



Inter-Parliamentary Union

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Multi-country review of parliamentary practices in advancing the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals: Summary of key findings

Background

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development explicitly recognizes the central role of national parliaments in ensuring an enabling legal and budgetary environment and in fostering accountability for the effective implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs),¹ such as by promoting inclusive national and subnational reviews of progress.²

Acknowledging the valuable contribution of parliaments to the implementation and follow-up of the 2030 Agenda, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) initiated an extensive multi-country review of parliamentary practices towards the achievement of the SDGs, as well as related success stories and lessons learned. This review focused on the following aspects:

- Institutionalized (and, if applicable, ad hoc or informal) practices that mainstream the SDGs as a framework into the core functions of parliament
- Measures that ensure that the voices of underrepresented, marginalized and vulnerable groups are taken into account in the implementation of the SDGs
- Methods and actions that improve access to health-care services and address barriers to access to health
- Measures that strengthen the response to climate change, including green and carbon-neutral development, and renewable energy

The IPU review built on two previous surveys – *Institutionalization of the SDGs in the work of parliaments* (2018) and *Parliamentary practices to advance the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals* (2021) – plus information provided by parliaments about their practices in advancing the implementation of the SDGs during the First Global Parliamentary Meeting on Achieving the SDGs (virtual event, 28–30 September 2021).

Objectives and scope of work

In line with the aspects covered by the exercise (as detailed above), the IPU review sought to identify and outline existing parliamentary experiences in the following areas:

- Processes, methods and tools that integrate the SDGs as a framework into the core parliamentary functions (law-making, budgeting, oversight and representation)
- Efforts to analyse and maximize interlinkages between the SDG targets and to promote policy coherence for sustainable development
- Prioritization of laws and actions that contribute to improving access to health, with a particular focus on adopted measures (e.g. legal, budgetary) targeting vulnerable and marginalized populations or addressing barriers to universal access to quality health care, including to sexual and reproductive health-care services (SDG 3)
- Efforts to fight climate change by promoting integration into national mitigation and adaptation laws and policies, and by ensuring synergies with relevant national climate goals

¹ United Nations General Assembly, *Transforming our world: the 2020 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, A/RES/70/1 (2015), para. 45.

² Idem, para. 79.

and nationally determined contributions as well as with national disaster risk reduction strategies (SDG 13)

- Methodologies used to make laws compatible with the SDGs and to ensure that their interconnectedness is duly taken into consideration
- Efforts to engage civil society, academia, the private sector and other stakeholders, to promote citizen participation, and to facilitate multi-stakeholder contributions during the adoption of legislation impacting the implementation of the SDGs
- Efforts to ensure that budgets are aligned with SDG targets and national priorities, and that adequate resources are allocated to implementation of the SDGs through national budget cycles
- The way in which the impact of budget policies on SDG targets informs parliamentary budget deliberations and oversight work, and whether parliament plays an active role in scrutinizing/monitoring how official development assistance (ODA) is used to support the implementation of the SDGs
- The role of parliamentary mechanisms and initiatives dedicated to the SDGs (committees on the SDGs, informal groups or networks, systems of focal points, etc.), including in institutional/coordination arrangements, and the participation of parliamentarians in national inter-ministerial committees on the SDGs, high-level coordination councils or thematic working groups
- The support that national institutions (such as national statistical institutes) receive to develop tools/frameworks to track progress towards the SDG targets, and the overall role of the parliament in the follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda, including regular/periodic processes through which parliaments assess the impact of government policies on the SDGs, such as specific oversight mechanisms (e.g. parliamentary questions, committee hearings, inquiries and reports) or involvement in the preparation of national SDG progress/monitoring reports, voluntary national reviews (VNRs), voluntary local reviews, national “leave no one behind” assessments, and so on
- Awareness-raising initiatives, partnerships and capacity-building activities on the SDGs for parliamentarians and staff, in order to support the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the SDGs
- Integration of the SDG framework (or specific health and climate change goals and targets) into political party programmes

Methodological approach

A case study methodology with a two-phased approach was used to examine strengths and weaknesses and to systematically review parliamentary practices and experiences with the SDGs.

Phase one involved desk research of relevant IPU reports and studies, including a review of data collected through the IPU’s 2018 and 2021 global surveys on the SDGs, as well as the discussion points and conclusions of the First Global Parliamentary Meeting on Achieving the SDGs (September 2021). Thematic resources and publications of national parliaments were also studied. The desk review examined nearly 70 different countries,³ and information was cross-checked with reports from relevant United Nations agencies, civil society organizations (CSOs) and other stakeholders, including conference summaries, VNRs, SDG reports and shadow reports. The initial process was guided by an assessment framework, with key principles and criteria designed to ensure that high-quality parliamentary practices would be included in phase two. These principles and criteria are listed below:

³ The following countries were included in the assessment: Albania, Algeria, Andorra, Argentina, Armenia, Austria, Bahrain, Benin, Brazil, Burkina Faso, Canada, Central African Republic, China, Congo, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Ecuador, Egypt, Fiji, Finland, Gambia, Georgia, Guinea, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Ireland, Italy, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Kuwait, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lebanon, Lesotho, Lithuania, Malawi, Mali, Malta, Mexico, Morocco, Namibia, New Zealand, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Oman, Pakistan, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, South Africa, Spain, Suriname, Syrian Arab Republic, Thailand, Togo, Türkiye, Uganda, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, Uzbekistan, Zambia, Zimbabwe.

Guiding principles

- Balanced geographical representation based on the six IPU geopolitical groups
- Balanced country examples/case studies by income level as classified by the World Bank
- IPU staff experiences with the pre-identified country example/case study in terms of communication, reliability of the focal point(s), readiness to actively cooperate/willingness to participate, and potential for committed follow-up to finalize and validate the country example/case study
- Inclusion of less-studied contexts and parliamentary experiences
- Thematic diversity of the country examples/case studies

Key criteria

The list below is non-exclusive, meaning that one or more attributes were true for a given parliamentary practice:

- Evidence of clear parliamentary processes and strategies supporting the integration of the SDGs into core parliamentary functions (law-making, budgeting, oversight and representation)
- Demonstrated parliamentary involvement in categorizing and/or assessing SDG interlinkages
- Availability of methodology/processes to assess compatibility between SDG targets and national laws
- Adopted measures to secure progress towards, and achievement of, relevant targets for SDG 3 (universal health coverage, universal access to sexual and reproductive health-care services, etc.) and SDG 13 (nationally determined contributions, national climate policies, national adaptation plans and disaster risk reduction strategies, etc.)
- Existence of parliamentary mechanisms and/or processes for stakeholder engagement
- Evidence of scrutiny of mechanisms and/or processes for closer alignment between the SDGs and the proposed national budget
- Existence of parliamentary instruments/impact assessments that promote the inclusion of vulnerable and marginalized groups and/or ensure that public policies leave no one behind
- Existence of a functioning parliamentary mechanism dedicated to the SDGs (a committee on the SDGs, an informal group or network, a system of focal points, etc.) and of interactions within the broader national coordination framework for the SDGs
- Existence of specialized parliamentary bodies for monitoring progress towards the SDGs, such as impact assessments and oversight mechanisms to monitor how government policies affect the implementation of the SDGs and/or parliamentary contributions to the executive branch's 2030 Agenda follow-up and review processes, such as work with ministries and statistical agencies on improving how information is collected, disaggregated and reported to parliament
- Participation of parliamentarians in awareness-raising initiatives, capacity-building activities and partnerships for the implementation of the SDGs (small-scale, community-based, global, etc.)
- Explicit reference to, or integration of, the SDG framework (or specific health and climate change goals and targets) in political party programmes.

The results of the desk review were summarized in an evaluation matrix aimed at informing the selection of potential country examples/case studies.

Phase two consisted of semi-structured interviews with parliamentary focal point(s) from the pre-identified countries who attended the 143rd IPU Assembly in Madrid, Spain (November 2021). The purpose of these interviews was to obtain additional information and to validate some of the key conclusions. For those countries that were not present at the 143rd IPU Assembly, information was gathered from the relevant parliamentary focal point(s) in writing.

By combining different sources of evidence – written documentation, plus data collected through the IPU global surveys and in-person discussions – it was possible to substantiate the findings more robustly and provide a solid basis for developing and finalizing the country examples/case

studies. Once processed, the information was converted into two types of standardized country examples/case studies:

- i. More elaborate cases demonstrating the multiplicity of methods and processes used by parliaments to advance the achievement of the SDGs
- ii. Cases focusing on a particular issue or a thematic area relevant to the scope of the assessment

All draft country examples/case studies were shared with the respective parliamentary focal points for feedback and verification of the conclusions. Many countries, however, did not confirm interest or respond to IPU enquiries despite initial information suggesting that their parliaments were engaged in implementation of the SDGs or that there were some parliamentary mechanisms available in the country to support the 2030 Agenda. The final list of country examples/case studies therefore reflects the active contributions and inputs of well-informed MPs and staff members in the given country throughout the various phases of the assessment.

Timeline and milestones

1. Desk research: October–November 2021
2. Summary evaluation matrix with potential country examples/case studies: November 2021
3. Interviews/focus group discussions with pre-identified parliaments, including sharing drafts of country examples/case studies with MPs/parliamentary staff for feedback (in-person or in writing): November–December 2021
4. Finalization, validation and endorsement of the country examples/case studies: January–April 2022
5. Summary of key findings and final report: May–June 2022

Summary of key findings

Although the majority of the country examples/case studies focus on the results or impact achieved, some demonstrate important approaches and methods for parliaments to advance the implementation of the SDGs.

Of the nearly 70 parliaments reviewed, at least half have established tailored mechanisms or are increasingly using tools to integrate the SDGs into their core functions (law-making, budgeting, oversight and representation). The final list was narrowed to 15 country examples/case studies considered detailed enough to present the diverse experiences of parliaments in supporting achievement of the SDGs while allowing for subsequent replication in other contexts.

These country examples/case studies, which should facilitate experience- and knowledge-sharing, illustrate emerging practices in terms of how parliaments can fulfil their roles in implementing the SDGs. Examples of these practices are given below:

- Gathering feedback from the public, civil society representatives or other stakeholders prior to deliberations on a draft law or as part of an oversight inquiry (e.g. Mexico)
- Supporting the monitoring of, and national reporting on, progress towards the SDGs (e.g. Indonesia, Thailand)
- Engaging in the early formulation and adoption of national development plans (e.g. Spain, Uganda)
- Incorporating the SDGs into law-making (e.g. Nicaragua)
- Identifying law reform priorities (e.g. Uzbekistan)
- Enforcing measures to address the needs of marginalized and vulnerable groups (e.g. Pakistan)
- Fostering broad participation from stakeholders including Indigenous peoples, youth organizations and vulnerable communities in the development of national climate change commitments (e.g. Fiji)

- Balancing economic growth, social well-being and environmental protection as a key approach in implementing the SDGs (e.g. China)

A variety of parliamentary structures mandated with follow-up and review of the SDGs have been established, including multiparty task forces (Indonesia, Pakistan), special commissions (Mexico), ad hoc groups (Nicaragua, Serbia), joint bicameral parliamentary committees (Spain, Uzbekistan), parliamentary forums or caucuses on the SDGs (Kenya, Uganda), and subcommittees (Thailand). Other parliaments that do not have such specialized structures have mainstreamed the SDGs into the work of their existing standing committees (China, Fiji).

Although it was difficult to assess the actual impact of the work of these specialized parliamentary structures, they have played a critical role in raising the awareness of MPs and in supporting the efforts of members of other committees, and of staff, to incorporate the SDGs into parliamentary processes and procedures. Therefore, in parliaments where such dedicated structures exist, their work is usually backed up by dedicated tools and internal procedures (e.g. for drafting, submitting and enacting laws, or for budget formulation and endorsement) that foster the achievement of the SDGs. In addition, these dedicated structures provide convenient “entry points” for government officials to engage with parliament on a particular aspect of the SDGs, thereby improving coordination with lead ministries and agencies in the follow-up and review of the SDGs (e.g. the preparation of VNR reports in countries such as Mexico, Pakistan, Spain, Thailand and Uganda).

It was observed during the in-person consultations with MPs and parliamentary staff at the 143rd IPU Assembly in Madrid that, even where parliaments have not established specialized mechanisms on the SDGs or lack procedures with explicit reference to the SDGs, they still perceive their work as supporting the implementation of the SDGs (since “everything they do is relevant for the SDGs”). This interpretation, however, may critically disadvantage efforts to ensure that the 2030 Agenda is effective in delivering its targets.

Only the examples of Brazil and Uganda provide strong evidence of parliament’s role in working with other oversight institutions (i.e. the collaborative working arrangements with the Federal Court of Accounts in Brazil, and parliament’s follow-up of the Auditor General’s report on progress on implementation of the SDGs in Uganda). The review did not identify any specific practices of parliaments working with other oversight institutions – such as national human rights bodies or anti-corruption commissions – towards achieving either the SDGs in general or specific targets under SDG 16. This can be explained by the fact that available information was scarce. But it could also indicate limited engagement by parliaments with other oversight institutions. It was noted, however, that some parliaments engage specifically with the national statistical institute on the development or utilization of the national SDG indicator framework (e.g. Indonesia, Pakistan, Thailand, Uzbekistan).

In contrast, the review found that parliaments engage proactively with other non-State actors – such as CSOs, business associations, and representatives of vulnerable and marginalized groups – when debating legislation and adopting budgets, as well as during the preparation of the country’s VNR reports and their presentation at the High-Level Political Forum on sustainable development. This finding points to the emergence of a standardized approach towards the follow-up and review processes for the SDGs: the executive branch is increasingly engaging parliament in national progress reviews, and parliaments are increasingly engaging other stakeholders in these formal processes.

The review also suggested that, in developing countries, parliaments play a somewhat marginal role in monitoring ODA implementation, whereas their role is more robust in developed countries (e.g. Austria, Spain, United Kingdom). This situation has potential implications for the mutual ODA accountability framework as a two-way contractual process, under which donor countries commit to providing sufficient funds (ideally aligned with the SDGs) and recipients commit to using aid effectively and transparently.

Conversely, parliaments seem to be more involved in building partnerships for development. In many cases, this involvement is facilitated by the IPU (e.g. the partnership with Indonesia) and through the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), which is particularly active in supporting national parliaments to advance the achievement of the SDGs with ongoing

programmes in many of the studied examples (e.g. Armenia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Mexico, Serbia, Thailand, Uzbekistan). But some parliaments have also demonstrated independent initiative on this front. For example, the parliaments of Pakistan and Uzbekistan have convened international and regional exchange meetings for MPs focused on the SDGs. Meanwhile, the parliaments of Austria and Zambia have established a bilateral cooperative programme focused on the development of an enabling legal framework for the achievement of three high-priority SDG targets for Zambia.

Other frequently used approaches include holding capacity-building workshops and seminars (e.g. Mexico, Uganda, Kenya), producing guidance and handbooks on the SDGs (e.g. Brazil, Fiji, Indonesia) and arranging peer-to-peer coaching for MPs and staff members (e.g. Pakistan).

The review identified a few examples of parliaments using innovative tools to engage in oversight of government activities, including monitoring progress towards the SDGs and related budgeting and expenditures (e.g. the SDG Monitoring Portal in Indonesia, and the District SDG Scorecard in Pakistan). These examples underscore the prominent role that technology and digitalization play in assisting MPs and parliamentary staff in the oversight of SDG implementation. Importantly, however, such innovative approaches and online tools are not yet widely used, at least in the countries studied.

Even though the formulation of national development plans is normally the responsibility of government, some parliaments are nevertheless contributing to the early, priority-setting stages of national planning and implementation in relation to the SDGs (e.g. Spain, Thailand, Türkiye, Uganda). As a result, these parliaments are at an advantage in the subsequent stages of adoption and implementation, ensuring that the SDGs are fully mainstreamed into policies. In Thailand, for instance, early engagement in the formulation of the national development plan allowed parliament to draw up a criteria-based assessment framework for drafting and passing legislation that enables the implementation of national development priorities. In Uganda, meanwhile, parliament has developed a certificate of compliance, which evaluates how proposed sectoral budget allocations comply with and support the implementation of the national development priorities under the third national development plan. Such early involvement could be instrumental to securing broader ownership of the national development agenda, and to the continuous engagement of parliament in the subsequent stages of implementation, monitoring and impact assessment.

Turning to the use of innovative approaches in the core functions of parliament, the review found a growing interest among MPs and staff in using practice-driven methods and tools to support the achievement of the SDGs. In addition to the examples of Indonesia and Pakistan as detailed above, the Institutional Policies Information System in Nicaragua has proven to be a useful tool for integrating the SDG targets into legislation. In Spain, meanwhile, the government is required to present an annual report on the alignment of the general State budget with the SDGs, giving individual MPs an opportunity to share detailed feedback and to express their concerns on specific funding lines and planned expenditures. In some of the reviewed cases, citizens and civil society groups have taken the initiative to influence the law-making process (e.g. the open parliament initiative in Mexico, or the inclusive and participatory process by which national climate change commitments are defined in Fiji). Approaches such as these provide an invaluable opportunity to promote domestic accountability for the SDGs. Yet, out of the nearly 70 parliamentary practices reviewed, specific tools and mechanisms to foster the achievement of the SDGs were only observed in a handful of cases.

Apart from the efforts to localize the SDGs undertaken by the special commission in Mexico, the review found limited evidence of specific, local parliamentary actions. Some activities were undertaken by MPs in Indonesia, Kenya, Pakistan and Serbia, where they held public hearings and consultations outside the premises of the parliament, and organized regular field visits and local public discussions on specific issues related to the SDGs. However, this is not enough to foster any kind of systematic approach that would enable MPs to take more comprehensive action on localization of the SDGs.

A lack of information meant it was challenging to assess the extent to which the SDGs are incorporated into political party programmes or internal party structures (e.g. dedicated working groups or focal points).

The review identified a number of challenges, which were either raised by MPs and staff members during consultations or observed by the external consultant during the exercise. Some of these challenges were context-specific but others were common across parliaments. One of these common challenges related to the technical capacity and specialized skills MPs and staff needed to make a tangible impact and to produce recommendations on improving implementation of the SDGs. For this reason, many of the interviewees emphasized the importance of existing training programmes and similar initiatives, which help to build skills and knowledge among parliamentarians and parliamentary staff. Although most of the parliaments reviewed have organized capacity-building workshops, lectures and seminars on the SDGs, often in cooperation with UNDP, fully fledged continuing education programmes on this topic are yet to be properly rolled out. Moreover, the complex nature of the interlinkages between the SDGs, and the interactions between targets, requires an integrated approach to SDG planning, implementation and oversight. As a result, many of the MPs have not attained the necessary expertise and knowledge to “navigate the nuances” around the achievement of the SDGs – a situation that is further compounded by regular turnover linked to their mandates.

In many of the developing contexts studied for this review, access to the financial, human, technological and other resources required to support the implementation of the SDGs poses another major challenge. In addition to this, the review suggested that parliaments are not yet channelling sufficient resources towards identified weaknesses or investing in the use of new tools and innovative methods to accelerate progress towards national development priorities and/or the SDGs. Consequently, most of the parliaments examined for this exercise do not fully integrate the SDGs into their everyday work or into regular parliamentary procedures.

The case studies emerging from this review can be viewed as a starting point for discussion on how parliaments can properly engage in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. They outline emerging experiences, working arrangements, and practical tools and methods that can be replicated and adapted to a larger group of countries.

Conclusions and recommendations

Although not all parliamentary practices observed in the desk review resulted in a full or thematic case study, the exercise made it possible to compare experiences between parliaments – by looking at concrete outcomes and processes – thereby promoting discussion on how parliaments can improve their engagement in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. In addition, the review unveiled specific issues and practices that had previously been largely overlooked, such as using participatory methods to draft legislation, giving a voice to poor, marginalized and vulnerable groups in budgetary allocations, introducing innovative methods for data collection and monitoring, and participating in reporting on the SDGs.

In light of the findings of the review, the input provided directly by MPs and staff members during the consultations, and the external consultant’s own observations, the IPU could take a number of follow-up actions:

- Develop training programmes focused on the SDGs, divided into levels and thematic modules (social, economic, environmental and cross-cutting issues, interlinkages, etc.), to facilitate the building of skills and knowledge among MPs and staff members.
- Organize, on a continuous basis, ad hoc capacity-building workshops, thematic seminars and exchange meetings which, instead of focusing on a broader range of issues related to the SDGs, target a specific concern or practical tool/method for a particular geopolitical region or subgroup of countries facing a similar set of problems.
- Follow up on the 2018 and 2021 global surveys by developing user-friendly questionnaires and reporting formats, which would enable the Organization to better reflect on identified weaknesses and build on the strengths of parliaments in advancing implementation of the SDGs through knowledge-sharing.
- Create an online platform for the SDGs, as a dedicated web page on the IPU website, in response to the interest of parliaments in using practical tools and innovative approaches. This platform could host resources including country examples and parliamentary case studies; handbooks, publications and other materials; tools and methods used in different

countries to enable the achievement of the SDGs, such as information about specific laws or drafting/enacting procedures; and mechanisms for monitoring or scrutinizing government budgets and actions.

- Build on the positive experience of the twinning programme between the parliaments of Austria and Zambia by evaluating the impact of such initiatives, and consider introducing/facilitating similar programmes with a “twinning” element (working with international or bilateral development agencies).
- Pilot capacity-building workshops or knowledge-sharing meetings in priority countries, working jointly with UNDP. These initiatives could cover topics such as SDG 16, law reform initiatives or needs assessments in relation to goals such as SDG 3 or SDG 13, the establishment of a dedicated committee on the SDGs, or engagement with other oversight institutions.
- Take prioritized, targeted actions, in a handful of least developed countries and small island developing States, geared towards designing standardized parliamentary methods/procedures for overseeing the delivery of ODA, such as guaranteeing that ODA is spent effectively and transparently, is integrated into the national budget and sufficiently contributes to the achievement of national development priorities and/or the SDGs (recognizing that the IPU is not a development agency).
- Consider repeating the review exercise in two years, or at another regular interval as appropriate, in order to check whether any new IPU measures (including those recommended above) have had the desired impact, as well as to build a picture of evolving parliamentary practices.