

Report: APRN Executive Committee Meeting

The Executive Committee of APRN met in Accra on September 29, 2007. On the agenda was:

- Review of APRN activities during 2007;
- Definition of work plan for 2008;
- Discussions: how to make APRN more sustainable as a network; membership relations and review of membership criteria.
- By-election of Executive Committee member from West Africa as well as new Vice-Chair;

The current Committee was represented by Soulé Adam (Benin), Hon. Idrissa Adamou (Niger) and Hon. William Okecho (Uganda). Hon. Anne Makinda (Tanzania), Chair of the Committee, Hon. Kenneth Thindwa (Malawi) and Hon. Priscilla Misihairabwi-Mushonga (Zimbabwe) were unable to attend the meeting. The current Vice-chair, Soulé Adam, had unfortunately not retained his seat in the last parliamentary elections in Benin, and therefore this was his last attendance. To replace him on the Committee, Hon. Kissima Mangané (Mali), newly re-elected in the parliamentary elections, had previously been suggested and subsequently invited to attend the meeting. Also present during the meeting, was Issifu Lampo and Petra Andersson (Parliamentary Centre) as well as Franziska Walter (Austrian Development Agency) and an interpreter for the French participants. Soulé Adam was selected to chair the meeting by the present members.

The work plan and the various activities for 2007 were discussed. During the review, focus and activities during 2008 were also discussed. Here follows some of the key issues raised per component:

Component 1:

a) Training module development

During 2007 a complete learning package has been developed to complement the Anglophone training modules on budgetary oversight. In addition, consultants have developed a French version of the training, which was tested the week prior to this meeting. These learning packages will be developed further during 2007, where focus will be to make the French training modules into a complete learning package and to increasingly reflect the Anglophone training. It was also suggested that these learning packages should be adjusted so that training can take place for a specific country with a larger group of participants.

Reflecting comments from participants at the previous training sessions, it was suggested that focus should be put on developing a specific training for parliamentary staff, as the need for training differs between MPs and staff. The Parliamentary Centre has for example conducted staff training together with WBI where the training sessions have taken place via videoconferences in six countries simultaneously. They have then been combined with training modules available on the Internet to be completed by the participants in between the training sessions. This interested the Committee, but it was stressed that the videoconferences cannot replace the face-to-face meetings and exchanges that take place when the participants are able to come together for a training session. One suggestion was to have an initial training session face-to-face lasting five days, followed by Internet based training modules to be completed by the participants during their own time, but according to a set schedule. Those participants that have not completed all modules will not be invited for the final training session, which would also be face-to-face, and hence not complete the program.

b) Training on budgetary oversight

During 2007, only two training sessions on budgetary oversight have taken place (one Anglophone and one Francophone). However, another one is planned for December. Initially intended for Francophone countries, but due to information that the budget process is still ongoing until the end of December in most Francophone countries, the training might be conducted for Anglophone countries instead.

It was expressed that the number of training sessions for Anglophone and Francophone participants should be equal and that the number of training opportunities should increase. The number of participants per training session should also increase, if possible. The question whether all training sessions needed to take place in Accra and what role other local offices, for example in Nairobi, could play was raised. It was also suggested that regional training sessions should be offered at a convenient location (outside Ghana) or in Parliament itself. It was pointed out that this might pose some difficulties with regards to logistical arrangements and financial management, depending on the involvement of the host. It was also stressed that the Learning Centre plays an important role in current activities and this role is expected to increase if additional resources and a larger facility can be provided. It was agreed that the type of training where three countries come together for a training session should continue. In total, four training sessions, two Anglophone trainings and two Francophone, should take place on a yearly basis. During 2008, this training will take place in Accra, and other possible locations will have to be discussed further.

In addition, training for parliamentary staff should also take place during 2008, following the completion of the learning package and necessary technical aspects of the Internet-based training modules, most likely in the latter part of the year. Also, one in-country training could also take place in an Anglophone country to be able to test the training

material and format. However, this will be weighed against time available for personnel and room in the budget for total number of activities.

The need for additional training on community monitoring was also raised, so that newly elected members can obtain knowledge about these important tools. This training was previously provided through a CIDA funded program, which has now come to an end. However, it will be considered when developing future programs, and could for example have a natural place within the context of the staff training to be developed.

Component 2: The Learning Centre

During 2007 the Parliamentary Centre has started to collect relevant material to create a library which can be used by visitors to the Learning Centre. Activities to enable the Learning Centre to become a true centre of learning will be focused on during 2008. This will involve increasing the number of relevant reading material; posting a list (continuously updated) of available books and articles as well as various activities taking place there on the APRN website; and informing MPs, parliamentary staff and researchers linked to Parliament, in particular in Ghana, about the centre; keeping track of the usage of the centre by recording number of visits and type of usage; and the development of a strategic plan for possible extended use of the centre. In addition, the possible physical expansion of the Learning Centre will be explored by the Ghana office.

Component 3:

a) Communication

- Newsletter

The Parliamentary Centre has been experiencing difficulties in acquiring articles and other information from APRN members for the various newsletters, which has delayed the production of the Newsletter during 2007 (only one issue to date). The Committee discussed if the Newsletter should continue to be quarterly and how themes for each issue should be selected. It was agreed that we will try to continue with quarterly issues during 2008 as well, but if the problems continue, this will be discussed further. It was also decided that the Committee needs to be involved more by providing input or contacts for possible contributors. It was suggested that a specific country could be in focus per issue or that themes be selected for the full year, in order to receive articles in time. In addition, a bank of contacts of possible contributors that we contact on a regular basis, as well as an article bank to facilitate the newsletters coming out on time should be created. The participants raised the difficulties for MPs to write articles due to time constraints and also suggested that payment for articles should be looked into.

- Website

The participants were informed that the APRN website is now up and running in both French and English. During 2008 the main focus will be to keep the website up-to-date and provide even more links and relevant information.

- Virtual Parliament

There has been no development on this so far, but this will be an important tool with regards to the parliamentary staff training, where an actual training- and discussions forum (password protected) will be important for the activity.

- Publications

The update of the handbook on poverty reduction will hopefully start at the end of this fiscal year and continue during the beginning of next year. There will also be made room for other publications during the year in the budget, for example information material on APRN to be used in membership relations and research of the budget cycles and processes in our various member countries.

b) Regional Conferences

At the time for the meeting, only one regional conference had taken place so far, i.e. the conference *Southern Perspectives on Reform of the International Development Architecture* at Wilton Park (part of a North-South Institute research project), where Hon. Okecho had attended. He reported that he had been contacted by several organizations following this conference to talk about domestic resource mobilization in Uganda, which he had done at the Wilton Park conference (not as an official speaker, but during the general discussions). Most recently, he had been invited by WBI to make a contribution on the subject during their conference in Helsinki. He also talked about how the conference had contributed to increase his own knowledge on a number of issues directly related to his work as an MP.

Although this type of conferences can add great value to those who are able to attend, it was suggested that they will be kept to a minimum to allow for increased training opportunities. It was suggested that we increasingly try to link conferences to the work of the APRN, and if possible connect such a conference to conducted research and case studies, similar to the NSI format, so the discussions can feed into the research and future useful documentation.

c) APRN Executive Committee Meetings and AGM

The Committee stressed the need to set the dates for future meetings as timely as possible to allow for proper planning and commitment from the committee members. Meetings should take place twice per year, as stated during the December meeting from now on and a suggested time for the next meeting was at the end of May or beginning of June in 2008. Relevant documentation needs to be circulated before the meetings and available in both French and English.

During 2008, APRN will hold its second AGM, where a new Executive Committee will be elected. Current members can be re-elected if they wish. If possible, the timing of the AGM should take in consideration that most Francophone countries are involved in their respective budget process from October until the end of December. The present members also emphasized their commitment to the APRN and asked to be involved more during

the work planning and development of new activities. It was decided that the work plan for 2008 would be circulated to the whole committee (in French and English) as soon as a draft was ready for their input.

As part of the meeting agenda, discussions also took place on how to make APRN more sustainable as a network; how to improve membership relations; and the possible need to review of membership criteria. Everyone agreed that it is important to discuss the sustainability of the network. There is a quite substantial risk for the network to cease to exist when the Parliamentary Centre can no longer fund the current type of activities. Although the membership of the APRN currently is made up of parliamentary committees, it became clear that the formality of the membership varies from country to country. For example Mali and Niger have local networks on poverty reduction set up within their parliamentary structures, but with very limited funding to support the activities PC offer. These networks are only open to current MPs, so any change to the APRN membership criteria to allow for former MPs or parliamentary staff to join in some form would be difficult. In Uganda, the committees are the directly involved and each committee makes sure that they set aside funding to support these activities in their respective budget. There the APRN is not formally tied to the Parliament, so an expanded membership would be possible, as former MPs are linked to Parliament through the Association of Former MPs already.

The discussions did not lead to any decisions on changing the membership criteria or any other formal changes to increase the sustainability of the network. However, suggestions were made that PC develops a strategy to deal with committees/parliaments after elections, especially when many active members are not reelected. The involvement of Clerks has also proved quite successful in the past and should be explored further. They also stressed the need for future involvement of PC in some form to support the network, as it is unlikely that the Parliaments themselves will be able to sustain the network activities. Financial commitment of the parliaments should however be increased over time. PC was therefore advised to continue seeking for funding after the ADA support is over, as well as include activities to support the various country networks in seeking funds to support local follow-up activities. The question was raised if PC would be able to provide yearly funding to support local networks and if local APRN's should be developed with the ADA funding. However, as funds are limited, focus will need to be put on the actual training activities. It was confirmed by ADA that they are committed to supporting the network until 2011, but the need to think about what happens after the funding ends was also emphasized. It was decided that these questions should be researched and discussed further at the next meeting before any changes are to take place.

Last on the agenda, Hon. Kissima Mangané was elected unanimously to replace Soulé Adam on the Committee and Hon. Idrissa Adamou was elected new Vice-Chair. Soulé Adam was thanked for his time and commitment to the APRN and the Parliamentary centre expressed its gratitude to the whole committee for taking the time to attend the meeting.