



Inter-Parliamentary Union

For democracy. For everyone.

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Address by the IPU Secretary General, Mr. Martin Chungong

ECOSOC special meeting: Towards sustainable, resilient and inclusive societies through the participation of all

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Ambassador Chatardova, President of ECOSOC,
Professor Steven (moderator),
Colleagues,

It is a great honour for me to be part of this discussion today.

The IPU is the world organization of national parliaments. Our mission is to strengthen democracy through parliaments – the branch of government that is supposed to be representative of all of society. The 45 to 46,000 members of parliament around the world today constitute a powerful group of lawmakers whose decisions, taken as a whole, can make or break the 2030 Agenda.

In a world that has grown hyper-competitive, with very low levels of trust in government, and one of the worst cases of inequality in modern history, cooperation and partnership are indeed needed more than ever. They are also the only way to deal with issues and processes of such complexity that no single person or institution can tackle them alone.

I agree that parliaments definitely belong to this discussion about strengthening cooperation and partnerships for sustainable, resilient and inclusive societies. We need strong, inclusive parliaments able to interact with and include all sectors of society to help design and implement national policies for sustainable development.

There are many considerations that come to mind when I think of the role of parliaments in this regard. As this is a broad subject, I will keep my remarks general, focusing on a few issues. I will be happy to get more into the details of things during the debate.

Let's reflect on the meaning of partnership and on the conditions required to make any partnership work.

Partnership is a very effective term when we want to evoke the need for multiple actors to work together toward a common vision. Parliamentarians of course should help forge that vision in a constant dialogue with citizens, including the most marginalized.

But the idea of “partnership” can also be misconstrued to suggest that all actors in the partnership are more or less on the same level, with roughly similar responsibilities. Also, since by definition only those interested in a partnership join in, the action that is associated with the partnership may be understood to be primarily of a *voluntary* nature.

In my view, while we work in cooperation and partnership with the government, civil society, the private sector and others, we must remember that each of us has a specific role to play and specific responsibilities. In this multi-stakeholder enterprise that is the 2030 Agenda, we need the executive arms of governments to *lead* and exercise the full potential of their policy making capabilities and authority for the benefit of the people. Parliaments have a unique role as well, and it is to *exercise oversight* and hold governments to account for their commitments.

Parliaments must act on behalf of all people, regardless of their differences – of social status, wealth, ethnic or other – to make sure that laws conform to commitments taken, and that they pursue the common good. The most important bill that all parliaments must consider each year is the budget bill. Here too, parliament must ensure that the bill reflects the best interest of all people and not just of a few, and that through both revenue and expenditure people contribute and receive their fair share.

I say this because I am all too aware of a tendency over the past few decades for governments to sort of retreat from their responsibilities (i.e., by deregulating and privatizing entire areas of government). But as we know from the human rights framework, governments are *duty bearers* – meaning they are the guarantors of the well-being of their citizens and must use every tool at their disposal to affirm the human rights of all. This may require more government intervention in the economy than we have seen in the last 2-3 decades, as well as more pro-active social and environmental policies.

Civil society of course has a tremendous role to play in helping organize people and articulate their views around specific issues. Civil society organizations must be enabled and supported to play this role which of course requires direct interface with governments and parliaments alike.

It worries me that in many countries civil society organizations are being constrained. We need to go the other way, empowering civil society to air its concerns and help facilitate a response from government officials and parliamentarians. There needs to be mutual trust between civil society organizations and parliaments in the spirit of true partnership.

The private sector too has a major role to play in building sustainable, resilient and inclusive societies. We need companies that create good jobs with benefits, respect environmental rules, and make things and services that are good at once for the people and for the planet, consistent with the SDGs. And of course, governments need to support an enabling environment for the private sector to thrive.

But here too a few qualifiers are in order when, sometimes, we talk about the need for “partnership” between government and the private sector as if up until now there was no interaction between the two or as if, worse still, governments were tone deaf to the needs of the private sector. This is not quite the case.

When it comes to *large companies*, national or transnational, recent history shows that they have quite a bit of political clout already, influencing policy making in ways that may be more in their own interest than in the interest of society as a whole. The past few decades have also witnessed a higher concentration of corporate ownership in fewer conglomerates, resulting in even more political influence. In his analysis of the 2008 financial crisis, for example, Prof. Stiglitz famously described how government regulators had been captured by the industry to basically regulate or de-regulate the financial sector according to its wishes.

So today more than at any other time in recent history we need a new relationship between governments and the private sector whereby *all segments of the private sector*, particularly small and medium enterprises that make the bulk of businesses in developing countries, have their say and get to express their needs and concerns to governments and of course to the parliaments as well. At the end of the day, governments – and parliaments with them – must enact laws and regulations that are in the best interest of all actors including the private sector and indeed all groups in society.

One of the things we emphasize in our work with parliaments is that they need to keep their doors open to all of the people and of course to civil society and private sector entities as well. We encourage open door hearings where all groups can participate. We also encourage MPs to use social media and other tools to keep their constituents informed and to hear from them directly.

Looking at parliaments more closely, as the institution of government that more than any other should *bring all components of society together*, our experience at Inter-Parliamentary Union is that unfortunately, there is quite a way to go still for parliaments to be fully representative of the people so that they operate and deliver in an inclusive manner.

When some groups are *under*-represented that means others are *over*-represented, resulting in a distortion of the decision-making process. This imbalance is the root cause of exclusion and marginalization at more than one level.

Today, there is a huge under-representation of women and youth, compared to the general population, but also of other minorities, including indigenous peoples. More important, in many countries the poor themselves tend to be under-represented as they are the least likely to participate in politics. No wonder so many countries continue to have policies that stop short of gender equality or are not quite pro-poor. A number of pro-active measures from quotas to public financing of elections and much more need to be enacted to reverse this course.

On the other hand, entrepreneurs and business managers of various backgrounds are generally well represented in parliaments, providing a clear pathway for the “business case for sustainable development”, as some put it, to be made right inside the legislative arena. A recent study of Latin American parliaments even shows strong over-representation compared to the general population.

Parliaments are also generally under-capacitated and disempowered, lacking sufficient authority and resources to oversee government action. No government, even in the most advanced democracies, likes to be scrutinized too closely. In a democracy where the separation of powers is the norm, there is always a tension between the executive and legislative branches. But today more than ever, if we want to succeed in the ambitious agenda we have set for ourselves, we need to work harder at making this relationship more effective at both national and global levels.

A good example of this is the government-led process for the Voluntary National Reviews of the HLPF, which for the most part does not include consultations with parliaments (only about a quarter of parliaments contributed last year). Likewise, while we see more parliaments inputting into national plans for the SDGs and asking some tough questions of governments when it comes to assessing results, in far too many countries parliaments are still on the sidelines of SDGs implementation efforts.

At the end of the day, the partnership that matters most is that between governments and their people. This means we need to strengthen all institutions of government and improve the relationship between them as a matter of priority. This will help ensure all people are fairly represented and their opposing interests reconciled toward a common vision for a sustainable and just society.

Thank you.