1. **Summary of Recommendations**

1.1. Based on our on-going research on parliaments within Ethiopia and Bangladesh (2014-2017) we draw out some implications for DFID’s parliamentary strengthening programmes.

**Approach and strategy (paras 4.2-4.7)**

1.2. DFID should not dictate the shape that other democracies should take and threatening conditions to aid along these lines would be counterproductive. DFID could usefully focus on facilitating processes that strengthen democracy, rather than defining the content of improvements. DFID is recommended to facilitate the creation of forums for parliament to engage in public dialogue with civil society, in constituencies, and facilitated by the media.

1.3. We recommend a shift from a narrow, top-down and technical approach to institutional strengthening – which focuses on structures, rules and information – in favour of a broader and participatory pursuit of better governance through a multi-pronged strategy with clear priorities at any one time. Strengthening the capacity of oversight political institutions, the media and civil society may be equally, or even more, urgent priorities for capacity building in order to achieve improved governance.

**Gender equality and women in politics (paras 4.10-4.12)**

1.4. Women MPs in both countries welcomed support from foreign donors to enable better representation of women in all political institutions and for them to learn from the experience of other parliaments, especially in their region. We strongly recommend that DFID treats its support to women in parliament, and other political institutions, and women’s civil society organisations as an even higher priority.

**Planning, evaluation and donor transparency (paras 4.8, 4.9, 4.13-4.15)**

1.5. We recommend a review of the charity laws to be commissioned jointly by government and civil society to ascertain the impact of these legal frameworks.

1.6. DFID might suggest to governments that they commission an independent body to monitor levels of political engagement and participation in Bangladesh and Ethiopia on a regular basis.

1.7. We recommend that DFID moves away from a reliance on targets, log frames and numerical indicators for evaluation purposes. A clear strategy but one that allows flexibility is required for developing priorities and plans in response to demand within Bangladesh and Ethiopia.

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1 The views expressed in this submission represent the views of the individuals and not any organizations we are associated with. Members of our Advisory Panel have also expressed their support to these recommendations: Professor David Lewis (LSE); Professor Shirin Rai (Warwick University); and Professor Uma Kothari (IDPM, University of Manchester).
1.8. Rather than merely relying on self-assessment by parliamentarians or the standard external evaluation, with its emphasis on measurement of statement objectives from the perspective of a limited number of informants, in democracy programmes it is vital to take broader account of citizens' diverse views and the bigger governance picture.

1.9. We recognise that some sensitive political discussions with governments cannot be conducted in the public domain, but greater transparency by DFID of plans and progress would broaden ownership and buy-in of democracy programmes.

**Funding mechanisms and priorities (4.16-4.18)**

1.10. DFID is recommended to open its tendering for technical assistance within parliamentary strengthening to open competition to nurture innovation and highest standards. We recommend a shift in funding priorities away from international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and an increase in direct funding to national civil society – including media organisations, capacity-building organisations and research institutes/researchers.

2. **Introduction and context**

2.1. SOAS and Hansard Society are conducting research on the role of parliaments in poverty reduction and public engagement in Bangladesh and Ethiopia, funded by the Department for International Development and Economic and Social Research Council (2014-2017). Based on recent interviews with parliamentarians, civil society leaders and academics in the two countries, we have preliminary findings about strengthening parliaments and democracy.

2.2. Our recommendations will not necessarily apply to other countries. All those consulted made it clear, including DFID advisors, that it is imperative to understand the political context of specific countries before designing a governance programme. Based on recent interviews and our literature review, the context that Bangladesh and Ethiopia share that is particularly relevant to DFID’s investment in parliamentary strengthening includes:

- Significant poverty and inequalities (including based on gender) and huge aid programmes in both highly populous and diverse countries
- Significant progress on poverty reduction and economic growth
- Distrust and blaming between political parties and between government and civil society
- Democratic elections but an absence of opposition parties in parliament, lack of independence in the judicial system, and restrictions on freedoms and civil liberties
- A substantial contribution by civil society to poverty reduction but a law restricting the activities of civil society
- Military governments in their recent history, political instability, threats to security and potential for conflict

2.3. At the same time, differences are as significant to planning interventions. The press and civil society are more vocal and critical in Bangladesh than Ethiopia. Corruption has been lower but is on the increase in Ethiopia. Parliament has been multi-party in Bangladesh until recently, with the two main parties alternating in government, whereas in Ethiopia one ruling coalition has governed for some time and there is currently only one opposition MP. Many Bangladesh MPs visit their constituencies frequently but are seen as patrons and aid-givers, rather than representatives who are accountable to citizens, whereas most Ethiopian MPs

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2 Parliamentary Effectiveness: public engagement for poverty reduction in Bangladesh and Ethiopia, grant number ES/L005409/1.
rarely interact with constituents. Parliamentary strengthening programmes should be tailored to and designed to respond to specific contexts.

3. Past programmes and stakeholders’ recommendations

3.1. Evaluations of parliamentary strengthening by donors tend to be reasonably positive about meeting objectives but this contrasts to critiques by academics and civil society leaders looking at the longer-term and at parliament within the context of wider democracy and governance. Many parliamentary reform initiatives have tended to consider powers or procedures whilst the quality and inequality of public engagement are neglected. World Bank and UN programmes to strengthen parliaments have had limited success (Ahmed 2011, Nijzink 2007, and Rahmato and Ayenew 2005) and the extent that donors should interfere with national governance is contentious (Kroon and Stapenhurst 2008, DFID 2004: 26). Governance reform often fails to take account of the imperatives facing MPs as constituency and party representatives (Power 2011). For information about past evaluations and stakeholders’ views see Appendix 2.

3.2. All our informants – both parliamentarians and citizens – stressed the importance of nationals designing the content of their democracy. In the words of one academic, “outsiders should not speak on behalf of Ethiopians, they should focus on process.” In Bangladesh too, ill-informed foreign interference and assumptions that Western models of democracy should be exported to the Global South are understandably resented.

3.3. The assumption of parliamentary support tends to be that if you strengthen the structure and procedures of institutions, and train or inform the people within them, you get better governance. This glosses over the politics of parliamentary strengthening. As the academics Pelizzo and Stapenhurst point out, legislative oversight of democracy may be essential for both strong democracy and controlling corruption but it will only happen if there is a demand for good governance among citizens and the political will of politicians (2012). In creating these conditions, within Ethiopia and Bangladesh an independent judiciary, a free media, and other civil society organisations (CSO) will play a vital role, according to academics and civil society representatives.

3.4. From the viewpoint of donors, they meet the resistance within parliaments when encouraging such aims. Donors have different constituencies and political pressures at home that create contradictions between them; it is notable that there are markedly different approaches to governance between emerging and more long-standing donors. Some are more critical of the Bangladeshi or Ethiopian governments while others stress their achievements and challenges in the face of increasing instability globally.

3.5. While parliamentarians stress the need for support to strengthen parliament internally, people outside parliament invite donors (including DFID) to: (a) facilitate a forum for dialogue between parliamentarians and civil society (including through the media), (b) encourage an assessment of the legal framework (especially the charity law in both countries), (c) encourage government to recognise value the contribution of civil society to development, (d) support an independent judiciary, external oversight institutions and free media, (e) encourage MPs to deepen their accountability to their constituencies.

3.6. Returning to the International Development Committee’s report on DFID’s Programme in Bangladesh (2010), we strongly endorse the recommendations made about improving the capacity of civil society (para 29) and empowering women in society (para 90). In relation to parliamentary strengthening (para 24), while enabling parliamentary committees is valuable, we urge consideration of the points above about the limitations of institutional and
procedural reforms and suggest that a greater emphasis on engagement with between the public and civil society organisations and elected representatives may be worth encouraging.

4. **Recommendations**

4.1. We reiterate that our research is at an early stage and that these recommendations are based only on our initial findings.

**Approach and strategy**

4.2. Some critics of the governments of Bangladesh and Ethiopia, and of foreign donors, have suggested that aid investment in these countries provides legitimacy to anti-democratic regimes and should be stopped. Others claim that women, men and children living in poverty would be the greatest victims of withdrawal. We recommend that DFID should continue its poverty reduction programmes, partly because withdrawal would have extremely damaging consequences, but also because DFID has huge potential to influence stakeholders within these countries. While DFID should not dictate to Bangladesh or Ethiopia the shape their democracies should take, and threatening conditions to aid along these lines are counterproductive, they should encourage governments and civil society by facilitating engagement and dialogue.

4.3. In both Bangladesh and Ethiopia the parliament is completely dominated by a single party and has only limited independence from government. In these circumstances projects aimed at institutional and procedural reform or provision of greater research support may achieve little to broaden and deepen democracy. It may make more sense to examine whether there are other institutions with a governance role that can be supported and where greater impact can be achieved. In both countries, the oversight political institutions (such as, Anti-Corruption Commission, the Human Rights Commission, the office of the Ombudsman, and the Auditor-General) may be equally, or even more, urgent priorities for capacity building in order to achieve improved governance. Appointments to these institutions in Bangladesh are not independent. DFID is advised to encourage a de-politisation of appointments. Furthermore, in view of the absence of opposition political parties in parliament, the role of civil society in Bangladesh and Ethiopia, including those representing the interests of women and minorities, has even greater importance than ever within the political domain.

4.4. We recommend a shift from a narrow, top-down and technical approach to institutional strengthening – which tends to focus on structures, rules and information – in favour of a broader and more participatory pursuit of better governance through a multi-pronged strategy with clear priorities at any one time. DFID could usefully focus on facilitating processes that strengthen democracy, rather than defining the content of improvements, for example by working with government and civil society to improve public engagement with parliament and government in various ways.

**Strengthening parliament’s oversight and public engagement**

4.5. MPs should be made more accountable for their performance. Parliamentary committees in Bangladesh should be strengthened to play a vital role in ensuring the accountability of those responsible for these programmes. Experience shows that there exists better scope for inter-party collaboration in Bangladesh in committees than on the floor of the House. This collaboration should be encouraged.

4.6. DFID is recommended to facilitate the creation of forums for public dialogue and debate. This may partly take the form of encouraging greater engagement between MPs and their constituents – particularly in the constituency itself. Improved debate with local communities about their diverse needs, interests and challenges will assist MPs in prioritising within their
role as representatives. DFID could also encourage implementation of the provision in Ethiopia law that requires MPs to report to their constituencies in public meetings twice annually. Other countries, including Bangladesh, might learn from the experience of this legal requirement to be accountable.

4.7. Facilitating more structured and transparent debate between parliament, government and civil society is strongly recommended by academics and civil society. They emphasise the key role played by the media. DFID should learn from its past experiences and consolidate good practices in the creation of public spaces in which political discussions can take place, for example, continuing to support the BBC World Trust to facilitate the equivalent to Question Time on radio/TV, as well as encouraging innovation by local media organisations. For example there is particular scope for encouraging greater reporting on the work of MPs in their constituencies, to improve scrutiny of elected representatives and enhance public awareness and understanding of their role.

Review of the impact of the charity laws jointly commissioned by civil society and government

4.8. It would be of significant value in both Bangladesh and Ethiopia to support a review of the laws that govern the operation of charities and civil society organisations. Both countries have laws placing restrictions on civil society that prevent it from fully contributing to the democratic life of the society. One mechanism to do this may be commissioning joint reviews involving representatives of both civil society and government in the process of evaluating the impact and responses to laws regulating civil society.

Monitoring public engagement

4.9. We recommend that DFID might consider suggesting to governments that it would be useful to commission an independent body to monitor levels of political engagement and participation in Bangladesh and Ethiopia on a regular basis. This would enable both government and parliament to better understand the political views of the public, both women and men and including ethnic minorities and disabled people, in different regions. It would also provide some indication of progress towards enhancing public participation in politics. The survey questions in the Hansard Society’s Audit of Political Engagement, which have been used internationally already, would be a suitable starting point for consideration.

Gender equality and women in politics

4.10. Ethiopia has better representation of women in parliament (27%) than the UK and the leaders of the two main parties in Bangladesh are women. Just as the content of democratic strengthening should be designed with nationals, the priorities for working towards gender equality should not be determined by DFID or international NGOs.

4.11. Women MPs in both countries welcomed the support from foreign donors – for current MPs as individual women and when working in groups/caucuses. They have assisted national bodies to encourage better representation of women in all political institutions. Women MPs are keen to learn from the experience of other parliaments, especially in their region.

4.12. Even though women MPs tend to be highly educated and experienced, they are embedded within wider societies with pronounced gendered inequality, so support for their commitment to women’s rights within their countries is uneven. While recognising that DFID invests in women and children, their support for gender equality in the political domain receives less attention. We strongly recommend that DFID treats its support to women in parliament and other political institutions and women’s civil society organisations as an even higher priority.

Planning, evaluation and donor transparency
4.13. Project evaluations need to take a broader understanding of what constitutes impact in the area of governance. The focus on relying on targets, log frames and numerical indicators for evaluation purposes is even less helpful in this area of development work than in other sectors. While a clear strategy for a long-term investment in governance and statement of intentions within it is essential, flexibility is required for developing priorities and plans in response to demand within Bangladesh and Ethiopia. This would enable DFID to be more responsive and allow room for public engagement, debate and learning.

4.14. Parliamentary and democracy strengthening, as identified above, is a complex social, cultural and political process. Rather than merely relying on the narrow self-assessment by parliamentarians and standard external evaluation, with its emphasis on measurement of statement objectives from the perspective of a limited number of informants, in democracy programmes it is vital to take broader account of citizens’ diverse views as well as the bigger governance picture. We suggest that DFID might also develop far more imaginative and rigorous approaches and methods for participatory monitoring and evaluation of its own contribution in collaboration with a range of stakeholders (including citizens) – using in depth ethnography, social media, radio, for example. We have also suggested an Audit of Public Engagement as one way of monitoring democracy from citizens’ viewpoints.

4.15. Parliamentarians, academics and CSO representatives were all interested to encourage donors to be transparent to a far wider group about the content and progress of the governance programmes that they support. We recognise that some sensitive political discussions with governments cannot be conducted in the public domain, but greater transparency would broaden ownership and buy-in of democracy programmes.

Funding mechanisms and priorities

4.16. A proportion of DFID's contracted work is put out to tender only to a small number of pre-approved consortia. Outside of these consortia other organisations are not made aware of these opportunities nor are eligible to apply for them. While it is easy to appreciate the efficiency of dealing with fewer tender submissions and organisations that are 'known quantities', this approach restricts competition and risks stifling new thinking and innovation.

4.17. We recommend a shift in funding priorities away from international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and any implication that DFID is supporting the exporting of Westminster standards. While the Bangladesh parliament is based on the Westminster model, and MPs in both Bangladesh and Ethiopia have appreciated visits to Westminster, the idea that the UK parliamentary experts can necessarily teach MPs in the Global South about democracy is inappropriate. When INGOs offer a specialist and well-defined service – not just to facilitating processes in parliament but to other institutions and the media – the value of their role is clear but investment in organisations with a poor or limited track record in this area is highly risky.

4.18. We recommend that DFID increase its direct funding to national civil society – including media organisations, capacity-building organisations and research institutes. The importance of the development of a research capacity within Bangladesh and Ethiopia cannot be overstated. Scholars of parliament will provide reflection, scrutiny and advice to parliament, and although exchanges with academics from elsewhere can be useful, the overwhelming need is to invest in nationals.

Appendix 1 – References


House of Commons International Development Select Committee, 2010. DFID’s Programme in Bangladesh. HC-95.


Appendix 2 – Background information and past evaluations

The researchers
While the SOAS researchers in this research project have a background in international development and parliaments in Eastern Africa, South Asia and the UK, the Hansard Society are focusing on public engagement within this research project. Our research is designed to enable national researchers to develop their capacity to study their own parliaments’ engagement in public participation, while the UK researchers in the coalition will focus on reporting findings to the UK government and parliament. Please see Hansard for more details: http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/research/strengthening-parliaments/parliaments-public-engagement-and-poverty-reduction/

Past evaluations of parliamentary strengthening
To give an example from Bangladesh, a scholar found little evidence that a UNDP programme to strengthen the Bangladeshi parliament (including parliamentary committee or rules of procedure) made much impact because there was a failure to address the vested interests and political will of MPs and their parties (Rahman 2010). It lacked a coherent strategy, was too ambitious and was based on the experience of rules of European countries. The international consultants used failed to understand the local context. The project met some of its success criteria but achieved little and was not accountable to either Parliament or to Bangladeshi citizens. An annual review of the subsequent phase of this ‘Strengthening Political Participation’ programme carried out for DFID was more positive about meeting outcomes but also had some criticism about connections and wider achievements: ‘SPP has not been as successful in achieving synergies and active cooperation between project components as hoped.’ (2012:20). A DFID official who worked in the Dhaka office some years ago was particularly doubtful about the value of training conducted within parliament. Several donors have actively supported the strengthening of oversight institutions without much success. For example, although provided for in the legal framework, no effort has yet been made to appoint an Ombudsman. The government of Denmark provided a grant towards the establishment of the office of Ombudsman, but no practical progress was made by the end of the project in 2004. A multi-donor project, supported by World Bank, European Commission and Government of Canada, has also sought to strengthen the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General with no greater success.

In the case of Ethiopia the multi-funded five-year Democratic Institutions Programme was recently evaluated. It was found to be aligned with the government’s commitment to broadening and deepening democracy while also maintaining stability (2013: 3). On the one hand the programme has developed the capacity of political institutions, including parliament but also oversight institutions like the Anti-Corruption Commission, Human Rights Commission and the Ombudsman, but civil society has lost out (compounded by the charity law that restricts their funding and activities) and accountability of the programme itself has been weak. ‘For a programme that is largely based on the notion of broadening participation, accountability and transparency systems to monitor trends in public perception were singularly absent.’ (ibid: 4). One of their recommendations is that to achieve their ambitions a far longer timeframe is needed: 15-20 years rather than the typical 5 years. They advise government to recognize more fully that broadening and deepening democracy will improve public’s acceptance of them (ibid: 7). The evaluators did not record any meetings with academics or civil society, although they met some beneficiaries (ibid: 50). To all concerned they point to the importance of mainstreaming gender into all political institutions.

Stakeholders’ perspectives: preliminary research findings
Our interviews in Bangladesh reveal that MPs are apparently more constituency-oriented and have less interest in law-making and, to some extent, oversight more due to structural constraints than personal failings. As constituency representatives MPs have active involvement in the planning and/or
implementation of programmes aimed at reducing poverty and encouraging public participation, giving a high priority to building educational institutions and rural infrastructures projects. Such involvement, however, risks weakening local government institutions in the rural areas. Some MPs have a negative view of different civil society organisations (CSOs), which they consider spurious, subject to foreign interference and ill-co-ordinated. Civil society representatives stress the need for better collaboration between MPs and different CSOs so that the two can understand each other’s perspective better and jointly contribute to the deepening of democracy in the country. While there is a clear case for parliament-civil society collaboration, there is also an urgent need for strengthening parliamentary committees, in the view of academics in Bangladesh, especially those that have the potential to oversee the activities of ministries concerned with the planning and implementation of programmes aimed at reducing poverty. Bureaucrats and NGOs/CSOs have greater involvement than parliamentarians/politicians in the planning and implementation of poverty reduction programmes.

Our interviews in Ethiopia with civil society suggest that such a programme’s impact on democracy will be inevitably limited by three laws that restrict freedoms – Charities and Societies Proclamation No. 621/2009 of Ethiopia (know as the Charity Law, Civil Society Law or CSO law) (2009), Anti-Terrorism Law (2009) and Mass Media and Freedom of Information Proclamation (2008) – by the politicization of the courts and media, and by restrictions on opposition parties. Much of the media is state-owned and there is only one government-owned internet service provider in Ethiopia. The arrest of nine bloggers and journalists in April 2014 for “working with foreign human right activist organisations... and inciting violence through social media to create instability in the country,” confirmed for many that media freedom is limited. Parliamentarians stress that they have created opportunities for citizens to take part in parliamentary scrutiny, but engagement has been limited, with opposition politicians and activists often unwilling to participate. Civil society representatives by contrast argue that the process gives them insufficient time and policy detail to prepare to present their views and that sessions have a hostile atmosphere towards any meaningful scrutiny of government policies. As a result they are sceptical of the value of getting involved. For further examples of the perspective and recommendations of Ethiopian civil society organisations see the Journal of Ethiopia Civil Society, supported by Action Aid-Ethiopia, published by the Consortium of Christian Relief and Development Associations.