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The Parliamentary Information: Innovations and Opportunities

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SUMMARY

With globalization, where software / computer programs oblige us to design information management systems all in the same way, the Cameroon National Assembly, with the support of a number of international institutions, recognizes the need to use new technologies to facilitate parliamentary activities and to modernize its parliamentary information management system.

After re-organizing and equipping its documentary services (libraries and archives) and other services, it undertook to diversify the sources of parliamentary information. Accordingly, data bases were created throughout the General Secretariat in order to capture all relevant information. These interconnected bases today form the intranet network. This network distributes all information internally and is accessible to the members and staff of the National Assembly. Parliamentary business is updated regularly on the Internet site, a real window on our parliament.

It is my very pleasant duty to speak to you who come from a variety of parliaments around the world and work daily to provide varied and credible information to parliamentarians, which may be of assistance to them in the course of their work.

In addition, if I may, I would take a moment to congratulate the dynamic team running our section and to tell you how much I appreciate the opportunity this forum provides us to meet and get to know one another, to appreciate each other and to draw on our collective experiences.

Everyday, in the course of our duties we have to adapt to new situations—a real challenge. This is why I would like to share a few thoughts with you on our parliamentary information system. The guidelines our parliament has defined in this area, while open to improvement, reflect the profound changes taking place in our society and with the major trends marking developments in information systems worldwide.

Over the course of my presentation, I will attempt to explain the strategies behind the use of new technologies to maximize performance. Fundamentally, the system is supported by data bases created within each division of the National Assembly's General Secretariat. They capture all relevant information, disseminate it through the intranet and post it on the Web site—the window on our parliament.

➤ AN INTRODUCTION TO CAMEROON AND ITS PARLIAMENT

Cameroon is located in Central Africa and has an area of 475,000 km². The country is in the shape of a triangle, with the tip of it touching the edges of the Sahara and the base, resting on the ocean, located in the middle of the equatorial forest and has a population estimated at 20 million. Independent since 1960, it includes in its population some 250 ethnic groups and has two official languages—English and French—inherited from the colonial era. It is divided into ten provinces and has a semi-parliamentary political system.

The institution of parliament has existed in Cameroon since 1946. The *Assemblée Représentative du Cameroun* (ARCAM – Representative Assembly of Cameroon) was in fact established under the French administration on December 22, 1946. Over the years, the name of the institution changed from *Assemblée Territoriale du Cameroun* (ATCAM – Territorial Assembly of Cameroon), to *Assemblée Fédérale* (Federal Assembly) and finally to *Assemblée Nationale* (National Assembly) in 1972.

Currently, under the terms of the Constitution of January 18, 1996, the parliament is bicameral, in other words, it has two chambers: the National Assembly and the Senate. However, section 67, paragraph 3 of the Constitution provides that the National Assembly enjoys all of the prerogatives conferred on parliament until a Senate is established.

Five political parties sit in the current legislature—the RDPC, the SDF, the UNDP and the UDC—for a total of 180 members elected under universal suffrage for a five-year term. Two parliamentary groups are constituted within the house according to the rules of procedure. They are the RDPC, in the majority with 419 members, and the SDF, in the minority with 23 members. The National Assembly sits three times a year for 30 days at a time (March, June,

and November). There are nine 30-member general committees to study matters submitted to them.

To support the political players, a technical body known as the General Secretariat had to be set up, with a staff of 600 in all categories working in five divisions, as follow:

- the Administrative Division
- the Financial Division
- the Co-ordination Division
- the Legislative Division
- the Information, Studies and Research Division

The last one, the real driving force behind information policy in our parliament has undergone a number of changes.

➤ **PARLIAMENTARY INFORMATION ON LINE THANKS TO DATA BASES, THE INTRANET AND THE WEB SITE**

■ **THE INTRANET AS A VEHICLE OF INFORMATION**

- **The process**

The National Assembly recognized in the early '80s that it needed a modern system to manage parliamentary information. At that point, a computerized system permitting rapid capture and research was paired the traditional system. With support from Canadian Cooperation, the process of computerizing the library was begun. As the process was beginning to show promise, the fire in documentary services interrupted the progress.

Later on, the National Assembly was given another opportunity: support from the Assemblée Parlementaire de la Francophonie (APF), which decided to

implement programs in conjunction with the Agence Intergouvernementale de la Francophonie.

Through its "PARDOC" and "Inforoutes de l'APF", the APF contributed between 1991 and 2001 to the creation of documentary services and Internet sites in the southern and eastern assemblies. In all, 29 parliaments including that of Cameroon were given assistance, and five Internet sites were created.

There are, clearly, many facets to parliamentary information and many sources of it. Clearly too, it would be desirable to identify all the sources, organize them and then create the conditions that permit the exchange and circulation of information within an interactive system.

To this end, the PARDOC program became NORIA in 2002 and serves to consolidate the parliaments' computer capabilities in the area of information (by setting up computer and Intranet networks, among other things) and to facilitate the distribution of francophone information internally. It was, therefore, in the course of this program's implementation that the National Assembly decided to create five data bases within each division to capture specific information:

- ✓ the **financial data base** contains information on sessional allowances, spending allowances, vehicle allowances, micro projects, employee remuneration, equipment costs, ... ;
- ✓ the **administrative data base** is for information pertaining to members' practical lives (transportation, health, housing), administrative files, administrative services ;
- ✓ the **coordination data base** contains information on the internal and international activities of the National Assembly (limited to the audiences of the Speaker of the National Assembly, parliamentary missions...);
- ✓ the **legislation data base** contains information on the whole of the legislative process from a law's introduction to its promulgation, on government action...;

- ✓ the **information data base** takes a longer look at studies and current affairs matters (a member's status, mandate, control,...) all reference documents (Constitution, procedural rules...), the library and archives catalogues.

Along the same lines, Parliament installed cabling at 125 points (workstations) in the main building and the adjoining building and staff were given the following training courses:

- introduction to computers and the Internet service, May 15 to 26, 2000;
- Web site creation, June 12 to 17, 2000;
- Webmasters meeting, November 14 to 16, 2000;
- information systems, creating and managing a dynamic Web site, June 30 to July 5, 2003; and
- network administration, June 30 to July 3, 2003.

The work of cabling the main building and other buildings is complete. Of the five data bases identified earlier, the Information Division data base is operational.

■ **ACHIEVEMENTS**

(1) The electronic library

A new information management policy resulted in parliament's building a modern three-story building to house research and documentation services exclusively. This significant achievement is an expression of the authorities' desire to focus on improving the working conditions of the country's elected officials. It is quite an innovation given that, when parliament saw the light of day in 1946, the library was confined to a tiny office beside the committees room. This three story architectural jewel is occupied as follows:

- the archives, the consultation room and offices are located on the ground floor and in the basement;

- the library, reading room, periodicals room and offices are on the second floor; and
- a research centre and cyber space containing some twenty computers reserved for members are located on the third floor.

The parliamentary library is not far away from there and from the committee rooms, and overall provides excellent working conditions (computers, air conditioning, washrooms, comfort, reading rooms...).

In human resources terms, staff is being increased. The number of people working in this building has grown and currently totals 40 officials and officers in all categories, most of whom are post-secondary graduates.

The function of library of the National Assembly, like that of most parliamentary libraries, is primarily to inform members. The library contains some 5,000 works on politics, law, the economy, the social sciences and history and subscribes to some twenty national and international magazines. It also contains press files, studies and selections from documents relating to current legislative matters.

Management of all of this information required the purchase of an information management system known as ALEXANDRIE, version 5.5, which includes a number of functionalities, modules and applications and has a powerful search engine. It has enabled our library to make much more information available to users, who, from a variety of points, can quickly access the data. Through the library portal, readers can access a catalogue on line. Clear graphics help in the research. Thanks to this modern program, the library can easily manage loans, reserve books, indicate returns, do follow-ups, order subscriptions... All the usual document management functions are generally available.

(2) Electronic archives

The archives are the memory of a parliament. They include statutory and regulatory documents, administrative documents and documents on inter-parliamentary activities (the National Assembly's participation in meetings of the Inter-parliamentary Union, the Union of African Parliaments...).

Overall, archive material is regularly deposited with the Information Division by all the other components of the General Secretariat and by outside bodies. This collection of information, essential to the country's cultural heritage, must be conserved in an organized and detailed fashion. The information is of considerable interest for research and historical documentation purposes. Accordingly, the management system put in place tries to reconcile archive protection and conservation requirements with the need for access to archive documents for research and information purposes. The archives data base more thoroughly compiles and indexes legislative documents such as bills, draft legislation, mission reports and minutes and a variety of administrative documents. Users of this base are presented with the following menu:

- | | | |
|-----------------|-------------|--------------------|
| (1) Legislature | (5) PJJ No. | (9) Committee |
| (2) Session | (6) PPL No. | (10) Law reference |
| (3) Date | (7) PR No. | (11) Text |
| (4) Order No. | (8) PV | |

■ THE INTERNET SITE OR A WINDOW ON OUR PARLIAMENT

The National Assembly wanted to make the most of the possibilities offered by computer technology to make parliamentary business more accessible to the general public. And so, with the support of the program "les Inforoutes"

of the Assemblée Parlementaire de la Francophonie, the Assembly's site was created in 2000.

This public site is today a true on-line documentation centre, providing a means to follow the day-to-day business of parliament, to better understand the National Assembly and potentially to reach elected officials.

In terms of the management of this project, everything that contributes to the smooth operation of the information system (servers, networks, data bases, applications and software) is administered internally by a committee chaired by the Assistant General Secretary and comprising those in charge of the main sections and computer specialists. The Web site of the National Assembly is opening it up to the world.

A very initial limited version went on line at the end of 2002; the present site is a substantially reworked version. The pilot team has worked to open a number of portals to enable the various divisions to make their products available.

Global site updates are done twice weekly (Monday and Friday).

In closing, modernizing our parliamentary management system is a long process, and to ensure we are moving in the right direction, we are looking for the support we need from more experienced partners.

The Parliamentary Information Management System of the National Assembly of Cameroon

