

More than Information Processing! Committee Hearings as Public Engagement in the Works of Parliament. Conceptual Thoughts and Empirical Findings

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Keywords: Committees; Parliaments; Public Hearings; Field Hearings; Public Engagement

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Abstract

Committees are a ubiquitous parliamentary institution. They are used for legislative and oversight purposes by parliaments around the world. However, though committees form an important part of parliamentary studies literature, their use in public engagement has been underexplored, both conceptually and empirically. This paper sets out to help fill this gap by providing a broad conceptual overview of committee hearings and then bringing together empirical findings, drawing on original data collected for the 2022 Global Parliamentary. The paper asks what committee hearings are used for, why are they held, and how they are organized. It presents an overview of how committee hearings are used for public engagement and investigates ways in which committees can strengthen engagement by increasing the number of citizens a parliament reaches, the quality of information parliament uses, and the kinds of policy issues that are discussed. Analyzing a survey of 70 parliaments worldwide, it becomes evident that committee hearings are a common tool for engagement, particularly in large countries and countries with higher socioeconomic status. Committee hearings are also more likely to be used for engagement for legislative rather than oversight purposes. Based on interviews with MPs and staff, the paper identifies good practices in the use of committees for engagement. In particular, it spotlights committee field hearings, to show how they can amplify public engagement. It also explores core issues from committee practice, such as committee jurisdiction, virtual hearings, and mechanisms for involvement of CSOs, in the public engagement context. Taken together, the paper offers perspectives for a better understanding of committee hearings and shows that they provide important instruments for parliamentary public engagement.

1. Parliamentary Committees and Public Hearings – Places of Work or of Outreach?

1. Introduction

Committees exist in all parliaments and are considered to be one of the most important features of their internal organization (Strøm, 1998, p. 47). They are often described as the “engine room” where the real work of parliaments takes place and where decisions are prepared for the plenary activity. A classic saying goes that while the plenary sessions stand for parliament on “public exhibition”, parliament “at work” can be observed in the committees (Wilson, 2006 [1892], p. 69). Recent research casts doubt on such a simple distinction between committees as workshops and the plenary as the showroom: First of all, in many parliaments, nowadays, the proceedings in committees are certainly not the beginning of negotiations among a small group of policy specialists. What happens there is preceded by the coordination within ministries, parliamentary party groups (PPGs) and a lot of interaction in the relevant policy network with interest groups, civil society organizations and other stakeholders (Siefken & Rommetvedt, 2022a, pp. 26–28). Thus, the real policy workshops may be found elsewhere than in committees. And second, committee proceedings are often very similar to the ritualized behavior in plenary debates, even serving as “testing ground” for them in some parliaments. In other words, there can be a whole lot of “show room style” in committees, too.

In fact, it appears that overall, committees are increasingly outward-oriented, while they still hold their sessions closed to the public in quite a few parliaments. But there is a clear trend towards holding public committee sessions in most parliaments. Thus, committees often become part of the front stage, rather than a behind-the-scenes affair. It is therefore necessary to give parliamentary committees renewed attention as various authors have stressed recently (Gaines et

al., 2019, p. 333; Martin & Mickler, 2019, p. 92; Siefken & Rommetvedt, 2022b, p. 6). A better understanding of what happens in committees and how it relates to the functions of parliaments can help parliamentary development around the globe. It can also educate MPs how to best act there and also enlighten a broader public about their own democratic institutions and what to expect from them. Obviously, there is a lot of variety between different parliaments to be accounted for, an ever present challenge for their comparative study (Blondel, 1973).

Hearings have become a visible activity of committees around the globe, but their academic conceptual understanding and empirical study is limited. Hearings have a long history in the United States Congress, dating back to pre-constitutional practice in the colonies (Potts, 1926, p. 704). By the 18th century, most American colonial assemblies had given their own committees the powers to hold hearings and to travel for gathering information (Squire, 2012, p. 43). Over the decades, many parliaments have integrated hearings into their parliamentary processes, often as a direct “institutional diffusion” taking inspiration from U.S. practice (Loewenberg, 2006). Hearings are usually regulated in the standing orders or in the rules of procedure. In a survey from 1990, public hearings existed in only seven of 18 western European democracies – and it was noted that a few of them had just recently introduced them: Belgium in 1985, Sweden in 1989, Finland and France in 1991 (Strøm, 1998, 49–51, 54). A recent in-depth comparative study of 17 parliaments found that public committee hearings exist in 15 of them, but the frequency of their actual use was judged as low in six (Siefken & Rommetvedt, 2022a, p. 17). It is surprising that they have not been studied comparatively, and there is also little country specific research about them (for Sweden: Arter, 2008; for the US: Kornberg, 2023; for Germany: Solomon, 2015; Hünermund, forthcoming).

This paper sets out to help better understand parliamentary hearings and lay the

groundwork for future research. To grapple with their use, a few fundamental questions must be addressed: What are they used for? Why are they held and how are they organized? What are international practices of committee hearings? After addressing the topic conceptually, this paper sheds light on these question based on extensive research that was conducted in preparation for the Third Global Parliamentary Report of the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the United Nations Development Program (IPU / UNDP, 2022)¹.

2. Conceptual Thoughts for Understanding Committee Hearings

2.1. What are Hearings Used For?

Public hearings, by their name and definition are open, and thus a part of engaging the public in the work of parliaments. Yet this is often seen as secondary. Commonly three types of hearings are distinguished, all related to other classic functions of parliaments: oversight, legislative and appointment hearings.

Historically, the institutions of hearings have been developed out of the oversight capacities of parliaments that held, in fact, judicial powers. For example, in 1758, the Assembly of Pennsylvania declared judge William Moore guilty of contempt of the Assembly and ordered him imprisoned. It had conducted hearings with numerous witnesses, said judge among them (Potts, 1926, p. 711). While the judicial powers of parliaments are no longer relevant, other oversight hearings have gained much attention in recent history of the U.S. Congress, to name a few those by the Senate committee chaired by Joseph McCarthy on alleged communist influence

¹ The authors of this paper were both involved with the reports, Kornberg as lead researcher and lead author, Siefken as member of the advisory board. The right for data use by IPU / UNDP is gratefully acknowledged.

within the press and the federal government (1953-1954), those chaired by Senator J. William Fulbright on the war in Vietnam (1971), the U.S. Senate hearings on the Watergate scandal (1973), or recently by the House panel on the January 6 attack on the Capitol (2021).

In many countries, specially-tasked investigating committees can also hold public investigative hearings. They scrutinize past action by the executive (for the EU see Pavy, 2020, pp. 13–14; for Germany: Siefken, 2018). But committee oversight hearings are not always aimed at scrutinizing past government action and may instead serve controlling it in a future-oriented manner. This is the case when study commissions develop visions for policies and help set the agenda (for Germany: Siefken & Schüttemeyer, 2013, p. 166). The budgeting process is another one that is future-oriented and often includes hearings.

Some parliaments have introduced other future-oriented oversight hearings, for example the evidence checks initiative in the United Kingdom. This initiative invites members of the public to respond directly to reports that government agencies supply to parliamentary committees. As part of their role in oversight, select committees receive submissions from the government departments that they oversee. Committees then publish these reports, and members of the public can comment on the evidence supplied by the department. This additional information supports committees as they conduct further investigations. In 2016, the Women and Equalities Committee conducted an “evidence check” on the topic of sexual harassment in schools. Many stakeholders, students who experienced harassment, and other experts contributed. Their statements and feedback on the evidence supplied by the government agency led to a revised estimate of the incidence of harassment in schools in the ministerial briefing.

Fulfilling their “elective function”, identified by Walter Bagehot in his classic text as the most important one (Bagehot, 1993 [1867], p. 153), some parliaments also use public hearings:

The Senate confirmation hearings in the U.S. Congress are a long-established practice and have become integral to the particular system in the “separated institutions sharing powers” (Neustadt, 1960). Confirmation hearings of judicial nominations still form a significant type hearing there. Recent public hearings for the confirmation of United States supreme court justice Katanji Brown Jackson are one prominent example of this. With its wide visibility, similar mechanisms have been in use in other political systems, too, and are on the rise, this is likely another case of “institutional diffusion” (Loewenberg, 2006): The European Parliament has held hearings with candidates for the Commission and also the judges at the EU courts. In the United Kingdom, introducing confirmation hearings for judges has been debated for well over a decade now. In France, according to the Constitution, the President can only make appointments to certain executive positions after the relevant standing committees of the Assemblée nationale have given their “opinion” – and for reaching this opinion, they hold public hearings of the candidates. So, oversight hearings have many forms: ongoing oversight of administrative action (accompanying oversight), investigation of past activities (ex-post oversight) , broad inquiry into future policy paths (ex-ante oversight)

Table 1: Types of Oversight hearings	
Accompanying oversight	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scrutiny hearings by standing committees
Ex-post oversight	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Investigative hearings by standing committees or investigative committees
Ex-ante control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inquiry or study committee hearings • budget hearings • appointment hearings

See Siefken (2018) for the different temporal perspectives on parliamentary control.

Finally, hearings are often held in the context of legislation. They have, in fact, become a textbook part of the legislative process in many parliaments and are often understood predominantly as just that: Providing information to policy makers, bringing (expert) knowledge to MPs. For example, it was noted that contemporary Israeli Knesset committee hearings bolster committee expertise (Friedberg & Fridman, 2018). Accordingly, they are conceptualized as an instrument of parliamentary policy advice for listening to stakeholders and experts (Siefken & Schüttemeyer, 2013, p. 168). But what exactly constitutes “expert” knowledge is very different in political systems around the world and it depends on the political culture of societies. There may be a strong traditional focus on academic and scientific expertise, or on interest groups in systems with a strong corporatist tradition. For this reason, hearings are also often analyzed in the context of lobbying (Eising & Spohr, 2017; Hulden, 2019). But in many parliaments, civil society voices have been included more broadly, as well as stakeholders from affected communities.

So, hearings can be related to the oversight, electoral and legislative functions of parliament. At the same time, all of them serve communicative functions. That is: they are not just about getting information in, but also about getting information out. They can be used to signal positions and can even turn into mere “political theater” (Cammisa, 2022, p. 336). Public hearings may, in fact, have only this role: experts of various backgrounds, sometimes carefully handpicked, state to parliamentary experts what they – and every expert in the relevant policy network – already know. If that is the case, their role would be different than often assumed and the perspective for studying them needed readjustment. Maybe, overall, they are much better

understood as tools of communication, signaling and engagement rather than of bringing new information into the political process? There will certainly not be one universal answer to this question but there will be variation between and within parliaments.

1.2. Why are Public Hearings Held?

For explaining the actual use of political instruments, the perspective of parliamentary functions as the motives of political actors must be accounted for, too. Disentangling them requires more analytical depth and skill. Some are related to the traditional approaches to study parliamentary committees (Martin, 2014, p. 352): informational theory and party competition and opposition behavior. Newer approaches from representational theory may also inform their study, notably those on representative claim making (Saward, 2010). So, hearings can be held for MPs to gather information but the primary motive to hold the can also be in partisan communication, to signal positions and communicate alternatives, differentiated from those of the political competition, especially at the dividing line between majority and opposition parties. Their role may also outward-oriented towards the policy networks: They can help create cloture after major scandals or societal upheavals, or they may simply be used to reduce conflict with stakeholders by making sure that all the relevant voices are included and that nobody feels left out. Such an inclusive approach may make it more difficult for the involved groups to follow a strategy of “going public”. Finally, hearings can serve the purpose of involving the public, bringing in the voices and experiences from society and helping to make them a base for the political decisions. In short, hearings can be held for very different motives, that can be organized on an increasingly outward-oriented continuum: tradition, information gathering, signaling, reducing conflict, and engaging the public. Obviously, they can serve multiple

purposes at once, and different actors may have different motives for using the same parliamentary hearing.

1.3. How are They Organized?

Hearings are organized in many ways. That committees gather information by asking experts to testify and discuss is not new. But just like most of committee work, traditionally this took place behind closed doors. The study from the 1990s mentioned above shows that hearings existed everywhere, but *public* hearings were still limited (Strøm, 1998).

Another difference is what exactly constitutes “public”. In some parliaments, it means that in-person access is granted for journalists who may report about the proceedings, in others anybody who comes to the parliament building can sit in on the meeting (if there is enough space), yet others broadcast public hearings on their television channels or through webcasts – and still others allow for live interaction with the audience.

The traditional approach has been to summon them to the seat of parliament. But in recent years, the practice of field hearings has spread: To make parliaments more accessible, committees travelled and held hearings elsewhere. The Covid pandemic has accelerated another way to facilitate access: in digital hearings, experts testify via video conference. These different organizing principles can be set on a scale of ascending accessibility – both for experts to testify and for the public to observe (table 2).

Table 2: Structuring committee hearings by access to testify and to observe					
accessto testify: limited < ----- > broad				
		experts	interest groups	stakeholders	the public
... to observe: limited	private hearing	1			
	public hearing	2			
	digital hearing	3			
broad	field hearing			4	

The overview has shown that committee hearings deserve more attention and a better theoretical grasp for systematic study – and also for parliamentary practice. There is a trend towards more public hearings in many parliaments which has the potential to (further) shift its uses from internal to external perspectives of parliament. This is not necessarily a bad thing. Maybe committee hearings are in fact much more relevant and important for outreach and engagement than for traditional information gathering from “the experts” in modern times. We turn now to some of the key findings from the comparative study and relate them to these conceptual thoughts.

2. State of Engagement

2.1. Methodology

This paper draws on research conducted for the 2022 Global Parliamentary Report (GPR), a joint initiative of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and the United Nations Development Program. The GPR focuses on public engagement in the work of parliament. It demonstrates why continuous public engagement is essential to parliaments and parliamentarians, as well as

provide support to parliaments in integrating public engagement into their work.

It included different methods of data collection: interviews, focus groups and a written survey of parliaments as well as ongoing feedback during the data analysis through an advisory board. 141 parliamentary staffers and MPs participated in research for the GPR, in interviews or focus groups. The sample consisted of a near even split of male and female participants and had a regional balance (33 percent from Africa and Middle East, 33 percent from Europe, 20 percent from the Americas, 14 percent from Asia and the Pacific). Overall, the GPR research covered nearly 80 countries.

A written survey was sent out to IPU Member parliaments in the summer of 2020, and responses were collected from 69 parliamentary chambers. These included 27 submissions from Europe, 13 from North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa, 13 from Asia and the Pacific, ten from the Americas and six from the Middle East. This imbalance is also reflected across different GDP size categories as defined according to United Nations standards (31 submissions from high-income countries, 18 from upper-middle income countries, 15 from lower-middle income countries and five from low-income countries) and population size (30 submissions from small countries (population below 20 million), 20 from medium countries (population between 20 million and 50 million) and 17 from large countries (population above 50 million). Imbalance is accounted for in the data analysis by adding control variables for GDP and population size and adding regional weights in some of the analyses as noted below.

2.1. State of Engagement

Table 3. Percent of Survey Respondents Using Committee Hearings for Engagement	
Legislative Hearings	73%
Oversight Hearings	66%
Field Hearings	54%
Survey question: “Which of the following public engagement practices for consultation does your parliament use regularly?”, n=69 parliamentary chambers	

The survey asked: “which of the following public engagement practices for consultation does your parliament use regularly?” Response options included: committee hearings for legislative purposes, committee hearings for oversight purposes, and field hearings, and caucus meetings. The answers yield a number of interesting results (Table 3). First, it shows that public committee hearings are a common tool today: Over half of parliaments surveyed employ them. Thus, they are clearly an established part of parliamentary practice. The findings also relate to the larger question about what committee hearings are used for, illustrating that they are used for both legislative and oversight purposes. The findings show that more parliaments hold committee hearings for legislative purposes (73%) versus oversight purposes (66%).

While the literature has identified oversight as a core function of committees (Siefken & Rommetvedt, 2022c) , many parliaments struggle to conduct this effectively. Vivek Ramkumar, Senior Director of Policy at the International Budget Project (IBP), explains that parliaments are “compromised in their abilities to provide the necessary checks and balances...to hold their own against executive dominance of the (budget) process.”² One of the reasons for this weakness in relation to the executive is a lack of independent information and expertise . This manifests itself in both budget approval and implementation. First, parliaments may merely “rubber stamp” draft budgets from the executive because of their limited expertise to amend budgets. According to IBP’s 2019 Open Budget Survey, 108 of 117

² All interview quotes draw on GPR interview data.

countries surveyed have the power to amend budgets, only 31 chose to use this power (IBP, 2019). This suggests that their capacity level does not allow them to take advantage of their oversight role – or that oversight is exercised through different channels, maybe leading to mutual adjustment before amendments are required (Mezey, 1990 [1975], p. 154). Second, even after budgets are approved, when parliaments cannot act as a check on the executive, budgets may be misused in practice. According to the IBP survey, “in 69 of the 117 surveyed countries, or three out of five, executives shift funding between ministries or departments without authorization from the legislature.” (IBP, pg. 61, 2019) This again points to ineffective oversight. The fact that parliaments hold less oversight hearings may therefore be seen in the larger context of less emphasis places on oversight in general.

It also asked respondents how often they have these kinds of hearings: never, less than once a year, once a year, once a month or more.

Figure 1. Frequency of Oversight Committee Hearings

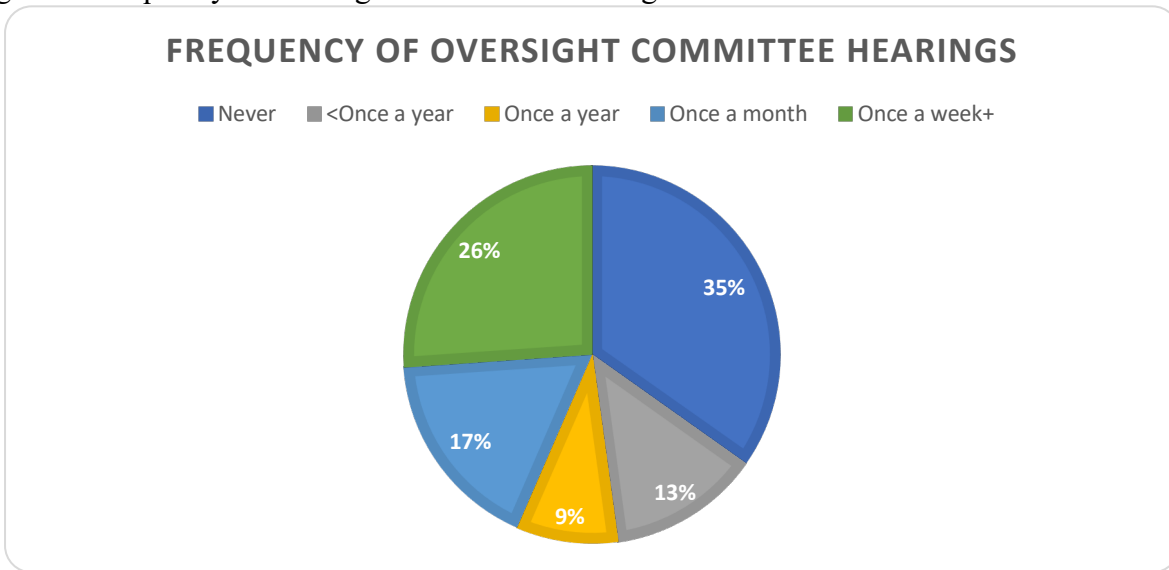


Table 2. Frequency of Legislative Committee Hearings

FREQUENCY OF LEGISLATIVE COMMITTEE HEARINGS

■ Never ■ <Once a year ■ Once a year ■ Once a month ■ Once a week+

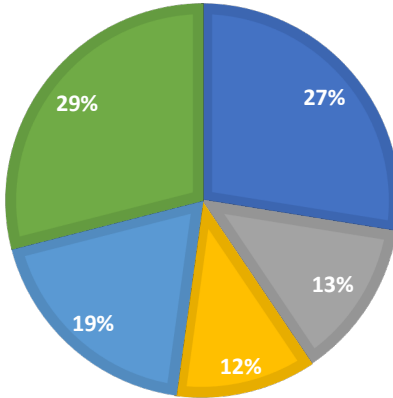
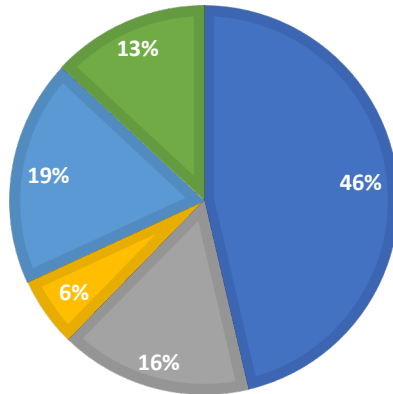


Table 3. Frequency of Committee Field Hearings

FREQUENCY OF COMMITTEE FIELD HEARINGS

■ Never ■ <Once a year ■ Once a year ■ Once a month ■ Once a week+



There is a positive correlation between the country's Freedom House score³ (used as an indicator of relative strength of democracy) and the frequency of all three types of hearings: One additional Freedom House score point is associated with a 40 percent increase in the frequency of legislative hearings, a 29 percent increase in the frequency of oversight hearings, and a 16 percent increase in field hearings. This finding is important in the context of the connection between civic engagement and democracy. Parliamentary engagement with citizens (beyond periodic elections) has been linked to increase in public trust and political knowledge and creates a more inclusive and transparent decision making process (IPU / UNDP, 2022) That committee hearings are linked to the strength of democracy reaffirms their role as a tool for public engagement.

Further analysis reveals the significance of country size and socioeconomic status in the use of committee hearings for engagement. For this analysis, regional weights were added to account for the imbalance in survey response⁴. Results revealed that, overall, committee hearings were twice as likely to be hosted in large countries versus small countries. Larger countries also host field hearings almost twice as often as smaller countries. This makes sense given that one of the primary benefits of field hearings is reaching communities who may not otherwise travel to the capital. Alasdair Mackenzie, manager of outreach and engagement at the UK House of Commons, explained that there is a "convenience for people of having someone who can come to them, slot into their regular meeting schedule. They are not having to ... make massive travel arrangements and come all the way down to London." In large countries, traveling long distances may be more prohibitive for MPs and citizens, rendering field hearings more important and impactful.

In addition, committee hearings were three times as likely to be hosted by high income countries than by low-income countries. Interview data confirmed the significance of resources in the use of committee hearings. MP Billy Tunkara of Gambia reflected:

³ Freedom House Scores are a commonly used indicator for a country's democratic status. For more information on the scores and the methodology see: freedomhouse.org

⁴ Two methods of weighting were used: inverted weights and datapoint variance. Both are imperfect ways of accounting for imbalanced data. Nevertheless, they provide a partial correction.

“Resources [are] a big challenge as far as Parliament’s work is concerned, [...] now in Parliament there are restrictions, whereby our committee engagement are also restricted. They give you a particular number of meetings that you can sit as a committee. When you exhaust that three meetings in a month, it means you cannot sit again. So that is really a challenge, even though there are other things to be discussed as far as the law is concerned as well, we have to defer until the next one because you have reached the limit, because the rationale behind the particular policy, because of the resources involved to pay allowances of MPs.”

This statement shows that as a result of the lack of resources, committees can be restricted in their function. Several interviewees particularly noted resources for travel. Winnie Seoposenge, Leader of the Parliamentary Democracy Office in the Northwest Province of South Africa, explained that in such a large country, there are many costs for the committee to travel hundreds of kilometers to different districts for field hearings. Likewise, MP Lambert Dushiminama of Rwanda argued that many citizens cannot travel to testify in hearings because of costs. Staff capacity and skill are other important component or resources for engagement. Christoph Konrath, senior staff in the Parliament of Austria said

“so far, there’s no sort of department for exchange with the citizens...the problem that we have faced so far is that it is committees that say ‘we want to make an inquiry’, and so it is the people that are in the committee secretariat that have to organize the inquiry. And it is not the same team of people that would organize any inquiry so people can start from scratch and to not have this sort of continuous experience engaging with citizens or engaging with NGOs. And this is ... an ad hoc basis and not institutionalized ”

Lack of organizational memory and staff capacity impede committee engagement.

3. Good Practices and Innovations

This section showcases several good practices and innovations in the use of legislative committees for public engagement. It demonstrates how field hearings, virtual hearings, committees with unusual policy focus and jurisdictions, and institutionalized mechanisms for involving CSOs⁵ can increase the number of citizens parliaments reach, quality of information informing parliamentary work, and help tailor parliamentary work to issues that matter to the community.

3.1. CSO Involvement

Civil society organizations are regular contributors to committee hearings around the world. In many instances, they will be witnesses providing expert testimony, help committees recruit participants to attend events outside of parliament, and support committees in other ways. Cait Hayes, Head of Public Engagement in the Parliament of Ireland reflected “when they're (committees) discussing a topic, a certain topic, they would talk to the civil society groups or the NGOs in relation to that particular topic.” However, this contact is rarely streamlined and institutionalized. In the United States, for example, staff will reach out to CSOs on a case-by-case basis. Perhaps they need a witness for a hearing or some advice on marking up a bill. The personal networks of the staff normally determine who they reach out to, skewing the number of CSOs involved, and therefore the portion of the public represented and information provided. Similarly, in Germany there are no fixed provisions and no “rights to be heard”, not even for those CSO on the Bundestag’s “lobbying list”, as the Constitutional Court has decided.

An institutionalized collaboration with CSOs may help increase the number of perspectives as well as the quality of information provided. There are different ways to institutionalize CSO engagement

⁵ This paper uses CSOs and NGOs interchangeably following the definition that “A civil society organization (CSO) or non-governmental organization (NGO) is any non-profit, voluntary citizens’ group which is organized on a local, national or international level.” (United Nations Civil Society - <https://www.un.org/en/civil-society/page/about-us>)

with committees. In Latvia, an umbrella organization of NGOs holds an annual NGO forum in parliament, in which the inclusion of NGOs in parliamentary processes (including in committee work) is discussed and evaluated. Representation in the forum is determined by an elected board and decided based on areas of substantive experience and demographics. It gives the included groups a say not only on policy, but also in the way they are involved.

Similarly, the Green Chair initiative in Serbia allows for an NGO from the Green Chair Network (a group of environmental NGOs) to take part in every meeting of the environmental protection committee (including meetings outside of parliament). In the words of Vladimir Filipovic, Senior Advisor in the Parliament of Serbia,

“the goal of the Green Chair, which is the only mechanism of its kind, is to improve communication between citizens and citizens’ associations with the legislature, in order to influence the improvement of environmental laws. This unique mechanism enables continuous and coordinated participation of civil society representatives in the work of the Committee and is one of the most important mechanisms for involving citizens in the work of parliamentary committees...(it is) very useful mechanism for acquainting the Committee with the state of the environment on the ground, especially in parts of the Republic of Serbia that are environmentally most vulnerable.”

By institutionalizing CSO collaboration, the green chair initiative strengthens the amount and quality of information that the parliamentary committee receives. While sporadic engagement may skew the kinds of CSOs parliament hears, the green chair ensures that different members of the environmental network, including vulnerable communities, are represented. In addition, this continuous engagement bolsters CSO influence, and by extension, amplifies the citizen voices they represent.

3.2. Digital Hearings

In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, an increasing number of parliaments have moved hearings online. Eighty seven percent of parliamentary chambers responding to the GPR survey indicated that they broadcast committee or plenary sessions online. Likewise, the expert panel study on Parliaments in the Pandemic showed that digital hearings by committees have become a widespread instrument and the increasing uptake of digital hearings points to a new way in which committee hearings are organized, making them – in effect – a testing ground for parliamentary work (Siefken et al., 2021).

Virtual hearings also open the opportunity to participate to those who could not otherwise travel to the capital. Amy Brier, manager of public engagement in the parliament of New Zealand, explained that “I think our social media channels and live streaming of select committees is really how people engage with that work in a way that they never would.” Aziz el Mouhib, Director of Communication in the Parliament of Morocco explained that virtual streaming targeted a young population, saying

“And above all, it is very important for Morocco because ... the majority of the population is a young population and young people can be found in the social networks Facebook, Twitter. So we saw that after the dissemination of the work of the committees on social networks and live and offline, we saw an increase in subscriber members a big increase.”

Online hearings also stand to combat lack of public understanding of parliamentary work by amplifying exposure. Aziz el Mouhib, said of online broadcast that

“this is the first time in the history of the Moroccan Parliament (that) Committee meetings are now broadcast live, online live, on social networks (...) On the portal of the House of Representatives. And that has contributed to a great commitment to improve audience engagement (and) the opinions of parliamentary work, because people are now beginning to

understand the importance of parliamentary work, are starting to understand that it is not enough.”

Online broadcast of committee hearings has increased viewership but it does not need to end there: Some parliaments have used the potential of digital integration by fostering real exchange. For example, in Brazil, the public can send in questions and comments online for hearings. Over ten million people have submitted over 24 million opinions on the platform on nearly 10,000 propositions. These high numbers are a direct result of accessibility of digital exchange. Latvian MP Marija Golubeva made this point, too, explaining that normally the presence of members of the public and CSOs is restricted because of the physical size of committee rooms, but the move to online hearings during Covid19 has increased the number of possible participants.

From Indonesia to Latvia, Pakistan to Qatar, interviewees lamented the lack of public understanding and knowledge of parliamentary work. Imen Ben Mohammad, a former Tunisian MP representing the Italian diaspora, reflects on the “real lack of understanding between the role of parliamentarian and the role of municipalities for some members of the public.” She describes

“a lot of confusion between those two roles, and the parliamentarians end up being constantly over the phone dealing with problems such as lack of light on the road for instance, or similar examples, when this should be the role of mayor. (They) receive different requests which are not related to their functions per se.”

This is, in fact, not a particularity of transitioning systems and has also been noted for the cases of France and Germany, where federal MPs take up all kinds of issues in their district work, regardless of their formal role. This makes them, in effect, “multilevel representatives” of their political systems (Siefken &

Costa, 2018, p. 102). Making information easily accessible online to larger groups of citizens stands to increase public understanding.

Virtual hearings hold the potential to increase the number of people engaging with parliamentary committees, and the diversity of voices represented, opening up engagement to those who may not otherwise be able to take part. This can help increase public understanding of parliament.

3.3. Field Hearings

Over half of the parliaments surveyed in the Global Parliamentary Report held committee field hearings. This illustrates another important trend in committee hearing organization. This committee practice is far from new. In the United States, Congress has been holding field hearings since the Civil War and committees of the American colonial assemblies had traveled to gather information in the 18th century (Squire, 2012, p. 48). This tried-and-true committee practice yields a number of important benefits. First, they allow for a much larger group of citizens to take part. For example, the parliament of Serbia holds regular “mobile hearings” outside of parliament. As of December 2021, 19 committees have held over forty mobile hearings. In 2014, a hearing on agricultural subsidies was held in a remote region of Serbia that had been devastated by flooding. Several dozen local citizens spoke to the committee about the need for agricultural insurance, and as a result of the hearing, the committee voted against government budget cuts that would have heavily affected their communities. A member of the Serbian Agricultural Procedures Association explained the difference between these mobile hearings and earlier engagement, noting that

“the main problem was the lack of communication with the committee...in earlier years they were virtually impossible to reach...so how would a peasant be able to enter the Assembly? It’s a major relief for farmers when they were able to present their problems but also offer proposals and suggestions for their solution” (UNDP, 2017).

Field hearings allow for those who could not otherwise speak to MPs (because of the cost and other burdens associated with travel to the capital) to share their perspective.

If the people cannot come to parliament, parliament can come to the people. This additional perspective can improve the quality of legislation. In Georgia, where committees hold field hearings on occasion, Georgian Deputy Speaker Kacha Kuchava explained “I cannot know all of the problems. It is simply impossible.... So, engaging more people gives me more possibility to scrutinize the government better and initiate better laws.” In Algeria, committees hold regular field visits to different districts. Fawzia Benbadis, a member of the Council of Nations of Algeria remarked,

“the field visits make it possible to observe the shortcomings, the shortcomings from which the citizens suffer. For example, the gap between legislative provisions and texts in general and their application in the field. (For) example, the delay in the realization of certain projects compared to the government program. Yes, and in this case, the legislative instruments are provided for this purpose to establish a relay between the power...i.e. the decisions of the government...and their execution at the level of local communities.”

These reflections from two very different country contexts illustrate that field hearings provide MPs with additional information about how laws affect the community. This can help them perform better oversight of the executive branch, and the feedback on implementation may lead to honing legislation.

In the midst of rising distrust in parliaments around the world, field hearings also increase the relatability of members of parliament. The Chairwoman of the Subotica City Association for People with Autism Disabilities in Serbia, a group visited by the Serbian mobile committee initiative, reflected, “I believe it was very useful for them (MPs) as well... as they were able to see the real life and hear about essential problems. Only then [after the hearing] I realized that they [MPs] are people just like us. We just need to present them the problems we are coping with” (UNDP, 2017). Her words point to the empathy invoked by visiting locales and speaking to members of the community. She was able to relate to the

MPs, and she believes they were able to better understand her as a citizen. This account was corroborated by Georgian Deputy Speaker Kuchava. He explained that

“one of the best ways we can get trust and credibility from the people [is] not just to reply to them letter by letter or ask the ministers to come, but go there, see what the problem is, what is their real concern and then make the decisions.... Some of them even told us that ‘we never thought that you would come back here. We really appreciate that.’ And the tone of discussion right away [is] very constructive, especially we give the feelings to them [that] we want to make changes. If there is a real problem here, we are to help you out.”

Field hearings are an example of a good practice that allow for more citizens to take part in committee hearings, which in turn improves the quality of oversight and legislation and combats growing distrust in parliamentary democracy.

3.4. Special Committees

The topic of committee organization is central in legislative literature (Krehbiel, 1992; Mattson & Strøm, 1995; Olson, 1980). In most instances, committees are organized along major policy areas in that country. Common committees include committees on economic affairs, foreign policy, agriculture, environment and natural resources, and other core issues (Siefken & Rommetvedt, 2022a). But most parliaments can also create ad hoc committees to address an issue at a particular time. For example, some parliaments started special Covid-19 committees to handle responses to the pandemic (Siefken et al., 2021). These special committees hold a unique opportunity to engage with members of the public beyond “the usual suspects”.

In addition, some parliaments include or support permanent committees that extend beyond traditional policy areas and therefore increase the reach of committee engagement. For example, the UK House of Commons supports the youth select committee in the British Youth Council. The membership

includes members of the British Youth Parliament, a young mayor, youth councilors, and members from each of the devolved nations. This committee conducts inquiries and makes policy recommendations to Parliament. Past inquiries have addressed issues such as youth mental health, work, transport, and lowering the voting age. The committee increases the connection of parliament to young people and the issues they face. Mattson and Strøm write of European legislative committees, “expertise acquisition is also facilitated if the scope of the committee’s jurisdiction is narrow and well-defined” (Mattson & Strøm, 1995, p. 270). Committees that extend beyond traditional jurisdictions, and tailor their focus based on the needs of the community, can better align parliamentary information with community needs. In Finland the Eduskunta includes the committee on the future, which acts as a kind of think tank on the future of Finland, discussing future problems and developments (Raunio, 2022, p. 92). It has addressed issues such as foreign policy, technological development, and the potential of crowdsourcing in democracy. The committee’s unique jurisdiction allows it to tackle topics, and speak to people, who would not otherwise align with committee jurisdictions.

Special committees with unique and tailored jurisdiction extend beyond traditional committees in terms of policy expertise and engagement with citizens.

4. Conclusion

This paper explored parliamentary committee hearings, an under-researched but commonly used parliamentary tool for engagement. It asked what hearings are used for, how they are organized, and presented good practices in implementation of committee hearings. Drawing on data from the 2022 Global Parliamentary Report, the paper showed that hearings are used for both legislative and oversight purposes. They are more often employed for legislative purposes, supporting the particular challenge for many parliaments to conduct effective oversight . But public hearings always serve important communicative goals as well making them a potential

tool for parliamentary engagement. Parliaments with resources (both in terms of democratic institutions and financial resources) are generally better equipped to hold hearings.

Parliaments around the globe exhibit a lot of variation in how they organize hearings, and there seems to be a rather high level of experimentation and institutional learning across parliaments in different systems. To map this thoroughly is a requirement for future study and practice, in particular as committees arguably are a testing ground for broader parliamentary reform (Siefken et al., 2021). Studying hearings needs to take this variation into account and look at different motives of the involved actors and the many ways of organizing hearings.

There is not just variation between parliaments but also over time. Today, non-traditional organization of committee hearings is also common and holds many potential benefits. While traditionally hearings were held in the parliamentary building and include a handful of witnesses, many parliaments are now holding hearings that extend beyond this traditional format (both physical and digitally.) Over half of the respondents held field hearings outside of parliament (and this practice is even more common in large countries.) Interview findings showed how field hearings can bring more people into the conversation and provide information not otherwise available in traditional hearings. In addition, Covid-19 has accelerated the use of digital hearings, which similarly increase accessibility and change of the nature of the interaction. Unusual organization of committee jurisdiction or committee set up, through institutionalized CSO engagement or special committees focused on non-traditional policy topics, can also broaden and deepen the reach of hearings, quality of information, and the applicability of parliamentary work to community needs.

Given the prevalence of committee hearings and their importance for public engagement, our findings have important applications for the study of public engagement in the work of

parliaments. Furthermore, committees are central to legislative studies, and an understanding of committee hearings therefore contributes to the field as a whole. Future research should explore further the effect of country context on committee hearings. This paper uncovered initial trends, but further research is needed to parse this complex topic.

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