunis is a parliamentary advisor with over 15 years' experience in parliamentary strengthening. Since 2019, she has been a senior advisor with Inter Pares, where she developed a global e-learning programme and has guided work streams on open parliaments and youth participation. She previously worked at the United Nations Development Programme, the World Bank and the Open Government Partnership. In 2025, Lotte obtained her PhD in Governance (youth participation) from Maastricht University. She holds an MPhil from the University of Oxford, an MA from the KU Leuven and a BA from the University of Warwick.

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