

MPS DRAGGING THEIR FEET -
WHEELS ARE TURNING BUT WE
ARE GOING BACKWARDS:
OUTA 2021 REPORT ON
PARLIAMENTARY OVERSIGHT IN
SOUTH AFRICA



ADVOCACY BRIEF 2: THEORY & PRACTICE

Purpose:

The purpose of this Advocacy Brief is to provide a succinct overview of the section Theory and Practice in the 2021 Report on Parliamentary Oversight in South Africa as presented by OUTA.

Background:

In the 2020 report, OUTA outlined the constitutional mandate for Parliament's oversight function, highlighting that "In most democracies, Parliament has a constitutional mandate to represent the People and to protect fundamental democratic values. Facilitating public involvement in political decision-making is a key function through which Parliament fulfills this mandate. In a global political context increasingly marked by shrinking civic space, Parliament's watchdog role is more critical than ever." Why is it important for people to have a voice in Parliament? For OUTA, it is important because this ensures that public resources are not abused with impunity.

THEORY & PRACTICE

There is a discrepancy between the role of parliament in theory, and how that is enacted in practice. In South Africa, Parliament has a constitutional obligation to involve the public in its work. In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, Parliament had to adjust its operations to accommodate its function as both oversight and policymaking authority in the public interest. Shifting from offline to online operations, the results are positive. More citizens have been attending the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee meetings than before Covid-19.

ONLINE VS OFFLINE

On 6 April 2020, Parliament went virtual and has since held all its Parliamentary meetings online. The IT section of Parliament has enabled the video recording of all committee meetings, with several committee meetings being streamed via YouTube in real time. As the Covid-19 pandemic's various waves washed over the country, MPs continued to carry out their work in the virtual space. While the live streaming of meetings has meant potentially increased numbers of people could watch their MPs in action, this excludes the many millions of South Africans who cannot afford the data needed to watch a 3-hour YouTube meeting. Inclusive theory and practice must match.

YOUTUBE VIEWS

The 2020 April to July YouTube views were compared with the same months in 2021. The following committees were measured: DPE (52% decrease), DMRE (52% increase), CoGTA (117% increase), DWS (204% increase) and DOT (89% decrease). The results are encouraging and show a much larger number of people attending Portfolio Committee meetings in the National Assembly than ever before.

ACCESSIBILITY & AFFORDABILITY

The downside of online participation is the concern of accessibility. A substantial number of citizens are excluded from such engagements due to limited data and broadband provision, notwithstanding lack in trustworthy information and communication infrastructure. This discrepancy reinforces the already-existing digital divide in South Africa between those who are fortunate to have access and data provision and those who do not have it.

THEORY & PRACTICE

PARTICIPATION VS COMMUNICATION

Watching parliamentary proceedings does not imply increased public participation. The public can only participate if MPs engage meaningfully with communities in their constituencies. Holding public hearings via virtual reality has limitations. Some committees have effectively held public hearings on virtual platforms, but there is no opportunity for further clarification and discussion that takes place informally when members of the public attend committee meetings in person. Such informal exchanges inform MPs, and gives civil society spaces to provide alternative views.

SUBJECT MATTER SPECIALISTS

MPs are encouraged to continue collaboration, and expand partnerships with civil society representatives, academics, industry professionals and other advisory bodies. It is not feasible for individual MPs to know of everything there is to know about their assigned Portfolio. Still, Parliamentary engagement is a two-way street, where the public can and should extend itself to contribute not only with opinions regarding their needs and requirements, but also with knowledge and experience.





KEY MESSAGES

Parliamentary committees should actively engage with civil society, subject matter experts, academics, and industry professionals – and open themselves to influence. This extends to the requirement to engage directly with the public. When this happens, MPs will be seen and known as people who can be trusted. Engagement is not a tick-box exercise, but rather a meaningful act of allowing Parliamentary discourse to be influenced by experiences and views of South African communities.

CHALLENGE

Multistakeholder collaboration across multiple sectors of society is imperative. By holding public hearings and carrying out inquiries and associated investigations, Parliament will be able to direct the Executive to update their plans and so ensure that government responds adequately to the challenges South Africa faces. In addition, it is essential that affordable broadband provision and adequate ICT infrastructure be prioritized. The digital divide precludes active participation whilst also keeping many South African citizens and residents uninformed

GENERAL EXPECTATIONS

There are expectations of parliament, which include:

- Representation of the public's interests
- Politicians and MPs must be active citizens themselves
- MPs must uphold the highest moral code and act with integrity
- MPs must oversee the executive



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