NOVEMBER 2011

Climate change: an issue for parliamentarians in Southern Africa

Parliamentarians can play a key role in building climate resilience by bringing constituents' concerns into national forums, scrutinising how governments are responding to domestic and global climate change issues, and ensuring policy continuity. In the Southern African Customs Union, members of parliament often struggle to fulfill this role, hampered by limited understanding of the issues, fragmented policy and legal frameworks and competing priorities. Boosting parliamentarians' capacity to engage effectively with climate change in Southern Africa requires them to strengthen their research capabilities, diversify their sources of information and build cross-party groups on climate change.

Policy pointers

- Climate change poses a real and immediate challenge to countries in the Southern African Customs Union, but parliaments across the region have not been able to fully engage with the issues.
- Relevant cross-party committees exist but legislative and policy frameworks are fragmented and lack coherence.
- Parliamentarians in Southern Africa are well aware of climate change effects, but less knowledgeable about effective response mechanisms.
- To effectively shape climate policy and hold governments to account, parliamentarians throughout the region require access to information, from more diverse sources.

MPs matter

Climate change is a growing issue within the Southern African Customs Union (SACU) where countries — Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, South Africa and Swaziland — have already begun to feel its impacts. In Lesotho, for instance, it is no longer possible to ignore the alarming rate at which climate change is beginning to impact its lands, farming practices and livestock. In addition, the threat of severe droughts and floods on account of its semi-arid climate is already a very real menace. Coupled with susceptibility to natural disasters, a delicate ecosystem and widespread poverty, climate change will only amplify adverse impacts on food security, water resources, spread of disease and infrastructure. ¹

Similarly, recurrent droughts attributed to climate change have occurred in Botswana, leading to water shortages and land degradation, as well as increased vulnerability to other natural disaster risks. Climate change will also significantly alter the profile of commonplace vegetation and rangeland cover, which will have a broad-spectrum impact on a number of species as well as those reliant on these resources. This could increase sensitivity to climate change in many sectors, including agriculture, forestry, water and

health.² This again underscores the need for urgent action in these countries; governments will need to outline their adaptation plans if they are to address the expected impacts of climate change.

Many will also be required to take mitigation actions to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions. South Africa, for example, has already committed to significantly cutting its emissions to 34 per cent below business as usual projections by 2020, and 42 per cent by 2025.

Shaping the policies and strategies to achieve both mitigation and adaptation in practice will be tricky—not least because climate change impacts do not respect national borders. The Okavango River Basin, which feeds both Botswana and Namibia, is expected to experience a drop in mean water flow by up to 20 per cent by 2050 due to climate change.³ Both countries will feel the impact and face more pressure on their water resources.

Climate change related policies in one country can similarly have regional effects. South Africa may be the biggest emitter within the SACU, but it is also the main generator of electricity within the region.

Although central governments tend to spearhead climate change initiatives in the SACU,

parliamentarians have a pivotal role to play in the development and formulation of policy and law on

MPs must be more regularly and deeply engaged with climate change discussions

climate change. They can bring constituents' concerns into national forums, oversee the public purse, and help ensure policy continuity.

Parliamentarians support climate resilience by taking on multiple roles (see Figure):

- They bridge the gaps between global, national and local levels. They are responsible for truthfully translating the information that is shared at the global level and ensuring that it is accurately formulated and addressed at the national level. In addition, as ordinary people see members of parliament (MPs) as the face of government, it is important for parliamentarians to bridge their constituents' concerns and those of government.
- MPs are strongly placed to scrutinise how governments are responding to domestic and global climate change issues — and to hold them to account for their actions.
- Most SACU countries have a limited voice at international climate negotiations because of their small size and limited capacity. These countries negotiate as part of larger blocs, mainly the Africa group and the Group of 77. But parliamentarians suggest they can still play an important role in

Figure. The many roles of parliamentarians in building climate resilience

Honest brokers **Bridge builders** Building trust among parties Bridging constituents concerns and within negotiating blocs at those of government; bridging international climate talks national and global issues MPs' roles Knowledge guardians Watchdogs Building a critical mass of knowledge Scrutinising government reponses to keep climate change on the to climate change issues - and political agenda and ensure policy holding them to account continuity

- the negotiations, building trust among parties and addressing concerns of real communities.
- MPs help design and influence climate-related policy underpinning legislation. As well as ensuring policy continuity between outgoing and incoming governments, they can also help keep climate change on the political agenda. This should be via an educated approach through accumulated knowledge on the impacts of climate change.

But although parliamentarians, and others, in SACU acknowledge that they can potentially play key roles in driving policy and action, many (MPs) are not confident in discussing climate change and so remain little engaged with the issue.

Recent IIED research has examined the capacities of parliaments in SACU, Malawi and Scotland to respond to climate change.⁴ The research — which combined interviews with parliamentarians, nongovernment organisations (NGOs) and civil society groups with a literature survey and studies of existing legislative and policy frameworks in each country — provides some insight into the differences in knowledge base and outlook on climate change within SACU as well as identifying the opportunities and challenges for more effective parliamentary action on climate change.

Patchy understanding

Parliamentarians' understanding of the human causes of climate change varied greatly across the five countries studied, with a tendency to lump it together with other environmental issues such as depletion of the ozone layer, air quality and even littering.

Because the smaller African countries all have very small absolute and per capita carbon emissions, MPs often described mitigation as a developed world concern, adding that the big emitters — that is, developed countries — must move first. Some parliamentarians, however, did recognise that low carbon development is a desirable strategy.

Although the technical climate change knowledge as understood by MPs was often patchy, most understood the importance and immediacy of the issue at hand. Many could readily report the impacts of climate change on their constituents, including information around floods, droughts and changing rainfall patterns. The impact of these effects on agriculture was particularly well understood and parliamentarians acknowledged the need to adapt.

But many were less sure about how to do this, not least because they also face a number of other urgent problems, such as poverty, HIV/AIDS and high rates of unemployment. These issues, combined with the cultural and political heritage of each country,

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play heavily on the levels of commitment that each parliament can realistically accord to climate change.

A lack of information

To a large degree, the limited understanding of climate change and effective responses is an issue of access to information.

Research traditions and capability within many of the African parliaments visited is poor. MPs have little or no access to help from parliamentary researchers and in some countries do not even have access to the internet. Instead, most MPs get their information on climate change from the media and central government, which limits their ability to hold governments to account (see Where do MPs get their information).

The same is true when it comes to information about international climate change processes. MPs have little or no input into countries' negotiating positions and are not well informed on the outcomes of global climate talks. In some cases, parliaments must agree to international agreements made abroad; many MPs suggested that they do not know enough about climate change to make this more than a rubber-stamping process.

For MPs to truly become bridge-builders who accurately translate international agreements into a coherent national policy framework is undeniably crucial. MPs must be equipped with the necessary information that allows them to enter such international talks with the knowledge and understanding that enables them to make effective decisions that make sense within their own country context. This makes it important for MPs to be allowed to engage with the process early on, rather than simply being told after agreements have been made.

Fragmented frameworks

Another major challenge lies in the policy and legal frameworks within which MPs have to work. These are important because they provide the institutional basis for coordinating action on climate change and integrating it into development policies.

The parliamentary structures within SACU do have the basic foundations for engaging with climate change. In Swaziland, for example, the Meteorological Service has taken on climate change issues under the auspices of the Ministry of Tourism and Environmental Affairs, and the government recently took steps to establish a permanent office dealing with climate change. At the same time, a new interdisciplinary structure was created to coordinate climate change activities in the country — the National Climate Change Committee (NCCC).5

In many countries, relevant cross-party parliamentary committees are in place. But these typically also have other areas of policy responsibility. For example, in Botswana at the time of interviews, climate change

Where do MPs get their information?

Across the countries studied, MPs cited newspapers, magazines, radio and television as key sources of information on climate change. Government ministries were also found to be a major reference point.

In theory, parliamentary committees have the power to call in non-government organisations (NGOs) to brief them but in practice they rarely do. NGOs do often engage with central government but their views are not always seen as beneficial.

Without alternative and independent sources of information, parliaments can struggle to fulfill their role as a watchdog on government or to effectively link their constituents' concerns with those of the government.

Improving MPs' access to more information, from more diverse sources, is essential throughout SACU.

was being considered by a committee on agriculture, but a select committee specifically designed to drive climate change issues at parliamentary level was to be imminently created.

In Namibia, the Standing Committee on Economics, Natural Resources and Public Administration oversees climate change activities across the parliament, the Ministry of Environment and Tourism (MET) and the people on the ground. This committee also represents parliament at international events on natural resources management.⁶ This committee has a wide remit including agriculture, finance, fisheries, mines and energy, trade and industry as well as transport and communication. This bundling could weight climate change scrutiny towards the partner sectors. Water, energy, transport and agriculture are all sectors with a significant stake in climate change.

South Africa's parliament has taken steps to establish a focus group on climate change composed of a cross-section of MPs from various other committees. While the focus group does not possess the same power as committee, it represents an acknowledgement that a more strategic and cross-sector approach is required for dealing with climate change.⁷

The extent to which parliamentary committees take 'ownership' of climate change often depends on whether they recognise the issue as important to their other areas of expertise and interest. In some cases, committees may want to take control of climate change issues to protect these other interests — to ensure they have the power to shape the climate change agenda in a favorable way. The fledgling nature of several of the committees must not be overlooked — many have yet to fully establish their responsibilities and mandate, and their personnel remain relatively inexperienced. Even so, the mere existence of such committees seems to indicate a move in the right direction.

Many laws are directly or indirectly linked to climate

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change but in most cases these have emerged as byproducts of other objectives — disaster management,
agriculture, energy, housing, water, health or wildlife
— and are administered by several different government
bodies. This disconnect leads to incoherent decision
making and makes it difficult to analyse or measure the
extent to which they actually serve to control emissions
or support adaptation.

The lack of skilled personnel, access to information and resources, and the relative lack of continuity from one government to the next act as impediments to devising, and following, a single cohesive message about how parliaments can establish and implement climate policies.

Looking to the future

Existing efforts to strengthen MPs' research capabilities and ICT skills should improve parliaments' capacity to engage with climate change and are to be commended. In an effort to build capacity, several workshops on climate change have been organised in Botswana by the European Parliamentarians for Africa (AWEPA), the Parliamentary Centre in Africa, and the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA).²

In South Africa, the Long Term Mitigation Scenario (LTMS) process — mandated by the Cabinet and spearheaded by the Department of Environment and Tourism — to formulate a long-term policy on climate change was composed of a wide gamut of stakeholders aiming to ensure a rigorous and sound analysis. While MPs' overall involvement in the process appears to have been restricted, they were consulted to help deliver a broad understanding of relevant issues.⁷

MPs across SACU must also be more regularly and deeply engaged with climate change discussions and

sources of information. This requires strengthening the ties between parliament and government policymakers. It also requires diversifying where MPs get their information from; parliamentary committees in particular need to make greater use of NGO sources. Improving these links will allow parliamentarians to better bridge between the concerns of their constituents and those of government.

Supporting existing cross-party groups, or creating new focus groups on climate change with interested MPs, could create a critical mass of knowledge within SACU parliaments that enables more effective policy debates and holding of governments to closer account. Such groups must be led by parliament, but could make use of outside sources of support.

Climate change is a cross-cutting issue; its impacts will be felt in a wide range of sectors. SACU parliaments should avoid a siloed approach that assigns responsibility for climate change to a single committee. It's not an impossible ask, and one that these countries have faced before: government responses to HIV/AIDS over the past decade may provide important lessons to inform the response to climate change.

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