The size and complexity of government makes budgeting in the public sector inherently complex. Budget documents can comprise thousands of pages; the format of the budget is not always easily understandable; and thorough analysis can take considerable time. Accordingly, budget scrutiny can be a daunting challenge facing parliamentarians when they are asked to consider the annual revenue and expenditure proposals of the government. From a long-term perspective, the influence of parliaments on budget policy has declined in many countries. It now appears, however, that many parliaments are rethinking their role in the budget process and reasserting themselves as more active players.

In order to make a contribution towards supporting parliamentarians and parliamentary staff to effectively participate in the budget process, the Centre for Democratic Institutions (CDI) launched a new training course on "Effective Financial Scrutiny: The Role of Parliament in Public Finance" on Tuesday 29 July 2008. The course was designed and developed in partnership with the World Bank Institute (WBI) as part of both organisations’ professional development programs for parliamentarians and parliamentary staff in the Asia-Pacific region.

In a first for CDI and the parliaments we assist, the course was delivered by videoconference and online. Participants attended videoconferencing sites in their respective countries and were linked into the facilitators and presenters in Canberra and Washington DC using the World Bank’s Global Development Learning Network. The course ran for four weeks with two sessions per week between 29 July and 21 August 2008.

The genesis for the Course came from discussions between CDI Deputy Director, Mr Quinton Clements, Mr Rick Stapenhurst from WBI and parliamentarians and parliamentary staff from CDI’s target countries. It was clear from these discussions that there was strong interest in the region in learning more on financial accountability thereby enhancing the effectiveness of parliaments to play their proper role in this process. Given that WBI had pioneered this type of specialised training elsewhere in the world, it was agreed to trial a similar course in this region. WBI brought its expertise and experience in financial accountability training and CDI drew on its experience and networks in this region. Together we were able to design and deliver a training course tailored to the parliaments of the Asia-Pacific region.
Course Participants

Mr Clements and Mr Stapenhurst convened the course. They were joined by:

- Mr James Brumby, World Bank;
- Mr Bill Dorotinsky, International Monetary Fund;
- Ms Robyn McClelland, Parliament of Australia;
- Mr Russell Chafer, Parliament of Australia;
- Mr Tom Clarke, Australian National Audit Office; and
- Mr Mitchell O’Brien, WBI.

49 parliamentarians and parliamentary officials, including 20 women, from four countries - Papua New Guinea, Kiribati, Fiji and Indonesia – participated in the course.

The Course

The course focused on the following topics:

- Examining the evolution of parliament's power of the purse;
- An introduction to the budget;
- The budget process;
- Parliamentary approval of the budget;
- Parliament and the audit of public accounts;
- Opening up the parliamentary process; and
- Strengthening parliamentary involvement.

The format of most sessions involved a presentation from a guest presenter followed by questions and discussion from participants in each site moderated by Mr Clements. In the first session of the Course, Mr Stapenhurst provided participants with an overview of the history of parliamentary involvement in public finance, using the evolution of the role and powers of the UK’s House of Commons to illustrate this process. In the second session Mr James Brumby gave a basic introduction to the budget and related concepts that frequently feature in discussions on budgeting. He discussed the definition of the budget and its components, including revenues, expenditures and the deficit, as well as some of the key objectives of budgeting.

Mr Bill Dorotinsky gave the presentation on the Budget Process in the third session. He introduced some of the main participants of the budget process and presented a simplified and generalised outline of planning, approving, implementing and auditing expenditures. The next session was on Parliamentary Approval of the Budget. One of the main tasks of parliaments in budgeting is to review the draft budget tabled by the executive for the upcoming fiscal period. Ms Robyn McClelland explained how this process is undertaken by the Australian Parliament. She outlined some of the key issues that make for effective scrutiny of the executive draft budget including parliament’s constitutional powers, its committees, the timing of the budget process, and access to relevant information.

The fifth session focused on Parliament and the Audit of Public Accounts. Many parliaments not only approve the budget, but also assess the integrity of budget execution through involvement in the audit process. Mr Russell Chafer and Mr Tom
Clarke described the approach to parliamentary audit taken at the Federal level in Australia. They discussed the types of audits conducted, the interaction of auditors with parliament, the role of the Parliament’s Public Account and Audit Committee, and, finally, the use of follow-up mechanisms to ensure that government’s implement recommendations for improvements that are generated through the audit process.

The next session looked at opening up the Parliamentary Process. Many parliaments are considering whether to open up the parliamentary budget process to the media and the public, or whether they could more directly benefit from outside expertise for the scrutiny of government finance. Mitchell O’Brien discussed the pros and cons of opening up committees to the public and how a committee can organize public hearings on the budget.

Participants were given a course assignment to complete in their respective country groups. The assignment involved answering a set of questions on parliamentary indicators. Each country then gave a presentation on the indicators for their respective parliaments in the second last session of the course. This enabled participants to learn more about each country’s budget process and exchange views on the pros and cons of different approaches.

**Conclusion**

Overall, participants were involved in a very practically oriented and highly interactive program that challenged them and stimulated their interest in understanding the budget process. The evaluation feedback has been overwhelmingly positive and strongly suggests that this type of course that addresses specific skills development is greatly valued in the region. According to the feedback, the sessions on the Australian approach and the participant country presentations were very useful. A majority noted that more time was needed for discussion and the future courses should be expanded accordingly. There were numerous requests to repeat the course next year.

Despite some technical difficulties at the beginning of the Course, a majority of participants noted that they found the video-conferencing format and technology excellent and easy to use. However, several participants did recommend that the course be delivered in-country to ensure greater participation by key players in the budget process.

Overall, participants expressed great enthusiasm for the Course and the approach taken. Rather than being overly academic, the program was highly interactive and needs-focused. Each of the presenters used an inclusive and friendly approach in getting their messages across and engaging with the audience. All presenters had the view that the Course was about sharing experiences as opposed to dictating to the participants. As a result, the sessions generated lively discussion and numerous questions from participants. All participants exhibited a genuine desire to learn about the different topics and further develop their knowledge. There was considerable interest in not only learning from the presenters but also from the different countries participating. For example, the Indonesian participants were particularly interested in learning about the role of public accounts committees in Papua New Guinea and Fiji and consequently there was much discussion on this topic.
Acknowledgements

The Course would not have been successful without the active involvement and support of the World Bank Institute and the presenters. CDI extends its deepest appreciation to Mr Rick Stapenhurst and WBI for their generous assistance, advice and excellent material.

CDI is especially grateful for the enthusiastic participation of the Members and staff of the respective parliaments involved in the Course. CDI also acknowledges the kind assistance and support of the Department of the House of Representatives, Parliament of Australia and the Australian National Audit Office.

CDI greatly appreciates the involvement of the presenters in the Course – Mr James Brumby, Mr Bill Dorotinsky, Ms Robyn McClelland, Mr Russell Chafer, Mr Tom Clarke and Mr Mitchell O’Brien. Without their genuine interest, enthusiasm, skill as presenters and deep knowledge of their subject areas, the Course would not have been the success it clearly was.