



Inter-Parliamentary Union  
For democracy. For everyone.

## Parliamentary Forum at the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development

United Nations

Monday, 15 July, 3–6 p.m.  
Conference Room 1

The Parliamentary Forum at this year's UN High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) in July 2019 built on the parliamentary side events held on similar occasions in previous years.

The transition from being just one of hundreds of side events to a unique parliamentary forum conferred a special status on the meeting, which helped raise the visibility of parliaments as key actors in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The meeting was organized by the Office of the Permanent Observer of the IPU to the United Nations in New York in close cooperation with the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Over 140 members of parliament from 50 national delegations participated. The forum was introduced by the President of the IPU, followed by two panel discussions in which a mixture of parliamentarians and experts participated.

### Summary of the discussion

Opening the meeting, IPU President Gabriela Cuevas Barron noted that at the current rate of progress, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) would not be met by 2030. She lamented that parliamentarians were not dealing adequately with the global goals due to weak institutional capacities and dysfunctional politics. She called on MPs to overcome their political differences and reach out across the aisle to find workable solutions.

Referring to the theme of the first session on growing inequalities and distrust in government, President Cuevas stated that the reduction of inequality lay in two factors: pay people more for their work and make those who can afford it contribute more to the public welfare. She argued that the leading problem for MPs was government opposition to their oversight power. A fresh reminder of this was the Declaration of the SDG Summit (September 2019), in which government negotiators managed to leave out any reference to the role of parliaments in SDG implementation. Similarly, the IPU's yearly parliamentary engagement in the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) showed that only a third of parliaments were involved in this key government-led process. She emphasized that parliaments were often overlooked because governments saw them as a threat and not as partners working for the common good of the people. What was needed for good governance was a more organic relationship between the executive and the legislative branches.

## Session I. Growing inequalities and distrust in government: Breaking the cycle

Ms. Cuevas moderated this session, which included a keynote presentation by Mr. Pedro Conceição, Director of the UNDP Human Development Report Office, and two lead discussants, Ms. Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury, Speaker of the Bangladesh Parliament, and Ms. Erzsébet Schmuch, MP, National Assembly of Hungary.

Presenting the preliminary findings of the 2019 Human Development Report, which focuses on inequality, Mr. Conceição cited public opinion surveys that show strong support for more equality worldwide. He noted that the report aimed to go beyond the usual indicators of inequality, such as the distribution of income and wealth, to look at other dimensions and major future trends, including the impact of climate change and new technology. What transpired most clearly from the UNDP's analysis was that inequality was a matter of political choice, and therefore not an inevitable phenomenon. Fiscal policy played a necessary but insufficient role in narrowing the inequality gap. "Pre-distribution" policies that expanded opportunity through more inclusive growth (e.g. increased access to decent jobs, public goods, etc.) were also very important. Mr. Conceição concluded by underlining that, in today's integrated global economy, collective action and multilateralism were crucial to combat inequality.

Ms. Chaudhury further stressed that growing inequality fostered distrust in governments, and called on parliamentarians to break that negative cycle. She noted that rapid economic growth did not necessarily translate into benefits for the poor and most vulnerable, with rising inequality and a wider gap and disparity among people within and between countries still present. In Bangladesh, the expansion of social safety nets had halved the poverty rate.

Ms. Chaudhury also discussed the need for more opportunities for women's economic empowerment, particularly through ICT skill development. She emphasized that parliamentary standing committees played an important role in reducing inequality by allocating resources in annual budgets, as well as by identifying those who were being left behind and taking appropriate steps to uplift them. She called on MPs to ensure democracy delivered on people's economic and social aspirations.

Ms. Schmuch identified the root causes of income inequality in the workings of the present multilateral free trade regime and in unfair tax practices that favoured the rich. Climate change and the loss of biodiversity were exacerbating factors. She stressed that inequality strongly impacted democracy and good governance, particularly by depriving low-income families of information, which, in turn, could be manipulated for votes or influenced by the rich. She concluded by calling for independent oversight bodies to monitor decision-making processes at all levels.

### **Main messages and recommendations**

The debate, consisting of ten interventions from the floor, highlighted the following points:

- Parliaments have a key role to play in meeting the SDGs, which include a strong focus on inequality. However, many participants noted the lack of information and dissemination of the global goals at the local level. Parliamentary committees might not be aware that a particular law actually helps achieve the SDGs. Generally, more meetings such as the present forum are needed to help MPs better understand their role in the SDGs.

- International partnerships are needed to avoid asymmetrical approaches to reducing inequality. These partnerships must include different stakeholders, particularly from parliaments, academia, the private sector and NGOs.
- Affirmative action policies can help narrow the inequality gap, particularly when it comes to discrimination against women and minorities. Parliamentarians must enact legislation that promotes gender equality, keeping in mind the particular areas in which women and vulnerable groups are being left behind.
- Ordinary people are not adequately represented in decision-making. Policy capture by private interests, including multinationals, undermines the democratic process and is a major factor in the generally weak response to the problem of growing inequality.

## Session II. Parliamentary engagement in the SDGs: How can we measure progress?

Moderated by IPU Secretary General Martin Chungong, the panel featured three presenters: Ms. Kareen Jabre, Director, IPU Division of Programmes; Ms. Nina Scheer, MP, German Bundestag; and Mr. Bolpuso Wynter Mmolotsi, MP, National Assembly of Botswana.

Ms. Jabre presented the findings of the first IPU global study on engagement of parliaments in the SDGs, including in the VNR process. The survey identified trends and good practices in parliaments to implement the global goals. 89 parliaments, corresponding to roughly 50 per cent of the IPU's membership, participated in the survey. Highlights from the survey results included: 56 per cent of respondents received some sort of education and training on the SDGs; just over 50 per cent received regular reports on the implementation of the SDGs from their governments (though the level and frequency of reporting varied greatly between countries); 64 per cent of parliaments raised questions or initiated inquiries with regard to the national plan for the SDGs; and 53 per cent of parliaments ensured the SDGs were part of the national budget either by earmarking a dedicated sum or by mainstreaming the goals throughout the budget.

Ms. Jabre further noted that 52 per cent of the 89 respondents had set up a mechanism dedicated specifically to the SDGs, such as a parliamentary network, a standing committee or subcommittee, or a system of focal points. 43 per cent of parliaments had mainstreamed the SDGs into the work of existing committees. Showing that more than one institutionalization approach could be followed at the same time, one third of parliaments had established a special committee while proceeding to mainstream the goals through existing committees.

Among the 56 parliaments reporting that their government had submitted a VNR to the High-level Political Forum in the past few years, only 43 per cent stated that the executive had consulted with parliament during the process.

Ms. Jabre concluded her presentation with three key lessons from the IPU study. First, while institutionalization of the SDGs through parliaments was taking place, efforts needed to be scaled up dramatically. Secondly, there was no one-size-fits-all approach to institutionalization. Each parliament must find a suitable pathway that fitted their current needs, with the IPU ready to serve as facilitator and assist parliaments as needed. Lastly, parliamentary capacities to assess the impact of SDG policies remained generally weak.

Mr. Mmolotsi outlined the different ways in which parliament could engage in the SDG process, drawing on his experience as an MP in Botswana, where a roadmap, a national plan and a communication strategy for the SDGs were already in place. In his Parliament, parliamentary committees played an important role in measuring the progress on the SDGs. Committees

oversaw the executive by examining how the budget was allocated, which in turn strengthened transparency and public confidence. Plenary sessions of parliament had been used to check on SDG progress and to identify key SDG issues for the country. Emphasizing the vital role of MPs in localizing the SDGs, Mr. Mmolotsi highlighted the need to mainstream the SDGs into national and subnational development plans.

Mr. Mmolotsi also addressed the challenges MPs faced in engaging with the SDGs. He noted that, to varying degrees, parliaments tended to be poorly funded and not sufficiently independent of the executive. Individual MPs may not have the necessary legal background and may suffer from a lack of time and resources to engage in the legislative process. He called for more support and assistance to parliaments that did not yet have budget offices or capacity to engage in measuring SDG progress.

Highlighting another model of parliamentary oversight of the SDGs, Ms. Scheer described the work of the Bundestag's Advisory Council on Sustainable Development. The Council's mandate was to check that government bills and statutory instruments were in line with the SDGs (over 800 bills had gone through the Council to date). The Council worked across party and ideological lines but remained limited in its action by several factors: members were not as free to speak as they should be because of party allegiance and other pressures; not being an official parliamentary committee, the Council had mainly an advisory role and could not get involved in the process of drafting bills and lobbying and had no veto power over bills.

### **Main messages and recommendations**

The debate, which consisted of 13 interventions from the floor, highlighted the following points:

- International cooperation is vital to support the national institutionalization of the SDGs. Some parliaments lack the capacities to implement and measure the global goals effectively. This is particularly the case in countries facing conflict and instability, where more targeted approaches to incorporate the SDGs are needed. While partnerships with stakeholders can help advance the SDGs, there is a need for appropriate regulation of such partnerships, particularly when they include the private sector.
- The successful institutionalization of the SDGs depends ultimately on national ownership. Political will and leadership within parliaments is needed to prioritize the SDGs and hold governments accountable. Instead of seeing the SDGs as a burden, parliaments should think of the goals as an opportunity to improve the lives of their constituents. Several examples of parliamentary oversight of the SDGs were cited: the Parliament of Chad established a special SDG committee; Indonesia established six SDG centres across the country to broaden grassroots involvement; and Albania instituted a rule of procedure that asks the government to specify targeted indicators and goals when submitting new laws.
- Parliamentary oversight mechanisms need to be more inclusive of diverse groups and perspectives. Parliaments, being representative of the people, must "walk the talk". In Israel, for example, public institutions must have at least five per cent of representation from people with disabilities. Gender equality is also an essential factor in the success of an oversight mechanism. MPs from Zimbabwe shared the success of their Parliament's quota system, with 60 seats in parliament reserved solely for women. They also noted that a special budget had been set up for the exclusive use of women seeking financial help. Greater representation of all constituencies leads to more targeted policy action to make sure no one is left behind.