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Milli Mejlis of the  
Republic of Azerbaijan

## Fifth Global Conference of Young Parliamentarians

# Promoting sustainability, protecting the interests of future generations

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### Outcome Document

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*“Ten, fifty, a hundred years from now, and many generations hereafter, let it be said that during our watch, while gifted with intelligence and insight, with privilege and position, with the wealth of wisdom, and with freedom and power of the human will, let it be said that in our time, during our watch, we did our share, and maybe, just maybe, we will make a little difference.”*

We, 130 young parliamentarians, 36 per cent of whom are women, came together in Baku from 43 countries for the Fifth IPU Global Conference of Young Parliamentarians. Our average age was 37.7 years. We were joined by representatives of the Government of Azerbaijan, as well as representatives from international organizations, youth organizations and parliaments, academia, and the private sector. Three current and former State future generation officials were also among us.

As young parliamentarians, we face challenges created by the generations before us. The decisions taken and ways of doing things have resulted in environmental degradation and unsustainable production and consumption patterns well before we were born. Yet we are the ones – and future generations – who have to repair the damage.

We have a responsibility to ensure that our children, grandchildren and all those who will follow are better off than we are today. Future generations have rights. However, the way decisions are made is too often near-sighted. This is both unjust and self-defeating. Our planet is on the brink, and we simply cannot wait for another generation to act. The time for talk is over.

In our discussions we praised the seven-generation principle: that deliberations today should consider the impact that they will have seven generations from now. This is especially important when considering actions to save our planet. Efforts made so far to protect the environment and address activities leading to climate change have not been sufficiently effective. Despite the achievement of the Paris Agreement, we are still off-track. Our carbon emissions have increased since last year. Failure to act and reverse these trends will cause irreversible and irreparable damage.

For climate change, we need a climate of change. Carbon reduction and adaptation is needed, and research, technology and innovation are key to this. This is a shared responsibility as climate change knows no borders. We discussed that these innovative solutions need to be shared across borders and accessible to everyone. Technology transfers, sharing of good practices and technical support are therefore indispensable. Wars and conflicts are one of the greatest dangers for people and the environment. Too many young people are paying a high price in situations of conflict when they are prevented from accessing education, employment and safety. Such situations must stop as we cannot afford to have lost generations. Youth have a great role to play in peace building and sustainability and should be engaged and empowered to do so.

We were also inspired by examples of local wisdom that calls for dedicating time to let life, nature and the planet take a rest from human activity at least for a few hours once a year.

In Baku, we identified additional actions to better protect the environment for future generations, including:

- Support the implementation of the Paris Agreement on climate change through legislation, such as putting a price on carbon emissions, and hold our governments to account for national and international commitments made;
- Adopt laws and policies to better promote renewable energies, including through increased budgets; and
- Sensitize policy-makers and the people as action is required at all levels starting from the individual, the family, the community, the nation and the world as a whole. We also call on the IPU to consider establishing a network of young parliamentarians for the environment.

Protecting the environment goes hand- in- hand with delivering more responsible models of production and consumption. We are mere custodians of our resources, borrowing them from our future generations. The Sustainable Development goals (SDGs), in particular SDG 12, give us a framework in which to anchor these efforts. In Baku, we stood in unison and pledged to act for the achievement of the SDGs. Parliamentary mechanisms such as committees on the SDGs and self-assessment toolkits, are useful ways to coordinate and enhance our efforts.

Consumption and production are interwoven and they relate strongly to today's youth: as young people demand more sustainable foods and products, production patterns are bound to follow. We know that mentalities are already undergoing a paradigm shift; however, we young MPs must act to accelerate this transition. To achieve economies that are more responsible, that reduce or eliminate waste, and that are more circular by favouring re-use and recycling, we agreed to:

- Legislate and adopt policies to reduce energy consumption, better protect wildlife and water resources, and strengthen biodiversity on our planet, including by planting trees;
- Ensure lines in State budgets for the SDGs and invest in sustainability projects, including for research and technology;
- Take legislative action to mitigate over-exploitation of resources, and eliminate the use of plastics, especially single-use plastics and plastic bags;
- Promote incentives for more responsible consumption and production practices, including through subsidies and compensation; and
- Support effective waste – and ideally zero-waste – management projects, and their transformation into reusable products and energy.

One of the most effective ways of shifting the paradigms underpinning how we think about our environment and use of resources is through education. Education is not only about grooming smarter people, but also more socially responsible citizens. We called for education that is more focused on sustainable development and global citizenship.

First and foremost, education must be accessible to everyone. It is an antidote for poverty and gender inequality. In addition to free and compulsory education for all, we also supported more robust budgeting for scholarships, grants, and fair student loans, so that all can benefit from the fruits that education can bear. We insisted on the importance of providing life-learning opportunities for all so that education adapts to job market changes but also to individuals' self-development.

Education is also key to prosperity for future generations in a world with rapidly changing technological realities. Technological advancements are moving the tectonic plates of work beneath our feet. However, we cannot – and must not – fear human innovation; we must rather adapt, for advancements in technology have always destabilized the status quo.

From the earliest stages of school, curricula should be forward-looking and prepare young people for the jobs of the future. However, it is not only about *what* we learn but *how* we learn. Our education should focus on key competencies that modern technologies cannot replicate, such as out-of-the-box thinking, creativity, entrepreneurship, critical thinking and digital media literacy. It should also focus on soft skills like teamwork and communications.

If we update our smartphones every couple of years, we can also update our schools. To do this, we proposed to:

- Prioritize education in our planning and budgets and use parliamentary oversight tools to hold governments to account;
- Decrease military spending in favour of investments in youth empowerment and people's well-being;
- Prepare for the shift towards greater online education, which will one day overtake traditional programmes;
- Promote education that strengthens the skills of the future, including science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). Efforts must also be redoubled for girls and young women to be equally represented in these fields; and
- Better link our schools and universities with industry, including through apprenticeship systems.

For investments in education to be truly useful, they need to be coupled with the availability of decent work. Too often, our political institutions are too slow to adapt to the speed of change in the industrial and economic world. We are in the fourth industrial revolution and our countries and institutions need to be more agile in how they prepare: change is coming, whether we're ready for it or not. Technology is one big pressure for change, but there are other drivers, including demographic and geographic transitions.

Jobs will be displaced, including due to factors like artificial intelligence (AI), automation, and 3D printing. In only five years, tens of millions of data entry clerks, accountants, and factory workers will have their roles replaced with new available jobs for data analysts, AI and machine learning specialists, and people to design and build computers and robots. The jobs that are at risk of being extinct are not just routine jobs, but also white-collar work traditionally believed to be irreplaceable by machines.

The solution is to ensure that our economies are nimble and adaptable. The future is not mass unemployment but mass redeployment. Concrete steps we can take to facilitate this are:

- Better track technological trends in our countries by connecting our parliaments to the private sector through dedicated mechanisms;
- Promote life-long learning, including more targeted and faster vocational training programmes to facilitate the transition to new jobs;
- Ensure flexibility in social security systems and labour market regulations for those in transition, as well as flexibility in working arrangements, for example through remote working, freelancing, and the gig economy;
- Promote digital economies, innovation and entrepreneurship, through grants, loans, and programmes, including for start-ups.

To achieve these objectives, the needs and interests of future generations need to be integrated into our decision-making processes. We therefore commend mechanisms created in a number of countries that serve as guardians for future generations and hope to create and strengthen similar ones in our own countries. These include parliamentary committees or independent agents of parliament that link people to their governments and hold government to account for their performance in implementing commitments. These also extend to audit offices, ombudspersons and commissioners. These mechanisms should have a broad mandate that ensures accessibility and transparency, and can include: conducting investigations, facilitating petitions and complaints, engaging in parliamentary and legislative advocacy, and linking the future with parliaments by serving as think-tanks. We also highlighted forums

of young parliamentarians and youth parliamentary committees as mechanisms that can incorporate future generations into their mandate.

The global problems we all face are grave, and solving them requires courage, cooperation, and innovative solutions. We, young MPs, boldly asserted in Baku that we are up to this task. However, to make a difference we need to have a seat at the decision-making table. Having 2.2 per cent of the world's MPs under 30 years of age is not nearly sufficient. Justice and the need for creative solutions demand that we be fully included. We, therefore, endorse the targets for youth representation proposed by the Forum of Young Parliamentarians of the IPU so that by 2035, 15 per cent of MPs are under 30 years of age, 35 per cent under 40, and 45 per cent under 45.

In the final analysis, all hands on deck are needed and coordination between all stakeholders must be facilitated. Parliaments are a platform that brings people and institutions together. We will work with civil society organizations, academia, the private sector, local governments and all other stakeholders who want to be part of the solution. However, to not leave anyone behind, we can also create the space needed in our communities for all to participate.

Although our work is to link constituents to the machinery of State institutions, protecting and promoting the rights and interests of future generations is also a personal mission. When we say it is time to act, this also pertains to our day-to-day practices. Change starts with each and every one of us. As community leaders and role models, our example can have a ripple effect. We only need to look at the seven-generation principle to understand that even small steps in our daily lives can make a meaningful difference. The future of not just humankind, but our planet, is in our hands. As a concrete and simple gesture, we call on the IPU to continue its shift towards becoming paper smart, and to use only recycled paper in its documentation.

We express our thanks to the National Assembly of Azerbaijan for hosting this Fifth Global Conference of Young Parliamentarians and for serving as a platform towards a more prosperous life for future generations. The time to talk is over, the time to act is now.