
Developing a research service for the Hluttaw/Parliament of Myanmar

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Abstract:

Myanmar's Parliament is 4 years old in its current incarnation. After many years of military rule, the political and parliamentary leadership have set ambitious targets for reform, particularly in the area of reviewing all the major legislation by the election in late 2015.

This young Parliament wants to understand the legislative proposals put before it, and conduct more thorough debates. The establishment of a Research Service and the strengthening of the Library Service were identified as the first area where international assistance was requested during the IPU assessment mission in 2012.

The desire of Myanmar's Parliament to move from a traditional library service with rooms full of books to a legislative research service that is focused on supporting the work of MPs in the Plenary and in Committees is shared by a number of other Parliaments. It is not an easy transition, especially in a developing country with little experience in policy analysis and a scarcity of graduates with advanced degrees in law, economics and political science.

The Myanmar Parliament and the UNDP/IPU Parliamentary Support Programme were delighted when the UK House of Commons offered substantial assistance through the assignment of an experienced Research Manager to work with the Myanmar researchers providing training, mentoring and on-the-job coaching. This long term assignment of 18 months is a sizable investment which has made a major contribution towards the establishment of research services in the Myanmar Parliament. Other Parliaments have also assisted with sending senior parliamentary researchers for short term missions.

This paper will describe our journey as we developed Research Services in the Parliament of Myanmar, sharing our successes and our challenges. While we can all learn from the experience of other parliamentary research services, each Parliament has to decide for themselves what is relevant and useful from the experience of others. There is much that we can only learn by delivering research services in our particular parliamentary context and constant review of what works well and what

could work better. The important goal of improving the legislative and parliamentary programme through greater understanding of the legislative and budgetary proposals and implications provides great impetus, particularly for countries in transitional periods.

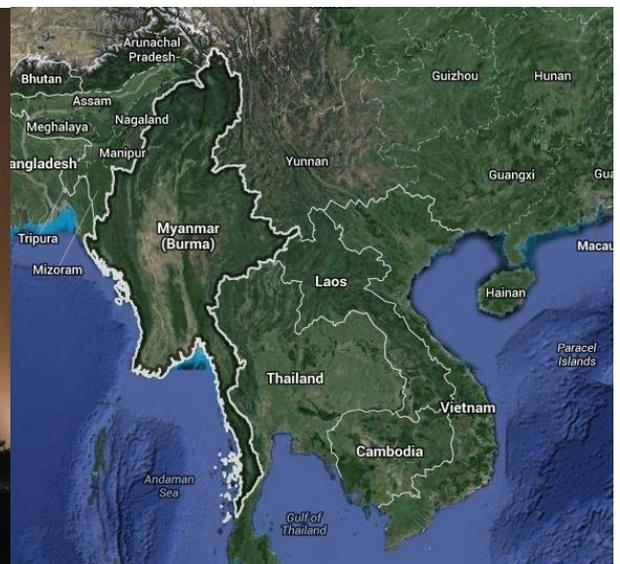
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MYANMAR

Myanmar has recently opened up again to the international community for development assistance, business purposes and tourism. Myanmar is the largest country in mainland South East Asia and is a little smaller than Zambia and a little larger than Somalia. Our population of 51.3 million makes us about 10% bigger than South Africa. We are closest culturally to Thailand, on the crossroads between China and India, with borders with Bangladesh, Laos and Thailand.



Shwedagon, Yangon, Myanmar.



Map Credit: Google maps

HLUTTAW OR PARLIAMENT

Our Parliament is one of the youngest in the world, as it is only 4 years old, with a long period of military government prior to that. There were a number of steps which led to the election in November 2010, which was followed by a by-election in April 2012 to replace the MPs who had been appointed as Ministers. The by-election allowed a more democratic representation and we have high hopes for an election which is free and fair on 8th November 2015 and continues the trend towards more democratic representation. Already there is much discussion about what the upcoming election will mean for our very young democracy.

The Myanmar Parliament is a bi-cameral Parliament. The Pyithu Hluttaw means the House of Representatives and has 440 MPs elected from geographic constituencies with 25% of them appointed from the Military by the Commander-in-Chief. The Amyotha Hluttaw means the House of Nationalities and has 224 MPs from Regions and States with 25% of them appointed from the Military by the Commander in Chief.

The Pyidaungsu Hluttaw is an innovation of the Myanmar Parliament and comprises the MPs from both the Houses meeting together. While a number of the world's bicameral

Parliaments have allowance in their procedural rules for the two Houses to sit together, it is usually a rare occurrence, whereas in Myanmar the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw sits most weeks. The joint House or Union Assembly discusses particularly important matters such as the Budget and State Plans. It also meets as a joint House to consider legislation when the two Houses have different views on a bill.



Picture credit: Hluttaw Photo collection



The Speaker's procession signals the day's sitting has begun.

Although our Parliament has only been in existence for a short period, the parliamentary leadership have an ambitious programme to review Myanmar's legislation and improve the legislative processes. One of the contributors to improving the legislative process is developing a Research Service so that MPs can be better informed about the legislative and budgetary proposals they are discussing and making decisions about. The Hluttaw is also developing processes and procedures for public consultation on bills, and increasing the capacity of Parliament to hold government to account.

As part of Myanmar's progress towards democracy the Myanmar Parliament rejoined the Inter-Parliamentary Union in 2012, which is an organization which supports parliaments working together, similar to IFLA. Shortly afterwards, an IPU Assessment mission team travelled to Myanmar to work with the parliamentary leadership to design a support programme that would meet the needs and priorities of the Parliament. The initial request for assistance to IPU was focused upon developing library, research and information services and began in mid 2012.

During 2013, the full scope of the parliamentary support programme was developed in conjunction with the United Nations Development Programme which broadened the scope of the work undertaken and increased the size of the project team. An important component to the success of the Myanmar Parliamentary Support Programme has been the very active involvement of the Speakers and Directors-General who shape and steer the programme to ensure that it delivers activities the Parliament needs to support its work and strategic development. We have been privileged and honoured to have many international experts from other parliaments travel to Myanmar to work with us, some for long periods and many for short periods. Although we have had lots of assistance so far, we still need more help to reach our ambitious goals quickly.

There are three key priority areas for development:

- Learning Centre where the staff and MPs can be trained in the skills required to undertake parliamentary work.
- Digital Parliament using computers to do the work of the Parliament more effectively and efficiently

- Research Services to support improved debate and decision making



Launch of the Learning Centre, February 2015.

EARLY DEVELOPMENT OF LIBRARY, RESEARCH AND INFORMATION SERVICES

International experts first came to Myanmar on an IPU Mission in 2012 to carry out assessments of what assistance was needed. By early 2013 the Hluttaw had moved the Library to a central position in the parliamentary complex, and begun to increase the staff numbers from the 7 staff in May 2012, particularly by appointing senior staff. In February 2013 the first mission team arrived to begin the capacity development programme with developing a Strategic Plan for LRIS.



This space which looks so empty in May 2012 is now the home of the Library. Photocredit: IPU Mission report, May 2012



The small group of Library staff with the assessment experts. Photocredit: IPU Mission report, May 2012



Training for capacity development underway by Mr Edward Wood, UK, in February 2013

From the beginning of 2013 IPU began a programme of assistance with international expertise in parliamentary library and research services. Mrs Moira Fraser¹ from New Zealand and Mr Edward Wood from the House of Commons Library and Research Service began working in Myanmar in February 2013 and created a Development Plan² for Library, Research and Information Services. An important component was interviewing 40 MPs to discuss their information needs with them. The information needs of MPs are more similar than you might expect across the world, because they always want data to help them to understand how their country, region and constituency is doing and what could be done to improve it.

¹ Former Parliamentary Librarian and Group Manager, Information and Knowledge in the Parliament of New Zealand from 2000-2011.

² Myanmar Hluttaw Development Plan for LRIS, adopted April 2013.



February 2013 mission team interviewing Amyotha Hluttaw MPs to complete an analysis of information needs of the Myanmar Hluttaw.

The Development Plan from 2013 included actions to strengthen the Library, and defined actions to create a Research Service and an online information services., neither of which existed in any form previously. It also included work on policy and guidelines, and strengthened the focus of collection building on the resources needed to support parliament's information needs. It laid out a plan for a staffing structure and the capacity development needed to support the development of the new Research Service and online information services.



Library and Research Services staff in September 2013 with international experts from NZ and the UK.

Increasing the staff of Library and Research Services was given priority in 2013 and you can see from the photo above there was substantial growth in staff numbers, particularly for Research Services. It was very satisfying to see how the staff numbers increased as the Research Service was established.

Towards the end of 2013 the UK House of Commons agreed a programme of bilateral assistance with the Myanmar Parliament, with some funding support from the UK

Department for International Development. The agreement was to provide an experienced parliamentary researcher, Mr Oliver Bennett, to work in the Myanmar Parliament coaching and developing the research teams. Initially the secondment was agreed from January – June 2014, and the first activity was the development of a Research Services Development Plan. In addition to the UK House of Commons Researcher, Ms Susan Swift, Director of the Parliamentary Library and Research Service in the Parliament of Ontario, Canada came to Myanmar to assist with developing the Development Plan for Research Services.³

CREATING A RESEARCH SERVICE IN 2014

It is easy to underestimate how much more challenging it is to create a research service in a developing democracy. In a country such as Myanmar with a long history of a military regime, establishing democracy requires the development of analysis, the ability to write appropriately about politically sensitive topics and education in topics such as political science which has not been taught in Myanmar for many years. We are trying to learn in a very short time, things that you have learnt and developed over many years. We have been privileged to have many international experts working with us, and helping us to progress quickly.⁴

After an intensive period of capacity building including many workshops, the Research Services was launched in May 2014. The input of the full time House of Commons researcher who provided nearly all the training and coaching was a significant contributor to establishing research services so quickly and at a good standard. Feedback from MPs has been good, and the evaluation is that these new research services (production of Research Briefings and answers to individual research requests) have had a direct positive impact on the behaviour and effectiveness of some MPs.

While it was possible to deliver the actions identified at the start of the project, more time was required than first anticipated to support the necessary skills improvements in the researchers. More work was needed in 2015 to continue the development of research services in the Hluttaw. Fortunately for us, the UK House of Commons assistance has been extended twice until October 2015 and the UK Department of International Development have provided more funding in 2015 to support the project.



³ Research Services Development Plan, February 2014.

⁴ The material in this section is drawn in large part from: *House of Commons' Hluttaw Strengthening Project: January – December 2014 Evaluation* written by Oliver Bennett, January 2015.

Key elements of the project to develop Research Services included a focus on a mix of workshops to share new knowledge and increase skills of researchers and on-the-job training to support the delivery of research services to MPs. 54 workshops were delivered during the 2014 year. The on-the-job training at both individual and group level has been particularly important in ensuring that the new skills are at an appropriate level for the staff and grounded in the practical realities of Myanmar’s situation. A key approach for the project is to pilot new services so that the researchers are learning in a real life situation about delivering services to MPs⁵. Mr Oliver Bennett works in partnership with a skilled project officer/interpreter, Ms Thiri Win Htike to ensure that participants fully understand both during workshops and in individual coaching.



The capacity training for staff was supported by management tools such as a Research Service Development Action Plan. By the end of 2014 more emphasis was given to coaching support for the research managers to increase the long term sustainability of the Hluttaw’s Research Service.



.Development of the Research Service Action Plan

Coaching session with research team

Intensive capacity development included report writing and using computers as well as research methodologies..

By the end of 2014, these milestones had been achieved:

- two of the three Houses had Research Services
- 18 Research Briefings were available to MPs on important subjects such as constitution reform, proportional representation and human trafficking demonstrating that researchers have learnt to write about politically sensitive topics
- Approximately 4500 copies of research briefings were taken by MPs, with nearly all MPs taking copies of some particularly popular briefings
- An individual research request service was available to MPs, although it is a lower priority for us than writing research briefings.
- 114 enquiries had been answered from MPs, Committees and senior staff on topics such as international development loans to the Government, domestic violence laws, economic development, dam construction and land law reform.

⁵ As Myanmar’s Parliament is so new, there is a reasonable level of tolerance from the MPs for staff who are learning new skills.



Researchers from the Research Service working with MPs and senior staff.

CONSOLIDATING THE RESEARCH SERVICE IN 2015

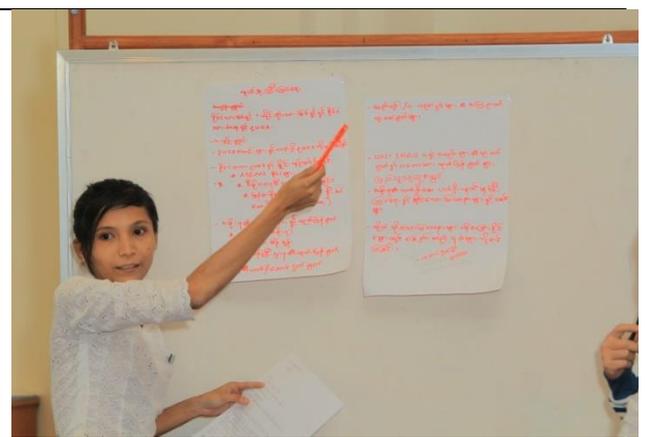
The Research Service has continued to grow and strengthen this year. The focus has been on working with the research managers to strengthen the capacity of the Hluttaw to continue to develop the Research Service by themselves.⁶

These key milestones have been achieved in the first six months of 2015:

- The original Research Development Action Plan which was written by international experts has evolved into Hluttaw Research Service Annual Work Plans developed by the Hluttaw Research Managers and their teams
- MPs give us positive feedback about the service’s usefulness to them for their discussions and decisions on legislative and budgetary proposals
- Staffing levels across the Research Services were increased from 29 to 41 to deliver increasing research service standards which is an acknowledgement of the usefulness of the Research Services to MPs
- Research Managers have developed service standards, and training plans and are coaching the research teams
- There are also good processes to ensure quality control and effective work flows in place
- All three Houses now have an operational Research Service.



Pride in their work is evident in this display on Research Services at the launch of the Learning Centre in February 2015



Researchers share knowledge with each other which contributes to a more sustainable approach to ongoing development of the research service.

⁶ The material in this section is drawn from the 6 month progress report by Mr Oliver.Bennett. Source: House of Commons’ Hluttaw Strengthening Project: Six Month Progress Report.

The statistics for the uptake of the Research products show a satisfying use of the service by Myanmar’s MPs.

Research Product	Dec-13	Dec 2014 (12 months)	June 2015 (6 months)
Research Briefings			
Number produced	0	17	25
Uptake by MPs	0	4500	4460
Research enquiries			
Enquiries answered	0	114	120

LOOKING AHEAD

The UK House of Commons and the UK Department of International Development are continuing their substantive support of the development of the Research Services with supporting a study visit to the House of Commons where 6 senior Research staff and 4 Committee staff will learn first hand about how the House of Commons delivers research services. There will be workshops and a chance to shadow research managers to continue the mix of new knowledge learnt in workshops consolidated with practical experience. We expect this study visit to give the research managers useful material to develop the Research Services as well as inspiration and motivation.



Early in 2016 the newly elected MPs will come to Nay Pyi Taw for their first sitting. We have just conducted a survey of MPs views to identify how we can improve the research service in time for the new MPs. While the survey results are still being analyzed, it seems that the response is very positive, but that we may need to do more to improve the customer service skills of staff receiving enquiries.

Our preparations for the new Hluttaw so far include planning to provide information and induction training about the Research services. We are also working on a major briefing containing short research briefings on a variety of topics that new MPs may need to familiarize themselves with. This *Key Issues for the New Hluttaw* book is modelled on similar books produced by the House of Commons Library and the New Zealand Parliamentary Library.

CONCLUSION

The creation of a Research Service for the Myanmar Parliament to support the Myanmar MPs in their discussions and decisions on legislative and budgetary proposals is a source of considerable pride for the Myanmar Parliament and the international development partners who assisted in the project. The Inter-Parliamentary Union and later the United Nations Development Programme were significant partners in 2013. Since the beginning of 2014 a programme of bilateral assistance from the UK House of Commons with funding assistance from the UK Department of International Development has been the significant contributor of international assistance with ongoing programme support from the UND/IPU Parliamentary Support Programme who have brought other international parliamentary research specialists to Myanmar. The largest share of the work and the credit goes to the Myanmar Parliament’s research managers and staff who have worked so hard to develop research services in their Parliament.

Acknowledgments

On behalf of both the Myanmar Parliament and the UNDP/IPU Parliamentary Support Programme we want to acknowledge all the parliamentary library, research and Information services experts who have travelled to Myanmar to help us. We have had assistance from all around the world. Here are the countries and parliaments who have supported their expert staff to come and work with us on the development of Research Services for one, two and occasionally three visits of 1 or 2 weeks. The biggest thank you goes to Mr Oliver Bennett and the UK House of Commons who so generously seconded him to work in Myanmar with us.

- Feb 2013: Moira Fraser (NZ) and Edward Wood (UK House of Commons Library)
- May 2013: Moira Fraser (NZ) and Peter Quin (NZ Parliament)
- September 2013: Edward Wood and Liam Laurence Smyth (UK House of Commons) and Peter Quin (NZ Parliament)
- January 2014: Oliver Bennett (UK House of Commons Library) and Susan Swift (Ontario Legislative Assembly)
- March 2014: Peter Quin (NZ Parliament)
- November 2014: Richard Cracknell, Statistical Researcher from the UK House of Commons Library Service)

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