**PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN PARLIAMENT – A SURVEY OF PARTICIPANTS**

**“One of the most important questions of political life – perhaps the most important of all is that of the nature, extent and strength of relationship between people and government, between rulers and ruled” – Blondel, 1995**

This report looks at public hearings in Parliament over the period 2015/2016, based on survey responses from 77 individuals and organisations, specifically who the key participants are, why they get involved, their observations about Parliament’s role in the process and what can be done to improve the process. This report comes at a time when key pieces of legislation have been returned to the National Assembly due to insufficient public consultation. Examples are the Expropriation Bill, returned to the House by the President due to reservations about inadequate public participation, and the Restitution of Land Rights Amendment Bill, returned to the National Assembly by the Constitutional Court as it found Parliament failed to fulfil public participation adequately.

Public participation is the backbone of **legitimate democratic governance** and a **healthy democracy**. It allows for the opening of parliamentary processes, encourages **public accountability**, **transparency**, **inclusion** and meets a **vital constitutional requirement**. Public participation remains central to the mandate of Parliament – oversight and the passing of legislation ultimately has to be done with the interests of the public in mind. Public participation thus lies at the heart of the work of Parliament.

The report provides an assessment of survey responses of the participation process in parliamentary committees. **Lack of time** to participate by the public came up sharply as an impediment in the survey although surprisingly **46 per cent** said that the average comment period provided by Parliament for bills of **17 calendar days** was adequate. Many respondents said ideally **four weeks** would be best. Participants were also probed about whether they were satisfied that their **submission was adequately taken into account or considered** – **30 per cent** of respondents were not satisfied while **37 per cent** of respondents felt Parliament did not **take public input seriously**. Providing feedback to participants on how the committee had considered submissions, or would generally move forward with the process, would assist in ensuring the public felt their submission was considered and not part of an obligatory showpiece – **79.5 per cent** of survey respondents indicated the **feedback process on submissions**, after the public hearing was held, was i**nadequate**. It was also brought to the fore that, troublingly, only **15 per cent** of public hearings over the 2015/16 timeframe of this study involved **topical matters, or as the Constitution states "matters of national importance",** as compared to **72 per cent** of public hearings covering **legislation**.

Our survey also brought to light many of the **impediments** relating to public participation in Parliament. Key obstacles unpacked included **lack of time**, **lack of funds and capacity** and the **perception** that committee members did not seem to be taking the process seriously. These impediments, in turn, have **further consequences and effects** on the public participation process in Parliament. Thereafter the report discusses opportunities and suggestions for effective and meaningful public participation that have been drawn out from the survey responses. This includes standardisation of the process between parliamentary committees, addressing the lack of feedback provided and suggestions for Parliament to solicit more input and interaction.

This report underscores the importance of public participation and the shortcoming in the current system. The legislature has a **duty to design meaningful public engagement processes** that can make a difference.