Indicator 3.3 – Access to parliament

This indicator covers issues concerning physical access to parliamentary venues and events for the public and the media. It does not address the transparency of information about parliament (which is covered in other indicators (3.1 and 3.2) or public participation in the proceedings and processes of parliament (which is covered in indicators 6.1, 6.2 and 6.3). However, it does include accessibility issues for persons with disabilities or specific requirements other than physical issues, which may limit their access to the parliament building and parliamentary information.

If parliament is to be regarded as being ‘open’ to the public and the media, the issue of physical accessibility is important. In times such as these, where there are concerns about security and, more recently, public health issues such as pandemics, all parliaments need to carefully balance accessibility and openness with other legitimate concerns, such as security and public health and safety.

This indicator covers the openness to the public of parliamentary venues (the building, chamber(s) and committee meeting rooms), as well as of events organized inside or outside the parliament. It also concerns accessibility issues for members of the community with specific requirements, including persons with disabilities. The media has a special place in democratic societies insofar as it provides a focus on the reporting of the activities of the legislature, thus ensuring the transparency and accountability of the legislature. Parliament needs to guarantee free and unfettered access to the media.

The assessment of the access to parliament indicator comprises the following dimensions:

- 3.3.1 Openness of parliamentary venues and events to citizens
- 3.3.2 Accessibility standards
- 3.3.3 Media access to parliament
**Dimension 3.3.1 Openness of parliamentary venues and events to citizens**

Indicator: 3.3 Access to parliament  
Sub-target: 3 Transparent parliament  
Target: 16.6 Effective, accountable and transparent parliament

**About the dimension**

While the transparency and openness of parliamentary processes and information is of great significance, the physical accessibility of a parliament and parliamentary events to its citizenry is of both symbolic and practical importance in shaping how citizens view the ‘openness’ of parliament. The accessibility of the parliament building and its venues for parliamentary activities plays a vital role in attracting the public and media to the parliament, which is not the case for other means of transparency, such as the availability of information about the legislature.

There are a number of aspects concerning the openness of the parliament and its venues to the public. Firstly, there is the question of the general accessibility of the parliament building to the public. Access for visitors can be facilitated by the provision of services such as a visitor centre and/or visitor services staff to assist, encourage and inform visitors. Special events such as open days or other special occasions, organized inside or outside parliament, to which the public are invited, can be used to attract citizens to the parliament building and give them a sense of ownership of and connection with ‘their’ building.

Many parliaments also provide virtual access to parliamentary buildings and events, through virtual tours or other means and tools, which can attract more people and foster a better understanding of the parliament.

Particular arrangements need to be made for accessibility to sessions of the plenary, public meetings of committees and other public activities in which the parliament is involved. It is reasonable for parliaments, when developing arrangements for accessibility, to be conscious of the security or public health and safety concerns that arise when ensuring ready accessibility to the parliament and parliamentarians. There is often a delicate balance between accessibility and public safety to be made by parliaments. In achieving this balance, parliaments have to ensure that their citizens have a clear understanding that parliament is an open institution with restrictions imposed only as needed to guarantee security and public safety. Parliaments may also require citizens to make a request to attend the parliament, and parliaments should make clearly available the instructions and contacts for the submission of such requests.

On the basis of a global comparative analysis of parliamentary practices and models in parliamentary development, an aspiring goal for parliaments in the domain of openness of parliamentary venues and events to citizens would encompass the following:

The laws and rules of procedure of the legislature provide for and encourage the country’s citizens to have open access to the parliament building, parliamentary venues and events where the parliament’s proceedings and processes are undertaken. Particular emphasis is placed on the rules allowing free access to the parliamentary chamber(s) for sessions of the plenary, to the public hearings of committees and other public activities of the legislature.

Restrictions on accessibility to the parliamentary building and its meeting and other venues, which are imposed by laws or the rules of procedure of the legislature, are limited to reasonable issues of security and public health and safety. The parliament ensures a careful balance, in its rules, between openness and accessibility, and only imposes reasonable restrictions.
The practices of the legislature support access for citizens to the parliament building and the parliamentary venues. Access to the parliament building is encouraged by approaches such as the operation of a visitor centre and a visitor service, and the organization of open days and special event days.

Arrangements for access to meeting venues for sessions of the plenary and public meetings of committees ensure ready accessibility for the public.

**Assessment**

The dimension is evaluated on the basis of several criteria that should be assessed separately. For each criterion, select one of the six descriptive grades (Non-existent, Poor, Basic, Good, Very good and Excellent) that corresponds best to your parliament, and provide details of the evidence on which the assessment is based.

The evidence for assessment of this dimension might include:

- Provisions of legislation and rules of procedures of the parliament which relate to arrangements for the public to have access to the parliament building and its public meeting venues
- Statistics about visitor numbers to the building, the chamber(s) and public meetings of committees
- Statistics about visitor numbers for open days and other special events
- Reports of visitor service units in the legislature
- Existence of virtual representations and tours of the parliament buildings

If relevant, additional comments or examples that support the assessment (such as references to external national, regional or international surveys and reports) can be provided.

**Assessment criterion No. 1: Legal framework for the openness of the parliament building and its venues**

The laws and rules of procedure of the legislature provide for and encourage open access for the country’s citizens to the parliament building and the parliamentary venues where the parliament’s proceedings and processes, such as the sessions of the plenary and public meetings of committees and other public parliamentary activities, are undertaken.

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Evidence for this assessment criterion:

**Assessment criterion No. 2 Restrictions on accessibility**

Restrictions on access to the parliamentary building and its meeting and other venues that are imposed by laws or the rules of procedure of the legislature are limited only to stipulated reasonable issues of security and public health and safety. Citizens are clearly informed of these restrictions.

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Evidence for this assessment criterion:
Assessment criterion No. 3: Practices of the legislature regarding physical accessibility

The practices of the legislature support access for citizens to the parliament building and the parliamentary venues. Access to the parliament building is encouraged by approaches such as the operation of a visitor centre and a visitor service, the organization of open days and special event days, and the provision of virtual representations and tours of the parliament buildings.

Evidence for this assessment criterion:

Assessment criterion No. 4: Information on access to parliament

Arrangements for access to meeting venues for sessions of the plenary and public meetings of committees ensure ready accessibility for the public. There is proactive communication with the public about access to parliament, and contacts and instructions for the public to access the building, its venues and events are readily available.

Evidence for this assessment criterion:

Recommendations for change

Sources and further reading
Dimension 3.3.2 Accessibility standards

Indicator: 3.3 Access to parliament
Sub-target: 3 Transparent parliament
Target: 16.6 Effective, accountable and transparent parliament

About the dimension

It is vital that parliament provides equal access to all members of the community. Parliament needs to be accessible to persons with disabilities, from disadvantaged groups or with other special needs that create barriers to access for the general public. Parliament needs to consider accessibility to the parliament building, parliamentary processes and proceedings and parliamentary information. Parliament has to make a special effort to ensure that persons with particular needs have the same level of access as that of the general community. This requires setting standards for accessibility and applying them across the board.

The physical structure of a building can create barriers for persons with disabilities (for example, not having wheelchair access, or access for persons with a visual impairment). These barriers may include difficulties in accessing the parliamentary chamber(s) and committee meeting rooms. Particular challenges exist for parliaments with older or heritage buildings, as they may need to be retrofitted to meet accessibility standards.

In addition to physical access to the building, persons with disabilities may experience other impediments to access. There may be impediments to access to parliamentary information in the form in which it is made available to the majority of the community. Therefore, when providing access to its information, parliament needs to ensure that the information is readily accessible to persons with disabilities such as vision or hearing impairment. If the parliament has a visitor centre, or holds open days or other special events, these also should be equally accessible to people with disabilities.

On the basis of a global comparative analysis of parliamentary practices and models in parliamentary development, an aspiring goal for parliaments in the domain of accessibility standards would encompass the following:

- There is evidence of the existence of a legislative framework with provisions that require parliament to ensure equal access to the parliament building, its processes and proceedings and to its information for all citizens regardless of disability or other special needs.

- In practice, the application of the legislative framework ensures that all citizens have equal access to the legislature and its processes, procedures and information, regardless of disability or special needs.

Assessment

The dimension is evaluated on the basis of several criteria that should be assessed separately. For each criterion, select one of the six descriptive grades (Non-existent, Poor, Basic, Good, Very good and Excellent) that corresponds best to your parliament, and provide details of the evidence on which the assessment is based.

The evidence for assessment of this dimension might include:
- Specific provisions of legislation and the rules of procedures of the parliament relating to disabled access to the parliament building, its proceedings, processes and information
- Statistics about disabled access to the parliamentary building and venues and information

If relevant, additional comments or examples that support the assessment (such as references to external national, regional or international surveys and reports) can be provided.
Assessment criterion No. 1: Legal framework for accessibility standards

There is evidence of the existence of a legislative framework with provisions that require parliament to ensure equal physical and online access to the parliament building, its processes and proceedings and its information for all citizens regardless of disability or other special needs. The legislative framework is supported by the rules of procedure of the legislature.

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Evidence for this assessment criterion:

Assessment criterion No. 2: Practices of the legislature regarding access to the building

In practice, the legislature applies its accessibility standards to ensure equal physical access to the building and the parliament’s processes and procedures for all citizens, regardless of disability or special needs.

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Evidence for this assessment criterion:

Assessment criterion No. 3: Practices of the legislature regarding access to information

In practice, the legislature applies its accessibility standards to ensure equal physical and online access to its information for all citizens, regardless of disability or special needs.

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Evidence for this assessment criterion:

Recommendations for change

Sources and further reading

• National Democratic Institute (NDI), *Towards the Development of International Standards for Democratic Legislatures* (NDI, 2007)
**Dimension 3.3.3 Media access to parliament**

Indicator: 3.3 Access to parliament  
Sub-target: 3 Transparent parliament  
Target: 16.6 Effective, accountable and transparent parliament

**About the dimension**

There is a complex relationship between the media and parliament and its MPs. On the one hand, MPs recognize the valuable role played by the media in informing citizens about the work of the parliament and, consequently, they wish to cultivate their relationships with the media. On the other hand, MPs often consider that the media focuses largely on the negative aspects of parliament (conflict between personalities and parties and the self-interest of MPs), which results in MPs seeking to avoid the media. There should be an understanding that MPs are public figures and, as such, are subject to greater scrutiny (and criticism) than others. Furthermore, the media can see parliament as unnecessarily restricting its access and freedom to fully report on the events of the legislature.

Nevertheless, despite the mutual distrust that can characterize this relationship, both the media and parliament can gain a great deal by working together cooperatively. The media plays an essential role in democratic societies by bringing the parliament and its work to the attention of the public, and in ensuring the accountability of the executive and parliament. To be able to carry out its work effectively, the media needs to have ready access to the parliament and the freedom to be able to report on events without fear of recrimination. For parliament, this means that a number of measures need to be taken to ensure free and open access and reporting for the media.

Parliament, through its legislative capacity, needs to provide the right regulatory framework in which the media can work, that is, to ensure there is diversity of media ownership and viewpoints, and there are no undue restrictions on the freedom of expression for the media (for example, unduly strong defamation laws or laws for contempt of parliament).

The rules of the legislature should provide the media with ready access to the parliament building and to the venues in which the public proceedings of the legislature are conducted. Such access should permit the media to freely report on the activities of the legislature. In this regard, it is noted that the work of parliamentary committees often portrays a more balanced and less adversarial perspective on the work of parliament. For these reasons, media access to and reporting on the work of committees should be encouraged. Many legislatures issue credentials to the media with access to the parliament. Credentialing should only be for the purpose of knowing who has access, or for exercising some overall control over the number of media outlets with access. It should not be used to limit the diversity of the media that is able to report on parliament nor to exercise political control over the media that has access to the parliament. The media also needs to have reasonable space (to work and conduct interviews) and infrastructure support (for example, Wi-Fi) to carry out its work.

The connection of parliament with the media can be facilitated by parliament having a media relations unit or staff to liaise with the media about the work of parliament and inform it of parliamentary activities, particularly the work of committees, which may be less visible. Such units and staff should work in a non-partisan way to support the legislature.

On the basis of a global comparative analysis of parliamentary practices and models in parliamentary development, an aspiring goal for parliaments in the domain of media access to parliament would encompass the following:
There is a legal framework (constitution, legislation) for the regulation of the media in the country. The regulatory framework ensures wide ownership and multiple sources of news and reporting, and freedom of expression, including protection for media sources and strict limits on the use of defamation laws and contempt of parliament provisions to curb free expression.

The rules of procedure of the legislature guarantee openness and accessibility of the parliament building and the venues where the parliament conducts its public proceedings.

Rules of the legislature for the credentialing of the media to have access to and report on the legislature do not limit the diversity of the media covering parliament, and are not exercised for political control.

Restrictions imposed by the rules of the legislature on media access to parliament are only to prevent serious interference with or disruption of parliamentary proceedings or the work of MPs. There are no unwarranted obstacles preventing the media from observing the plenary in session or the public meetings of committees.

The practice of the legislature is for diverse media to have ready access to the parliament building and its public meeting venues, and to be able to report on parliament freely. The parliament also should ensure that the media is given space and infrastructure support to enable it to do its work.

Assessment

The dimension is evaluated on the basis of several criteria that should be assessed separately. For each criterion, select one of the six descriptive grades (Non-existent, Poor, Basic, Good, Very good and Excellent) that corresponds best to your parliament, and provide details of the evidence on which the assessment is based.

The evidence for assessment of this dimension might include:

- Specific provisions of legislation and rules of procedures of the parliament relating to the legislature’s relationship with the media
- Statistics on accreditation and access of media representatives

If relevant, additional comments or examples that support the assessment (such as references to external national, regional or international surveys and reports) can be provided.

**Assessment criterion No. 1: Regulatory framework for the media**

There is a legal framework (constitution, legislation) for the regulation of the media in the country. The regulatory framework ensures wide ownership and multiple sources of news and reporting, and freedom of expression, including protection for media sources and strict limits on the use of defamation laws and contempt of parliament provisions to curb free expression.

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Evidence for this assessment criterion:

**Assessment criterion No. 2: Framework of the legislature**
The rules of procedure of the legislature guarantee the openness and accessibility for the media of the parliament building and the venues where the parliament conducts its public proceedings, including sessions of the plenary and public meetings of committees.

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Assessment criterion No. 3: Credentialing of the media

Rules of the legislature for the credentialing of media to have access to and report on the legislature do not limit the diversity of the media covering parliament, and are not exercised for political control.

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Assessment criterion No. 4: Restrictions on access

Restrictions imposed by the rules of the legislature on media access to parliament are only to prevent serious interference with or disruption of parliamentary proceedings or the work of MPs. There are no unwarranted obstacles preventing the media from observing the plenary in session or the public meetings of committees.

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Assessment criterion No. 5: Practice of the legislature

The practice of the legislature is for diverse media to have ready access to the parliament building and its public meeting venues and to be able to report on parliament freely and equally, and for no particular media outlet to be favoured. The media also is given work space and infrastructure support by the parliament to enable it to carry out its work.

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Recommendations for change

Sources and further reading