Conclusion – Special Issue

This special issue was dedicated to public engagement in the work of parliaments. Through a range of discussions, contexts and case studies, it demonstrates why public engagement is important for parliaments, as well as outlining best practices and tools for public engagement around the world. The articles themselves span a truly global context, surveying different elements of engagement: from theoretical to practical, from processes to tools. Taken together, they provide several important lessons.

The introductory note for this special issue illustrates the important work of the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the United Nations Development Programme in a context of diminished public trust and confidence. In doing so, it shows why engagement matters for parliaments and representative democracy as a whole. This is relevant and significant to a myriad of audiences across the world, from governments to civil society. The introductory note also shows how the special issue connects to the five key themes driving the IPU-UNDP Global Parliamentary Report: strategy, inclusivity, participation, innovation and responsiveness.

Leston-Bandeira and Siefken’s piece unpacks the process of engagement from a theoretical perspective. In doing so, it provides a theoretical architecture (incorporating the relationship between engagement and representation) that informs all of the subsequent articles, while also explaining why public engagement is central to representative democracy and how societal shifts have made it more essential. It also does vital work in discussing how studies of engagement have laid out different facets (e.g., information, communication, education, participation) and how this informs engagement, in both theory and practice.

The second part of the special issue focused on processes of engagement, using specific country examples to identify broader points. Feulner and Guéguin’s article on engagement in small island nations underscores the importance of proactive and inclusive outreach to citizens, and shows how engagement can be effective even with serious resource challenges. Odeyemi’s piece on institutionalization of public engagement, using South Africa as a case study, shows the importance of codifying processes for public engagement into parliamentary procedures.

In concluding the second part, Sheldon’s article takes a bird’s-eye view of engagement, illustrating the significance of the “feedback loop.” As Sheldon explains, effective engagement begins with setting clear goals. Parliaments must establish and measure outcomes, and ‘return’ these outcomes to citizens, to show them how their input mattered. In so doing, parliaments can avoid a ‘tokenistic’ approach to engagement, in which public voices are voiced but not *heard* and meaningful public input into governance remains elusive.

The last part of the special issue focuses on tools for engagement. Kornberg and Siefken show how parliamentary committee hearings can be used to engage the public. Prior and Sivashankar show how to use physical space for engagement. Both pieces connect back to the introductory note in calling for innovative practices to complement technological innovations. Technology is an important tool for public engagement, but it is not a panacea; it must form part of a broader institutional culture. Moreover, even with minimal technology, resources and infrastructure, public engagement can be proactive, innovative and enterprising.

The articles in this special issue emphasize several themes throughout. First, public engagement processes and tools should be inclusive and accessible. Public engagement exists in order to harness and amplify citizen voices, regardless of political, social, economic, geographical or cultural contexts. Using tools like hearings, and parliaments’ physical space, structural barriers can be identified and accounted for. Effective engagement institutionalizes processes that *leave no one behind*, thereby addressing a central tenet of the UNDP’s 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals.

Second, public engagement is both universal in desirability and highly particular and variable in application. The articles in this special issue range across different countries and contexts. Time and space are crucial factors: what works for one parliament may not work elsewhere, and what works for one parliament *may not always work*. Time and resource constraints, geography, culture and many other issues may shape engagement. After all – as this special issue illustrates – effective engagement is incompatible with a top-down, one-size-fits-all approach. It is receptive to, and informed by, the perspectives and circumstances of its audience(s).

These articles are by no means a comprehensive survey of engagement around the world. Rather, they illustrate universal lessons – often drawing from very specific case studies – about effective engagement, as well as the importance of engagement to parliaments, and by extension to representative democracy. We hope that this special issue has surfaced some core themes in public engagement and underlined the need for continued study of this core democratic concept. Representative democracy faces a series of interconnected threats; democratic institutions will need to respond accordingly, though interconnected public engagement efforts. In this context, the work of the IPU and UNDP is especially important.

Much of the research underpinning this special issue was conducted during the global Covid19 pandemic, as part of the research for the Global Parliamentary Report. As the world emerges from the pandemic, it is more important than ever to strengthen the relationship between legislatures and their citizens. The Global Parliamentary Report, and this special issue, represent a truly global collaboration between officials, academics and practitioners. Representative democracy is fragile, subtle and complex, and this special issue demonstrates the need for researchers and practitioners to put their heads together and join forces in the fight to understand and protect democratic norms and institutions.