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IPU Statement

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Secretary General

Fourth South Asian Speakers'
Summit on Achieving the
Sustainable Development Goals

Malé, 1 September 2019

Honorable Mohamed Nasheed, Speaker of the People's Majlis
Honorable Speakers and Deputy Speakers of Parliament,
Honorable Members of Parliament,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I am honored to be with you today at this Fourth South Asian Speakers' Summit on Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). I would like to express my deep appreciation to the People's Majlis, in particular the Honorable Speaker Mohamed Nasheed, for the wonderful work done in organizing this Summit and for receiving us with such kind hospitality.

We are here today to build on the foundations laid by our previous South Asian Speakers' summits held in Bangladesh (2016), India (2017) and Sri Lanka (2018). In a sense therefore, this Summit represents a significant milestone in the process of enhancing parliamentary cooperation and implementation of the SDGs in the region. Your presence here sends a strong message about your commitment and the commitment of your parliaments to pursuing the implementation of the SDGs without further delay. I understand that seven out of the invited parliaments are attending this summit.

The IPU is proud to facilitate exchanges of good practices and experiences among parliaments by assisting in the organization of this annual high-level event on the realization of the SDGs in the South Asian region.

The outcome of the previous Summits has been extremely positive. Speakers of Parliaments had the precious opportunity to share experiences, keep track of the progress of SDGs implementation in the region, discuss opportunities as well as the challenges that need to be tackled, and last but not least enhance regional parliamentary cooperation. In the summit declarations, South Asian Speakers articulated their vision and reconfirmed their political will to contribute robustly to the achievement of the SDGs at the national and regional levels, including through dialogue and cooperation with key stakeholders, including citizens (men and women), civil society, community leaders and young people.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Data currently available paints a rather mixed picture. According to the United Nations, no country is currently on track to achieve all of the SDGs, including in the South Asian region. Extreme poverty is still rife, inequality is stuck at very high levels, hunger is on the rise, global climate is changing much faster than expected.

Yet, the Asia-Pacific region as a whole has experienced rapid economic growth in a relatively short amount of time. In fact, the region contributes to two-thirds of global growth. According to a report published by the World Bank in 2018, over the past 2 decades, more than 40 per cent of the region's population has been lifted out of poverty.

Since 2000, the region has also made noteworthy progress on poverty reduction (SDG1), quality education (SDG 4), affordable and clean energy (SDG 7). Nevertheless the region lags behind on different areas most notably related to good health and well-being (SDG 3), gender equality (SDG 5), decent work and economic growth (SDG 8).

As I have just said, climate change also remains a serious threat. According to statistics released by the Asian Development Bank in 2017, in the 10 year period between 2007 and 2016, the average annual damage caused by disasters in Asia and the Pacific was \$48.7 billion. This figure is indeed alarming.

I am sure you will hearken the clarion call for Parliaments to employ more actively their legislative, budgetary and oversight powers to ensure the prioritization of these issues at national and regional levels while making sure that no one is left behind.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The IPU has been keen to follow up on the recommendations of your previous Summits by monitoring and tracking progress in the implementation of the SDGs. In this context, it has set out to document how parliaments are organizing their work around the SDGs, understand the patterns and share good parliamentary practices. And so last year, it launched a global survey on "Institutionalization of the SDGs in the work of parliaments.

The survey focused on both parliamentary activities on SDGs, and on parliamentary mechanisms for the SDGs. It gives me pleasure to share with you some of the findings of that survey. We asked participants if the parliament had organized training sessions or awareness raising activities for parliamentarians and parliamentary staff. 56% of respondents stated that their parliaments had organized such activities on the SDGs for parliamentarians. 38% had not. Fewer respondents (46%) had held training sessions or awareness-raising activities on the SDGs for parliamentary staff. The most common type of activities were seminars and workshops.

The majority, 53%, said their parliament had taken action to ensure the SDGs were reflected in the national budget. 30% know that no such action has been taken. 17% did not know. This response shows that the way countries incorporate the SDGs into their budget varies. Some parliaments allocated the budget to only certain areas that are related to the SDGs (e.g. health and education). Others dedicate a portion of the budget for the SDGs specifically.

Regarding parliamentary mechanisms specifically dedicated to the SDGs, 52% of respondents stated they have established at least one such mechanism. Examples of

mechanisms included: informal group or network; a system of focal points; and parliamentary bodies dedicated to the SDGs. 15% of respondents noted that none of these mechanisms have been established

Overall, we can see that there is room for improvement when it comes to the level of parliamentary engagement with the SDGs. At the IPU, we commend the development gains countries have made but at the same time we are convinced that only when the SDGs are firmly embedded in the work of parliaments will they be effectively achieved by 2030 and in the process ensure that no one is left behind.

There is no single path to advance the implementation of the SDGs – each parliament should integrate the SDGs in its key parliamentary functions, according to its specificities, needs and priorities. That is why it is crucial to take the time and assess the situation to ensure that the work to be done in your parliament responds holistically and synergistically to human development needs.

As you might be aware, the IPU has designed a series of tools and activities to assist parliaments in the SDGs implementation process. One such tool is the SDG Self-Assessment Toolkit for Parliaments produced in co-operation with the UN Development Programme. It provides a great opportunity for MPs and parliamentary staff to review key processes and identify institutional gaps, and to help their parliaments establish the right mechanisms that allow for greater ownership of the SDGs through oversight as well as legislation, budgetary allocations and citizens' involvement.

The self-assessment toolkit is not prescriptive but is designed to enable parliaments to identify baselines, good practices, gaps, opportunities and lessons learned to effectively institutionalize the SDGs and mainstream the various goals into parliamentary processes. It has been designed to be relevant to all parliaments, whatever political system they adhere to and whatever their stage of development.

The toolkit can help parliaments start their own process of internal benchmarking, set priorities for reform in order to strengthen their response to the SDGs and ensure a harmonious coordination between the different parliamentary structures—for example, how to use the existing structures more effectively to address the SDGs and overcome silos. The ultimate objective is to have parliaments fit for purpose to play a full role in realizing the SDGs.

Assisting parliaments in using the SDGs Self-Assessment Toolkit and fostering action at the national level is one of IPU's priorities in 2019. Several parliaments have organized a SDGs self-assessment exercise. I am very much pleased to see that the Parliament of Sri Lanka undertook this exercise last year, and hope that the recommendations that have been identified on that occasion are guiding the work of the parliament as a whole towards the effective integration of the SDGs. I am sure the Right Honorable Speaker of Sri Lanka will use a few minutes today to brief us on that.

The self-assessment has helped different parliaments define their specific strategy and action plan to better deliver on the SDGs.

It is my hope that as a result of this summit, you will consider organizing the SDGs self-assessment exercise in order to ensure that, through this process, your parliament can outline a coherent, sustainable and effective strategy to mainstream the SDGs into its work. The IPU, of course, stands ready to provide assistance in the facilitation of this exercise and would also be pleased to provide further information if requested.

Ladies and gentlemen,

During this summit, we will seek to deepen reflection and recommit to the acceleration of SDG 8 which foresees a full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including young people and people with disabilities, and equal pay for work of equal value. Equality at work would not only be a question of justice. It could also have a multiplier effect for development. For instance, women's equal participation in the global labor force would add US\$ 12 trillion to the global economy. Women who are economically empowered are more likely to invest in nutrition, education and health, with great benefits for their children, families, communities and society as a whole.

Youth employment is also a topical issue. Today, millions of youth remain unemployed. It has been said that, if you put them all in one place, the resulting country would be the twentieth most populous country in the world. By not sufficiently providing opportunities for these young people, we are not just accepting an environment where poverty and extremism can take root but we are also depriving ourselves of our most valuable resource for a brighter future.

The summit will also give us the opportunity to examine malnutrition which remains one of the major challenges in the region and to identify effective ways to ensure food security as well as progress on health, in particular maternal, child and adolescent health.

It is a matter of satisfaction for me that during your Summit, you will examine action to stem the tide of climate change, which holds the potential for a real disaster in the South Asia region, in particular. You will review the projected trends in the region since the adoption of the Paris Agreement and you will discuss how parliaments can strengthen a regional response to help combat climate change and prevent disaster risks, both of which particularly affect vulnerable groups, communities and ecosystems.

I need not tell you how instrumental parliamentarians are to the realization of the SDGs through their power to turn the voluntary commitment to the SDGs into enforceable laws, to hold their governments to account on development policy choices and strategies, and the adoption of national budgets. I just want to express the strong hope that this summit will give added momentum to the work you are already doing to forge a more robust role for your parliaments in the advancement of the SDGs.

The IPU is counting on this meeting to come up with recommendations and conclusions that will allow your parliaments to play that role more effectively.

I look forward to open and constructive deliberations and wish you all a very successful meeting.