### Stages of the assessment process

**Preparation**

1. Initiating the self-assessment process, and establishing objectives and expected outcomes
2. Selecting the indicators for assessment
3. Organizing the process, identifying participants, and establishing roles and responsibilities
4. Collecting evidence

**Assessment exercise**

1. Organizing the assessment session
2. Discussion
3. Selecting an appropriate grade for each criterion
4. Recommended changes

**Follow up**

1. Establishing priorities for change
2. Creating an action plan to define tasks, responsibilities and timelines
3. Monitoring and evaluating progress

### Preparation

**Initiating the self-assessment process**

When?
Parliament should think carefully about when an assessment would be most valuable. Certain moments can be more opportune or advantageous than others. As mentioned earlier, these include:

- at the beginning of a reform process
- at the start of a new legislature\(^3\) (parliament would have ample time to take action and monitor results, there is likely to be greater sustainability and continuity of outcomes, and new members could be encouraged to learn and use opportunities for change)
- when preparing or reviewing the parliamentary strategic plan, or when planning to modernize parliamentary work or enhance parliament’s capacity and performance in certain segments of work
- when applying or preparing for an external technical support project, to identify needs and priorities in preparation for an assessment
- when parliament has previously used indicators for assessing its capacity and performance in an area of work and wants to monitor progress over time

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\(^3\) Other terms in use: “new legislative term”, “new convocation” or “new parliament”.
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- at any other time in the life of parliament, to help it to exercise any of its roles more effectively.

Who?
The self-assessment process can be initiated by any stakeholder in parliament, including parliamentary leadership, committees, individual parliamentarians or groups of members of parliament, or the parliamentary administration. Stakeholders outside parliament, such as CSOs, can also propose the initiation of the process.

Experience shows that assessments are usually most fruitful and successful when the initiative comes from, or is strongly supported by, the parliamentary leadership. This signals to other stakeholders (members, the parliamentary administration and the general public) that parliament is committed to the exercise, and to following up on its results.

A parliamentary committee may wish to carry out the exercise itself on the subject within its competencies. After assessing its capacity and performance, the committee may identify ways to improve its procedures or introduce new practices and activities. A successful assessment exercise at committee level can have a ripple effect across parliament as a whole.

A parliamentary (party) group can also initiate and organize an assessment exercise for its own members, using indicators of their particular interest.

Finally, the assessment can be used to assess the independence, capacity and performance of the parliamentary administration.

Establishing objectives and expected outcomes

The objectives and expected outcomes should be clearly set in advance. Parliament needs a clear idea of why it is undertaking an assessment and what it hopes to achieve by doing so.

The specific objectives will depend on who initiated it and why. It is good practice to link the assessment to an existing parliamentary body, such as a committee, depending on its scope of work. Thus, the exercise will have an institutional owner, and its outcomes can feed directly into the other activities of parliament.

All participants must share a common understanding of what the self-assessment is seeking to achieve. Communicating the objectives to the entire parliament raises awareness and promotes ownership of the process, and lays the ground for acceptance of changes that might follow the exercise.

Selecting indicators for assessment

The choice of indicators to be assessed should be based on the objectives of the assessment exercise. If parliament wishes to assess its strengths and weaknesses in one or more segments of its work that it deems to be the most relevant to its current needs, it can select an entire sub-target or corresponding indicators. Parliament can also opt to follow the modular approach for assessing one or more of its key roles.

The selection of the scope and number of indicators for assessment might also depend on the time available for assessment and on the organization of the exercise itself, and on whether one or more groups of participants will be engaged in the exercise.

Organizing the process, identifying participants, and establishing roles and responsibilities
Various organizational issues should be considered well in advance to ensure that the assessment exercise is conducted smoothly and effectively.

**Getting the timing right**

The overall time frame should take into account the time needed to prepare for the assessment, to collect the evidence, and to leave enough time for participants to read the indicators prior to the assessment. Follow-up activities, such as reporting on the outcomes, should also be considered. The assessment exercise itself may take several hours, depending on the scope of indicators that are the subject of the assessment and number of participants.

The dates for the assessment should also be carefully planned in advance. The exercise should be scheduled in line with the parliamentary agenda, and ideally at a time when parliamentarians might be less busy with other matters.

**Identifying participants**

Before starting the assessment of one or more indicators, parliament needs to decide who will be involved. Parliamentarians (and parliamentary staff) are typically the main participants. Inclusiveness is vital to the legitimacy and effectiveness of the exercise. Participants should represent the entire parliament in terms of political party membership, gender and age, with due consideration given to under-represented groups or other relevant features.

Experience has shown that parliamentary assessment is more likely to be useful and effective when it is run by a group chaired by the Speaker, a committee chair or other senior parliamentary authority. Possible options are to use an existing parliamentary structure, such as a committee in charge of the area of work covered by indicators to be assessed, or to establish an ad-hoc committee or a steering group to conduct the assessment.

Having senior parliamentary staff involved in the exercise can prove highly beneficial, since they often bring a different or additional perspective. Administrative autonomy, capacity and performance are also the subject of several indicators.

Parliament may opt to invite external stakeholders, such as the supreme audit institution, the ombudsperson, experts in certain areas, civil society actors, or the media, to participate in, or assist with, the assessment of indicators. One option is to send selected indicators to one or more civil society organizations and ask them to assess parliamentary capacity and performance in a given area, by grading criteria and providing other comments. Parliament will weigh up the advantages and disadvantages of involvement of stakeholders.

**Establishing roles and responsibilities**

For the success of any assessment exercise, it is important to clearly define in advance who will do what. The roles and responsibilities of parliamentary leadership, parliamentarians and staff in the respective stages of the process, including political decisions and organizational issues, should be carefully planned and identified well in advance.

**Collecting evidence**

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The validity and reliability of the data used in an assessment is very important. When carrying out an assessment, parliament (or another organization) should gather evidence (information and data about the subject of the indicators that are assessed). Written evidence is a fundamental component of an assessment.

Each indicator is composed of several dimensions that consider a specific segment within that indicator. Each dimension has several assessment criteria with statements based on which parliament will assess its level of compliance with each criterion. Under each criterion, there is a scale with descriptive grades for assessment and there is also a field for evidence. This is a very important stage in the assessment of the dimension, as it provides a basis for discussion at the assessment session and for the assessment itself. Evidence also serves as a justification of the grade selected.

It is strongly advised that the parliamentary administration (committee staff, research service, library or other units) collect data and information for each criterion. The indicators to be assessed, together with written evidence that has been collected for each dimension, should be shared with all participants of the assessment exercise ideally a week or two before the exercise. Making this information available to participants of the exercise in advance of the assessment and selection of a grade should contribute to higher time-efficiency, accuracy and overall effectiveness of the assessment.

Examples of possible evidence that can be collected are given for each dimension. The evidence can include any information and data that could prompt a constructive, evidence-based discussion. This information should be (easily) accessible and contained in legal and parliamentary records, and should generally be publicly available. Feedback received from parliaments that organized a test-assessment of indicators generally indicates that it was relatively easy for parliaments to collect evidences for assessment.

Parliamentary administration (a research or similar service) could be also tasked with producing a research paper on comparative practices and mechanisms in other parliaments (including examples of good practice) in the area covered by the indicators that will be assessed, or with compiling relevant data from other sources. These are just a few approaches that could be adopted. In any event, parliamentary administrations are encouraged to prepare sound information for evidence, based on their understanding of what parliamentarians need.

Organizing a separate "information session" before beginning the assessment exercise can also help to ensure a common understanding of the exercise’s objectives and the scope of indicators.

Assessment exercise

Organizing the assessment session

The arrangements for the sessions will depend on the parliament and its political context, the number and scope of indicators selected for assessment, and on the number and composition of participants. If a parliament plans to involve a large number of parliamentarians in the exercise, two or more groups can be established to assess different indicators. Each group could have a rapporteur to present its key findings and recommendations to all participants at the wrap-up session.

It is very important to ensure that all participants in the assessment exercise have a common understanding of the assessment tasks and how the exercise will be carried out.

Experience shows that it is useful to set “ground rules” at the beginning of the exercise. These rules could be called the “code”, “guidelines” or “standards” to make them sound less restrictive and punitive. They may cover a range of issues, such as the maximum time a participant is permitted to speak, or key messages such as “all
ideas are valid” and “let us remain open to new ways of doing things”. The exercise is likely to be more efficient and effective if the rules are accepted by all participants at the outset and are displayed in a place in which they can be seen at all times.

Bicameral parliaments can decide whether to organize the assessment together or separately, depending on the parliamentary context and the level of cooperation between the two houses.

**Discussion**

For an effective and fruitful discussion, it is crucial that all participants carefully read the indicators and dimensions that are the subject of the assessment, and be well-prepared for the session.

Each dimension has several parts that should help participants to objectively assess their strengths and weaknesses in a specific domain of parliamentary work, and to inspire them to recommend changes for improvements:

- an introductory part that describes the dimension and provides key information about its purpose and what are some general practices and trends in that area across parliaments,
- an inspiring goal, which portrays the ideal parliamentary capacity and performance in a given segment of parliamentary work,
- an assessment section which contains assessment criteria and a scale with grades and an evidence field for carrying out the assessment.

Information given within each dimension, as well as evidence collected in advance, should provide a sound basis for a constructive discussion, enriched with the personal experience and views of MPs and parliamentary staff.

Assessment is not a party-political exercise. It is fundamentally about the parliament as an institution, in which all parties and citizens hold a stake. Although nothing in parliament is free of political considerations, the IPU’s experience is that self-assessment works best when there is an open discussion and an exchange of views, opinions and ideas.

Facilitating the discussion is an important component of every assessment session. Smooth and efficient facilitation is vital to achieving the best outcomes. Facilitators also help to ensure that all participants share a common understanding of the exercise’s objectives, and are there to channel the discussion, especially in a politically sensitive parliamentary environment.

Facilitators can be national or foreign, and can be selected from within or outside the parliament. National facilitators and those from within parliament (parliamentarians or senior staff members) usually have a good insight into parliamentary processes, the political environment and the local context. External facilitators, on the other hand, might bring to the table other forms of expertise, or be able to explain issues and present examples of good practices from other parliaments. One option is to have two or more facilitators with different backgrounds. In any case, facilitators should be experienced in and trained for the role. The IPU or other partner organizations may be able to provide organizational and expert support if required.

**Selecting an appropriate grade for each criterion**

The indicators enable scoring based on objective criteria. Scoring based on an assessment and aggregation of the indicators provides a user-friendly way to measure current status and to focus attention.
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It is accepted that not everything a parliament does can be measured. It is also recognized that parliaments are complex institutions with competing interests, whereas many other public institutions may share a more clearly defined common objective against which performance can be measured.

Scoring should be understood as part of a process that helps parliaments to identify gaps in their work and to guide them towards good practices, based on evidence and dialogue from the assessment exercise.

The criteria are the central part of each dimension aimed at assessing the specific issue. Each criterion provides a short description (statement), and a scale which offers six descriptive grades: “Excellent”, “Very good”, “Good”, “Basic”, “Poor” and “Non-existent”. Participants need to assess to what extent their parliament complies with each criterion by selecting one of the six grades that corresponds best to their parliament. In the majority of cases, it is expected that the criteria will be simple and relatively easy to assess. Nevertheless, some criteria inevitably concern more than one element and participants will need to weigh these elements to decide which grade is the most accurate in their context.

Ideally, an open and constructive discussion on each criterion among participants in the assessment exercise should lead to a common agreement on which grade corresponds best to a given parliament. If it is not possible to reach agreement, other options, such as calculating an average grade or accepting a grade selected by the majority of participants (if a political balance is achieved) may be considered. A group, with the assistance of a facilitator, may need to find a solution that best fits a given political context, if different grades are given by members of majority and minority parliamentary groups.

In any case, scores should not be the sole focus of the exercise. Assessments based on the indicators include a qualitative analysis that helps parliaments to prioritize their reform efforts. The indicators are not intended to generate a comparative ranking of parliaments. Scores are valid primarily in the context of the parliament that is being assessed.

Descriptive grades offered for criteria are considered more meaningful to end users than numerical ones, and are more in line with the objectives of the assessment, which are learning and development.

However, if parliament wishes to have aggregating scores at the level of entire indicator or a sub-target, the following corresponding numerical values for descriptive grades can be used:

1. Grade “Excellent” corresponds to numerical grade 5;
2. Grade “Very good” corresponds to numerical grade 4;
3. Grade “Good” corresponds to numerical grade 3;
4. Grade “Basic” corresponds to numerical grade 2;
5. Grade “Poor” correspond to numerical grade 1, and
6. Grade “Non-existent” corresponds to numerical grade 0.

The score at the level of the dimension can be calculated by simply adding up the numerical grades of all criteria in a dimension and dividing it by number of criteria. Similarly, the aggregate score of an indicator is the sum of the scores of all dimensions divided by the number of dimensions, and the aggregate score of a target is calculated based on the average of the scores across all indicators in the target.

The indicator framework is intended to provide a tool that is relevant and applicable to all parliaments, regardless of their parliamentary context. Criteria are written in a way that seeks to encompass practices in all parliaments with different parliamentary systems: those with parliamentary, presidential or hybrid systems; unicameral or bicameral parliaments; and systems with federal or state parliaments. Therefore, where a parliament does not have a particular legal provision, or capacity or performance required by a criterion, it is not possible to assess the
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criterion as “non-applicable” It will instead be rated as “non-existent” In these cases, the grade “non-existent” means that a given parliament does not have a certain capacity or performance described in a criterion, which, according to a global comparative analysis of parliamentary practices and models in parliamentary development, a democratic parliament should have.

However, if participants in an assessment exercise consider that some criteria are genuinely not applicable in their parliament, and do not concern a non-existent practice that ideally should be present, such information should ideally be shared with the IPU or partner organizations, through the feedback form (available at the indicators’ website). This would contribute to improving the indicators and ensuring their universal relevance.

Though indicators should be relevant and applicable in all parliaments, regardless of their size, parliaments in smaller countries may need to make some adjustments in the assessment of part of a criterion. It is understandable that parliaments with a small number of parliamentarians cannot have, for example, separate committees for every single area, or entire units specialized for every segment of work, as large parliaments usually have. In such cases, small parliaments should adapt the criteria to their circumstances. They are also encouraged to contact us for assistance.

Recommendations for change

The discussion at the assessment session should result in the identification of gaps or areas for improvements in parliamentary capacity and performance, as well as ideas for further action. The main findings and conclusions should be summarized at the end of the assessment of each dimension and be noted in the box for recommendations for change. This wrap-up can focus on identified strengths and weaknesses, areas recognized as priorities for further improvement, possible actions to be undertaken and potential obstacles to be overcome. Recommendations for change may range from significant changes to constitutional or legal provisions to more modest proposals to change procedures, allocate resources or adjust existing practices.

Although the dimensions contain an area to summarize the recommendations for change, main findings and conclusions of the assessment exercise, the discussion will likely generate more ideas and suggestions, which should also be documented. It is therefore advisable to prepare a written summary of each assessment session, and to circulate this among the participants. Audio or video recordings could also be taken.

Follow-up

Deciding on priorities for change

The assessment exercise is not a goal in itself but rather a first step towards improvement. It is important to identify changes that parliament needs to introduce, as short-term or long-term goals, depending on the parliament’s current capacity. This may require some political decisions to be made based on the assessment outcomes and on the objectives of the assessment set at the preparatory stage. As indicated above, these changes may be large or small in scale, depending on the gaps identified and parliamentary priorities.

Deciding on how to introduce changes and who will be responsible can be a next step. Parliament may have sufficient internal capacity for making such decisions, but may also wish to ask for support from an external expert, such as a parliamentary strengthening organization, or to learn from the experience and good practice examples in other parliaments. Sources for further reading that are made available at the end of dimensions, whenever applicable, can be also consulted, which can contribute to gaining a better understanding of the issue and to obtaining insights into the global trends and experience and practices across parliaments.

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Parliament may wish to make publicly available the assessment process, the findings of the exercise and the action to be taken for improvement. If appropriately communicated, including in the media, a parliament’s initiative to assess its capacity and performance in certain areas of its work could have a positive impact on public perceptions of the institution.

Creating an action plan

It is advisable to create and adopt an action plan or similar planning document that will help to translate assessment outcomes and needed improvements into regular parliamentary procedures and practice. Such a document should define clear tasks, responsibilities and timelines. Making it publicly available could be beneficial as a confirmation of parliamentary commitment to develop and improve, while also maintaining parliamentary accountability for its implementation.

There may also be financial implications of any desired improvements and implementation of the action plan, which will need to be taken into account in the preparation of the action plan, including the possible sources of the necessary funding. Expected costs should be estimated in advance – if possible, at the parliamentary budget planning stage. If funds are not available from the current parliamentary budget, the parliament can request external financial support.

Monitoring and evaluating progress

Regular monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of an action plan or other outcome documents is an important part of the process. It allows for the identification of possible challenges or impediments to the introduction of changes, thus allowing them to be addressed in a timely manner. Monitoring and evaluation of progress should continue even after the changes are implemented to make sure that changes are sustained and implemented well. Assessment of the same indicator(s) based on which the improvements have been initiated may be repeated at a certain point to assess progress over time.

Regular reporting to the public on the implementation of an action plan and on the progress achieved should be also be part of the follow-up process.