



Inter-Parliamentary Union
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T +41 22 919 41 50
F +41 22 919 41 60
E postbox@ipu.org
www.ipu.org

Chemin du Pommier 5
Case postale 330
1218 Le Grand-Saconnex
Geneva – Switzerland

Speech by Ms. Anda Filip, IPU Secretary General

Panel discussion

Promoting the sound development of AI and advance people's well-being through technological innovation

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Dear Chair, distinguished delegates,

Thank you to the National People's Congress for hosting this seminar, and for putting the issue of well-being and technological development high on its agenda.

Parliaments are critical institutions for development. They scrutinise whether national plans are delivered as promised, pass the laws and approve the budgets that allocate public investment, and critically they bring into that work the needs of the people who stand to benefit.

We meet four years from the deadline for the Sustainable Development Goals. The 2026 report on the Goals records that, of the 139 targets, 36 per cent are on track or making moderate progress. Fifteen per cent have fallen below where they stood in 2015. Official development assistance fell by 23 per cent in 2025, the largest annual decline ever recorded. Those numbers are stark and should set the terms of this discussion.

However, we are seeing remarkable change unfolding rapidly. Artificial intelligence is one of the few inputs to development that has become cheaper and more widely available over the past years. The World Bank's judgement is that AI could compress a century of development progress into a decade. For 6.8 billion people living in low- and middle-income countries, AI if used well could extend costly medical, legal, educational and agricultural services to underserved billions.

And we're seeing the benefits of many applications of AI for development. A farmer in Colombia can photograph a banana plant on a mobile telephone and receive a diagnosis of disease with 90% accuracy; in Tajikistan, AI-powered X-ray machines screened 120,000 people for tuberculosis in a year. In India, a maternal health service reaches 3.6 million women with voice messages generated by AI. For these countries, none of this required advanced AI companies or frontier computing power. Applications often required a mobile network, high-quality and contextual data and public institutions prepared to adopt it.

The experience of our hosts in China is highly instructive. We note in the "AI Plus" initiative there are national targets for use of AI in science and technology, industrial development, people's well-being and capabilities of governance institutions. We note that the recent establishment of the World AI Cooperation Organisation that puts capacity-building for developing countries as a central objective, in service of the 2030 Agenda. And we recognise that Chinese open AI models will be a foundation that entrepreneurs in developing countries can build on.

However, countries with the most to gain appear will need to be prepared. The World Bank has reported that more than 80 countries have published a national AI strategy, yet amongst the 25 low-income countries, only Rwanda has one. And it is the foundations that often matter more than the technology. In sub-Saharan Africa nearly one third of rural schools have no reliable electricity, more than two thirds have no dependable internet. Capturing value from AI is therefore a political question and not solely one of technology, and the foundation is effective governance and well-informed and prepared institutions.

This is where parliaments come in, and I want to be specific about what they contribute. Parliaments are the lawmaking body, and key foundations on AI are around data protection, privacy, consumer

protection, anti-discrimination law, cybersecurity and rules on public procurement. Reviewing these frameworks to help harness AI for well-being, and to uphold the rights of the public, is work that can start now.

Parliaments a critical check on the deployment of different AI applications, to ensure benefits are realised and touch all of society. Where a government has an AI strategy, parliament can ask what it delivered this year, and who the benefits reached. Where a public institution is using and procuring AI, parliament can ask what it costs, what evidence there is that it works, and who answers if it fails.

As elected representatives of the people, parliaments are also where the voices of people affected by AI can be brought into the discussion. The farmer who can now diagnose a diseased crop from a photograph. The nurse whose clinic can screen for tuberculosis without a laboratory. The graduate whose first job may not exist in the form it once did. Each of them is represented by someone in a chamber like yours, and their experience, of the benefits and of the costs, belongs in the decision-making process.

And at international level, the United Nations reported that 118 countries are not engaged in international AI governance, most of them in the Global South. IPU resolutions have called for increased international cooperation on AI, and stressed that international cooperation must prioritise the protection of human rights; that the concentration of AI power in a few actors is unacceptable; and that the Global South must have an equal voice in shaping the rules. At the first UN Global Dialogue on AI governance in Geneva in July, I argued that parliaments not only need to be able to contribute to discussions on international AI governance; but that parliaments also can help in finding political solutions to the challenges of cooperation.

The IPU's work on AI is guided by the 2024 resolution on AI and democracy, and the Kuala Lumpur Declaration on Parliaments and Responsible AI, adopted last November by more than 200 parliamentarians from 65 countries. This Declaration asks parliaments to hold governments to account for progress on national AI strategies so that the technology serves people's well-being. That is one of its 13 recommendations. Other recommendations speak directly to this seminar. They ask parliaments to build the knowledge of their members and staff, to identify independent expertise their committees can draw on, to take part in international dialogues and in parliamentary diplomacy on AI, and to develop shared resources for all parliaments.

Those recommendations recognise a key priority. MPs are being asked to legislate and oversee a technology that is new and moving very fast. Few parliaments have access to specialist advice on AI. Strengthening parliaments belongs in the development agenda itself, and it costs very little against what is at stake. So, I would ask two things of you. Tell us what your parliament needs. And tell us what your parliament is already doing, so that others can learn from it and so that this becomes a shared body of practice. As the Declaration puts it, alone we are vulnerable; together we can shape the future that we want.

Distinguished delegates,

I want to end with a discussion of the frontier of AI, and the red lines that AI must not be allowed to cross, such as the loss of human control over highly autonomous systems. We are conscious that AI brings not only opportunities but also risks, including potential for the most extreme risks to humanity. With frontier AI, capabilities are moving faster than public understanding of their impact. Laws are usually written once the effects of a technology are understood, and some of the potential harms cannot be undone once they occur. Responding after the fact is therefore not an option. For parliaments, oversight of AI will need to be increasingly anticipatory, and on this issue anticipatory work is easier done together and results shared broadly.

I therefore call upon parliaments to take up the issue of extreme AI risks and to give consideration to the case for international AI red lines and the definition of the limits that must not be crossed. I encourage parliaments to help to focus political and public attention on this critical issue.

I was struck by the words of President Xi at this year's World AI Conference that AI must be secure and controllable, supported by laws, monitoring, early warning and emergency response, and always under human control. These issues cannot be addressed by individual countries alone. They demand clear and pressing answers from the whole international community.

In my view, there is a critical need for major actors in the development of AI to reach a common understanding. I acknowledge the competition between States for leadership in the AI race. But I want to believe that everyone shares a common interest in mitigating the risk of unintended, catastrophic consequences of AI development that outstrips investment in AI safety.

Reaching agreement on AI red lines will require political will and wise leadership. I believe that parliamentary diplomacy can help to foster dialogue and mutual understanding and contribute to developing a basis for agreed action to avoid unacceptable risks. This is not unfamiliar work. At the height of the Cold War, states with every reason to distrust one another built common institutions to manage a dual-use technology, the International Atomic Energy Agency among them. The creation of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe was a direct result of a parliamentary initiative. Distinguished delegates,

Artificial intelligence runs through all of our work at the IPU, across human rights and democracy, peace and security, and today's topic of sustainable development. The IPU supports the provision of expertise to parliaments to help play a full role on AI policy and in international governance. We record and share actions they are taking and convenes networks of members and staff across regions. It is open to every parliament represented in this room, and I urge you all to fully engage with the topics of today's seminar and this broader agenda. As I stand before you today, I am pleased to offer the IPU's services as a platform to advance the essential inter-parliamentary dialogue and cooperation on AI.

Thank you.