




Strengthening Oversight of Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic

#ParlAmericasOPN #COVID19

The ParlAmericas virtual meeting, [Strengthening Oversight of Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic](#), hosted by the Chamber of Representatives of Uruguay, brought together parliamentarians and parliamentary staff to discuss challenges and good practices associated with exercising oversight of government responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.

 Access the recording of the session [here](#) (in Spanish)

THEME

Oversight, transparency, sustainability, gender, economic recovery

LOCATION

Virtual Meeting

DATE

August 21, 2020

PARTICIPANTS

More than 120 parliamentarians and parliamentary staff from 17 countries



This activity is aligned with SDG 16

Summary

The virtual meeting was inaugurated with welcoming remarks from Speaker of the Chamber of Representatives **Martín Lema** (Uruguay), the host of the meeting, Member of the National Assembly **Elizabeth Cabezas** (Ecuador), President of ParlAmericas, and Senator **Blanca Ovelar** (Paraguay), President of the ParlAmericas Open Parliament Network.

Prior to the featured panel of parliamentarians, Member of the Chamber of Deputies **Carla Piccolomini** (Argentina) and Member of Parliament **Susana Beltrán García** (Catalonia, Spain) outlined the motivations behind holding this virtual gathering, as well as the forthcoming publication from ParlAmericas on oversight challenges during the pandemic, which would be informed by the discussions in the meeting.

The panel was moderated by Representative **Silvana Pérez Bonavita** (Uruguay) and featured parliamentarians from seven countries presenting on the oversight efforts of their respective parliamentary committees. It was followed by an interparliamentary dialogue on challenges to oversight and transparency in the region and closing remarks from Member of the Chamber of Deputies **Javier Macaya** (Chile), Vice-President of the ParlAmericas Open Parliament Network for South America.

Member of the National Assembly
Elizabeth Cabezas (Ecuador),
President of ParlAmericas



Even before COVID-19, Uruguay's parliament had resolved to strengthen the scope of its oversight functions due to a growing public demand for greater transparency and accountability.

Representative **Martín Lema**
(Uruguay), Speaker of the Chamber
of Representatives and host of the
meeting



Clearly, oversight during the pandemic cannot be delegated. It is indispensable and has become extremely necessary given that many existing structural failures have been laid bare in different countries affected by the pandemic. For example, the health care systems of many countries have fallen short of meeting the needs created by the health crisis that we are currently facing.

Senator **Blanca Ovelar** (Paraguay), President of the ParlAmericas Open Parliament Network



The urgent need to meet the multiple and complex challenges created by the pandemic requires that we strengthen our role in the oversight of actions by the executive branch, with the aim of ensuring transparency, accountability, honesty, ethics, and integrity in public service.

It is essential to ensure effective communication with the public, providing reliable information and data presented in a clear and comprehensible manner, regarding the disease itself and all measures of prevention, care, and assistance.



Representative **Silvana Pérez Bonavita** (Uruguay), Chair of the Committee on Public Health and Social Assistance

Member of the Chamber of Deputies **Carla Piccolomini** (Argentina), Special Committee on the Modernization of Parliamentary Functioning



I appreciate the opportunity to participate in preliminary discussions for the publication that ParlAmericas is preparing on oversight during the pandemic, by sharing, from my perspective as an Argentine legislator, the work we have been doing to strengthen the Chamber's oversight role. For my part, I emphasized the need to promote and demand the publication of public information for citizens, mainly regarding public spending in relation to the pandemic.

In our parliamentary oversight work as members of the opposition, it is important to achieve a balance in times of crisis. At times it is advisable to be supportive of the government, because the situation we are facing is extremely serious, but at other times, precisely in order to safeguard and protect citizens, we need to have a critical and demanding attitude toward our governments.



Member of Parliament **Susana Beltrán García** (Catalonia, Spain), Committee on External Affairs, Transparency, and Institutional Relations

ParlAmericas Resources on Oversight and the COVID-19 Pandemic



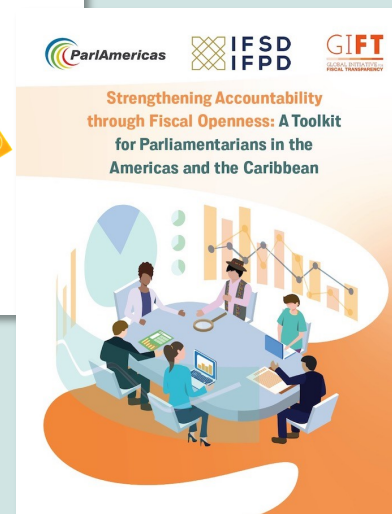
[COVID-19 and Parliament's Role during a Pandemic](#). ParlAmericas, 2020.



[COVID-19: The Challenge of Adapting and Strengthening the Role of Parliaments. An Analysis from an Open Parliament Perspective](#). ParlAmericas and Directorio Legislativo, 2020.



[COVID-19: The Challenge of Adapting and Strengthening the Role of Parliaments. An Analysis of the Legislative Agenda and the Centering of Gender Equality in Legislative Responses](#). ParlAmericas and Directorio Legislativo, 2020.



[Strengthening Accountability through Fiscal Openness: A Toolkit for Parliamentarians in the Americas and the Caribbean](#). ParlAmericas, Institute of Fiscal Studies and Democracy, and Global Initiative for Fiscal Transparency, 2020.

Panelists from Parliamentary Committees

Representative **Silvana Pérez Bonavita** (Uruguay) introduced the panel, noting the challenge of overseeing fiscal and budgetary policy in light of unforeseen public expenditures, as well as ensuring transparency of information on the procurement of goods and services within the context of states of emergency. She also remarked on several actions taken by the legislative and executive branches to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 in Uruguay, including through the creation of a health emergency tax on the highest-earning public officials to help finance immediate socioeconomic needs.

Member of Congress **Alberto de Belaunde** (Peru) initiated the panel presentations by highlighting the importance of centering action on climate change and environmental protection in responses to the current crisis. He argued that despite the zoonotic origins of the COVID-19 pandemic, ecological considerations are rarely seen as policy priorities in conversations about recovery. The Special Multiparty Committee Responsible for Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation he presides over aims to raise awareness about the relationship between sustainability and the current pandemic, the extent of future disasters that can be expected due to climate change, and the urgency of developing and implementing evidence-based climate policies in Peru.

The goal of the Special Committee on Climate Change is to ensure that it is understood, first, that while the challenge of COVID-19 is great, the challenge of climate change in the coming years is immense. Second, we want to emphasize that economic recovery cannot be achieved at the expense of our ecosystems and that we are in this situation now precisely because we have not had a sustainable plan for economic development. Thus, it is essential that we overcome this false dichotomy between economic growth or environmental protection.



Member of Congress **Alberto de Belaunde** (Peru), Chair of the Special Multiparty Committee Responsible for Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation



The next set of panelist presentations highlighted concerns around gender-based violence that have been exacerbated as many countries in the region implemented a variety of isolation and quarantine measures over the past few months in an effort to curb the spread of COVID-19.

Member of the Chamber of Deputies **Jimena López** (Argentina) noted that the self-isolation orders in Argentina brought attention to the neglected issue of gender-based violence, which in turn led to several national and provincial government actions, such as strengthening the national hotline for victims of gender-based violence and exempting women in vulnerable situations from mandatory isolation ([presentation](#)). The Committee on Women and Diversity of the Chamber of Deputies played an important role in monitoring and ensuring the effectiveness of these response mechanisms by the government.

Senator **Esperanza Andrade** (Colombia) characterized gender-based and domestic violence as a parallel pandemic in Colombia and a central focus of the Legal Committee for Women's Equity ([presentation](#)). She remarked on the Committee's recent virtual oversight work, including holding hearings with the National Administrative Department of Statistics, the Ministers of Commerce and Labour, and the Presidential Council for Women's Equity to study the government's actions on mitigating the economic impact of the public health emergency on women.

The pandemic is not democratic. We are all on the same sea, but we are not all in the same boat. For those who were suffering violence, the situation of the pandemic has exposed the fragility of all the systems in our country.

Member of the Chamber of Deputies
Jimena López (Argentina), Secretary
of the Committee on Women and
Diversity



The Women's Legal Committee has worked on various responses to help the executive branch deal with the crisis, while also protecting women. A great deal of work has been done to approve the country's next budget for 2021 and the Committee has made efforts to ensure that we can continue reaching women and reducing domestic violence.



Senator **Esperanza Andrade**
(Colombia), Legal Committee for
Women's Equity

Senator **Confúcio Moura** (Brazil) delivered a solemn reminder of the ongoing depths of the crisis in many parts of the region, including in Brazil, where he noted an average in August of about 1,000 deaths daily due to COVID-19 ([presentation](#)). He provided an overview of the Joint Committee on COVID-19, which was created at the end of March and has a mandate until the end of December 2020 to examine fiscal policy in the context of the pandemic and also act as a source of reliable and transparent information on the crisis for the National Congress and the general public.

Senator **Antares Vázquez** (Mexico), ParlAmericas Board Member, presented on her work in the COVID-19 Working Group of the Senate of the Republic, which was established to monitor national circumstances—including the pandemic’s health, economic, and social repercussions—as well as international developments ([presentation](#)). She highlighted several key actions from the Working Group, such as issuing requests for information from the heads of health departments in the executive branch, holding meetings with technical experts, and advocating for health and social security benefits for health workers in Mexico working under temporary contracts.

Senator **Confúcio Moura** (Brazil), Chair of the Joint Committee for Monitoring the Fiscal Situation and the Budget and Financial Execution of Measures Related to the Coronavirus



The Joint Committee oversees the use of resources. We have allocated funds to the most unprotected and disadvantaged populations. These are not loans, but aid for families so that they can survive this period. We have also provided liquidity to banks so that they can offer loans.

Three [Working Group] meetings have been held so far and we have had working meetings with . . . researchers from the Geographic Information Centre of the National Autonomous University of Mexico on the spread of COVID-19 over time and space, to gain a better understanding of how it has spread, in what contexts, and its effect on vulnerable populations. A meeting was also held with the National Council for the Evaluation of Social Development Policy, which shared projections on the impact of the pandemic on the economy and poverty levels in our country.



Senator **Antares Vázquez** (Mexico), COVID-19 Working Group of the Senate of the Republic, Health Committee, and ParlAmericas Board Member

As part of our role in ensuring checks and balances, we had to oppose a special budget proposed by the government, despite the fact that in the opposition we have been very supportive during this pandemic. We opposed it to draw attention to the fact that the government needs to ensure greater control over public spending . . . That forced the government to present a new budget with greater cost containment and clearer priorities in public spending.



Member of the Legislative Assembly **Silvia Vanessa Hernández** (Costa Rica), Chair of the Committee on Financial Affairs

From her role on the Committee on Financial Affairs, Member of the Legislative Assembly **Silvia Vanessa Hernández** (Costa Rica) underscored the fiscal challenges in Costa Rica as a result of a steep decline government revenues brought on by the crisis and estimated at about 4% of the country's GDP. Within this context, she highlighted oversight actions from her committee, including closely monitoring the disbursement of a temporary monetary transfer, which was implemented to assist people who lost some or all of their income as a result of the pandemic, and scrutinizing the government's recent budget proposals.

Continuing along the lines of fiscal oversight, Senator **Agustín Amado Florentín** (Paraguay), ParlAmericas Board Member, explained that the law passed in Paraguay to introduce a significant sum into the government's response plan to COVID-19—directed toward the health system; social protection; basic amenities; micro-, small-, and medium-sized businesses; and the national economic reactivation plan, among other areas—was accompanied by the creation of a bicameral committee mandated to oversee this spending ([presentation](#)). The oversight actions of this committee have included a request for an investigation into the procurement process of the Ministry of Public Health.

Senator **Agustín Amado Florentín** (Paraguay), Chair of the Bicameral Congressional Committee for the Oversight of Resources Provided in Emergency Law N°6524/20 and ParlAmericas Board Member



Regarding the Emergency Law, it is important to mention that the National Congress approved the executive's proposal on funds to fight the pandemic, for an amount of 1.99 billion US dollars . . . For Paraguay, this is a very significant amount because it is 5% of the GDP. The fundamental mission of the Bicameral Spending Oversight Committee is to monitor the use of these funds.

Interparliamentary Dialogue

The interparliamentary discussion, moderated by Representative **Silvana Pérez Bonavita** (Uruguay), provided a space for the participation of parliamentarians and parliamentary staff who commented on oversight and transparency concerns, as well as broader legislative challenges to responding to an unprecedented pandemic in real time, particularly given the need for expedited actions that in many countries entailed declarations of states of emergency and numerous executive decrees. The dialogue also drew attention to the necessary balance between oversight and collaboration with government, particularly in crisis situations.

One of the concerns highlighted in the dialogue was the unexpected government expenditures and the implications for future generations of a growing public debt, given that several countries have taken on additional loans to cope with increases in spending at the same time that revenues have plummeted. In this regard, some commented on the parliamentary role of ensuring spending was prioritized to the most urgent needs. Along these lines, the importance of minimizing corruption in the health sector given the influx of resources into health systems was also noted.

Transparency of information was mentioned as an essential prerequisite for proper oversight, particularly with regards to access to accurate and timely health data essential to informing decision-making across all branches of government, and regularly communicating this information with the general public to maintain trust in public institutions. Concerns around the spread of misinformation—which the World Health Organization has characterized as an “[infodemic](#)”—emerged as a central sub-topic on access to information, with reflections on parliament’s role in countering misleading and false information.

The great challenge we face in terms of transparency is when information is concealed and manipulated. I think that this leads to significant uncertainty and distrust on the part of the public . . . I believe that we need to be very vigilant and careful to ensure that the information provided is accurate and truthful and to achieve greater transparency, independent of the outcomes during the pandemic. This would undoubtedly help us to provide proper oversight and to reach agreements on economic recovery.



Representative **Gabriel Vallejo** (Colombia)

One of the main actions taken by the Members of the Chamber of Deputies was to directly monitor the hospitals receiving federal support. We went to the hospitals in our districts, talked to the directors, and asked them if they were receiving the required medical supplies. Some informed us that they were, while others reported that the supplies were insufficient. In the latter cases, we supported those hospitals with masks, gloves, and any other supplies we could provide.



Member of the Chamber of Deputies
María Eugenia Hernández (Mexico)

Conclusions

The meeting concluded with closing remarks from Member of the Chamber of Deputies **Javier Macaya** (Chile) who commented on the value of learning about the experiences of different parliamentary committees in the region dedicated to exercising oversight, whether they were created as a result of the pandemic or already existed. He emphasized the ongoing and long-term nature of these oversight tasks: as countries eventually start to move past the most difficult crisis periods, parliamentarians will need to continue scrutinizing government recovery plans and ensure they consider the differential impacts of the pandemic, including on women and vulnerable populations.

Our region is becoming the epicentre of the pandemic, so I believe it is important to emphasize that the rapid responses that have been required cannot be realized at the expense of democratic principles of transparency, accountability, and integrity. Thus, parliaments are also responsible for ensuring that all of the measures that have been implemented in our countries as a result of the emergency do not end up limiting something as basic as our civil liberties and access to information, and that government actions can be continuously monitored by the legislative branch and by citizens.



Member of the Chamber of Deputies **Javier Macaya** (Chile), Vice-President of the ParlAmericas Open Parliament Network for South America

Parliaments have a new role that entails not only collaborating [with the executive branch] when necessary and opposing it when required, but also being able to combat false news on social media in pursuit of the common good, as the highest body of citizen representation.



Juan Carlos Chavarria, Director of the Department of Citizen Participation of the Legislative Assembly of Costa Rica

Key Considerations for Parliamentary Oversight

- Parliamentary committees in the region play an important role in practicing oversight of government actions during the COVID-19 pandemic, which will be a long-term task given the still long road to recovery for the region.
- Oversight during this crisis encompasses not only scrutiny of budgets, fiscal policy, and resource allocation in the health sector but also advocacy for the inclusion of gender equality and climate considerations within policy responses.
- Oversight entails a balancing act between supporting the government in its policy responses in a time of crisis and applying the necessary checks and balances to ensure that such policies are effective in addressing core issues.
- The dual challenge of increases in government spending—and often public debt—alongside falling revenues, necessitates fiscal scrutiny but also an exploration of fiscal reforms, including more progressive tax regimes, given the long-standing wealth and income inequality in the region.
- Transparency and access to information are critical to effective oversight by the legislative branch and the public.
- The spread of misinformation—misleading or fabricated information or news—presents an important challenge for all branches of government in their response and recovery efforts.
- Building public trust in the response to and recovery from the health and socioeconomic crisis requires clear and timely communication with the public and opportunities for its participation in the decision-making process.
- Ongoing vigilance is needed to ensure that responses recognize the differential impact of the pandemic on women, single-parent households, and informal sector worker, as well as vulnerable or historically marginalized populations, including Indigenous, Afro-descendent, refugee and internally displaced, LGBTQ, homeless, and prison populations.

Parliaments Present



Argentina



Chile



Guatemala



Panama



Venezuela



Bolivia



Colombia



Honduras



Paraguay



Brazil



Costa Rica



Mexico



Peru



Canada



Ecuador



Nicaragua



Uruguay

Canada



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