



SUCCESS STORY

Kenyans Watch as Parliament Asserts Power



OTI/Kenya

With audio-visual equipment supplied by USAID/OTI, Kenya's Parliamentary Broadcasting Unit is transmitting legislative proceedings throughout the country.

“You are too late... This is one project that will show the people how you represent them in Parliament.”

—A Kenyan's confident statement to his cowed Member of Parliament who had tried to close a regional viewing center

September 2009 – People across Kenya were closely watching a broadcast from the floor of the Kenyan legislature September 17 as the Parliament rejected the President's nominations for the directors of the Anti-Corruption Commission by a vote of 86 to 45.

The vote was important because it sent a message that the Parliament intended to exercise its authority, and the broadcast was historic because it gave average Kenyans an opportunity to see—in real time—what was happening in Nairobi.

Following the 2007 general election, Kenya's Parliament enacted the National Accord and Reconciliation Act, which established a coalition government. The Act also laid out a reform process aimed at streamlining and strengthening government institutions. USAID/Kenya collaborated with the Parliament to help it identify its institutional development priorities, while also supporting its efforts to develop and implement reforms to strengthen its legislative and oversight functions.

USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) then stepped up and, working through the State University of New York, brought in broadcasting equipment to establish a media center at the Parliament complex in Nairobi. The newly equipped television and radio studio has enabled the Parliamentary Broadcasting Unit to produce TV and radio programs from the Parliament's floor and air the proceedings live throughout the county. The unit will also broadcast legislative committee meetings.

In conjunction with the media project, eight viewing centers were set up in the northern Rift Valley. The centers are providing citizens with places to watch the parliamentary proceedings and stimulating discourse on the implications of proposed legislation. And heightened awareness is prompting citizens to question their representatives about their voting records.

Under the coalition government, the Kenyan Parliament has emerged with greater powers than it has had in 40 years. It now has the ability to scrutinize executive appointments and partially control the legislative calendar. (In the past, the Parliament could only be summoned from recess by the President.) In addition, sweeping changes to parliamentary procedures have fundamentally strengthened the legislature's operations and, combined with grassroots efforts to hold representatives accountable, set the stage for the groundbreaking vote.