



141st IPU Assembly

Belgrade (Serbia)

13-17 October 2019



Governing Council
Item 12

CL/205/12-R.2
22 August 2019

Reporting by Members on IPU-related activities

Survey report on the engagement of parliaments with the United Nations

The present report elaborates on the results of a survey of IPU Members (179) conducted between 1 March and 30 June 2019. The survey was designed to assess the extent to which parliaments are able to provide input on key UN processes and oversee their governments' interaction with the United Nations as the most important institution of global governance. The results will help inform an ongoing reflection at the IPU on the role of parliaments at the United Nations in the lead-up to the Fifth World Conference of Speakers of Parliament (August 2020) and other relevant processes within the Executive Committee and the IPU Standing Committee on United Nations Affairs. The findings of this report may also contribute to a broader evaluation of the IPU's political project at the United Nations, which the Executive Committee will consider at its session at the 141st Assembly.

The survey consisted of **eight questions**, of which the first five were to be answered by all parliaments and the last three only by parliaments in countries receiving the support of a UN Country Office (UNCO). With only a few exceptions, countries in which a UNCO is located or provides assistance generally fall into the category of developing countries.

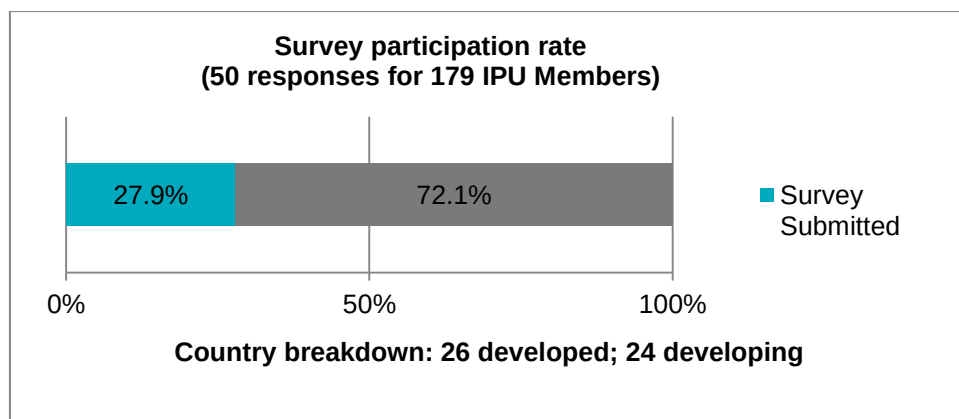
After several reminders sent and two deadline extensions granted to the 179 IPU Members since the initial launch, there were only 50 responses¹ (27.9 %) to the survey exercise. This is a fairly low participation rate when compared to other IPU surveys of similar institutional relevance.² The low number may be due to a variety of incidental factors such as parliamentary elections, recess, or lack of staff support. However, such factors cannot fully account for the large group of non-respondents (129), which suggests that many parliaments are either not engaged with the United Nations in a significant way or do not see the need to involve themselves in UN affairs.

There was no significant difference in survey participation between developed and developing countries.³ However, as the group of developing countries worldwide is roughly three times as large as the group of developed countries, the almost equal response rate between the two groups suggests that parliaments in developing countries are considerably less involved in UN affairs than parliaments in developed countries.

¹ This total includes a non-member of the IPU (Belize) plus two houses of the same parliament (France).

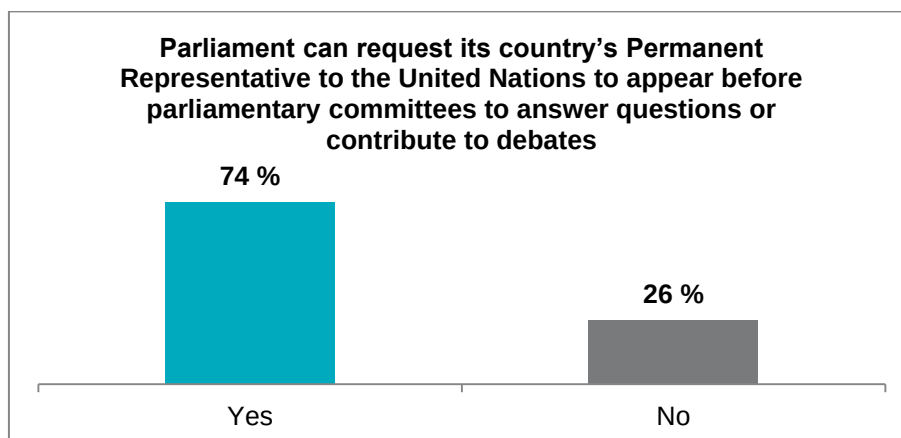
² By comparison, a survey of IPU Members on their engagement with the Sustainable Development Goals, conducted in 2018, had a 50 per cent participation rate (89 parliaments).

³ As there is no definitive list of developed and developing countries, for the purpose of this survey the list of 36 OECD members was used to classify developed countries. Andorra, Kuwait, Liechtenstein and the United Arab Emirates were considered developed countries even though they are not members of the OECD.



The **first** question of the survey enquired whether parliaments can request their countries' Permanent Representative to the United Nations to appear before committees and answer questions or contribute to debates. This question alluded to the *authority* or the *capacity* that a parliament may have to summon the Permanent Representative and enquire about the country's position in UN negotiations, request reports on UN activities, or discuss decisions that may impact national policy. Whereas most parliaments can be assumed to be able to question the foreign minister or the head of the government with respect to UN processes, direct interaction with the country's representative to the UN generally indicates stronger oversight capacities.

The answers to this question (37 out of 50) indicate that a strong majority of participating parliaments, particularly in developed countries, do have the authority or the capacity to summon their chief diplomat to the United Nations. This is a good foundation for strong parliamentary oversight of governments' interaction with the United Nations.



Total responses: Yes: 37 | No: 13

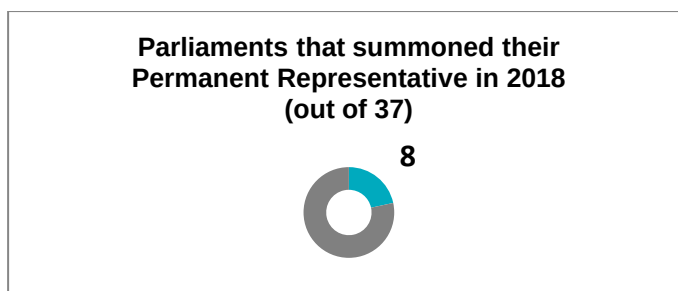
Developed countries:

Yes: 22
No: 4

Developing countries:

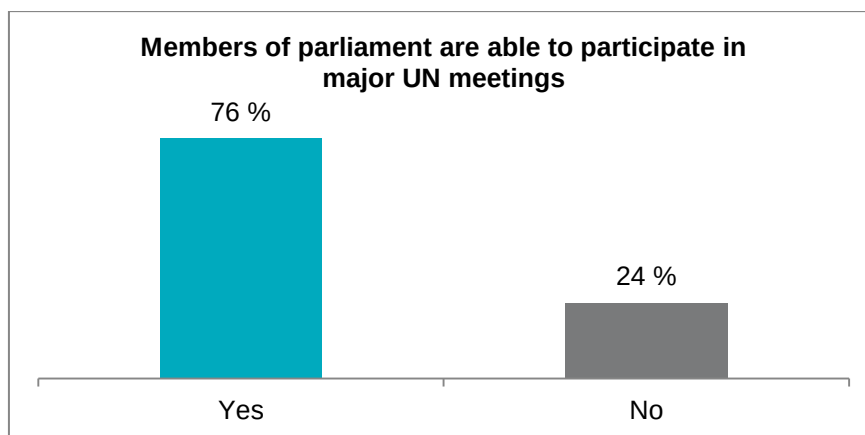
Yes: 15
No: 9

However, as only one quarter of these parliaments (8 out of 37) actually requested a hearing with their Permanent Representative in 2018, it would seem that in actual practice this oversight practice is being underutilized for either political or procedural reasons.



The **second** survey question asked whether members of parliament were able to participate in major UN meetings as part of the national delegations headed by a minister or even the head of government. The IPU has long encouraged members of parliament to join their national delegations to UN meetings as the most effective way for parliaments to be informed of key processes and to hold governments accountable for the commitments they make at the United Nations as a result of those processes.

The fact that 38 out of 50 (76%) responded yes to this question is encouraging. The relatively high number corroborates empirical observations over the past few years. However, given the small sample of survey participants (50) there is probably much further to go to extend the practice of parliamentarians joining their national delegations to all 179 IPU Members.



Total responses: Yes: **38** | No: **12**

Developed countries:

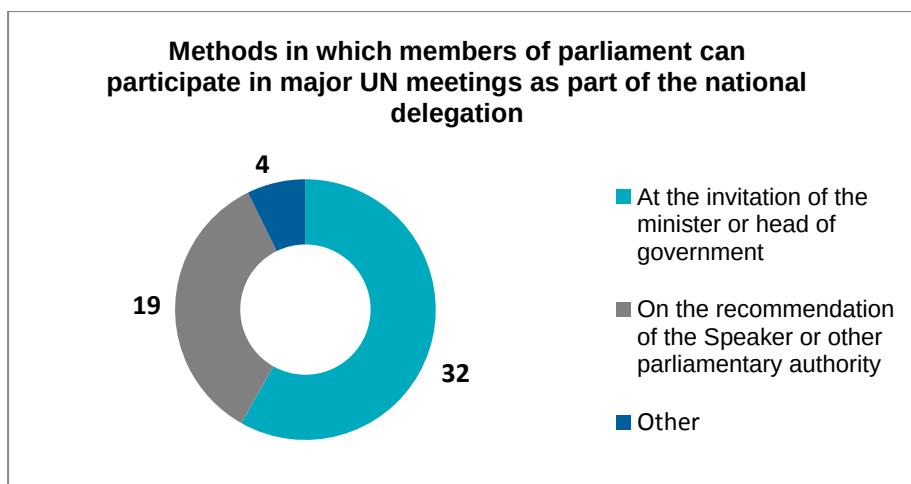
Yes: **23**
No: **3**

Developing countries:

Yes: **15**
No: **9**

Looking at the ways in which members of parliament may join their national delegations to the United Nations, most of the 38 parliaments whose members can participate in UN meetings (32) do so at the invitation of the government. This may pose a problem in terms of political representation within national delegations (particularly if opposition members are excluded).

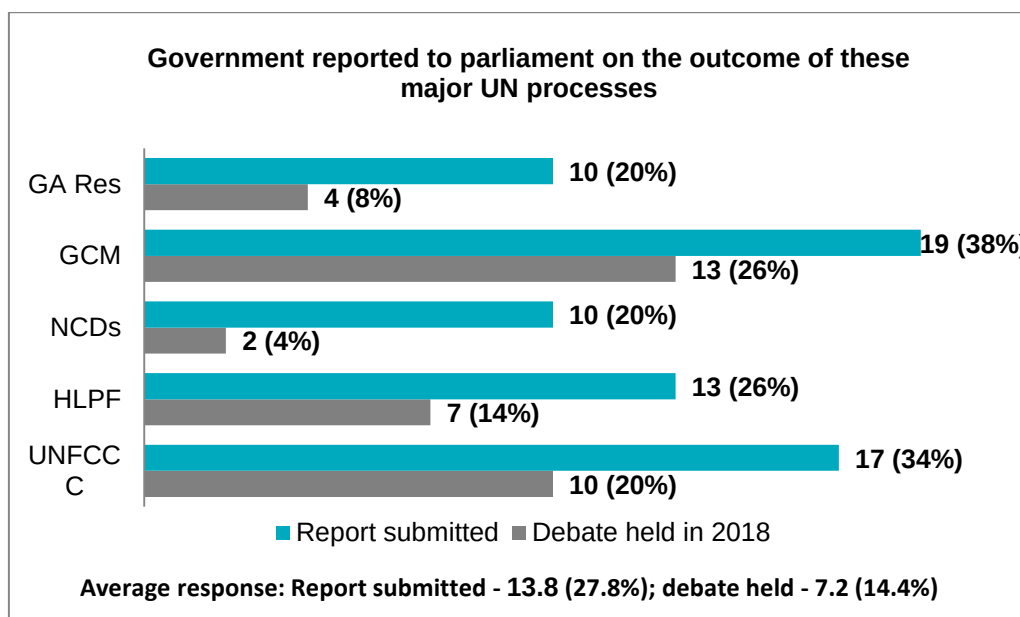
On the other hand, a significant number of parliaments (19) reported that their participation in UN meetings depends on a recommendation of the Speaker or other parliamentary authority. In a number of parliaments, both practices (government invitation and Speaker recommendation) are likely being utilized.



The **third** survey question enquired whether governments reported to parliaments on five major UN processes leading up to official resolutions or declarations in 2018. The five processes were: the biennial resolution of the General Assembly on interaction between the United Nations, parliaments and the IPU (GA res), the Global Compact for Migration (GCM), the Political Declaration on Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs), the Ministerial Declaration at the end of the annual session of the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF), and the outcome of the Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

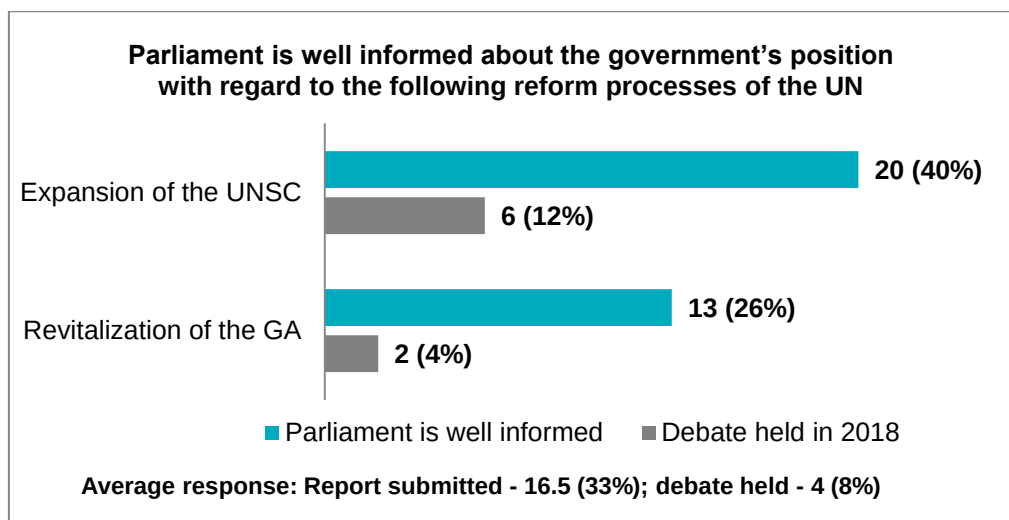
When a government feels obliged to report to parliament on key UN processes (as they are unfolding or at the conclusion), and parliament is able to hold a debate and ask questions of the government, this is usually indicative of strong parliamentary oversight. The response to this question unfortunately shows very little opportunity for discussion of major UN processes in parliaments. On average, governments reported to parliaments on the five major processes in about 13 cases (or 27%) out of 50. Parliamentary debates on these same processes were held in about seven countries on average.

Of particular interest in this picture is the low number of parliaments that were briefed by their governments on the UN General Assembly resolution on interaction between the UN, parliaments and the IPU (10), and the even lower number of countries where parliaments held a debate on the resolution (4). As this resolution governs much of the relationship between parliaments and the United Nations through the IPU, it is surprising that a large majority of respondents (40 out of 50, or 80%) were not informed of it in order to provide input on the process or at least take stock of its final outcome.



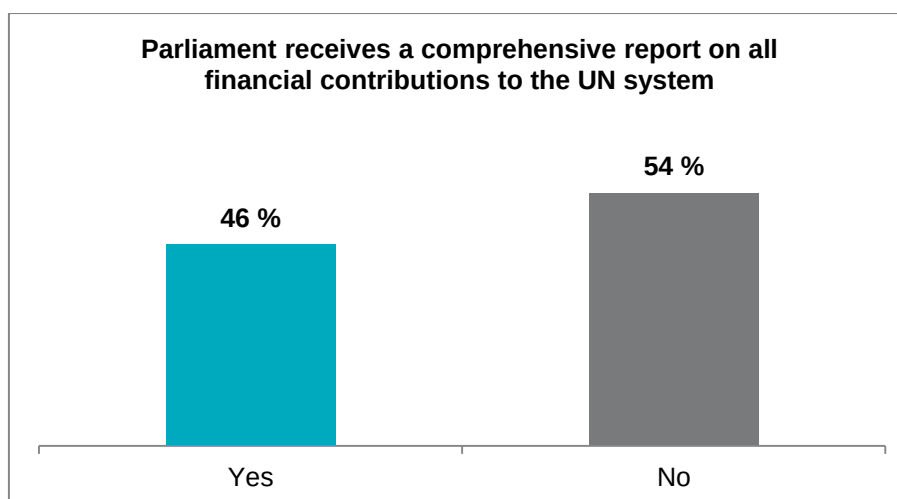
The **fourth** survey question looked into two key reform processes designed to make the United Nations more representative and more effective as an institution of global governance: the expansion of the 15-member Security Council, and the revitalization of the General Assembly (i.e. enhancing the authority of the President of the General Assembly, reducing the number of resolutions, streamlining the agenda, etc.).

Both processes have gone on for several years. Parliaments were asked whether they knew of their governments' position with respect to these reforms and whether, in the event, a debate was held to discuss either process in 2018. In response, 20 parliaments out of 50 (40%) reported being aware of the discussion about the expansion of the Security Council, and, of these, only 6 had some kind of debate (either in plenary or in committee). The lesser-known process for the revitalization of the General Assembly had a comparatively lower score of 13 parliaments being informed and 2 holding a debate. While these numbers are modest relative to the political weight and long lifespan of the two processes in question, they are not entirely negligible. They signal at least some interest by parliaments in making the United Nations more democratic and better prepared to meet the challenges of our time.



The **fifth** survey question touched on "the power of the purse" that parliaments exercise through the budget process. It probed parliaments' authority to oversee the budget allocation that goes to the UN system as a whole (the United Nations proper, as well as all UN entities such as UN Environment, UNDP, UNESCO, etc.) by asking whether parliaments can clearly ascertain what amount goes to the United Nations with the help of a comprehensive government report.

This question was inspired by a debate of the IPU Standing Committee on United Nations Affairs held in October 2016 (135th Assembly), in which most participants were unaware of their countries' budget allocation to the United Nations and therefore not in a position to demand accountability for money spent (in terms of overall results, value for money, etc.). The response to this question is encouraging but not wholly satisfactory: a good number of parliaments (23) receive a report on UN allocations from the government, but the majority (27) does not. Among the 23 who answered yes to this question, 14 were from developed countries that are likely to contribute more to the UN system in assessed contributions and voluntary funding than most developing countries.



Total responses: Yes: 23 | No: 27

Developed countries:

Yes: 14
No: 12

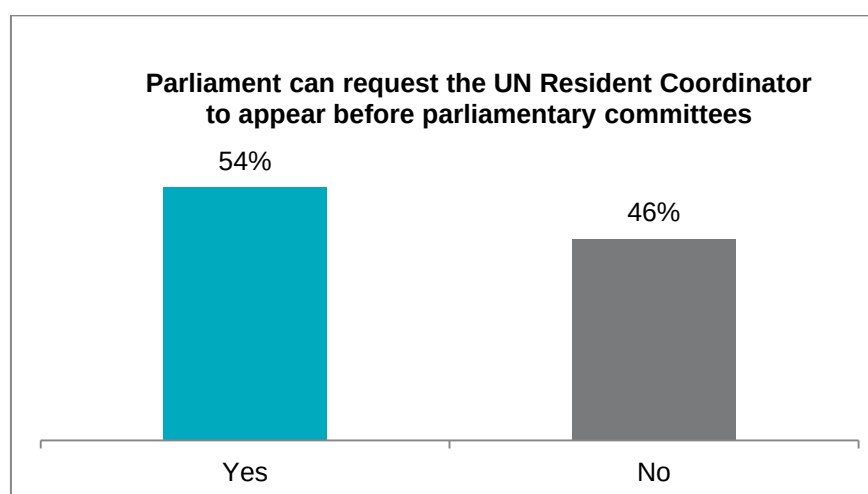
Developing countries:

Yes: 9
No: 15

As mentioned at the outset of this report, the last three questions of the survey (6, 7 and 8) applied only to parliaments in developing countries (for the most part) receiving UN support or with UN presence in the form of a UN Country Office (UNCO). Of the 50 survey participants, 28 parliaments fell into this category and provided answers to the three questions.

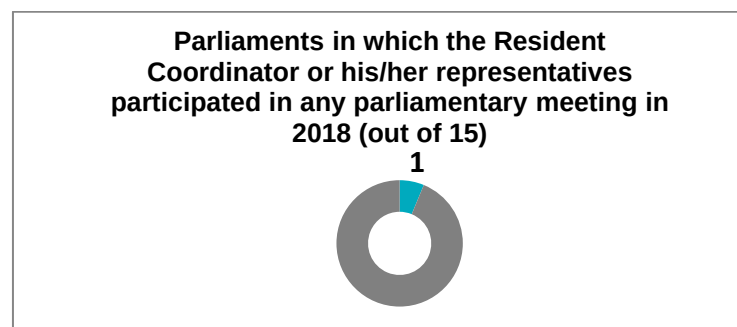
The Resident Coordinator is the most important UN figure in each country and is responsible for the UNCO in which representatives of the various UN agencies and programmes work together as a team. As such, the Resident Coordinator is in constant contact with the host government and is responsible for all UN activities in the country, including projects, plans and budgets.

The **sixth** survey question probed parliamentary authority to exercise direct oversight of UN activities in the field. It asked whether the parliament can request the Resident Coordinator in the country to appear before parliamentary committees to answer questions or contribute to debates. The responses to the question were almost even, with a slight majority of respondents (15 out of 28) saying yes and a slight minority (13) saying no. While not optimal, this result shows that the relationship between the UN country presence, through the Resident Coordinator, and the government is in principle subject to parliamentary scrutiny.

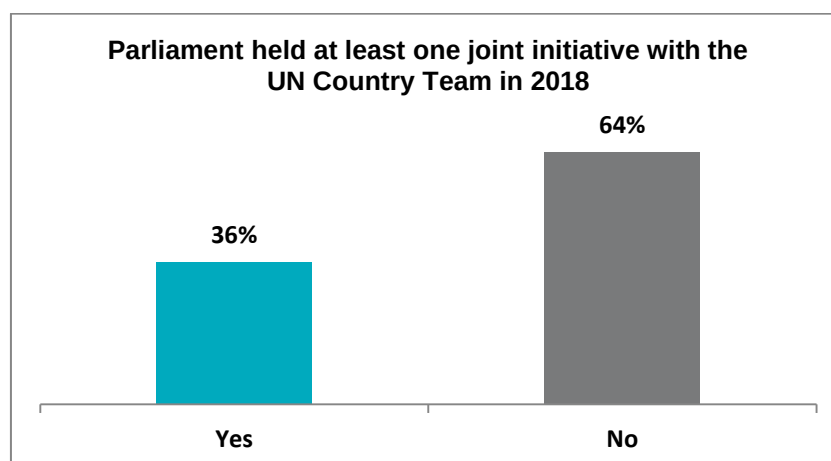


Total responses: Yes: 15 No: 13

However, of the 15 parliaments that claimed to have the authority to summon the Resident Coordinator to a debate or a hearing, only one actually did so in the course of 2018. While there may be many incidental reasons for this very low number, it generally indicates that the relationship between parliaments and Resident Coordinators is rather weak. This may result in parliaments failing to oversee UN activities in the field or to provide input on plans and projects.



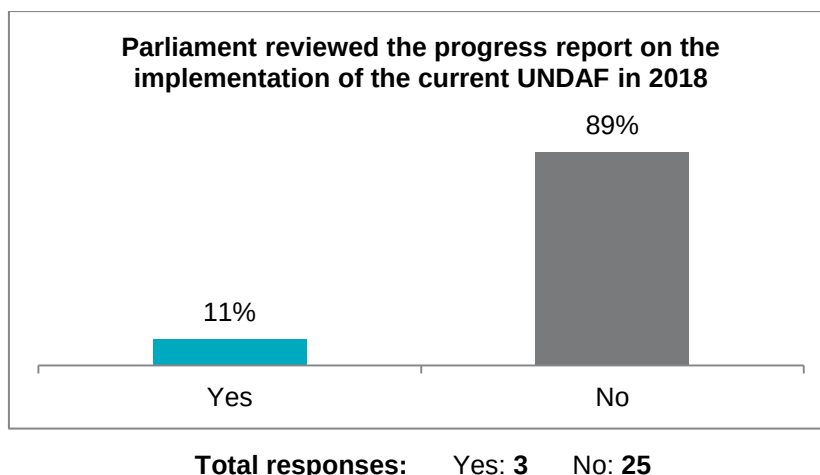
The **seventh** survey question was meant to show the extent to which parliaments may engage with the UNCO as recipients of support. More specifically, the question asked whether parliaments held at least one joint initiative (e.g. a thematic workshop, a capacity-building project, etc.) in 2018. The response to this question shows a strong majority (18 out of 28 respondents) having no interaction with the United Nations at this operational level. Given that the United Nations is not the only development actor on the ground, the fact that most parliaments in this small sample of respondents do not work with the United Nations is not in itself a bad thing. The result, however, suggests that the potential for UN assistance to parliaments is likely underutilized.



Total responses: Yes: 10 No: 18

The **eighth** and final survey question concerned the UN Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) – the plan of work, as it were, that the United Nations adopts in each country in close consultation with the government. The UNDAF outlines what the UN system will do over a period of time (four or five years) to help a country achieve its own development objectives.

From an oversight standpoint, it is important that parliaments assess the results of UN work in their countries. To assess the extent of this, the question in the survey asked whether parliaments reviewed the progress report on the implementation of their country's UNDAF in 2018. The response to the question is almost entirely negative, with a total of 25 parliaments (out of 28) conducting no review. While this may be attributed in part to different reporting cycles, generally the poor result shows that in many countries parliament is unaware of the United Nations' work plan and of its results.



Conclusion

All in all, this survey report exposes many gaps in the way parliaments engage with the United Nations at the national and global levels. There are some signs of vitality in the relationship but also many signs of parliaments not using the full potential of their oversight of the United Nations or in the extent of their input on UN processes. The low survey participation rate signals that there is still a long way to go for most parliaments to be appropriately engaged in UN processes either directly (particularly in the field) or through their governments.

In many cases, there is a clear gap between the authority that parliaments have to oversee UN affairs and their capacity or political will to actually exercise their authority. The bulk of parliaments are unfamiliar with key UN negotiations and reform processes. The participation of parliaments in UN meetings may be less effective than expected as it may be subject to government control. Many parliaments appear unable to oversee their countries' budget allocations to the UN system. The relationship between parliaments and the UN system in the field is generally tenuous.

Building on this first baseline, it is recommended that a follow-up survey be performed every two to three years to track progress and inform debate on practical ways and means to improve future interaction between parliaments and the United Nations through the IPU. The IPU Executive Committee and the Standing Committee on United Nations Affairs are encouraged to review the findings of this report and provide guidance on the way forward.

List of survey participants

Algeria	Kuwait
Andorra	Latvia
Argentina	Liechtenstein
Australia	Luxembourg
Austria	Malaysia
Bahrain	Maldives
Belgium	Mexico
Belize (non-member)	Montenegro
Bhutan	Namibia (National Assembly)
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Netherlands
Canada	New Zealand
Chile	Pakistan (Senate)
Côte d'Ivoire (National Assembly)	Serbia
Croatia	Slovenia
Cyprus	Spain
Czech Republic	Switzerland
Denmark	Sweden
Fiji	Syrian Arab Republic
France (National Assembly)	Thailand
France (Senate)	Tunisia
Germany	Ukraine
Guyana	United Arab Emirates
Hungary	United Kingdom
Israel	Uruguay
Kenya	Zambia