



Inter-Parliamentary Union

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# Transforming the SDGs into everyday reality: the role of parliaments

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I very much welcome this opportunity to share my views with you on this important topic: the role of parliaments in transforming the SDGs into everyday realities. Before I start, I wish to thank Amanda Ellis for the invitation and the wonderful hospitality accorded to me during my stay in this beautiful city of Honolulu.

For those of you who might not be familiar with the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), allow me to give you a brief overview of our unique organization. The IPU was founded in 1889 by two visionaries – a Frenchman known as Frédéric Passy and an Englishman called William Randall Cremer, both recipients of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1901 and 1903 respectively. These two individuals were convinced of the value of political dialogue for the peaceful resolution of conflicts. You will agree that their vision is as valid today as it was back then. As you can see, the IPU predates the United Nations and even the League of Nations.

Today, the IPU is the international organization of 178 parliaments that continues to work for peace, reconciliation, human rights and equality in all its aspects, as well as for effective and inclusive parliaments that reflect and represent women, young people, indigenous peoples and other segments of society. The IPU represents the voice of parliaments at the United Nations and in many of its global processes. It is a pioneer in the areas of gender equality and youth representation in politics. It also has a unique mechanism for addressing alleged violations of the human rights of parliamentarians. These values and aspirations are embodied in the IPU's Strategy, which also includes important focus on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Today, I am pleased to talk to you about this aspect of our work: helping parliaments transform the SDGs into everyday realities. Let me start by asking, what are the SDGs? In short, they are a universal set of goals, targets and indicators that UN member states adopted in 2015 to frame their agendas and policies over the next 15 years. The SDGs followed and expanded on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which were agreed by governments in 2001 and expired at the end of 2015. The SDGs capture and provide answers to the greatest global development challenges of our time, from poverty to inequality, from climate change to pollution. They aspire to be transformational and to ensure that no one is left behind. While one can argue that the framework is too broad and heavy with numerous targets and indicators, it is in fact remarkable that such an ambitious agenda was agreed by all countries in the world. The SDGs give the world guidance and represent a noble agenda that our countries, institutions but also each one of us, have the responsibility to implement for better tomorrow.

Democracy is often conceived in abstract terms, referring to values, principles and aspirations. I believe it is high time we begin to humanize democracy; to give it a human face. This means viewing democracy as a means to achieving a more noble objective: improving lives.

Now, what do parliaments have to do with this Agenda? Parliaments (legislatures) are the key institution of State and democracy. They make and adopt laws that ensure rights and obligations and make the everyday life of each country possible. They oversee the functioning and performance of the executive arm of government on a variety of issues and can ensure that laws and policies are implemented to the benefit of all. Parliaments also have a key function in each country's budget process as they approve the annual budget/appropriation bill. Finally, as representatives of the people parliamentarians have important responsibilities in ensuring that the real needs on the ground are met through government's programmes and plans.

So given the importance that parliaments have, it would be logical to think that they would be a key player in the negotiations of the UN-led and internationally-agreed development goals. Unfortunately, this has not always been the case. When the MDGs were adopted in 2000, parliaments were not consulted and most of them were not even informed about the existence of this framework. Not surprisingly, the first review of MDG implementation done by the UN in 2005 showed that it was important for goals not to be seen or implemented in isolation. It also showed that much more progress would have been made had parliaments and other stakeholders been involved in the implementation from the outset.

These findings prompted the IPU to take action, advocate with the UN for inclusion of parliaments in MDG implementation and raise awareness among parliamentarians about the MDGs and the roles they had in the implementation process. These efforts were very well received by our members, resulting in a number of IPU resolutions and other political pronouncements on development goals since this period. Parliaments also took action where it matters most – in their countries – resulting in improved legal/legislative environments, more funds for the poor and better awareness about development needs. Unfortunately, all this came too late and the MDGs expired in 2015 with a conclusion that no development goals could be implemented by governments and the UN in isolation from parliaments other actors.

In 2015, the world saw adoption of three major transformative agreements through the UN that seek to eradicate poverty and bring social, economic and environmental development on a sustainable path in just 15 years. These are the SDGs, the Sendai Agreement on Disaster Risk Reduction and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. Convinced of the centrality of the SDGs, very early on the IPU began to organize a parliamentary input to the UN so that the goals would include the views of parliamentarians. The perspectives of parliaments and parliamentarians from across the globe have indeed enriched the formulation and articulation of the SDGs and the IPU is proud to have contributed to this process.

In collaboration with other partners, we helped secure the governance goal (Goal 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions), which among other things calls for more accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels. The critical role and responsibility of parliaments in the implementation of the SDGs were also recognized in the Political Declaration accompanying the Goals.

Goal 16 focuses on peaceful, just and inclusive societies, and contains values that we at the IPU consider to be central to democracy, such as transparency and accountability, representation and inclusiveness. Having fought so hard to see that

these values are explicitly linked to the SDGs, I believe that we have a special responsibility to promote Goal 16 and support States in achieving it.

We can now ask a number of questions. Firstly, how have the SDGs come to permeate the very fabric of our organization? Secondly, what are the lessons we have learned from engaging with parliaments on the SDGs? Thirdly, how can we take SDG16 forward?

From the outset one of the questions that we at the IPU asked ourselves was how we as the global organization of parliaments reconcile our traditional mandate with the SDG agenda? To what extent are we able to, or should we, reshape our business processes in service of this agenda? How do we ensure that parliaments are informed about the goals and take action to enable their implementation? At the IPU we have chosen to keep our historic focus on democracy, but to integrate SDGs across all areas of work. I think it would be fair to say that the SDGs now run through the IPU like blood through our veins. In a way, it is remarkable how quickly the SDG lens has become part of our 129 year-old organization. I think that this reflects a broad agreement among IPU Member parliaments on the SDGs objectives.

At the political level, there is a growing corpus of official IPU positions in support of the SDGs: the Quito Declaration in 2013 expressing support for the SDG process, the Hanoi Declaration: *Transforming Words in Actions*, the declaration of the 2015 Fourth World Conference of Speakers of Parliament on Translating the SDGs into action, the 2017 resolution on international cooperation on the SDGs, a resolution the IPU adopted this year stressing the link between sustainable development and sustaining peace, to name but a few. The SDGs have been mainstreamed in the IPU strategy 2017-2021, both as a specific objective and to support other objectives.

At the operational level, our work is grounded in the Common Principles for Support to Parliaments, adopted by the IPU's governing bodies in October 2014. The Common Principles provide a common language that all actors involved in parliamentary development can share. A fundamental tenet of the Common Principles is that parliaments themselves should lead their own development agenda.

In order to support parliaments in becoming "fit for purpose" and carry out their traditional functions of legislation, oversight, budget and representation in the SDG context, we have published a Self-Assessment Toolkit. The toolkit is designed to assist parliaments and parliamentarians to determine themselves whether they are equipped in terms of institutional processes and capacities to do their part in implementing the SDGs. It has been designed to be relevant to all parliaments, whatever political system they belong to, whatever their stage of development.

The IPU is actively supporting parliaments in assessing their capacity to work on the SDGs in Fiji, Mali, Djibouti, Serbia, with Namibia, Kenya and Sri Lanka in the pipeline, to name but a few. We have organized regional seminars for parliaments in the Asia-Pacific region, Sub-Saharan Africa, Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, and the list goes on. We also promote parliamentary engagement and contribution to country SDG reports to the UN – a process that takes place every summer at the UN in New York. I have just come from this year's session where there is growing evidence that governments and parliaments are working together to move forward the SDG agenda. That is a good lesson worth emulating.

In terms of lessons learned so far from working with parliaments and parliamentarians on the SDGs, I see four in particular.

1/ In a general sense, parliaments are much more aware of the SDGs than they were of the MDGs. Certainly this is a result of the more inclusive preparatory process of the SDGs, but also thanks to the efforts of the IPU and other organizations working with parliaments. We have observed a lot of interest and goodwill towards the SDGs. Parliamentarians who are familiar with the SDGs tend to quickly understand their political interest.

2/ Regional cooperation around the SDGs is welcomed and is necessary. Through the regional seminars we have organized with parliaments, we have observed a lot of political will to establish dialogue, to set aside tensions that can exist between countries, and to use the SDGs as a platform for cooperation. Our experience is that countries see that the SDGs as an opportunity to foster inter-parliamentary dialogue and cooperation on concrete issues ranging from the economy, health to resource management.

3/ National ownership remains a challenge. At the governmental level, many countries are revising their national development plans or producing specific SDG plans. Yet parliaments seem to be only weakly associated with these processes. We have observed one country, Hungary, where the Speaker of Parliament is chairing the national coordination body. But that seems to be the exception. In many countries, there are still questions about whether parliament should even be part of the SDG coordination body or whether its role should be to monitor the work of these bodies and hold them to account.

4/ Which points perhaps to the biggest lesson learned, that often parliaments are willing to “do something”, but may be unsure about what exactly that thing should be. Some parliaments have moved to establish SDG committees, but they have quickly realized that the SDG agenda is too broad to be covered by one committee alone, and that the SDGs overlap with many existing committees in Parliament. That is why we have been working with parliaments, using our self-assessment methodology, so they can determine for themselves on a case-by-case basis how to adapt their existing structures to take account of the SDG agenda.

Our conclusion is that there is a lot of scope for sharing experience and knowledge at a regional level. Basically there is no single recipe for the SDGs and everyone is still learning how to work with them. Parliaments learn quicker when they are able to draw on the positive and negative experiences of their peers. But with only 12 years left to implement the SDGs, all development actors have a responsibility to intensify efforts to strengthen the role of parliaments in SDG implementation. Indeed, we could say that we are engaged in a race against the clock.

Let me come back to SDG 16 which recognizes the importance of human rights, the rule of law and strong institutions if the development goals are to be met. Goal 16 has challenged national statistical offices to think carefully about practical ways to measure governance. In the IPU's case, Goal 16 fits very well with our vision of “strong democratic parliaments serving the people”. Goal 16 is also identified as a priority by many United Nations agencies, international organizations, think tanks, civil society organizations.

In the three years of engaging on SDG 16 many of us have come to certain conclusions. I would like to share two with you.

1/ That the breadth of the issues covered makes it difficult to work on SDG 16 as a homogenous goal. We can agree, I think, that the targets within this goal are important and mutually reinforcing, for its achievement as for the entire 2030 Agenda. But each target within Goal 16 is complex and multilayered in itself. Taken together, it is easy to

be overwhelmed by the complexity of the interplay between the issues to be addressed.

2/ This broad sweep of issues is combined with a comparative lack of depth in the indicators that are used to monitor and report on progress. Assigning one or two indicators to an area as complex as the rule of law is at best symbolic. Creating a handful of complementary indicators is a way to recognize the problems, but can only go so far in resolving them.

We accept that the overall number of indicators has to be limited, otherwise governments will never be able to report on them, and citizens will not be able to make any sense of them. Even so, there are still more than 200 SDG indicators at the global level. Because the SDGs are more comprehensive than the MDGs were, we need to make a special effort to package and present them in a simple and effective way. The 2030 Agenda is both a challenge and an opportunity for parliaments to develop their role in working with governments to improve the well-being of the planet and of all people. But there is very little in the indicators for Goal 16 that helps us to know where parliaments stand and how they are changing. So what can be done?

All the SDGs require parliaments that pass laws, allocate financial resources and hold government to account for progress. That is the easy part.

But developing institutions that are truly effective, accountable and transparent, and ensuring responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making, while central to the IPU's mission, are not at all straightforward tasks. That is perhaps an understatement.

We say that parliaments have a role to play in holding governments accountable for progress towards the SDGs. But how well-equipped are parliaments to play this role? The 2017 IPU-UNDP Global Parliamentary Report (GPR) on oversight and accountability suggests that many parliaments are not well-equipped at all.

Parliamentary oversight is and will remain a highly political issue. The political space for oversight simply does not exist everywhere. There is a need to continually develop and strengthen a culture of oversight and accountability. For example, by providing safeguards that protect the right of the opposition and minority parties in parliament to question and challenge the government.

Our research shows that an effective system of oversight requires a combination of a strong mandate that sets the rules of the game, preferably secured in the constitution and in legislation; adequate parliamentary resources, including in terms of access to information and capacity for analysis; and willing and committed participation from parliamentarians. Yet effective oversight remains an aspiration for many parliaments.

I firmly believe that oversight will be a key marker of parliament's relevance in the twenty-first century. By holding government to account, identifying problems and seeking corrective measures in legislation, budget allocations, policy and administration, parliament provides a vital service to society. I remain optimistic that parliament's role in holding government to account for progress on the SDGs will also be a powerful catalyst for the 2030 Agenda, even if much more needs to be done.

I would like to conclude by reiterating the three particular responsibilities that the organizations working to strengthen democratic parliaments have in implementing the SDGs:

1. To keep a focus on our historic missions, while adding a dimension that addresses the Sustainable Development Goals in a coherent way. For the IPU, that includes standard-setting and capacity building to support strong parliaments, including on issues of gender equality and human rights.
2. To help to build national ownership of the SDGs in strong partnership with the government, while encouraging dialogue among parliaments at a regional level and sharing lessons learned

I wish here to stress the importance of partnerships: governments, parliaments, civil society, private sector, development banks etc. Indeed, implementing the SDGs is a multi-stakeholder endeavour.

3. Organizations working with parliaments should develop and promote standards and indicators that have the depth and local relevance that can be difficult to identify at the global level, while remaining aligned with the overall goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

These are the directions that we at the IPU are undertaking to help parliaments transform the SDGs into everyday reality. Today's parliaments and the democratic dispensation in which they operate can only be relevant to the extent they address the development agenda in a coherent, effective and meaningful way. The outcome: increased wellbeing for the people is maybe the main yardstick by which that relevance can be measured.

What we are asking of parliaments/legislatures is not rocket science but that they should use the powers vested in them by their constitution to help transform lives to bring well-being to all of society. The SDGs provide a golden platform for that in view of their consensual, universal and non-controversial nature. They represent an opportunity for Members of Parliament to cross the aisle and work together for common purposes.

I commend the Hawaii Senate on being the first US legislature to embrace the SDGs.

Developing and developed countries need to put all hands on deck.

The key word in the SDGs is "sustainable". We should be in the development business for the long-haul. One-off initiatives will not work. We need to think of the planet we want to bequeath to "future" generations, not only the "next" generation.

Resilience therefore should ring a bell to all of us.

Thank you.