



Libraries, Access to Information and Democracy

Evidence Presented at World Library and Information Congresses

If information is power, democracy – rule by the people – requires access to information for all. By providing this, libraries have an indispensable role in building and strengthening democracy around the world.

While there is strong variation from country to country, almost all democratic systems rely to a large extent on voters selecting representatives who propose, debate, and pass laws. This implies both that the voters themselves need to be properly informed when choosing representatives, and that the representatives, in turn, need information to carry out their jobs.

Libraries have a major role in achieving both, with parliamentary libraries particularly important in supporting the constitutional process¹. This article draws on presentations made at recent World Library and Information Congresses and related satellite events, bringing together examples and evidence. It looks at how libraries serve elected representatives, and the people who choose them.

Finally, there's a particular focus on the work of parliamentary libraries in transition countries – those moving towards greater democracy, but where capacity for democratic decision-making may still be lacking.

Stronger Parliaments, Stronger Scrutiny

In between elections, parliaments provide the best way of ensuring that governments are doing a good job. Through debating laws, scrutinising actions, and proposing their own ideas in some cases, parliaments look to ensure that the interests of the people are heard and respected in decision-making.

This makes the role of parliamentary libraries essential. While governments usually benefit from having large administrations (civil services) in order to gather and produce information, members of parliament may only have small teams of assistants or advisors, if anything at all. It is important to ensure that the 'executive branch no longer overwhelms its legislative counterpart in democratically shaping and managing public policy issues'².

Parliamentary libraries – and in particular the research services that are often attached to them – therefore play a crucial role. They enable MPs to understand both the context and the specifics of the issues before them, and help them act as a counterbalance to governments.

¹ Cohen, Cliff (2016), *Congress.gov: Access to U.S. Federal Legislative Information*, IFLA Parliamentary Libraries 2016 Pre-Conference, https://www.ifla.org/files/assets/services-for-parliaments/preconference/2016/cohen_presentation.pdf

² Lim, Seong-Ho (2015), *Legislature as a Deliberative Arena and a Discursive Role of Legislative Think Tanks: The South Korean Case*, IFLA Parliamentary Libraries 2015 Pre-Conference, https://www.ifla.org/files/assets/services-for-parliaments/preconference/2015/28_lim_ppt.pdf

As suggested by Etienne Bassot in a presentation at a pre-conference organised by the IFLA Section on Libraries and Research Services for Parliaments, 'expertise is essential to the European Parliament, to maintain autonomy, to affirm political, legislative and budgetary powers, and to make scrutiny of the Executive possible'³.

Clearly libraries continue to focus on core services around acquiring information and records management⁴. But they are also going further. For example, the research service at the National Assembly of the Republic of Korea produces legislative impact assessments. These explain, to representatives, the legal, political and administrative, economic, social and cultural, regulatory impacts of legislative proposals, as well as looking at risks of corruption and other impacts. With these in hand, MPs can be active in questioning and challenging what the government is proposing⁵.

In the European Parliament, the research service reaches out proactively to Committees, offering oral briefings in meetings and training sessions for MPs. To match the timescales to which representatives are working, they have moved to producing shorter materials, more quickly, in order to make the most timely contributions possible to debates⁶.

Libraries and research services can also run their own stakeholder consultation processes in some cases. The National Assembly Research Service in Korea uses a number of tools, from labs and incubators to deliberative events and reservoirs of policy ideas, helping to build trust and shared understanding⁷. The Polish Senate organises consultations and focus groups, aiming to produce independent and high-quality research information as a basis for decision-making⁸. This role is no less important at a time when there is an abundance of information online. No MP has the time to go through all of the material and opinions available, much of which can be highly partisan.

By putting together explanations of key subjects, and summaries of the evidence, parliamentary libraries not only save MPs time, but empower them. In effect, parliamentary libraries and research services can offer representatives their own in-house think tank⁹.

This is not necessarily an easy task. Parliamentary libraries around the world are working hard to improve the services they offer to members, reflecting new expectations and taking advantage of new technologies. Just as other libraries need to consider the needs of their users, parliamentary libraries too are highly

³ Bassot, Etienne (2015)

⁴ Swartz, Barbara (2015)

⁵ Cho, Kyobeom (2016)

⁶ Watt, Ian (2015)

⁷ Lim (2015)

⁸ Dziubecki, Andrzej and Karwowska-Sokolowska, Agata (2015)

⁹ Bassot (2015), Lim (2015)

aware that they need to build services around representatives (for example using personas¹⁰), and build good customer relations¹¹.

For example, in Japan, there are regular surveys of MPs, as well as efforts to reach out to external researchers in order to provide members with the most up-to-date information¹². The European Parliament Research Service has explored a wide variety of new tool – animations, podcasts, as well as social media – in order to get information to representatives in the most effective way possible¹³.

Better Informed Populations, Stronger Democracy

As highlighted in the introduction to this article, a well-informed population is key to the effective functioning of democracy. When people have access to information, they are better able to make judgements at elections, as well as to ensure that their representatives are indeed representing them between-times.

Research in Nigeria focused on the link between the work of libraries in providing access to information, and turnout in elections, finding that there was a strong link between feeling informed, and feeling empowered to take action¹⁴. Libraries, the article recommends, can make a real difference.

This is not a new role. The intention that the library of the Finnish Parliament should be open to the public dates back 110 years, to 1908. The legislation governing its work underlines that “The Library of Parliament ... serves the Parliament as appropriate for its field, operates as the central archive for the Parliament as well as a public central library disseminating information on law, society and the Parliament.¹⁵”

A first area of work is providing access to legislation already in place. This is indeed an issue of fundamental rights, since it is not possible – or fair – to expect people to adhere to laws which are hidden from them. Brian Anderson quotes Glenda Browne in underlining the unique potential of libraries here:

‘This perception of an honest and impartial dealer in information garners a certain respect for libraries as institutions, existing for the betterment of society. This is uniquely true as it relates to legal information, an extremely important special collection as it related to the rule of law, as free access to legal information for the general public promotes the rule of law¹⁶’

This is not necessarily an easy task. Libraries of course also need resources to be able to do their jobs here, and too often, they are weakest in the countries where the

¹⁰ Brodie, Lynn (2016)

¹¹ Furtado, Adolfo (2016)

¹² Okuyama, Hiroyumi (2016)

¹³ Bassot, Etienne (2016)

¹⁴ Obasi, Nene Favour K. (2015)

¹⁵ Korkeila, Sirkka-Liisa and Peuhkurinen, Tommi (2014)

¹⁶ Anderson, Brian D. (2016)

need is greatest¹⁷. Governments may not be helpful – in Ghana, for example, the government itself did not give access to laws, forcing the parliamentary library to try to buy content¹⁸.

The information needs to be properly presented. In the United States, the Library of Congress has also focused extensively on the usability of the information it makes available, setting the goal that this should be 'accessible, accurate, authoritative, authorized, available, efficiently produced, comprehensive, findable, integrated, machine readable, timely, and well-organized'¹⁹. Such efforts to share information can work across borders also, as the example of Thailand's ASEAN law database shows²⁰.

In addition to posting information online, there is also a need to reach out. The Library of Congress already does this, with civil society and schools particular targets²¹. In Zimbabwe, building on existing successful efforts by the parliamentary library, there are calls for partnership with public libraries in order to develop the ability of the general public to understand legal documentation for themselves. This sort of information literacy is vital to democratic participation, and an area where libraries can make a difference²².

However, libraries do not just need to give access to laws that have already been passed. In many cases, they are also helping citizens stay informed and get involved in ongoing debates. Despite stereotypes, there is evidence of a readiness, and understanding, among public librarians for example to get involved in hot topic discussions, and help people become better informed²³.

As for parliamentary libraries, they can support this by providing access to the proceedings of parliament, in particular with good search functionality. This can help people following what is going on, as in the case of the National Diet Library of Japan²⁴.

In Switzerland, the library of the Federal Parliament has gone further, producing records of voting behaviour and attendance by Members, allowing their constituents to see how they have been acting²⁵. The Spanish Senate has done the same, as part of broader efforts to promote transparency²⁶. The Polish Senate, as mentioned earlier, has gone further still, engaging citizens in consultations and discussions about legislation²⁷.

¹⁷ Anderson (2016)

¹⁸ Apeadu, Eric Yeboah (2015)

¹⁹ Cohen (2016)

²⁰ Pongput, Sangduen (2016)

²¹ Cohen (2016)

²² Musemburi, Darlington and Nhendo, Collen (2016)

²³ Lin, Wen-Yau Cathy and Zhong, Ren-You (2016)

²⁴ Okuyama, Hiroyuki (2015)

²⁵ Leuthold, Jeremie (2016)

²⁶ Cueto, Marina (2016)

²⁷ Dziubecki and Karwowska-Sokolowska (2015)

It is important to note that parliamentary libraries often also have a preservation role, ensuring that records of past discussions. This can play a useful role in promoting transparency as to the role of key public figures in the past, as well as broadly supporting research in political and social sciences. Presentations at World Library and information Congresses have offered valuable examples in this regard from Spain²⁸ and Canada²⁹.

Nonetheless, as in the case of access to existing law above, this access is not always simple. The experience of Parliamentary Constituency Information Centres in Zimbabwe shows both the promise of such efforts – strong interest from the public, reduced pressure on the central parliament library – but also the real need for space, technology and resources to do the job well³⁰.

Building Democracies Through Libraries

Many, although not all, of the examples given above come from well-established democracies. However, a number of presentations at World Library and Information Congresses have offered valuable insights into the work that libraries are doing in countries which have only recently become democratic, or indeed are still in the process of becoming democratic.

Two particularly strong examples are Myanmar and Uganda. In Myanmar, the military has started to hand over more power to parliament. Elected representatives have been faced with a huge workload, updating outdated laws and dealing with the consequences of years of sanctions. The development of a library with a strong research service and digital presence has been at the heart of this effort³¹.

This has required extensive efforts to develop both physical and human capacity, notably around understanding budgets and legislative proposals. Support from parliamentary libraries in other countries has made a major difference here, especially in helping people to understand democratic culture after a lifetime of living under a dictatorship³².

Uganda too is in transition, with the development of multi-party democracy a relatively recent phenomenon. Parliament has grown in size and acquired new responsibilities vis-à-vis the executive, but faced challenges around a growing number of MPs per researchers, heightened expectations, and a high turnover of representatives from one election to the next³³.

²⁸ Armando Gonzales, Luis (2016)

²⁹ Bebbington, Sonia (2014)

³⁰ Munyoro, Isaiah (2015)

³¹ Aye, Ni Ni and Fraser, Moira (2014)

³² Fraser, Moira and Myat Kyaw, Aung (2015)

³³ Kintu, Francis and Enamu, Jonathan (2015)

There have been important lessons about the need to think hard about how to package information, especially for newcomers to politics who may not have the same background as traditional elites, as well as building capacity, acting faster, and meeting standards³⁴.

Other examples come from post-Communist countries, such as Ukraine and Armenia, where it was novel for representatives to be able to source information from places other than Moscow. Here, for example, links between parliamentary and public libraries also played a valuable role in sharing information and developing democratic culture in society as a whole³⁵.

Finally, libraries can also play an important role in coming to terms with periods of authoritarian or dictatorial rule in the past, as examples from the Philippines demonstrate³⁶.

Where Next?

As highlighted above, libraries – and in particular parliamentary libraries – are highly conscious of their role in strengthening democracy. This happens both through empowering the representatives who take decisions and scrutinise the work of governments, and through empowering people to get involved in debates, and hold their own representatives to account. They are also continuously working to build better and more effective services, in addition to keeping up with technology and expectations.

Working internationally can play a valuable role. IFLA's own Section on Libraries and Research Services for Parliaments supports debate and exchange of ideas and practices globally. The Section is also behind IFLA's Guidelines for Parliamentary Research Services, which provide a valuable tool both in designing strategies internally, and advocating for stronger support externally³⁷. These were subject to a review of their effectiveness in 2018³⁸.

There is also work to develop regional networks, united by language or experience, such as in Francophone Africa³⁹, and most recently, in Latin America through the Valparaiso Declaration, which involved parliamentary libraries in Chile, Argentina and Mexico⁴⁰.

2019 will be an important year in this regard, with good governance in focus at the United Nations' High Level Political Forum (HLPF), and in preparatory events. It is a

³⁴ Rugamwa, Innocent and Kintu, Francis (2013)

³⁵ Valentine, Ellie (2014)

³⁶ Buenrostro, Iyra S. and Cabbab, Johann Frederick A. (2017)

³⁷ Obasi (2015)

³⁸ Gassie, Lillian W. (2018)

³⁹ Garga, Alim (2015)

⁴⁰ Valparaiso Declaration (2017)



great opportunity to highlight what effective library services can to build effective and inclusive democracy.

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