



Inter-Parliamentary Union
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Third Regional Seminar on Achieving the SDGs for the IPU's Twelve Plus Geopolitical Group

18–19 January 2024, Paris, France

SUMMARY REPORT

More than 70 participants from 18 countries in the region gathered in Paris on 18 and 19 January 2024 for the Third Regional Seminar on Achieving the SDGs for the IPU's Twelve Plus Geopolitical Group. The seminar, organized jointly by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and the French Parliament, was opened by Mr. Gérard Larcher, President of the French Senate, Mr. Martin Chungong, IPU Secretary General, and Mr. Xavier Iacovelli, Executive President of the French IPU Group.

The seminar, the programme of which is attached, enabled parliamentarians to take stock of the implementation of the SDGs, and to discuss ways in which they could contribute to the achievement of these ambitious goals, adopted in 2015.

The seminar was held over two days. On Thursday, 18 January, three thematic round tables focused on: sustainable development and the ecological transition, equal opportunities and resilient health systems, and open parliaments and innovation. On Friday, 19 January, the sessions focused on the link between the Olympic and Paralympic Games and sustainable development, with a round-table discussion and visits to two of the sites under preparation for the Paris 2024 Games, at the initiative of the French Parliament. The delegations present in Paris visited the future Athletes' Village and the Olympic Aquatic Centre.

The round tables enabled participants to benefit from the expertise of renowned representatives of international organizations (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, World Health Organization, UNESCO, IPU) and national bodies (French Ministry for Ecological Transition and Territorial Cohesion, French Development Agency), as well as representatives from academia (French Institute of International Relations, Sciences Po Paris, University of London), experts and parliamentarians from various countries. Together, they debated the challenges posed by the implementation of the SDGs and proposed courses of action to accelerate their implementation. The participants agreed that the time had come to take action, given that the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences, as well as the many strategic crises destabilizing the world, were resulting in a slowing down, and sometimes even a backsliding, of the 2030 Agenda.

A summary of the key points and recommendations discussed at the event can be found below.

Session 1: Running for sustainable development and the green transition

The first session gave an overview of the current status of implementation of the SDGs in the Twelve Plus countries, focusing on climate and the ecological transition. According to data gathered by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), poverty has fallen in most countries, but not fast enough. The UNECE's latest report on progress towards the SDGs also indicates that in a third of the countries for which data is available, more than 20% of the population is still living below the monetary poverty line. This example alone illustrates the scale of the challenges that remain to be

met between now and 2030, the date by which the 169 targets of the 17 SDGs adopted in 2015 are supposed to be achieved.

Both experts and parliamentarians pointed out that, at the halfway point of the 2030 Agenda, progress with implementation of the SDGs is disappointing. Moreover, at a time when the world is facing several systemic crises – particularly health crises – and the strategic upheavals emerging around the world, there is a risk that the SDGs will be “left by the wayside”.

Against this backdrop, the debates highlighted the urgent need to accelerate reforms and efforts to achieve the SDGs. The issues that urgently need to be addressed concern macro factors – such as existing conflicts – but also structural questions. There is a need to better understand the interconnections between the different SDGs, and to improve both the quality and quantity of the statistical data about them, in order to be able to assess the whole set of SDGs, since many of the targets cannot be assessed due to a lack of sufficient data. The SDGs were adopted in 2015, the same year as the Paris Agreement, and are closely linked to the fight against climate change, so a large part of the discussions were devoted to this aspect.

The discussions first focused on the main commitments made at the 28th United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP28) in December 2023, which also included the first global stocktake on the Paris Agreement. The reference in those commitments to “transitioning away from fossil fuels” goes a long way towards explaining why many commentators have described this COP and the agreement reached there as “historic”.

In order to achieve the objectives of the Paris Agreement and implement the outcomes of COP28, in particular in terms of transitioning away from fossil fuels, it was agreed that parliaments should support stronger and more ambitious Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs). Discussions also covered the need for countries to focus on transforming into low-carbon economies and to invest in renewable energy, as well as to set targets to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050.

The COPs are an indispensable forum for discussion at the international level, particularly for those countries most exposed to the consequences of climate change or which, because of their small size, population or economy, have no other opportunity to assert their positions vis-à-vis the “big” or most polluting countries. However, the COPs also have their weaknesses, notably because their conclusions are not binding, as the parties are only “called upon” to commit to the recommendations therein. Participants emphasized that taking action, including financial action, was essential to ensure that the fight against climate change remained at the forefront of national and international policies.

This session was also an opportunity for several of the Twelve Plus countries to present initiatives they had implemented, in the form of contributions from national experts and through the speeches of numerous delegations. France’s national strategy for implementing the SDGs was also presented.

In addition, several key actions were highlighted that parliaments could consider to accelerate the implementation of the SDGs and the ecological transition:

- Integrate the SDGs at institutional level into the main parliamentary functions (drafting and voting on laws and the budget, oversight of government action and evaluation of public policy, representation of constituents, creation of specialized bodies on the SDGs and the associated issues).
- Strengthen collaboration and dialogue between parliaments in order to encourage the sharing of experience, as well as between parliaments and other actors.
- Encourage actions that address existing problems in a comprehensive and structural manner, finding solutions that take into account the links between the SDGs.
- Systematically follow an approach that takes account of social, environmental and economic issues in the development of legislation and public policy.
- Strengthen the collection and use of quality data to ensure that decision-making is always based on factual and reliable information.
- Ensure that legislation takes into account the rights of future generations.
- Encourage participation in and contribute to the voluntary national review process as part of government oversight activities, and ensure that national development plans, policies and budgets are adequately aligned with the SDGs and implemented consistently and effectively.

- Support legislation that prioritizes renewable energy and ensure that appropriate funding is allocated to clean energy initiatives.
- Use parliaments' oversight role to encourage, where necessary, governments to update and strengthen its nationally determined contributions by 2025.
- Close the climate finance gap by ensuring that developed countries provide sufficient support to developing countries, which are on the front line of climate change.
- Strengthen international partnerships and knowledge-sharing on climate action by supporting cooperation between parliaments, but also with governments, civil society and climate experts.

Session 2: Racing for equal opportunities for all and building resilient health systems

This session focused on health issues. Four years after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, strengthening health care systems and their resilience is more of a priority than ever in order to cope with future health crises, ensure equal access to health care for all, reduce inequalities (between and within countries) and guarantee health security. Although undeniable progress has been made in recent years in improving global health, major challenges remain. According to data provided by the World Health Organization (WHO), 5 billion people around the world still do not have access to basic health care. This problem affects both low- and high-income countries, even though everyone agrees that the people most exposed to health risks are the poorest and most vulnerable.

However, the last 15 years have shown increasing levels of crisis in health care systems, for several reasons: the industrialization of health care systems and the increasing complexity of care procedures, a vocational crisis leading to growing shortages of health care professionals, and an explosion in funding requirements, particularly as a result of the ageing of societies. Moreover, access to health care remains unequal, and indeed is very poor for certain populations or in certain locations. New challenges are also emerging, even in countries with well-established health care systems, requiring a rethink of prevention, the way health care professionals work, their training, and the use of new technologies. In this respect, artificial intelligence offers opportunities to improve access to health care and the effectiveness of certain health care interventions, provided it is well-regulated.

Ultimately, it is the very notion of resilience that needs to be rethought, incorporating more sophisticated thinking on the links between human health and climate change, migration, the environment, and geopolitical and demographic upheaval. In addition, for countries with more fragile health systems, it is essential to move away from a humanitarian approach – i.e. emergency aid – towards an institutional approach, which is the only way to strengthen health systems over the long term and make them more robust. Such an approach must necessarily be accompanied by determined action on prevention and health education, which are fundamental elements in the resilience of health systems: without a robust health system, there can be no quality education; without quality education, there can be no robust health system.

Participants discussed the importance of strengthening health systems in order to improve the response to health emergencies and achieve greater equity in access to health care. The involvement of communities and stakeholders is necessary to build more inclusive systems that look after the needs and rights of all populations and build trust. Equity, including gender equity, is also a key principle of decision-making processes. Parliaments were encouraged to consider how legislation can facilitate inclusive participation, particularly of marginalized groups, as well as providing a legal basis for extending access to health services. In addition, action in the health sector must be part of wider action in favour of education, information and the fight against inequalities and vulnerabilities such as poverty and social exclusion.

Key actions identified during the discussions included:

- Ask the State to invest more in order to respond to pre-existing inequalities and to act on several fronts.
- Negotiate for more funds dedicated to pandemic response and more resilient healthcare systems.
- Promote access to health care for all; promote a people-centred approach, which aims to eliminate barriers to health care access.
- Identify new sources of funding and direct investment towards health care systems and the training of health care personnel.

- Promote close collaboration between the education and health sectors, as education is the foundation of a resilient health system.
- Put in place prevention and protection systems that also include measures to verify the information that is shared with citizens – to avoid the spread of “fake news”.

Session 3: Open parliaments and innovation

This session addressed the issue of open parliaments in the context of SDG 16, which covers peace, justice and strong institutions.

In an international context marked by growing public mistrust of public institutions and increased questioning of representative democracy, parliaments have been led to question the way they operate and the way in which their role and the exercise of their constitutional missions are perceived by the public. Beyond this, citizens aspire to be more involved in the development of public policy and legislation, and also demand that public action and administrations be ever more transparent.

This explains the attention paid by many parliaments to the "Open Parliament" approach, even before the discussions undertaken as part of the Open Government Partnership (OGP) initiative, launched in 2011.

Participants noted that the relationship between parliaments and the public is constantly evolving and that transparency – which presents risks when it is absolute, sometimes leading to the debate spilling out of parliament – and dialogue are the basic tools for building trust between the people and their elected representatives.

Many parliaments have developed innovative ways of engaging the public in parliamentary work, not only so that citizens can be kept informed, but also so that parliaments can gather their experience, expertise and opinions through consultations, petitions, forums, participatory spaces and other initiatives. Open data platforms have also been set up to make freely usable data available to the public, both on parliaments' performance of their constitutional duties and on how they operate (budget, status and resources of members of parliament). In addition, to help restore citizens' trust in their elected representatives, proactive policies on transparency and ethics (appointment of an ethics officer or ethics body, drawing up codes of conduct, etc.) have been initiated in several parliaments.

The digital transformation of our societies is giving rise to many challenges, particularly in terms of artificial intelligence, its impact and the need for regulation, and the rise of social networks, which have both positive and negative influences. But this digital transformation is also a formidable tool for modernizing parliamentary practices. Online public hearings, consultations on draft legislation and petitions are all practices that are constantly evolving.

In this respect, the principle at the heart of the SDGs of "leaving no one behind" can be taken to another level. Parliament needs to hear all voices, including those of young people and the most marginalized. Technological advances can therefore be used to reduce the gap between society and institutions.

The Global Parliamentary Report 2022, which highlights numerous examples of good parliamentary practice and recommendations for strengthening public engagement, can serve as a benchmark in this area.

Measures to improve relations between parliament and the public include:

- Strengthen political commitment to transparency.
- Develop strategies for public engagement, with ambitious objectives, to ensure the coherence and effectiveness of activities involving the public.
- Increase diversity in parliaments in order to restore trust; increase the participation of women and of representatives of minority, marginalized or vulnerable groups; adopt approaches to reach out to and engage with new citizens, for example immigrants.
- Analyse the progress of parliaments in relation to targets 16.6 and 16.7 of the SDGs, using the reference framework provided by the new Indicators for Democratic Parliaments.

- Publish details of the work of parliament to help combat fake news and promote engagement with citizens, not just during election periods; strengthen links between the public and parliament.
- Promote the use of participatory tools, such as hybrid conferences, virtual forums or legislative workshops in constituencies, to encourage dialogue between citizens and parliamentarians.
- Be aware of the negative effects that total transparency can have on society; welcome this openness, but be aware of its limits.

To inspire further action on implementation of the SDGs, parliamentarians are encouraged to bring this document to the attention of their colleagues and to increase dialogue, actions and coordination of parliamentary work in this area.

The above-mentioned conclusions and recommendations will also be brought to the attention of parliamentarians from around the world during the next IPU Assembly, which will be held in Geneva, Switzerland from 23 to 27 March 2024.

In line with its 2022-2026 Strategy, the IPU stands ready to provide assistance to parliaments, in collaboration with its partners, to strengthen their technical capacities to effectively integrate the SDGs into their core functions (legislation, budgeting, oversight and representation) and to foster collective parliamentary action and dialogue to achieve sustainable development for all.