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Opening remarks by Mr. Martin Chungong, IPU Secretary General

Webinar for the Asia-Pacific Region Parliaments: The impact of COVID-19 on SDG implementation in Asia- Pacific: What role for parliaments?

Geneva, 28 July 2020

Madam Executive Secretary of the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific,
Honourable Members of Parliament,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I am pleased to welcome you to the opening of this important webinar entitled “The impact of COVID-19 on SDG implementation in Asia-Pacific: What role for parliaments?”. Let me start by thanking Madam Executive Secretary of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, Ms. Armida Salsiah Alisjahbana. We are very pleased to organize this regional webinar in collaboration with such a valuable partner as UN ESCAP, and look forward to our continued partnership.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The current global health crisis is an unprecedented wake-up call that is showing us how crucial it is for countries to have policy and legislation ensuring preparedness and prevention. The socio-economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic are uncovering stark asymmetries and structural imbalances in our societies, such as the prevalence of poverty, unequal access to health services, weak regional and global cooperation, and persistent inequalities of income as well as of access to public goods and fundamental human rights. The latest data shows that the pandemic has been hampering the realization of the SDGs, pushing critical development targets beyond reach and hitting the most vulnerable and marginalized segments of the populations the hardest.

To contain the spread of the pandemic, alleviate its effects and ensure that no major crisis will follow at the economic, social and environmental levels, it is crucial that countries implement well-directed and well-resourced responses that are inclusive, forward-looking, and aligned with the SDGs. In the IPU's view, the global goals are more relevant today than ever before. The world is faced with a number of challenges that can only be solved through common, global solutions that the SDG framework readily offers. Thanks to their integrated and interlinked nature, the SDGs provide a road map that can help countries improve their preparedness, respond to the pandemic, and implement recovery plans that deliver social and environmental sustainability in a comprehensive manner.

Parliaments have a central role to play in this effort. Their legislative, oversight and budget responsibilities make them key players in, for example, improving the health

coverage of the people, combating inequalities, and building peaceful, just and inclusive societies. But are parliaments fit for purpose to play a full role in realizing the 2030 Agenda despite the current hurdles? Are they doing their utmost to effectively mainstream the SDGs in their parliamentary mechanisms?

As countries are now resetting their priorities and reallocating resources to deal with the pandemic, parliaments should be in a position to influence policies and budgets to ensure that the COVID-19 pandemic responses and recovery strategies incorporate the SDG framework in its entirety. Parliaments should monitor policy implementation and ensure that the needs and concerns of the whole of society are given due consideration, with no one left behind. Parliaments should be at the heart of the national and global response to COVID-19, and they should also drive transformational change. Going back to business as usual cannot be an option.

What we saw in the period before the pandemic was that, despite the progress that had been made, action to deliver on the SDGs was not advancing at the speed required. The economic downturn due to the crisis has been increasing inequalities at the global level and is disproportionately affecting women and the most vulnerable people.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Now that we are entering the final decade of action and delivery for sustainable development, parliamentarians should actively contribute to the achievement of the SDGs by 2030. Parliamentarians are more than legislators; they are also opinion-makers and community leaders, and should act as the political watchdog of the government in times of crisis. A key step they should take in order to contribute to the SDG implementation process is to ensure that the parliament is prepared and ready to deliver on the SDGs.

As you may be aware, the IPU, together with the United Nations Development Programme, has developed an SDG self-assessment toolkit in order to assist parliaments in engaging with the SDGs and contributing to their implementation. This toolkit 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 to take greater ownership of the SDGs through oversight as well as legislation, budgetary allocations and citizens' involvement. The IPU stands ready to facilitate this exercise, if requested, and to adapt the format of its capacity-building activities, such as by organizing virtual events, if the current health crisis persists.

Ladies and gentlemen,

During this webinar you will acquire up-to-date information on the status of SDG implementation, as well as recommendations to accelerate transformative change in the Asia-Pacific region. You will have a unique opportunity to exchange views, share experiences and identify common strategies to integrate the SDGs in the work of your parliaments, and to scale up the resources for and political commitment to regional cooperation.

It is my hope that you will take advantage of this opportunity to come up with valuable recommendations and conclusions that will be beneficial to your parliaments and the region as a whole. I look forward to open and constructive debates, and wish you a most successful webinar.