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Pursuing climate action and sustainable development: the role of parliaments in enhancing policy coherence

10-11 August 2023, San José (Costa Rica)

Summary report

More than 39 participants hailing from 9 diverse countries convened in San José, Costa Rica, on 10 and 11 August to engage in a regional seminar on climate change and sustainable development, focusing on the parliaments of Latin America and the Caribbean. The seminar was a collaborative effort between the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and the Legislative Assembly of Costa Rica and marked a significant stride towards fostering awareness and action on pressing environmental and developmental issues in the region.

The seminar provided a space for an urgent inter-parliamentary dialogue on how to address climate change and sustainable development issues in the region, comprising expert presentations and plenary discussions. The seminar is part of an annual regional initiative and follows previous seminars held in Suriname (2018), Trinidad and Tobago (2021) and Uruguay (2022). The events brought together parliamentarians from diverse countries to exchange experiences, share best practices and gain insights into climate action strategies. As a result, these gatherings have facilitated the establishment of regional networks and enabled parliamentarians to collaborate on shared climate-related concerns.

This seminar's main goal was to discover effective ways for parliaments in the Latin American and Caribbean region to actively combat climate change. It also aimed to ensure that climate agreements, both at national and international levels, were put into practice. The discussions were enriched by the exchange of successful methods, real-life experiences and valuable lessons learned. Participants included members of parliament and parliamentary staff, current and former government representatives, and experts from the United Nations and civil society including from underrepresented groups such as youth and indigenous people's associations.



Figure 1: Participants at the Regional seminar on climate action and sustainable development for parliaments of Latin America and the Caribbean

Field visit

The seminar also featured a field visit to three projects designed to familiarize parliamentarians with the ongoing environmental and sustainable development endeavours being pursued in Costa Rica.

The experimental farm “La Hilda”, represents an example of a successful public-private partnership between producers and academia in executing research programmes and knowledge transfer. Here, parliamentarians explored projects aimed at adapting coffee cultivation to environmental changes. Insights included coffee's impact on carbon sequestration in soils, carbon dynamics, risk management, efficient water usage and climate resilience.

CoopeVictoria, Costa Rica's inaugural cooperative, demonstrated their dedication to climate action and other indicators of sustainable development through environmental protection initiatives and the use of clean technologies, the strengthening of gender policies and support for women entrepreneurs.

Central Valley Wind Park facilitated parliamentarians’ firsthand understanding of the National Power and Electricity Company’s wind energy policy. The wind farm prevented over 90,300 tonnes of CO₂ emissions since its launch in December 2012, generating clean, emissions-free energy for 12,000 metropolitan residents.



Figure 2: Participants at the Central Valley Wind Park

Special address: Exploring the frontiers of clean energy: biogas, hydrogen and plasma

In this special video address, retired NASA astronaut and scientist Franklin Chang-Díaz shared his insights and experience in developing a groundbreaking engine using biogas, hydrogen and plasma. He drew on his experiences in space and on the development of the engine to highlight the potential for clean energy transformation in Costa Rica and beyond. He discussed collaborations and strategic alliances with multiple companies underscoring the importance of partnerships and joint ventures in advancing clean energy technologies.



Figure 3: Franklin Chang-Díaz delivers video address to parliamentarians

Session I: Setting the scene: An overview of climate change and sustainable development in Latin America and the Caribbean

This session provided participants with an overview of recent climate change and sustainable development trends in Latin America and the Caribbean. The presentations collectively underscored how parliaments play a crucial role in enhancing policy coherence, establishing robust legal frameworks, budgetary functions, and in oversight to address climate change and related issues. The environmental impact of decades of inadequate methods of production and consumption were highlighted and alarming trends relating to democratic crises and gender-based violence were noted. There was an urgent need for global solidarity, gender equality and support for countries' development while protecting the environment. Additionally, the importance of regional cooperation and equitable economics was highlighted. Shortfalls in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were noted, and urgent action to limit global warming was encouraged. The need for sustainable practices, effective laws, and legislative support for meteorological services, early warnings, coordination, and climate-responsive planning was discussed. The impacts of extreme weather on agriculture and economies were highlighted, alongside calls for national accountability and stronger utilization of countries' strengths in addressing the ongoing planetary crisis.

Recommendations for parliamentarians:

Legislation: Strengthen, develop and support national legislation that aligns with international climate agreements and ensures coherent policies for climate action and sustainable development. Introduce legislation that incentivizes industries to adopt sustainable practices and reduce carbon emissions.

Climate funds: Advocate for budget allocations that prioritize climate-related initiatives, including green technologies ensuring sufficient resources for effective implementation.

Oversight responsibilities: Enhance parliamentary oversight responsibilities to maintain transparency, hold governments accountable for their climate commitments and progress towards the SDGs. Encourage better coordination between different institutions and sectors involved in climate adaptation and mitigation efforts.

Gender-responsive policies: Champion policies that address gender disparities exacerbated by climate change and empower women to be active participants in climate action.

Regional collaboration and global solidarity: Promote collaboration among parliamentarians across the region to share best practices and harmonize climate policies for maximum impact.

Meteorological services: Recognize the significance of accurate meteorological data for disaster preparedness and advocate for resources to strengthen these services.



Figure 4: Mr. J Troya UNDP addressing the participants of the seminar.

Session II: Protecting the region's oceans and biodiversity.

During this session the spotlight was on safeguarding the oceanic biodiversity of Latin America and the Caribbean, delving into the necessary parliamentary actions to ensure the protection of these vital marine ecosystems at the country level and through collaborative regional efforts. Presentations highlighted the intertwined challenges of poverty, inequality and climate change in the region, stressing the importance of addressing them collectively. The imperative to detach development from carbon emissions was accentuated, along with the call for a responsible approach to ocean preservation if the region is to achieve sustainable economic growth while simultaneously reducing the harmful environmental effects that threaten ecosystems, societies and economies. The multifaceted significance of the ocean – as an ecosystem, protein source and energy resource – was underscored, along with its vital role in regulating temperatures and absorbing carbon. The discussion explored the drivers of ocean degradation, including overexploitation, ocean acidification and poor governance followed by a comprehensive outline of strategies designed to enhance ocean health. These strategies encompassed the establishment of marine protected areas and the need for improved governance.

The session concluded with a call to parliamentarians to prioritize mangrove protection, enhance coordination among coastal governments, and address the intricate challenges of regional governance. Additionally, participants discussed local initiatives in national contexts, including legislative endeavours aimed at safeguarding coastal biodiversity and the establishment of marine conservation zones, among others.

Recommendations for parliamentarians:

Align legislation with SDG14: Advocate for laws that establish marine protected areas and collaborate with relevant institutions to monitor their effective monitoring and enforcement.

Strengthen ocean governance: Advocate in parliament for the implementation of the United Nations Ocean Treaty. Develop and enact laws for international cooperation in governance and conservation efforts.

End harmful fishing subsidies: Develop and support legislation aimed at eliminating subsidies that encourage overfishing. Redirect funds towards sustainable fishing practices and ocean conservation efforts.

Combat plastic pollution and reduce fertilizer use: Introduce bills to reduce single-use plastics and enforce waste management. Develop laws to reduce coastal fertilizer pollution.

Transition to renewable energy: Advocate for offshore wind and hydrogen energy transition. Emphasize the importance of reducing environmental risks associated with oil and gas extraction, which can harm marine ecosystems.

Support biodiversity regeneration: Allocate funds for marine protected areas and biodiversity regeneration. Support international agreements designed to protect and regenerate marine ecosystems.

Recommendations for parliamentarians (continued):

Foster and oversee multisectoral collaboration: Promote multisector collaboration to collectively address ocean conservation and sustainable management. Ensure that mechanisms for measuring progress are developed and that data is shared to track the impact of conservation initiatives.

Emphasize the economic benefits of ocean conservation: Advocate for policies that promote entrepreneurship and investment in green and sustainable industries. Monitor and emphasize the potential for job creation and economic growth through environmentally friendly practices and technologies.



Figure 5: Mr. Jose Maria Figueres Olsen (far left) ex-president of the Republic of Costa Rica addressing the regional seminar.

Session III: Public engagement on climate change: Hearing the voices of underrepresented groups

This session focused on enhancing public participation in climate change, particularly by amplifying the voices of marginalized groups. It also explored opportunities for engagement in implementing climate-related goals and emphasized involving vulnerable communities, including women, youth and indigenous people in decision-making processes.

The session featured presentations on the efforts of Costa Rican civil society in combating climate change and promoting sustainable development through local governments and the Civic Environmental Parliament. The speakers highlighted the role of local governments in sustainable development and the challenges faced by underrepresented groups due to environmental degradation, weak institutions and new challenges such as environmental migration and “narco-degradation”. The urgency of youth engagement in climate action was emphasized, focusing on political advocacy, communication, climate education and volunteering. The speakers stressed the need for parliamentary support in taking immediate action and integrating youth voices in decision-making. Also highlighted were indigenous perspectives in addressing environmental challenges, and waste management, and the importance of including indigenous communities in policymaking. The session concluded by underscoring the importance of continued efforts, particularly in involving youth and indigenous populations, and the necessity for collaboration

between civil society and political bodies to address the pressing challenges posed by climate change and environmental degradation.

Recommendations for parliamentarians:

Promote inclusive climate legislation: Develop and support climate-focused legislation that prioritizes public participation, particularly from underrepresented groups.

Strengthen representation of vulnerable groups: Ensure climate policies consider the perspectives and needs of marginalized communities, including women, youth and indigenous peoples, by supporting their meaningful engagement in parliamentary climate decision-making.

Enhance regional environmental agreements: Improve the implementation of regional environmental agreements, such as the Escazú Agreement. Advocate for aligning national laws with these agreements.

Support local climate governance: Empower and fund local governments to effectively execute climate initiatives, recognizing their pivotal role in climate action and sustainable development.

Oversee environmental policies: Scrutinize environmental policies’ impact on underrepresented groups, ensuring equitable resource allocation and targeting vulnerable communities effectively.

Engage youth in climate action: Acknowledge and support youth contributions to climate action and advocacy. Promote policies facilitating their participation in climate decision-making and allocate resources to support youth-led environmental initiatives.

Recognize indigenous environmental stewardship: Acknowledge indigenous communities’ crucial role in conserving natural resources and biodiversity. Advocate for policies that respect and incorporate indigenous knowledge into environmental legislation, protecting their rights and the environment.



Figure 6: MP Cheryl Dijksteel of Suriname addressing the seminar participants.

Session IV: Greening parliaments

The session emphasized the pivotal role of parliaments and parliamentarians in fostering a culture of sustainability. A presentation from a representative of the Parliament of Uruguay discussed the steps Parliament had taken to address the climate crisis ranging from the creation of a dedicated Ministry of Environment, creation of environmental legislation, innovative water management practices, the promotion of renewable energy to the incentivization of environmentally responsible practices among public officials and civil society. A representative of the Costa Rican Legislative Assembly gave a presentation on the design and construction of the Legislative Assembly building itself showing the sustainable design considerations incorporated throughout. These included methods to increase the building's energy efficiency through ventilation and insulation, the reuse of water and use of alternative energies. The presentation also highlighted: the choice of materials, such as low-maintenance wood, cork, and durable wall materials; the integration of green spaces; electromechanical systems' CO2 reduction; water and electricity conservation; and efficient lighting utilization.

Participants discussed personal commitments and initiatives they intended to carry back to their respective parliaments for the purpose of promoting environmental sustainability. These commitments encompass a wide range of actions, including fostering bipartisan cooperation and prioritizing environmental matters, efforts to reduce the carbon footprint of their institutions, becoming champions for climate action, and advocating for the development and promotion of environmental policies.

10 Actions for Greener Parliaments

Visit: <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/reference/2023-03/10-actions-greener-parliaments>

Institutionalizing the greening of parliaments

1. Track emissions from parliament's operations and set clear targets to reduce them
2. Promote transparency in the greening process
3. Strive for climate-resilient parliamentary operations

Greening the way parliaments and their members work

4. Make sure parliamentary business is conducted in sustainable, water- and energy-efficient premises
5. Implement green procurement policies
6. Make parliament's transportation sustainable
7. Embrace digitalization

Leading and fostering a culture of sustainable change:

8. Foster a culture of sustainability and climate awareness
9. Become a climate champion
10. Prioritize collaboration and knowledge-sharing



Figure 7: Senator Irene Moreira of Uruguay addressing the seminar participants

During the group's closing reflections, the consensus emerged that the journey through environmental matters had been enriching, leading to the acquisition of invaluable insights. The key takeaways from the discussions underlined the urgent need for collaborative parliamentary action to safeguard regional resources, recognizing that the impact of climate change transcends borders. The discussions also highlighted the essential role of parliamentarians in building resilience, addressing inequalities, and forging a strong link between environmental considerations and economic prosperity.