

Feature



Representatives of UNDP Lao PDR, USAID and members of the National Assembly at the recent evening reception to commemorate the International Day of Parliamentarism. –Photo UNDP

Bringing parliaments and people closer together

Catherine Phuong

We now tend to think of parliaments as the global norm but we should remember that has not always been the case. Although every country now has a form of parliament, this is a relatively recent development born out of long historical struggles for representation and participation.

Two decades into the 21st century, all countries around the world are facing the economic and social turbulence caused by global shocks, particularly climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic, which has led to a worrying reversal in human development. Strong parliaments are a vital element – the key element – in developing the right laws, policies and budgets that enable countries to respond and navigate such crises effectively.

We know this to be true but at the same time, the

stark reality is that these global crises have laid bare what many have suspected for some time: that our governance processes and institutions are struggling to respond adequately to the scale and nature of these monumental challenges. In many countries, inadequate and inequitable responses to the pandemic have aggravated existing distrust in governance institutions and led to fresh calls for deep reform of our institutions and processes.

The challenge now for governance institutions globally is to demonstrate that they are truly fit for purpose and can deliver sustainable development founded on peaceful, just and inclusive societies.

Turning now to the situation of the Lao PDR, how can the country's assemblies rise to this challenge?

Lao PDR has an established tradition of building and strengthening

its parliaments. The decision to open assemblies at the provincial level in 2016 is a clear indication of the country's commitment to bringing parliaments closer to people.

There is much work still to do for both the Lao PDR's National and Provincial People's Councils to enable people to connect with and participate in the decision-making processes that impact on their lives.

Public engagement is mutually beneficial for parliaments, their members and communities. When people can participate meaningfully, it adds depth and breadth of information and ideas to the parliament's main work of representation, oversight and law-making.

Participation also ensures that laws, policies and budget allocations respond to people's needs, aspirations and expectations. So this enhances both the quality and the relevance of

parliament's work.

Bringing people into these core functions of parliament can also help avoid a disconnect between elected representatives and the public they serve. It can show the community it is being listened to and heard. It is precisely when a country is faced with the kind of challenges that threaten prosperity and well-being that parliaments should be seeking to increase engagement with the people they represent.

This also means ensuring that everyone can participate. No one should be left behind, especially historically disadvantaged populations such as women, youth, persons with disabilities, and ethnic groups.

Civil society organisations are important allies for parliaments in reaching vulnerable and marginalised communities. Technology, digital

solutions in particular, has the potential to extend the reach of state services and empower more people to have a say in the decisions that affect their lives.

UNDP has supported the assemblies in Laos for over 15 years. Through the establishment of the Provincial People's Assemblies, we have seen the work of the parliament and its Members move ever closer to the people they represent.

UNDP has been working closely with both newly elected and long serving assembly Members, in Vientiane and in provinces around the country, through technical assistance and capacity development to help them execute their representative, oversight and legislative development mandates.

On the eve of the International Day of Parliamentarism, held every 30th June, we were honoured to join with Members and

staff of the assemblies and with staff of the US Embassy and USAID to celebrate the central role parliaments play in our lives.

In difficult times, people turn to parliaments to represent and respond to their needs and concerns. As assembly Members in Laos continually improve and sharpen their skills, we as UNDP have noticed an increased interest in the public to reach out and engage with their representatives.

This strengthening of engagement between Members, civil society and the public is a welcome trend that could have a profoundly positive impact on sustainable development in the Lao PDR. UNDP once again confirms its continued commitment to helping the assemblies of Laos move even closer to the people they represent and fulfill their role in leaving no one behind as they respond to global challenges.