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Reports on recent IPU specialized meetings

(e) **Parliamentary side event at the UN High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) Mobilizing parliaments for the SDGs**

New York, 16 July 2018

Summary of the discussion

Eighty-four MPs from 36 national delegations were in attendance.

Moderated by Senator Lucila Crexell of Argentina, the panel featured three presenters: Ms. Elizabeth Cabezas Guerrero, President of the National Assembly of Ecuador; Ms. Petra Bayr, MP, National Council of Austria; and Mr. Thilanga Sumathipala, MP, Parliament of Sri Lanka.

The IPU President **Gabriella Cuevas Barron** welcomed participants to the event recalling that parliaments were acknowledged in the 2030 Agenda for their key oversight and legislative role in advancing the SDGs. She noted that the theme of the meeting, on sustainable consumption and production patterns, had been chosen to highlight how the challenge of decoupling economic growth from environmental sustainability continued and may prove insurmountable unless we began to think of an alternative economic model, more centred on human wellbeing.

President Cuevas further reported on the results of the IPU survey on parliamentary engagement in the HLPF and attendant Voluntary National Reviews. Only one third of the national reports presented to the HLPF included some kind of parliamentary input, and less than half of national delegations to the HLPF included at least one MP; clearly, there was still a lot to be done to fully engage parliaments in this major UN process.

As the first presenter, **Speaker Cabezas Guerrero** outlined Ecuador's experience to show how a gradual change toward a more sustainable model of consumption and production was possible. She referred in particular to the new 2008 Constitution that recognized nature as a legal category entitled to the right of self-preservation. As a result, the Government of Ecuador was duty-bound to adopt policies in harmony with nature. Ms. Cabezas noted how progress must be measured in terms of human well-being more than in simple GDP. No economy could rely on never ending extraction and resource exploitation as this would eventually undermine the economy's own foundations in the natural world. Guided by this understanding of progress, Ecuador devolved more authority from the central government to local authorities that were closer to the people and their environment. Another illustration of their people-centred approach was new legislation guaranteeing a basic income and stronger social benefits for domestic workers.

Ms. Petra Bayer discussed the limits of the green economy as it sought to marry policies such as the three Rs of the environmental movement (reuse, recycle, reduce) with the current economic growth model. She explained that while it was important that MPs supported the whole panoply of environmental preservation policies, what was needed for true sustainability - in a finite world - was a paradigmatic shift away from consumerism as a way of life.

Ms. Bayer further noted that, absent strong regulatory and enforcement frameworks, policies such as green labelling could easily be circumvented. She cautioned against the frameworks for corporate responsibility that relied on voluntary compliance in lieu of legally binding rules. In all this, Ms. Bayer noted, developed countries had a special responsibility to act first and help developing countries with solutions that would not lock them into the current unsustainable economic model. The SDGs called for a new normative shift based on human rights, peace and equity that should inform the policies of all countries.

Mr. Thilanga Sumathipala's remarks focused on his experience as Chair of the Sri Lankan Parliament's SDGs Committee. He explained that that body was constituted as a standing committee (the highest status in the Parliament's committee architecture) so as to immediately signal the critical role of the SDGs in all acts of parliament. The Committee had a strong consultative role vis-à-vis the thematic committees and helped highlight gaps and inconsistencies throughout the legislative and budgetary processes. Mr. Sumanthipala concluded by urging all MPs in attendance to help promote the SDGs at the community level, where citizen engagement was most needed to build national ownership and to design effective policy solutions.

Main messages and recommendations

The debate, consisting of fourteen interventions from the floor, highlighted the following points.

- The question of the long-term sustainability of the growth model is indeed a challenging one that can no longer be avoided. Globally, consumption and production patterns are well beyond the planet's carrying capacity. The model has "excessive consumption" built into it. As a first step in the right direction policies need to aim at shifting production from a linear model (e.g., products have a short lifespan and are disposed when no longer usable) to a circular model (e.g., products are designed for life and simply upgraded and repaired as needed). This change alone can go a long way toward achieving a zero waste economy.

One challenge in developing alternatives to the current growth model is the lack of a clear understanding of the green economy as well as lack of policy guidance on how to transition to it. Another difficulty is policy silos that remain pervasive in most parliaments. In particular, it was pointed out, questions of sustainability are confined to environmental committees and are rarely considered within the realm of trade and finance committees. SDG 12, on sustainable consumption and production patterns, provides a much needed linchpin to strengthen policy coherence between the economic, social and environmental pillars of sustainable development.

- Taking the cue from Sri Lanka's experience, some participants suggested that a serious review of parliamentary committees needed to take place. While a full-fledged standing committee for the SDGs may not be the best solution for all parliaments, some coordinating structure may help to steer legislation consistently in the right direction as defined by national plans for the SDGs. In their legislative and oversight work, parliaments must consider the actual state of play of SDGs implementation in their respective countries. To this effect, one participant referred to the Sustainable Development Solutions Network's Index and Dashboard (<http://www.sdgindex.org/>) as an excellent resource for parliaments.
- Essential to the transition toward the green economy and related well-being policies is the establishment of new metrics of progress. While GDP, inflation and interest rates and other common indexes have a role in economic policy, they should not continue to be paramount. Rather, happiness indicators that reflect subjective satisfaction as well as new cross-cutting metrics such as the ecological footprint, among others, should drive policy-making and enter the public consciousness as much as the traditional economic indicators.

Conclusion

President Cuevas Barron summarized the discussion in the following three points: first, each MP has a responsibility to ensure that the SDGs benefit all people, regardless of personal ideology or politics; second, policies need to go well beyond technocratic solutions to reflect the people's real aspirations and values; third, MPs need to work harder at institutionalizing the SDGs so as to help ensure their success in the remaining twelve years to 2030.