



Inter-Parliamentary Union  
For democracy. For everyone.

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## Address by the IPU Secretary General, Mr. Martin Chungong

### Inter-regional Dialogue on Democracy (IRDD)

#### The role of global and regional organizations in the advancement of sustainable development goal 16

Geneva, 13 March 2018

Yves Leterme, Secretary-General of International IDEA  
Michael Møller, Director-General of the Office of the United Nations in Geneva  
Thomas Garrett, Secretary-General of the Community of Democracies  
Distinguished delegates,

I very much welcome this opportunity to exchange views on this important topic. The organizations represented here today share a common interest in the SDGs and SDG 16 in particular.

Those of you who were involved in the process leading to the adoption of the SDGs will remember the intense discussions about whether there should be a stand-alone goal on democracy, on democratic governance, or governance *tout court*! Finally I think we reached a good solution that everyone could live with.

Goal 16 focuses on peaceful, just and inclusive societies, and contains values that we at the IPU consider to be central to democracy, such as transparency and accountability, representation and inclusiveness. Having fought so hard to see that these values are explicitly linked to the overall 2030 Agenda, I believe that we have a special responsibility to promote Goal 16 and support States in achieving it.

The dialogue we are embarking on today gives us the opportunity to address a host of fundamental questions: how do we as global or regional organizations reconcile our traditional mandates with the SDG agenda? To what extent are we able to, or should we, reshape our business processes in service of this agenda? How do we ensure that the overall outcome of all these initiatives is greater than the sum of their individual parts?

At the IPU we have chosen to keep our historic focus on democracy, but also to integrate SDGs across all areas of work. I think it would be fair to say that the SDGs now run through the IPU like blood through our veins. In a way, it is a remarkable how quickly the SDG lens has become part of our close to 130 year-old organization. I think that this reflects a broad agreement among IPU Member parliaments on the objectives and content of the 2030 Agenda.

At the political level, there is a growing corpus of official positions in support of the 2030 Agenda: the 2013 Quito Declaration expressing support for the SDG process, the 2015 Fourth World Conference of Speakers of Parliament on Translating the SDGs into action, the 2017 resolution on international cooperation on the SDGs, and a new resolution the IPU will adopt later this month stressing the link between sustainable development and sustaining peace, to name but a few. The SDGs have been mainstreamed in the IPU strategy 2017-2021, both as a specific objective and to support other objectives.

At the operational level, our work is grounded in the Common Principles for Support to Parliaments, adopted by the IPU's governing bodies in October 2014. The Common Principles provide a common language that all actors involved in parliamentary development can share. A fundamental tenet of the Principles is that parliaments themselves should lead their own development agenda.

The IPU has published a self-assessment toolkit on the SDGs in partnership with UNDP and is actively supporting parliaments in assessing their capacity to work on the SDGs. We've organized regional seminars for parliaments. We've published a major new Global Parliamentary Report on oversight and accountability, again with UNDP and we're continuing our long-standing work on standards and indicators for democratic parliaments.

In terms of lessons learned so far from working with parliaments and parliamentarians on the SDGs, I see four in particular.

1/ In a general sense, parliaments are much more aware of the SDGs than they were of the MDGs. Certainly this is a result of the more inclusive preparatory process, but also thanks to the efforts of your organizations. We have observed a lot of interest and goodwill towards the SDGs. Parliamentarians who are familiar with the SDGs tend to quickly understand their political interest. Indeed, we can comfortably say that parliaments can no longer claim ignorance of the SDGs as was the case with the MDGs.

2/ Regional cooperation around the SDGs is welcomed and is necessary. Through the regional seminars we've organized with parliaments, we have observed a lot of political will to establish dialogue, to set aside tensions that can exist between countries, and to use the SDGs as a platform for cooperation. Our experience is that countries see that SDGs as an opportunity to foster inter-parliamentary dialogue and cooperation on concrete issues ranging from the economy, health to resource management. I have just come from Istanbul where I attended the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Black Sea Economic Co-operation and where the point was made that of the 12 member states, 8 are in conflict with each other and that economic co-operation was a unifying tool for conflict resolution.

3/ National ownership remains a challenge. At the governmental level, many countries are revising their national development plans or producing specific SDG plans. Yet parliaments seem to be only weakly associated with these processes. We've observed one country, Hungary, where the Speaker of Parliament is chairing the national coordination body. But that seems to be the exception. In many countries, there are still questions about whether parliament should even be part of the SDG coordination body or whether its role should be to monitor the work of these bodies and hold them to account.

4/ Which points perhaps to the biggest lesson learned, that often parliaments are willing to "do something", but may be unsure about what exactly that thing should be. Some parliaments have moved to establish SDG committees, but they have quickly realized that the SDG agenda is too broad to be covered by one committee alone, and that the SDGs overlap with many existing committees in Parliament. That's why we have been working with parliaments, using a self-assessment methodology, so they can determine for themselves on a case-by-case basis how to adapt their existing structures and processes to take account of the SDG agenda.

Our conclusion is that there is a lot of scope for sharing experience and knowledge at a regional level. Basically everyone is still learning how to work with the SDGs. Parliaments learn quicker when they are able to draw on the positive and negative experiences of their peers.

With regard to SDG 16 and the role of global and regional organizations, we can start by focusing on the positives. SDG 16 recognizes the importance of human rights, the rule of law and strong institutions if development goals are to be met. Goal 16 has challenged national statistical offices to think carefully about practical ways to measure governance. The objectives set out in this goal support and comfort the existing mission of our own organizations, while also offering new elements to enhance our mission. In the IPU's case, Goal 16 fits very well with our vision of "strong democratic parliaments serving the people". Overall, the sustainable development Agenda provide a golden opportunity for democracy, the practices and institutions thereof, including parliaments, to prove their relevance as enablers of better outcomes for the people and therefore allow parliaments to reclaim their poor popularity rating and waning legitimacy.

But I would also make two observations that I am sure some of you will have frequently made yourselves.

1/ That the breadth of the issues covered makes it difficult to work on SDG 16 as a homogenous goal. We can agree, I think, that the targets within this goal are important and mutually reinforcing, for the achievement of Goal 16 as for the entire 2030 Agenda. But each target within Goal 16 is complex and multilayered in itself. Taken together, it is easy to be overwhelmed by the complexity of the interplay between the issues to be addressed.

2/ This broad sweep of issues is combined with a comparative lack of depth in the indicators that are used to monitor and report on progress. Assigning one or two indicators to an area as complex as the rule of law is, at best, symbolic. Creating a handful of complementary indicators is a way to recognize the problems, but can only go so far in resolving them.

We accept that the overall number of indicators has to be limited, otherwise governments will never be able to report on them, and citizens will not be able to make any sense of them. Even so, there are still more than 200 SDG indicators at the global level. Because the SDGs are more comprehensive than the MDGs were, we need to make a special effort to package and present them in a simple and effective way. The 2030 Agenda is both a challenge and an opportunity for parliaments to develop their role in working with governments to improve the well-being of the planet and of all people. But there is very little in the indicators for Goal 16 that helps us to know where parliaments stand and how they are changing. So as global and regional organizations, what can we do? What must we do?

We should continue to work on the basis of our core mission. But we must integrate an SDG dimension to this mission, and understand how our work contributes to the SDGs. In the IPU's case, the mapping is relatively easy. All the SDGs require parliaments that pass laws, allocate financial resources and hold government to account for progress. That's the easy part.

But developing institutions that are truly effective, accountable and transparent, and ensuring responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making, while central to the IPU's mission, are not at all straightforward tasks. That is perhaps an understatement!

We say that parliaments have a role to play in holding governments accountable for progress towards the SDGs. Yes, they do. But how well-equipped are parliaments to play this role? The 2017 IPU-UNDP Global Parliamentary Report on oversight and accountability suggests that many parliaments are not well-equipped at all!

Parliamentary oversight is and will remain a highly political issue. The political space for oversight simply does not exist everywhere. There is a need to continually develop

and strengthen a culture of oversight and accountability. For example, by providing safeguards that protect the right of the opposition and minority parties in parliament to question and challenge government.

Our research shows that an effective system of oversight requires a combination of a strong mandate that sets the rules of the game, preferably secured in the constitution and in legislation; adequate parliamentary resources, including in terms of access to information and capacity for analysis; and willing and committed participation from parliamentarians. Yet effective oversight remains an aspiration for many parliaments.

Dear colleagues, ladies and gentlemen

I firmly believe that oversight will be a key marker of parliament's relevance in the twenty-first century. By holding government to account, identifying problems and seeking corrective measures in legislation, budget allocations, policy and administration, parliament provides a vital service to society. I remain optimistic that parliament's role in holding government to account for progress on the SDGs will also be a powerful catalyst for the 2030 Agenda, even if much more needs to be done.

As we move forward in our work, I put to you that we have three particular responsibilities as global and regional organizations:

1. To keep a focus on our historic missions, while adding a dimension that addresses the Sustainable Development Goals in a coherent way. For the IPU, that includes standard-setting and capacity building to support strong parliaments, including on issues of gender equality and human rights.
2. To help to build national ownership of the SDGs, while encouraging dialogue among countries at a regional level and sharing lessons learned
3. To develop and promote standards and indicators that have the depth and local relevance that can be difficult to identify at the global level, while remaining aligned with the overall goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

These are the directions that we at the IPU are seeking to follow, and I look forward to hearing about the experiences of the organizations represented here.

Thank you.