INVITE COMMENTS AND FEEDBACK FROM CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS

There exist a large number of civil society groups working across sectors, especially on issues related to education, health, women rights, minority rights, environment, police, peace, climate change, poverty, agriculture and trade. All these groups have either direct stakes or have huge experience of working on related issues, which can be of tremendous value in terms of informing the policy making processes. It is, therefore, extremely important that parliamentary committees maintain a database of such organizations, remain in regular contact with them, and regularly invite comments and feedback from them on all the issues under consideration. This could, on the one hand, improve the quality of parliamentary proceedings and initiatives and, on the other hand, would contribute to building confidence of civil society organizations about democratic process and institutions. Many civil society organizations have email addresses, so it is not very difficult to invite their comments and feedback. All that the parliamentary committees need to do is to maintain their updated addresses, share with them the information, and establish a system of analyzing and benefiting from the feedback received.

Civil society organizations should also proactively engage parliamentary committees in the context of their advocacy work. So far, the civil society linkages have been mostly with individual members but it would be useful if institutional collaborations with relevant committees are explored and established.

Currently, National Assembly and Senate take a lot of time in publishing their detailed parliamentary proceedings, which makes it difficult for members of the Parliament and other interested individuals to track parliamentary debates. This must be made efficient. All the parliamentary debates must be published on the website within 48 hours, besides ensuring live broadcasts.

GIVE ACCESS TO MAXIMUM INFORMATION

Access to information is a fundamental human right, and a “touchstone” of all other rights and freedoms. It has been characterized as “oxygen for democracy”, because citizens cannot make informed choices until and unless they have easy and timely access to maximum information. It is, however, unfortunate that even parliamentary institutions sometimes operate behind closed doors and deny easy and timely access to information. This attitude needs to be corrected at the earliest. Secrecy is widely considered as responsible for exclusive governance and lack of public accountability.

“Right to information. Every citizen shall have the right to have access to information in all matters of public importance subject to regulation and reasonable restrictions imposed by law.”

Article 19-A of the Constitution of Pakistan

Information and records that must be made accessible by the Parliament or parliamentary committees include:

- List of members and their contact details
- All the rules, procedures, standing orders and standard operating procedures
- List of staff in the parliamentary secretariats along with their responsibilities and contact details
- Calendar of meetings of the House and well as parliamentary committees
- Agenda for the upcoming meeting
- Proceedings of the House

Minutes of previous meetings of parliamentary committees
- Recommendations made by parliamentary committees on specific issues and their implementation
- Reports of consultations by parliamentary committees with stakeholders, if any
- Bills, motions and resolutions adopted
- Reports prepared by parliamentary committees for submission to the respective House
- Full copies of bills, motions, resolutions or call attention notices under consideration
- List of of assurances given by ministers, along with specific dates
- Details about when a bill was received, action taken and the latest status
- List of business forwarded to various committees by the House
- Attendance records of members
- Statements on conflict of interest, if any
- Information about the course of performing their official responsibilities
- Details of foreign visits by members of the Parliament paid through tax-payers’ money
- Annual performance reports
- Annual budget and quarterly budget expenditure reports
- Expenditures on parliamentary lodges and information about outstanding dues
- Any other information.

Parliament must proactively oversee and ensure efficient implementation of Right to Information guaranteed under Article 19-A of the Constitution. In this context, the Parliament must first implement it itself by making its Secretariat the most transparent organization among the government departments. If parliamentarians want to be leaders, they should lead by their own example. Then, they must demand all other public bodies to become transparent and ensure maximum access to information.
It is, sometimes, argued that parliamentary committee meeting need to be held in closed door so that, instead of parish the gallery, members could more告诉我 that effective business in a serious manner and in a more congenial environment. This argument carries weight but only in relation to those of the meeting or those meetings, wherein members sit to debate and finalize recommendations. All other meetings should be held in open, especially the ones involving the ministries or related departments and institutions; (b) questioning of ministers and related departments on specific issues, performance gaps or allegations; and (c) presentations by experts or various stakeholders on specific matters. The committees, which still hold their meetings behind closed doors, perpetuate the endemic culture of secrecy in government and demonstrate in their attitude, which is not democratic.

In this content, it is important that civil society groups and parliamentary institutions work together for reforms and executive oversight, whereby parliamentary performance could be strengthened with the active participation of citizens and civil society organizations. Such a partnership is especially needed with parliamentary committees, as those committees can play a significant role in initiating, strengthening and sustaining the reform process in various sectors. In view of this, it is important to maintain an open and active participation of civil society committees in the executive oversight.

“Liberty cannot be preserved without general knowledge”.
John Adams

POWERS OF PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEES

- Parliamentary committees consider legislative bills, issues and matters, which are forwarded to them by the respective House or its chair (i.e. Chairman Senate or Speaker National Assembly), and make appropriate recommendations on them;
- Parliamentary committees can propose amendments in legislative bills;
- Parliamentary committees, on their own initiatives, can examine the expenditures, administration, delegated legislative notices, public petitions and political relation to the related ministries or their affiliated institutions; and then submit recommendations to the respective House;
- Parliamentary committees have the power to require the attendance of persons or the production of papers or records, or examine such persons on oath or solemn affirmation, if such course is considered necessary for the discharge of duties;
- Parliamentary committees can summon a witness, who shall appear before the committee and produce, if so required, the required documents;
- Parliamentary committees can summons or allow to appear before, and hear expert evidence or any other person having a special interest in any matter under their consideration.

MAKE THE TIME AND AGENDA OF COMMITTEE MEETINGS PUBLIC:

Parliamentary committees should announce sufficiently in advance the time and agenda of their meetings. Such announcements can be made through websites, press releases, and notices to civil society groups working in relevant sectors. Timely sharing of such information would allow the stakeholders to give suggestions and feedback on the meeting agenda, which would be useful for effective committee proceedings. This practice would not only contribute to transparency of parliamentary committees but would also build their credibility in the eyes of civil society and public at large.

HOLD OPEN MEETINGS:

Meetings of parliamentary committees should ordinarily be open to media and public. In particular, the media should have maximum access to observe the committee proceedings, so that they could inform the citizens in whose name and behalf the Parliament and parliamentary committees function.

"Let the people know the facts, and the country will be safe." Abraham Lincoln

PROACTIVELY DISPLAY AND DISSEMINATE BILLS FOR PUBLIC COMMENTS:

The parliamentary committees must follow a clear laid-down procedure to consider the laws that are forwarded to the House by the government, for consideration and recommendations. One of the first steps in this regard should be to ensure that all the stakeholders become aware of the contents of the bill that is under consideration. While a large-scale publication of bills may be expensive, the committees can ensure maximum dissemination by:

- Display of bills on the website of the National Assembly;
- Proactive sharing of copies of bills and their summaries with media; and
- Sharing of bills with civil society organizations for comments as well as organizing public hearings.

Parliament must ensure that people can easily enter in the Parliament House and observe the parliamentary proceedings from the visitors’ gallery. Currently, the procedure of obtaining permits is highly bureaucratic and informal, so it makes it difficult for common people to observe parliamentary proceedings. You may find the minions of some official or someone in the Secretariat to get a pass. The security barriers on the Constitution Avenue have made the situation even more difficult.

Parliament must be an open and accessible place for everyone without any discrimination. People should be allowed to enter the visitors’ gallery on the basis of ‘first come first serve’ basis, as long as the number of seats do not exceed the parliamentary protocols. Recommendation by a member of the Parliament for obtaining an entry pass should not be the requirement.

ORGANIZE PUBLIC HEARINGS:

Civil society organizations or members of the public have a lot to share or suggest but they often fail to do so, either because they are not aware of where their grievances related to laws, policies or performance of government departments are heard, followed up and effectively addressed. Such problems or suggestions are sometimes brought to the notice of individual parliamentarians, who also extend help to resolve specific complaints and the relative individual and systemic problems remain un-addressed. It is very rare for people to approach the parliamentary committees to seek their intervention for improvement or quality of services in the public sector. Nor do the parliamentary committees provide other opportunities whereby they could consult to each other or participate to each other. What would be required is that the parliamentarians and general public. The public hearings can be held on specific and pre-determined issues, or on general concern related to the public services. It would particularly be useful if the public hearings could be held in different cities across the country. This practice would not only give the parliamentarians an opportunity to raise issues set before them but also communicate to the parliamentary committees and inform their initiatives, but would also enhance the credibility of parliamentary institutions.