



Inter-Parliamentary Union
For democracy. For everyone.

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President's summary of the debate on the overall theme of the 142nd IPU Assembly

Overcoming the pandemic today and building a better tomorrow: the role of parliaments

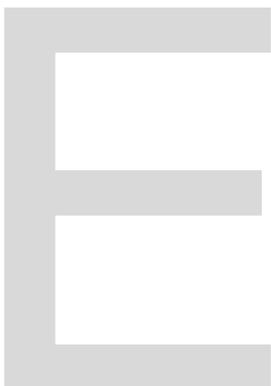
*Endorsed by the 142nd Assembly
(Virtual session, 27 May 2021)*

In addition to the discussions that took place during the debate on the overall theme at the 142nd Assembly, the present summary draws on the deliberations at sessions that the four Standing Committees of the IPU (Peace and International Security, Sustainable Development, Democracy and Human Rights, and United Nations Affairs) held from 26 to 28 April. The deliberations of the Forum of Women Parliamentarians held on 10 May 2021 and of the Forum of Young Parliamentarians held on 13 May 2021 have also informed this summary. The summary captures the key messages conveyed by panel presentations and interventions from the floor. It is provided as a contribution to the IPU's overall response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the need to build a better tomorrow.

The IPU Members were unanimous in their determination to contribute robustly to efforts designed to control and stop the devastating COVID-19 pandemic. They recognized the need for a stronger response in order to save lives and end the pandemic as soon as possible. In this context, MPs recommended bold new steps to advance peace, sustainable development, gender equality, youth empowerment, democracy and human rights.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created social, economic and political crises. It has exacerbated inequalities within and between countries, and stalled progress on sustainable development, youth empowerment and gender equality. Women and youth have been disproportionately affected, with more women than men losing jobs and taking on an even greater share of household work, and many young people being left without access to work or education.

The pandemic has also contributed to an increase in violence against women and girls, including through the internet, giving rise to a need for greater investment in services for survivors as well as more extensive regulatory frameworks for online platforms and tech companies. As reflected in this summary, the particular concerns of women and youth should inform parliamentary action in all policy areas, from peace to democracy and sustainable development. Parliaments must continue efforts to enhance women's leadership and gender parity in all sectors, as well as to increase the representation of women and youth in politics.



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Guided by these considerations, participants committed to ensuring that relief efforts reached the most vulnerable groups, and that vaccines, tests and treatments were affordable and accessible to all. They agreed that a crisis of this magnitude demanded a global solution, which multilateralism was best placed to deliver.

Key messages on peace and security

Parliaments are the main venue for managing conflict in a non-violent manner and a central forum for inclusive debates on policies for building resilience, strengthening institutions and improving people's security. In order to build resilience and strengthen capacity so that countries can recover from future pandemics and other shocks, parliaments must focus on emerging risks and preventive action.

The COVID-19 pandemic has illustrated the need to reduce military spending and shift budget priorities in order to respond to the health crisis and its ripple effects. Official development assistance must be increased and funding must be allocated directly to the COVID-19 recovery.

Parliaments need to support more systematic funding for peacebuilding and conflict prevention, which not only works, but is cost-effective. Including women in peacekeeping efforts is critical to the success of these efforts and to the sustainability of peace agreements. It is also imperative for every government to have a well-funded women, peace and security plan. To prevent instability, parliaments must also focus on youth and ensure they have access to work and education opportunities.

To improve peace and security and build up resilience and human security, parliaments must prioritize emerging risks, act early and strengthen capacities for local response, including that of local law enforcement and the security sector. More attention needs to be paid to tools to respond to such risks that can be scaled up and adapted to different contexts at local, regional and global levels.

Conflict resolution and the maintenance of peace depend on parliaments working together with all stakeholders, including the executive, the private sector, academia and civil society. In keeping with the IPU's support of multilateralism, dialogue among parliamentarians needs to reach further and go deeper at all levels – local, national, regional and global.

There can be no lasting peace, security and development without addressing climate change and securing the environment. Parliamentarians need to deepen their efforts to ensure the implementation of all relevant international commitments in this regard.

Key messages on sustainable development

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that, over and above wealth, real prosperity should be about health. Prosperity should be thought of more in terms of a healthy environment, better quality of life and more time for self-improvement, as well as for the community. The care economy – which includes front-line workers and those who care for children and the elderly – epitomizes this vision and must therefore be better valued and financed. Care workers deserve stronger social protection. Institutions, rules and policies that allow for proper financing of jobs in the health sector, environmental preservation, education and other components of the care economy need to be strengthened.

Parliaments need to better recognize the role of women in the care economy. Women need financial support for their unpaid work, help in finding jobs outside of hard-hit sectors and greatly expanded access to affordable childcare. Cash transfers and other such programmes need to be better targeted at women as a way of distributing benefits to their communities.

Greater investment in decent jobs for youth and incentives for entrepreneurship are also needed to curb the high level of youth unemployment. Access to quality education and vocational training has been disrupted by the pandemic and parliaments should prioritize the building of resilient education systems that allow equality of access to all children and youth.

Caring for people and caring for the planet go hand in hand. Parliaments must support the shift towards the green economy through a more progressive tax system, universal basic income and other innovative policies. The current food system – which leaves millions of people hungry or malnourished, creates enormous waste and relies on vulnerable supply chains – needs to be reimaged. In particular, parliaments need to monitor the food security situation and ensure that countries achieve food self-sufficiency. Food systems need to be more grounded in local communities and access to key agricultural inputs must be more equitable.

Key messages on vaccine access

The COVID-19 pandemic will not end until the vast majority of people in each country are vaccinated. As a public good, vaccines need to be readily accessible to all people on the planet, including the most vulnerable populations, namely refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced people, stateless people, indigenous people, migrants irrespective of legal status, persons with disabilities, detained persons, and people living in areas under the control of non-state armed groups.

Parliaments must stand against vaccine nationalism and advocate for vaccines to be free and accessible to everyone, not just those in wealthy countries. High-income countries need to step up support to COVAX and other multilateral efforts to tackle the pandemic. It is also essential to strengthen public health infrastructure and communications with the public, including through digital technologies, and take appropriate public health measures to protect people.

With few exceptions, the parliamentarians who spoke on the issue of a temporary waiver of vaccine patents, currently before the WHO, were generally supportive of such a waiver. Enabling generic production of the vaccines could boost vaccine access to developing countries where only a fraction of the population has been vaccinated so far. In settling this issue, claims that patents provide a key financial incentive to research and development of new vaccines should be weighed against public health concerns, as well as the considerable support provided to patent holders through government subsidies, public investment and purchase guarantees.

Key messages on democracy and human rights

By all accounts, the pandemic has put a strain on democracy. Many countries have declared states of emergency, which in some cases have unduly limited personal freedoms. Freedom of expression has been sacrificed under the guise of combating disinformation. There have been restrictions on media integrity, including the incarceration of journalists; as well as restrictions on personal integrity and security, including excessive use of force and arbitrary arrests. In a number of countries, electoral processes have been postponed, some without a new date.

Parliaments need to conduct strong and swift oversight of any emergency measure or restriction on fundamental freedoms and human rights. Measures must be taken democratically, be proportionate, time-limited, necessary and legal. Parliaments must fight against conspiracy theories and misinformation, and confront hate, racism, xenophobia and nationalism, which have been on the rise. Decision-making and political dialogue in general need to be informed by facts and scientific evidence. Taken together, these steps can help build trust between governments and citizens.

The pandemic provides a critical opportunity for parliaments to become stronger. With many parliaments resorting to remote or hybrid ways of working, modernization has accelerated, allowing parliaments to become more flexible and efficient. Still, nothing can fully replace the in-person interactions between parliamentarians and constituents, which are so essential to dialogue, negotiation and compromise.

In reflecting on the many impacts of the pandemic on peace and security, sustainable development and democracy, parliaments and decision-makers everywhere should retain one overarching lesson: there is only one humanity coexisting on one planet.