

**THE ROLE OF PARLIAMENTS  
IN SUPPORTING GOVERNANCE AND DEVELOPMENT  
IN THE SADC OF TOMORROW**

by  
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## Introduction

In my brief for this panel, I was asked to present my view “*on the role of parliaments at the national and the regional level in supporting governance and development in the SADC of tomorrow*”. The focus of my remarks will be the regional level, i.e. the future role of a regional parliamentary body which currently exists in the form of the SADC Parliamentary Forum, whose 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary we are celebrating today. National parliaments are only touched upon, when it comes to their role in fostering the regional agenda, or to illustrate the division of labour between regional and national parliamentary bodies with regard to some major challenges the countries in the SADC region are facing.

Even with these major limitations, to do justice to this brief is anything but an easy task. It requires insight, foresight, a good dose of imagination and a crystal ball certainly would be of help. Because what we should expect from a SADC parliamentary body cannot be looked at without taking into account the future development of SADC itself.

In the first part of my presentation I will look at this relationship between what may or may not happen at SADC and its implications for the future role of a SADC parliamentary body. I will argue that the transformation from the current situation of a parliamentary assembly into a fully-fledged and officially established regional parliament will only be perceived to add significant value, if the integration process itself will have moved to an extent that, at least, some executive and legislative powers on SADC issues are devolved from the intergovernmental to a supranational regional level.

In the second part of my talk I will look at some areas in which regional parliamentary work, in whichever institutional form, as regional forum or as regional parliament, can add significant value to the challenges the region is currently facing. There is, of course, a plethora of issues that a regional parliamentary body can put on its agenda or plan of action for, say, the next five years. However, in order to make meaningful, significant and visible contributions to progress in the region with the limited means at its disposal, the Forum or a possible successor needs to focus its activities. To this end, I have identified four ‘generic’ areas, namely *regional integration, development, governance and democracy* which, in my view, are priority areas for parliamentary action in the SADC of today and tomorrow in every plausible future scenario<sup>1</sup>. For each of these four areas or broad challenges I have tried to outline the specific role of the regional level.

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<sup>1</sup> For the sake of this presentation I have omitted a fifth dimension, namely ‘peace and security’, a fundamental prerequisite for development and of no lesser importance than the other four. To the extent that most threats to peace and security these days have their starting point in internal conflicts based on a (perceived) lack of good governance and democracy against a background of injustice and poverty, dealing with some of the other dimensions implicitly also helps in dealing with peace and security. On the other hand we cannot run away from the fact, that there are genuine security issues which parliaments and parliamentarians have to tackle. One issue in that regard would be the issue of democratic control of the security sector in general and the issue of parliamentary oversight over armed forces, intelligence services, etc. in particular.

## Part One

Unfortunately - and this is the very nature of dealing with the future, predictions of how SADC will evolve and the SADC of tomorrow will look like, are fraught with a lot of uncertainties. As the European example shows, regional integration is a long-term and complex process, a long and winding road with few shortcuts and numerous dead-ends along the way. Expectations for increased socio-economic gains from integration are countered by fear of the consequences of sacrificing national sovereignty. Integration does not only produce winners and potential losers will try to prevent that things are moving too fast and too far from their perspective. No wonder that open questions and question marks with regard to the future of SADC do remain.

- As we discuss here today on this panel, are we all sure, that the SADC-region is actually making the sustained progress from co-operation to deeper integration that we all seem to subscribe to?
- What do we say to those, who argue that SADC is rather stagnating in its integration efforts, given, for instance, the still unresolved issue of overlapping memberships or the slow pace in which agreed commitments are implemented with regard to internal trade liberalization and in view of attaining the goal of a SADC free trade area by 2008?
- Is the argument that Member States are in the danger of loosing interest or focus as a result of other integration initiatives, be it at the continental (AU) or sub-regional (SACU) level, devoid of all truth? Aren't some of these initiatives which are meant to be complementary initiatives in reality not deflecting political and public attention from the SADC process and competing for scarce human and financial resources within the public administration of Member States?
- Are there any concrete steps or at least signs that SADC will move towards more supranational features in its structures and decision-making processes? Or will it just remain an intergovernmental arrangement as is, at least in the foreseeable future?

My contention is that the future role of parliamentary bodies in regional governance and regional development will be shaped to a large extent by the future scenario of what will happen to SADC itself. In case this assessment is a correct one, chances for SADC-PF to mobilise enough political will for its speedy transformation into a fully-fledged regional parliament with a reasonable amount of oversight, investigative and law-making powers unfortunately may not be terribly high, unless and until such time that SADC-integration itself moves again into higher gear.

To all of you, who for very good reasons keep on lobbying heavily for the transformation of the Forum from a parliamentary assembly into a Regional Parliament, this may seem to be too pessimistic or despondent a view. Well, actually, and particularly on such a day of celebration, I don't mean to sound pessimistic or spoil the party. Because from my point of view which is of course that of an outside observer only there is no reason whatsoever to be pessimistic or despondent.

On the contrary, because by looking at SADC-PF's past achievements during the last 10 years, its current structure, its able staff and its future plans, I would argue that there are many important things that parliamentary work at regional level even in its present institutional form can achieve in furthering integration and in meeting the major challenges the region is facing at the moment. Also, because the Forum which on the one hand may be considered to be 'less' than a regional parliament, on the other hand is actually much more than that. It has also developed into an umbrella body for national parliaments and parliamentarians in the region, a sort of "Inter-parliamentary Union of Southern Africa". On top of that it has become an internationally renowned torchbearer for the entrenchment of representative democracy in the region. Like always and everywhere, there is still room for improvement. But for its important work to become still more effective, it may not necessarily be status and powers which constitute the limiting factors at the present state of SADC-integration. If this is so, we should then rather try to identify what these limiting factors are and find ways of addressing these.

Secondly, even if one is of the view that the issue of status and powers of the regional parliamentary body needs to be addressed vigorously and proactively, there is maybe more than one way of getting what is needed to increase the role of the regional parliamentary body in the regional policy and decision-making process. In case the resistance against a Regional Parliament persists and talks around its creation deadlock, one may want to start looking into the possibility of increasing the powers, e.g. the deliberative, advisory, oversight and investigative functions, of the regional parliamentary body in its present institutional form as a second-best option. I am not a constitutional lawyer and I cannot judge if the legal impediments of such a gradualist approach would be insurmountable, but the gradualist approach at least bears the chance of allaying some of the fears of some governments in terms of the costs of a Regional Parliament.

## **Part Two**

Now in the second part of my observations I will deal with the four 'generic' areas identified earlier, which in my view, should become, or remain priority areas for parliamentary action at the regional level.

The first of this areas or challenges I want to elaborate on is the **Regional Integration Challenge**. This relates directly to the Parliamentary Forum's overarching goal of "*strengthening the implementation capacity of SADC by involving parliamentarians in the work of SADC*". The main question we have to ask here is: what can Parliamentarians do to accelerate regional integration? The second question is: what is the role of a regional parliamentary body in promoting regional integration?

The answer to both questions obviously depends on the state of integration itself. Starting with question number two, in an inter-governmental arrangement, such as SADC, the role of the regional level is first and foremost one of a platform for knowledge-sharing and awareness-raising among parliamentarians as to what the current issues in terms of SADC are, where actual bottlenecks in terms of deepening integration lie and what has to

be done to overcome these bottlenecks. This, of course, requires permanent and effective channels of communication to the SADC-Secretariat and regular briefings by SADC-officials at the committee as well as the plenary level of the regional parliamentary body. And this is perhaps the area where an increase in the powers of SADC-PF is most needed.

But then, the real action of influencing and shaping political decision and administrative action, the real hard work starts at home at national level. This is the level, where a country's position in terms of major regional policy decisions is formulated, where treaties and protocols have to be ratified, where governments have to be held to account on agreed policies and commitments they have promised to implement, where national policies and programmes have to be aligned to regional programmes such as the RISDP, etc. In answering question number one this means that the real arena for parliamentarians to accelerate regional integration for the time being thus remains the national parliament in the Member State.

Under these circumstances, the interface between regional and national level is of crucial importance. The real question then becomes *what can be done in order to improve the effectiveness of SADC Parliamentarians, i.e. members of the SADC-PF, in driving the integration agenda within their respective national context?*

It is certainly not my task to make suggestions of how that should be done. But the mandatory use of simple work or action plans on what to do next at home, to be drawn up individually by members of the Parliamentary Forum or jointly by the caucus of a particular country could perhaps go a long way in this regard. Equally, the creation of receptive structures at home, where they don't yet exist, such as a dedicated committee or a SADC caucus within national parliament, of which members of the Forum are part of and to which members of the Forum have to report back to, could be of great help. Such a parliamentary committee or caucus would perhaps create a critical mass of politicians interested in regional integration. It could also work closely with the national contact point of SADC, a structure not very active and largely unknown in most of the Member States.

The second area I want to deal with is what I call the **developmental challenge** within SADC. Regional integration itself, of course, is supposed to be nothing else than a vehicle for development. Through the creation of greater markets, joint infrastructures, harmonised policies and good governance SADC is supposed to create an enabling environment in which economic development can take place. Nevertheless, economic and social development remains first and foremost a national task, however one that is shared by all of the Member States. It is also a task to which SADC and in particular its parliamentary wing can offer added value by creating the space for debating shared policy challenges. Again the role of the regional level would be that of a platform for knowledge-sharing, peer-learning, exchange of experience and the highlighting of lessons learned and good practise. This in turn should inform again policies and policy debates on national level where the real decision-making power lies.

Among the many shared developmental challenges there are two which I would like to mention here. The first one certainly is the **HIV/AIDS** pandemic and how to combat it efficiently and effectively. This has rightly been named as one of the priority areas of SADC-PF for its future work.

The second which in my view is also key, is the issue of **poverty** and *poverty reduction strategies*. Most, if not all SADC countries in one way or the other have adopted poverty-reduction strategies as an important tool or even the major focus of development planning. Despite many problems with implementation, poverty reduction strategies have started to greatly improve the quality and focus of development planning and budget allocation in many poor countries, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa. Within SADC, countries could benefit tremendously by sharing knowledge and learning from each other. Among other things, this also refers to the nature of the *participatory process under PRS*, where some national parliaments are not yet adequately involved, even though parliaments are particularly well placed to ensure accountability and transparency in decision-making and the cost-effectiveness of public expenditure.

There are many more issues with regard to poverty where the regional parliamentary level could act as a clearance house of information and a catalyst for national policy debate and development. One area, for instance, where Southern Africa even has international best practise to offer is its experience with *cash transfers as a policy alleviation tool*. This refers to the experience with social pension, child grants and other social transfers that to all intents and purposes have become the most efficient and effective poverty alleviation tools in countries such as Namibia or South Africa. Today new technologies, such as the smart-card system (used by Nampost for example) allow for a quantum leap in the efficient and effective delivery of such basic services providing a lifeline for a substantial part of the population in both countries. Other countries, like for instance Angola, which also struggle with widespread abject poverty and a particularly skewed income-distribution could certainly benefit from these experiences, as well as from the discussions around the possible extension of these systems (e.g. into what is called a “basic income grant”).

The third area or challenge I want to touch upon briefly is what I call the **challenge of governance**. Parliaments as the legislative arm of government are, by nature, very much at the heart of governance. To the extent that governance, or rather the lack of good governance, is today seen as a major impediment to progress and development, it is of utmost importance for parliaments and parliamentarians to address that challenge head on. Parliaments are called upon to play a much more active role in *promoting transparency and accountability* and combating the scourge of corruption, nepotism, favouritism, fraud and mismanagement. Again, like in the case of HIV/AIDS, SADC-PF is already taking up this challenge with a major conference on this issue planned for August in Namibia. Again, as in the previous two areas, the very important regional dimension of addressing the governance challenge is that dimension of peer-learning, knowledge-sharing and the formulation of recommendations or norms and standards out of lessons learned and good practise. At national level, SADC-parliamentarians must become drivers for the domestication of international legal instruments such as the SADC

Anti-Corruption Protocol of 2001 and watchdogs over the forceful application of recommendations and standards in legal and administrative practise. But parliaments must also strive to continuously strengthen their own structures, in particular the work of their *public accounts committees*. A close co-operation between SADC-PF and SADCOPAC should be very beneficial to that effect.

The fourth and final challenge I want to mention is the **democracy challenge**. When I said earlier on that SADC-PF is much more than a regional parliament it mainly referred to the democracy dimension of its work. This is an area where SADC-PF can build on past experiences and past achievements. SADC-PFs contribution to the effective entrenchment of representative and democratic governance in Southern Africa has been huge. With its norms and standards for democratic elections, SADC-PF has created a benchmark not only for the region but way beyond. Its work on the promotion of gender equality in politics and in society is also well recognized. It should build on these achievements and continue to act as a standardbearer for democratic governance, e.g. by its successful missions to monitoring elections.

In addition to looking at *improving democratic processes*, SADC-PF in future should also look at *strengthening and improving democratic institutions*, parliaments in particular. This can be done in a number of ways. And again, as an outside observer who comes from an organisation whose main task is democracy promotion one cannot be but delighted to see that SADC-PF is ready to take up the democracy challenge. The recently created *SADC Parliamentary Leadership Centre (PLC)* can play a fundamental role in strengthening parliaments by addressing the training needs for Members of Parliament and Parliamentary staff in the SADC region. A second way of improving the quality of institutions of democracy, in particular parliaments, could be the *development of norms and standards or benchmarks for good practise of parliaments* – and later on other institutions of democracy. Once again knowledge-sharing, peer learning and standard setting are the watchwords here.

In conclusion, and as I have been trying to show here, the challenges for parliaments in supporting governance and development in the SADC of tomorrow are huge, manifold but exciting. This will be even more so, if the process of SADC integration is again picking up speed. I am convinced that SADC-PF, or a possible successor institution, will be up to these challenges if it continues to work with the same determination, focus and courage on that way that some visionary leaders, like the late Dr. Mosé Tjitendero, have paved more than ten years ago.