



## **Strengthening multilateralism: The role of parliaments at the UN**

### **IPU's submission to the UN High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism**

#### **Background**

The IPU has significantly stepped up its efforts to bring a “parliamentary dimension” to the work of the UN since the late 1990s, when the promise of globalization was beginning to falter. The IPU was among the first to argue that, in the face of mounting global challenges, the UN-led multilateral system could only deliver for the people if it included parliaments and parliamentarians, along with civil society and others, in its decision-making and implementation processes.

The 2000 UN Millennium Declaration stressed the important contribution of parliaments and the IPU to the UN's work. Heads of State and Government called upon the United Nations to more systematically engage with parliaments through the IPU as their world organization on a wide range of issues. Since then, a number of high-level political statements and IPU initiatives have placed parliaments and parliamentarians on the UN radar. Yet, despite considerable strides over the years, the inclusion of parliamentary voices in UN debates and follow up processes remains uneven and well below scale. The parliamentary dimension to the UN has yet to reach “critical mass” at the political and operational levels.

As recently as 2020, the Fifth World Conference of Speakers of Parliament called for a stronger, rules-based multilateral system. As the speakers said: *“Common challenges can only be overcome through global responses, coordination and collaboration between all our nations. We therefore reaffirm the key role of multilateralism, with the United Nations at its core. We also firmly support the IPU's efforts to engage and mobilize parliaments and parliamentarians around major international processes and global commitments....We must continue to review, revitalize and renew multilateralism, so as to ensure that the voices of parliamentarians are heard at the United Nations and other international fora.”*

#### **IPU's approach to the UN**

As the world organization of national parliaments whose membership closely mirrors that of the United Nations, the IPU is uniquely positioned to help *institutionalize* the parliaments-UN relationship. IPU action in this respect is articulated in four key objectives:

1. Bring the views of parliaments and parliamentarians to bear on UN decision-making processes, adding critical elements or validating decisions already made.
2. Help parliaments hold governments accountable for their UN commitments, as in the case of international treaties and conventions, and for UN resolutions and declarations (General Assembly, ECOSOC, Security Council etc.).
3. Build political support amongst the world's citizens for the United Nations as the leading global governance institution.

4. Facilitate the implementation of UN agreements through enabling legislation and budgetary allocations.

These objectives form a continuum from input to output, or from words to action. While all four objectives are important, in reality greater advances have been made on the last two objectives that have to do with the UN institutionally and with the implementation of UN commitments. The first two more *political* objectives have proven more difficult in the face of Member States' seeming reluctance to subject themselves to parliamentary oversight.

For the IPU, the **main pathway** to providing a parliamentary perspective to UN processes is at the *national level*, that is by engaging each national parliament with its own government in relevant UN decision-making processes. The idea is to utilize existing oversight and legislative structures at the national level to put parliaments in a position to weigh in directly on what their governments are saying or doing at the UN on behalf of their people.

This is complemented by IPU action to mobilize MPs from the relevant parliamentary select committees around issues that are high on the international agenda (sustainable development, climate change, human rights, etc.) and thus help bridge the gap between decision-making at the international and, respectively, the national level. In practice, IPU efforts to engage national parliaments with the UN consist primarily of the following modalities:

- Encourage the inclusion of parliamentarians in national delegations to UN meetings and conferences (in keeping with recommendations from the biennial UNGA Resolutions on Interaction between the United Nations, national parliaments and the IPU).
- Organize parliamentary meetings in conjunction with major UN conferences and processes, including meetings held at the Human Rights Council, the HLPF, the CSW, the COP of the UNFCCC, HLMs on health, WTO ministerial meetings, as well as occasional treaty-making processes (e.g., the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, the new Convention on cybercrime, etc).
- Hold an annual Parliamentary Hearing in conjunction with a major UN process (organized jointly with the Office of the President of the General Assembly).
- Engage parliaments (through surveys and information exchanges) in key reporting exercises of the UN such as the Voluntary National Reviews of the HLPF, the Universal Periodic Review of the Human Rights Council, the national reports to the CEDAW, and the national reports on military expenditures filed with the UN Office of Disarmament Affairs.
- Encourage UN Country Teams to engage parliaments in the national development plans and related processes and to help strengthen the capacities of parliaments with regard to their main functions (oversight, legislation, representation).
- Highlight UN debates and processes in IPU's Assemblies and specialized meetings.
- Produce information/capacity building materials/tools (guidance notes, handbooks, etc.) for parliaments on global issues of mutual concern for the IPU and UN (e.g., climate change, SDGs, disarmament).

At the operational level at least, the relationship between the IPU and the UN is coordinated through regular "leadership meetings" between the IPU Secretary General and the UN Deputy Secretary General. While these meetings are very useful to discuss common strategies and work plans, they cannot be a substitute for more political discussions that need to happen between the Member States represented in the General Assembly and the global parliamentary community that is represented by the IPU.

### **UN's approach to the parliamentary community**

While welcoming IPU's efforts to bring the voices of parliaments and parliamentarians to the UN, in practice the UN approach to the parliamentary community could be more consistent, stronger political will and leadership could be demonstrated and more resources invested to fully institutionalize the

parliaments-UN relationship. Greater consistency is needed not only across UN bodies but also within the larger UN system of specialized agencies and programmes.

Through its biennial resolutions on *Interaction between the United Nations, national parliaments and the IPU*, the General Assembly has come to endorse formally many of the modalities of engagement that the IPU has established or recommended over the years. Yet, these same modalities are not applied automatically and consistently by the various members-led UN processes and are often subject to “re-negotiation” depending on the politics and actors of the day.

Illustrations of this include:

- The practice of including parliamentarians in national delegations to the UN is entirely voluntary and up to each Member State. Modalities resolutions for important UN conferences encourage this practice all too infrequently. When parliamentarians are included in national delegations, there is no clear rule or guideline to encourage the widest possible political representation, including from opposition parties, nor encouragement to include women MPs and young MPs –two key constituencies that remain under-represented in global governance.
- The practice of holding a parliamentary meeting in preparation for or at major UN conferences remains very much ad hoc. Such meetings are almost always the initiative of the IPU, not of the UN, and therefore are not part of the official process. Here too, it is rare that modalities resolutions of major UN conferences outline a “parliamentary track” to gather the input of parliamentarians.
- The joint annual Parliamentary Hearing at the UN is considered an *informal* meeting as opposed to a mandated, calendar meeting of the United Nations. The Hearing is entirely paid for by the IPU and does not yet register as an opportunity for the UN to consult with the parliamentary community as very few representatives of permanent missions participate.
- The parliamentary engagement in the national reports to the UN bodies charged with monitoring the implementation of international commitments (on human rights, gender, children rights, SDGs, and military expenditures) should be standardized. In particular, the Voluntary National Reviews presented to the HLPF fail to engage parliaments in a meaningful way despite UN guidelines to that effect. Whether and *how* parliaments participate in the reporting exercise is a concern to the IPU but not to the official UN process. The IPU is excluded from the Group of Friends of the VNRs where the participation of parliaments in each VNR cycle could be discussed.
- Following recent reforms of the UN development system, maintaining relations with parliament has been added to the official job description for Resident Coordinators (mainly at the initiative of the IPU). However, there is no specific, detailed guideline to RC’s as to the key steps they need to take with the parliament of the host country, nor is there a systematic report back to ECOSOC or other body to provide a comprehensive overview of the work UN Country Teams carry out with parliaments.
- The inclusion of parliamentarians in SG-appointed high level advisory groups and in UN mediation teams (as recommended in the latest GA interaction resolution) is highly discretionary and inconsistent.

In addition, and as suggested above, the IPU and the world parliamentary community it represents at the UN is still seen as just one of many interlocutors of the UN on a par with civil society, the private sector and other so-called “stakeholders”. There is no compelling *strategic partnership* between the UN and parliaments to incentivize transformative action by Member States in their respective national domains. The regular resolutions of the General Assembly on *Interaction between the UN, national parliaments and the IPU* have become perfunctory and do not provide a real opportunity to help renew the UN from within. More broadly, the fact that parliaments are key institutions of government (distinct from the executive) with essential legislative, budgetary and oversight functions has yet to be recognized in practice.

## **Recommendations to the HLAB**

The High-Level Advisory Board may wish to consider the following recommendations as part of its report to the General Assembly in January 2023:

1. The General Assembly should standardize the contribution and participation of parliaments, including through the IPU, in major meetings of the UN so that the same modalities apply across the board and in a way that recognizes the distinct role of parliaments versus that of civil society, the business community and other constituencies.
2. The parliamentary meetings that accompany official UN sessions (e.g., the Parliamentary Meeting at the Commission on the Status of Women, the Parliamentary Meeting at the UNFCCC COP, the Parliamentary Forum at HLPF, etc.) should be recognized as “joint meetings” that are part of the official UN process. Parliaments should also systematically be included in the various UN reporting exercises.
3. Mainstreaming the relationship between parliaments and the UN system as a whole should be a regular item on the agenda of the Chief Executives Board (CEB).
4. Modalities should be developed for a systematic engagement of parliaments by the UN Country Teams, accompanied by regular reporting to the relevant UN bodies.
5. To further expand the UN's political engagement with parliaments, the mandate of the President of the General Assembly (PGA) should include a clearly defined role vis-à-vis the global parliamentary community. As part of this, the PGA should work to ensure that all major conferences of the UN, special sessions of the General Assembly, and other high-profile UN meetings provide space for a parliamentary perspective/contribution.