



Inter-Parliamentary Union

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Parliamentary Forum at the 2020 HLPF: Opening remarks by the President

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Dear colleagues,

Welcome to our Parliamentary Forum at the HLPF. I am so glad to see so many of you online.

If it wasn't for the ongoing pandemic, we would all be attending the main session of the HLPF in New York together with our ministers and ambassadors.

The HLPF is the main UN hub to track progress toward the 17 SDGs that governments committed to implement by 2030. Five years in, no country is on track to achieve all of the goals. The vast majority are behind on many of the goals and several may fail all of them.

At this rate of progress, we will not have eradicated poverty by 2030 even by the very minimal official standard of \$1.9 a day. By the more realistic standard of \$5 a day, there will be at least 2.3 billion people living in poverty by 2030 (*from the July 2020 report of the special UN rapporteur on poverty*).

Aside from official reports, we know from a recent public opinion survey in 104 countries (*of the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network*) that only a minority of respondents - about 16 % - believe the SDGs will be achieved for the most part.

This is all very worrying. The SDGs are the most consequential agenda of our time. What is at stake is the livelihood of billions of people and the sustainability of the planet as we know it.

Failing the SDGs will also cause unprecedented social unrest, mass migration and probably more conflicts within and across borders. People will grow even more disenchanted with their governments and with politics in general.

The Covid-19 pandemic has dealt a major blow to the SDGs. It has highlighted all that is wrong and dysfunctional in the world, like the growing divide between finance and the real economy, or the extreme vulnerability of global supply chains.

The pandemic has highlighted pre-existing inequalities of income and wealth but also of access to public goods and fundamental human rights. With easy access to health care, savings to rely on, more stable jobs, and greater capacity for remote working, the rich have fared much better than the poor.

Likewise, the developing countries are struggling much more than the industrialized economies in the face of the health crisis and the global recession related to Covid-19.

As today's programme notes, there are at least three overarching lessons from this crisis.

The first is that *people* are the lifeline of any economy. When workers stop working, and consumers stop buying, the economy crashes.

We need to re-think the economy to be more people-centered so that it serves real human needs. Let's be less fixated with GDP and much more concerned with human well-being.

Second, the virus reminds us of how the whole of the economy depends on nature: the more we undermine nature, the more we undermine the economy itself. Covid-19 is not an isolated incident but part of a long pattern of infectious diseases related to our unsustainable exploitation of nature.

A third lesson from the pandemic is about the role of government in managing the economy. As the pandemic began to wreck national economies everywhere, it is to government that people and companies looked to for help. And governments did come to the rescue one way or another.

In many cases, decades of austerity policies in which governments told their people that there is no money for health, education, infrastructure, and environmental protection – the stuff of the SDGs – were reversed almost overnight.

For all these reasons, we can't possibly think of achieving the SDGs just by tweaking the system that we have. *We need to shift the system in a whole new direction and reset it on a much stronger footing.* The ten years ahead, until 2030, give us just enough time to do that before it is too late.

As parliamentarians, we have a key role to play in resetting the system across the board. We are more than legislators; we are also opinion-makers and community leaders.

Our first responsibility is that of accountability through oversight – making sure that governments have an effective SDGs plan in place that is properly costed through the budget process. Unfortunately, this oversight remains weak. A UN-SDNS survey of 30 countries shows that while most of them have adopted a national plan and established some kind of SDG coordination mechanism to implement it, only half of these same countries have reflected the SDGs in the national budget, and often in insufficient ways.

Our own survey of parliamentary engagement in this year's Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) show that less than half (18 out of 42) of the governments presenting these progress reports bothered to inform parliament of the process. Fifty-five percent of parliaments provided some kind of input into the government's report but the quality of this varies dramatically.

Another key step we need to make as parliamentarians is, quite simply, putting our own house in order.

Our strength comes from the fact that we represent the people. This however remains an ideal more than a fact. Women occupy only 25% of all seats and young people only

28%, despite the fact that both groups are key to the implementation of the SDGs going forward.

While there are no official statistics on the representation of the poor themselves within our ranks, it is quite clear that they too are severely under-represented.

Putting our own house in order requires that we reform politics and the political process in a very deep way. The SDGs cannot be a constant battlefield of ideas and ideologies - a zero-sum game where my win is your loss. The SDGs require consensus building and this in turn requires a less polarized political environment.

We need to make our parliaments and our politics more transparent and accessible to all so that decisions are made with the greater good of society in mind, and not under the pressure of particular interests.

Let's all commit to these reforms which are part and parcel of SDG 16, the so-called governance goal.

I wish you all a fruitful discussion.

Thank you.