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138th IPU ASSEMBLY AND RELATED MEETINGS

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Report of the Standing Committee on United Nations Affairs

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(Geneva, 28 March 2018)*

The Standing Committee on United Nations Affairs met on 27 March 2018, with its President Mr. A. Avsan, in the Chair. He noted that since his term as president was coming to a close, a new president would be elected at the end of the meeting.

Seven new members of the Bureau were confirmed: Ms. S. Alhashim (Kuwait), Mr. A. Al-Amri (Oman), Mr. M. Ben Souf (Tunisia), Mr. B. Llano Ramos (Paraguay), Ms. M.J. Carrión (Ecuador), Mr. L. Wehrli (Switzerland) and Ms. D. Nazarbaeva (Kazakhstan). Ms. L. Crexell (Argentina) resigned from the Bureau and was replaced by Mr. J.C. Romero (Argentina).

The President explained that the sitting was meant to provide a bridge to the session of the UN High-level Political Forum (HLPF) for sustainable development in July 2018 and that it had two primary objectives: to take stock of parliamentary action for the SDGs, and to prepare parliamentarians for the debate to be held at the HLPF.

Panel discussion on the parliamentary follow-up to the Sustainable Development Goals.

Presenters: Mr. M. Mijatovic, MP (Serbia), Ms. L. Crexell, Senator (Argentina), Mr. E. Saravanpavan, MP (Sri Lanka), Ms. N. Isler, Director, SDG Lab, Geneva.

The discussion highlighted various initiatives taken by parliaments to institutionalize the SDGs and to oversee their implementation. Best practices included: setting up a focus group of MPs; reviewing institutional capacity for the SDGs using the IPU-UNDP self-assessment toolkit; holding public debates to raise awareness among citizens, civil society organizations and entrepreneurs; supporting multi-stakeholder consultative platforms; creating an observatory within parliament to evaluate legislative proposals from an SDG standpoint; and requiring each new piece of legislation to clearly indicate an SDG that would be advanced by it.

Some of the most common risks associated with parliamentary work for the SDGs were also discussed. They included: the tendency of most MPs to be conditioned by short-term electoral pressures more than the long-term vision of the SDGs; the tendency of governments and parliaments to only focus on those SDGs that were seen as critical to their countries, ignoring that the SDGs were all interlinked; the difficulty of setting policy priorities within a complex framework where virtually all issues mattered; the relative disadvantage of developed countries that were only now learning ways of pursuing global goals.

Looking at ways to improve the implementation of the SDGs across regions, it was noted that while the collection of quality data remained critical, an even bigger challenge was finding ways to ensure that all relevant data informed the policymaking process. A second challenge was finding an optimal balance between raising additional resources to finance and support the SDGs and making the best use of the resources that were already available. A third, common problem was the difficulty of breaking up policy silos in order to improve policy coherence among the goals. There was also a need to better articulate the vaguely defined "private sector" so that different actors such as transnational corporations, small and medium enterprises, and family-run businesses could be engaged more effectively in SDG implementation.

The particular role of youth was underscored. In the relatively long lifespan of the SDGs, today's youth would be tomorrow's voters, taxpayers and decision-makers who would need to carry the SDGs through to the end. It was important therefore that parliaments work particularly closely with young people, including by ensuring that the SDGs were part of the school curriculum at a very early stage. Parliaments and MPs, along with governments and other stakeholders, also needed to do a much better job of publicizing the SDGs in language that everyone could understand.

As much of the responsibility for the SDGs lay with the governments that held executive power, the UN would continue to play a critical role in supporting the relevant efforts by its Member States. It had a unique convening power to bring governments together, the means and the moral authority to raise difficult questions for which innovative solutions were needed, and the ability to provide a repository of good practices for governments to learn from. With the help of the IPU, parliaments too could benefit from all that the UN had to offer with regard to SDGs implementation.

Panel discussion on the main theme of the HLPF: Transformation towards sustainable and resilient societies.

Presenters: Mr. A. Sinmaleza, MP (Ecuador), Ms. H. Haukeland Liadal, MP (Norway), Mr. M. Wackernagel, President and CEO (Global Footprint Network), Mr. S. Stone (United Nations Environment Programme).

The discussion focused on the environment as one of the pillars of sustainable development. The challenge of reversing unsustainable consumption and production patterns and of shifting energy production toward renewable sources (green energy) to combat climate change was deemed the most immediate threat to the planet.

Global consumption and production was now well above the environment's regenerative capacities. While economies might be growing in monetary terms, they were also undermining their own resource base and causing irreparable damage to the environment. The concept of the ecological footprint and its attendant calculator very effectively demonstrated how current consumption and production patterns demanded more of nature than nature could deliver. That was evidenced in particular by rising carbon emissions and their impact on climate change. Most of the ecological deficit could be attributed to unsustainable lifestyles in developed countries.

The discussion exposed the shortcomings of GDP as a key measure of economic and social progress. GDP assumed that material wealth was tantamount to human well-being, when in fact the latter depended on many other factors, such as education, health, culture, free time, friendship, community and a clean environment. Health care expenditure related to environmental pollution was counted towards GDP, as a benefit to the economy, when in fact it should count as a liability. The ecological footprint therefore provided the ideal counterweight to GDP: whereas GDP assumed potential infinite economic growth, the ecological footprint showed the limits of growth in environmental terms.

Energy was vital to all human activity. As carbon emissions linked to fossil fuels were the principle cause of the current environmental deficit, massive investments in renewable energy sources such as solar and wind power were urgently needed. However, that required urgent action against illicit capital flows and tax evasion, as well as increasing levels of public finance, so that more funds could be allocated to help developing countries.

In addition to scaling up green energy, other factors would prove decisive in the conversion toward environmental sustainability: urban design, so that cities were more compact and more efficient in their use of energy and other inputs; sustainable food production, which required more efficient agriculture and land use; and policies to contain population growth.

At the end of the session, the President encouraged participants to join their national delegations to the upcoming HLPF, from 9 to 18 July, in New York. He further announced that the IPU would hold an event on 16 July as an opportunity for parliamentarians to take stock of the main messages of the HLPF.

The Committee proceeded to formally endorse the nomination of Mr. J.C. Romero as its President, and the sitting was then closed.