Interview with the Global Organization of Parliamentarians Against Corruption

The Global Organization of Parliamentarians Against Corruption (GOPAC) is an international network of parliamentarians dedicated to good governance and combating corruption throughout the world by improving the effectiveness of parliaments as democratic institutions of oversight of governments. It consists of 13 regional and national chapters. GOPAC's regional chapters select the members to the GOPAC Board of Directors who, in turn, set the policy of the organization. The Board selects a Chair and an Executive Committee who manage the day-to-day operations of the organization.

For more information, please go to: http://www.gopacnetwork.org/

Interview

We would like to thank John Williams, Founder and Current Chair, Global Organization of Parliamentarians Against Corruption (GOPAC), for answering the following interview questions.

Q: Why was the GOPAC created in 2002?

There were three reasons for creating the organization. First, it became clear that if there was to be an effective fight launched against corruption, stand alone meetings and conferences would not work. An organization would allow us to bring together like minded people who all buy into a specific purpose or mission and motivate them to seek to accomplish a plan of action. An organization would provide leadership, focus, motivation, and continuity, and give voice to the people who coalesce around a particular set of ideas and principles.

Second, an organization can only be successful if the members see themselves as peers. Parliamentarians, elected by their people to govern their society, have significantly more powers and a different perspective than other individuals. By virtue of their election, they can speak on behalf of their constituents; they can implement policy and vote on legislation. It was obvious that an organization focused strictly on parliamentarians not only was required, but would only work that way.

Third, in general, parliaments had become tools for governments to use to demonstrate their democratic credentials by obtaining passage of their legislation. Parliaments had lost sight of their purpose to hold governments accountable. In the minds of the public, the line between government and parliament had been all but eliminated. Parliamentarians are the nexus between society and government. As individuals, they have little or no power beyond the power to persuade. Collectively, they have the power to approve legislation. This is why they are such obvious targets for corruption.

Q: There are currently over 400 Members of Parliament from over 70 countries in GOPAC. What impact has the organization made on anti corruption efforts at the international and national levels?

GOPAC's biggest contribution so far is to bring parliamentarians into the fight against corruption. Governments have always had the money and the capacity to implement change. Civil society has become organized, as motivated individuals coalesce around their particular interests (e.g. Greenpeace and Amnesty International) and they have become spokespersons for their specific agendas. Parliaments, on the other hand, cannot raise money, usually speak only in response to government initiatives (passage of legislation), have no way of speaking with a unified voice on any issue, and cannot coalesce around any specific issue for the long term. Also multi-lateral organizations, as creations of governments, did not see the need, or did not know how, to engage parliaments on the anti-corruption agenda. Nonetheless, they are an extremely important part of the puzzle in the fight against corruption.

Q: How do you identify parliamentarians who might be interested in participating in GOPAC?

We rely primarily on word of mouth. The name clearly speaks for our agenda and parliamentarians are always talking to each other, in their own country and internationally. Therefore, knowledge of GOPAC has spread quite quickly. We are not difficult to find for those parliamentarians who really want to be identified with our agenda.

Q: How do you measure GOPAC's success? What are its best attributes?

As a young organization we are still in the developmental stage. Our success will be measured in our ability to work with our agencies on the same agenda; our ability to
cause governments to ratify and implement anti-corruption conventions; our ability to improve the quality of oversight of governments by parliaments through training seminars for parliamentarians; and our ability to improve ethical behavior in society as a whole.

The best attribute of GOPAC is its single mission: “To make parliaments more effective as democratic institutions of oversight of government.” We seek to improve our capacity to fulfill our own responsibilities rather than to achieve results by influencing others to pick up our cause.

Q: What do you think has made GOPAC a successful and effective network? Is there any specific structure or activity of the network that has contributed to its success?

First, GOPAC’s mission resonates with its members. It is clear, it is specific, and it is understandable. It is also, as I say, an idea whose time has come. Ten years ago, fighting corruption was not seen as a serious issue. It was acknowledged, it was tolerated, people worked around it or lived with it, but there were no real initiatives to tackle it and contain it.

Second, GOPAC is organized on three levels:

- The global organization has an international Executive Committee and Board of Directors to provide leadership, direction and motivation. The global secretariat for GOPAC is located in the Parliamentary Centre, an NGO headquartered in Ottawa that promotes governance development around the world.
- Regional chapters organized along geographic, cultural, and linguistic lines provide a strong anti-corruption voice in their respective regions and coordinate parliamentary anti-corruption activities within those regions.
- National chapters allow individual parliamentarians to join with their colleagues in parliament to develop an anti-corruption agenda through promotion of appropriate legislation and improved parliamentary oversight of government.

Q: What major mechanisms enable members to network with each other? What main activities do they participate in?

A key component in enabling members to network with one another is a reliable, effective Global Secretariat with professional staff. The Global Secretariat plays the vital role of serving as the global point of contact for GOPAC and its regional and national chapters. In addition, it keeps records of memberships and promotes new memberships and affiliations. The Secretariat coordinates and facilitates the activities of the various organs of GOPAC, as well as GOPAC’s international programming, and provides a supporting role to the Executive Committee.

Although GOPAC relies on the use of ICTs in bringing together its memberships for online discussions, video conferences, etc., it also believes in the value of face-to-face meetings. This allows parliamentarians to build solid relationships with their peers as well as experts in the field.

GOPAC members participate in most of the activities of the organization. They provide the leadership for the organization (Chair, Board and Executive of the Global organization, as well as the regional and national chapters) and the leadership required for Global Task Forces, which look at issues concerning parliamentarians in the fight against corruption (i.e. AML, Codes of Conduct, Parliamentary Immunity, and International Conventions Against Corruption). It is only through the time volunteered by our members that GOPAC can undertake its work.

Q: How often does GOPAC hold meetings or conferences? How has it used information and communications technologies (ICTs) to help its members connect with each other?

GOPAC’s bi-annual conferences are hosted by different regional chapters each time. The founding conference was held in the House of Commons, Ottawa, in 2002, and GOPAC was registered as an organization in 2003. The 2nd global conference was held in the East African Parliament Building in Arusha, Tanzania (2006), and was hosted by the Parliament of Tanzania. It is our goal to hold a Board meeting of GOPAC with all members in attendance each intervening year. Most other organizational communications at the global level are by electronic means.

Regional chapters are smaller geographically but also have financial constraints on their ability to meet. National chapters can meet on a regular basis, since all members are present in their respective parliaments.

In addition, we organize workshops and seminars in conjunction with other organizations that see the need to participate with parliamentarians on the anti-corruption agenda, such as the Parliamentarians’ Forum at the Conference of States Parties for the UNCAC (Jordan, December 2006).

Q: What are the biggest challenges GOPAC faces today as a network?

As a relatively new global organization, GOPAC has a significant challenge in building the ethos of the organization, with language, culture, and distance being very real problems. Financial viability is also a real challenge, since funding parliamentarians is a new concept for government funders. In many ways parliamentarians have been seen to be a part of the problem, not a part of the solution; therefore, there is also a credibility factor to be considered.

A major challenge that has already been met is the articulation of the organization, its aims, objectives, methodologies, structure, and relationship to the outside world.

Thank you very much for sharing the objectives, activities, and strategies of GOPAC.