



INTER-PARLIAMENTARY UNION

CHEMIN DU POMMIER 5
1218 LE GRAND-SACONNEX / GENEVA (SWITZERLAND)

TELEPHONE (41.22) 919 41 50 - FAX (41.22) 919 41 60 - E-MAIL postbox@mail.ipu.org

HLCP FUTURE PROGRAMME OF WORK - RELATIONS WITH PARLIAMENTARIANS

The present Note has been prepared by the Secretary General of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) as a contribution to item 4(c) of the agenda of the twelfth session of the High Level Committee on Programmes.

The Note argues that the United Nations system stands to gain considerably by placing more emphasis on its relations with parliament as an institution, and that the IPU can play a unique role in shaping and providing content to this relationship. The Note offers insight into the type of mechanisms the IPU has developed to facilitate interaction between the United Nations and parliaments and provides examples of some issues that may merit special attention.

In line with the conclusions of the United Nations Secretary-General's 2006 report on Cooperation between the UN and the IPU, the Note argues in favour of a structured mechanism of consultation and coordination between the IPU and the United Nations system.

THE UNITED NATIONS AND THE WORLD OF PARLIAMENTS

The United Nations and its sister organizations are inter-governmental organizations in which member States are represented by the executive branch of government. Government representatives decide on programmes and budgets for these organizations and negotiate and sign agreements. However, there can be little doubt that those programmes and agreements will not take shape within everyday reality if a number of key actors do not provide follow-up and take action.

Parliament is one such actor. It debates and approves the national budget that includes contributions to international organizations, funds for their programmes and disbursements for services and projects set up by each country to implement international agreements. Parliament is often called upon to ratify these agreements and it translates them into national legislation. Parliament is also responsible for overseeing the executive branch of government and making sure that it lives up to its international commitments.

Parliamentarians have been elected to represent the people in all their diversity. They have a responsibility to influence and help shape government policy. They monitor international negotiations and are in close contact with government negotiators. In many instances it is parliament that grants the negotiating mandate. Here again, much important work takes place in the legislature and is intrinsically linked to the institution's agenda.

Of course, as individuals, members of parliament can also play a key role in building national support for international action. They are in regular contact with their constituents and can explain the background to international agreements and mobilize popular support for

international organizations. In turn, they also count on important institutional support for that activity, not least from their own parliaments.

There are almost 45,000 members of parliament in the 189 countries that have parliaments. Every year up to 10,000 parliamentary seats are up for renewal and some 2,000 members see their term expire. In some countries, as many as 75 percent of the legislators may not have their mandate renewed. All of which suggests that focusing on individual parliamentarians is a Herculean task that is beyond the means of multilateral institutions.

It follows that the United Nations system has a strong vested interest in ensuring that the important issues on its agenda are reflected on the agenda of national parliaments. It is parliament as a whole, with its myriad of committees, enquiry commissions and other structures that can turn the United Nations agenda into reality.

Globalization has vastly expanded the scope for parliamentary action and parliaments are today equally interested in developing a relationship with the United Nations system, albeit for varying reasons. They want, for example, to contribute to and monitor international negotiations and oversee the enforcement of what is adopted by governments. Similarly, they wish to scrutinize the activities of international organizations and contribute to their deliberations. In other words, they seek a two-way relationship.

THE UNITED NATIONS AND THE INTER-PARLIAMENTARY UNION

The IPU is the only global organization that brings together the world's parliaments. It is an entirely unique focal point for international cooperation between parliaments.

The organization promotes peace and international cooperation and works in support of the United Nations. Some 150 member parliaments participate in its activities which pursue three broad objectives: (i) international peace and security; (ii) democracy, with particular emphasis on human rights and gender equality; and (iii) development. Regional parliamentary assemblies and organizations and international political party movements are associated with the work of the IPU.

The IPU concluded a cooperation agreement with the United Nations in 1996 and in 2002 it was granted observer status by the United Nations General Assembly with the additional right to have its official documents circulated at the UN General Assembly.¹

The IPU can bring a unique contribution to the United Nations system by virtue of its global membership and agenda. In a manner analogous to the United Nations, membership of the organization is open to parliaments of all countries, and the vast majority are. In addition, many of its meetings and activities are open to parliaments that are not formally members of the organization. The IPU is not a single-issue organization and its agenda covers the whole gamut of subjects that are dealt with by the United Nations system.

For several years, Speakers and other leaders of parliament have been advocating a strategic partnership between the United Nations and the IPU. They wish to see more substantive interaction and coordination with the United Nations system, and have called upon the world body to resort more frequently to the political and technical expertise that the IPU can provide together with its Member Parliaments.

¹ The decision explicitly recognized the unique inter-state character of the IPU and hence clarified that the IPU is not to be assimilated with non-governmental or civil society organizations.

At the international level they have committed themselves to work through the IPU as the world organization of national parliaments.² Specifically, they want the IPU to (i) ensure that national parliaments are better informed on the activities of the United Nations, (ii) avail itself more frequently of the expertise of members of standing and select committees of national parliaments in dealing with specific issues requiring international cooperation, and (iii) develop further parliamentary hearings and specialized meetings at the United Nations.

In general, Member States and parliaments are opposed to international organizations setting up new structures for interaction with parliaments and their members. They concur in the need for closer cooperation between parliaments and these institutions, but wish it to be organized by parliamentary institutions such as the IPU which have the mandate and legitimacy to do so. This recommendation is reflected in both the Millennium Declaration and the 2005 World Summit Outcome.

IPU MECHANISMS FOR COOPERATION WITH THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM

The following are examples of mechanisms that are employed by the IPU to strengthen relations between the United Nations and parliaments and build parliamentary support for the UN:

- Forums where the UN can interact with parliaments. The annual IPU Assemblies which are attended by some 1,500 parliamentary delegates from some 140 countries offer unique opportunities for the United Nations to address and interact with the global parliamentary community on key UN issues through debates, panel discussions, work shops, field visits, and so forth.
- Specialized global committees and conferences on specific issues that are high on the international agenda. These structures are created for members of those parliamentary standing and select committees that are mandated to deal with such issues on a daily basis. They offer them a forum where they can debate them, exchange experiences and interact directly with international agencies. The IPU already does this in relation to human rights and to trade questions. It is developing similar mechanisms on HIV/AIDS and other pandemics, on child protection, on gender and on employment.
- Parliamentary meetings on the occasion of major United Nations conferences and similar events. These events allow parliamentarians to understand the issues under discussion, follow closely progress in the negotiations that take place, interact with governmental negotiators, exchange experiences with their colleagues and provide input to the UN event from a parliamentary perspective.
- Parliamentary hearings at the United Nations. The hearings which take place throughout the year, and particularly the one organized each year on the occasion of the General Assembly, enable members of parliament to discuss select issues with senior UN officials and representatives of members States, academia and civil society. They serve the dual purpose of informing them of the current situation and of providing a modicum of oversight opportunities.
- Monitoring implementation of UN Conventions. The IPU works in support of several United Nations treaty bodies and mobilizes parliaments to help monitor the implementation of agreements such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against women and its Additional Protocol.

² They have also asked the IPU to work closely with regional parliamentary assemblies and organizations.

- Tools for members of parliament on select issues. These often take the form of handbooks written in cooperation with international organizations specifically for a parliamentary audience. They typically identify specific actions that parliamentarians can take. Recent handbooks have addressed issues relating to human rights, humanitarian law, refugees and statelessness, child protection, and security.
- Workshops and seminars for members of parliament. These events address a wide range of issues. Recently, they have focused on human rights, gender equality, the environment and security.
- Operational support to UN missions, projects and activities. The IPU provides specialist technical support to UN operations in a variety of situations. Parliaments send staff and members to the IPU for the purpose of working with the UNDP, the Peace Building Commission and UN Democracy Fund, to mention but a few examples.

There is wide international consensus that development and peace will never be fully realized without good governance, and that parliament, as one of the institutions at the heart of governance, needs to be strengthened. There is, moreover, a growing realization that parliaments can play a critical role in peace-building efforts, and that the international community must therefore invest more in reinforcing parliamentary institutions in cases where they are weak. It is also necessary to do more to promote gender equality in politics and defend human rights, particularly freedom of speech.

These are areas where the IPU has extensive experience and developed unequalled expertise through activities, such as the following:

- Providing specialist knowledge on parliaments and their mandate, structure and working methods. The IPU has a wide network of parliamentary experts and can count upon support being provided by parliaments which offer staff and members on secondment to IPU activities. It tracks parliamentary elections and development in parliaments. It undertakes analytical and comparative studies and offers advice on parliamentary work and procedures.
- Setting standards and developing best practices. The IPU has a wide network of specialists within and outside parliaments that assist the Organization in developing standards and best practices. The IPU has developed universal criteria for free and fair elections that are widely used by election observers, a universal declaration on democracy and, most recently, a guide on democratic parliaments containing many examples of good practice.
- Providing technical support to parliaments. The IPU runs a technical cooperation program which provides support to parliaments, particularly in developing countries emerging from conflict. The program is implemented with support from parliaments and in close cooperation with the United Nations system. The IPU also cooperates with the United Nations through a Global Centre for Information and Communication Technology in Parliament jointly launched by the two organizations.
- Promoting dialogue and reconciliation. The IPU has a long history of facilitating political dialogue between adversaries through parliamentary diplomacy. In recent years, the IPU has expanded this activity to encourage more active parliamentary involvement in reconciliation processes.

- Offering support to parliaments in the area of human rights. This involves running training programs, seminars and other events to raise awareness of human rights issues and the work of the treaty making bodies, facilitating legislation and parliamentary oversight and offering protection to parliamentarians themselves and particularly those who belong to the political opposition in parliament.
- Promoting gender equality and partnership between men and women in political life. The IPU is the official data provider to the United Nations system on women in parliament and undertakes analysis, prepares progress reports and runs training programs for women candidates and members of parliament. The gender partnership program also addresses issues relating more broadly to women's rights such as violence against women, female genital mutilation, and others.

As the IPU develops these programs it also seeks to strengthen its cooperation with the United Nations system and, in particular, the new United Nations bodies. The IPU has a close working relationship with the United Nations Democracy Fund and the two organizations are concluding a memorandum of understanding. The IPU is working with the United Nations Peace Building Commission, placing its extensive experience in political dialogue and reconciliation at the disposal of the United Nations in specific country situations. The IPU is also in close contact with the United Nations Human Rights Council with a view to building a working relationship.

AREAS FOR FUTURE COOPERATION

The IPU has been working to advance virtually all of the issues on the UN agenda and particularly the follow up to the major United Nations international conferences, including the Millennium Summit. This work has invariably been conducted in cooperation with various departments of the United Nations and specialized agencies and has taken the form of joint meetings, publications, and other initiatives.

However, these activities do not amount to a coherent program of cooperation as they are normally selected in an *ad hoc* manner at the departmental or agency level. The IPU is therefore seeking to develop a regular mechanism of consultation that would aim at the constitution of a coherent program of activities targeted to achieve commonly agreed priorities between the IPU and the United Nations system. Recent debates at the UN and the IPU provide some examples of what might be envisaged.

The issue of employment connects with national politics like few others. It is present in almost every single election campaign and looms large in most political debates. It is also an issue where parliaments have a significant role to play through their legislative and oversight functions.

The World Commission on the Social Dimension of Globalization stated that parliaments should work to bring coherence to and consistency between economic, social and environmental policies and develop integrated oversight of major international organizations. Parliament's essential suitability to this task lies in its oversight function that allows it to hold government to account for the content and coherence of its policies in different international organizations.

The IPU and the ILO have initiated talks to start implementing these far reaching recommendations and the IPU will be approaching other relevant international organizations to develop a common strategy and a work plan for the coming four to five years.

The environment is also high on the agenda in parliaments. It has been examined by the IPU from different angles over the years with a constant focus on interdependence: between present and future generations; between continents, regions and States; between the major problems of mankind and the environment (population growth, health, poverty, uncontrolled urbanization); and between countries in the North and the South.

At its most recent Assembly, IPU members called for greater coherence in environment policies at the national and international levels, the development of specific environmental goals (similar to the MDGs), and the creation of new tools and methods for measuring GDP and other standardized economic concepts that take into account the value of natural resources.

In a few weeks, the United Nations will release a new comprehensive study on violence against children. The IPU has participated in the working group associated with this study at the request of parliaments and is in the process of developing a strategy for parliamentary follow-up for the coming years. The IPU is interested in ensuring the participation of all relevant organizations of the United Nations system in this process, so as to maximize efforts and ensure coherence.

This year the United Nations will receive a report on violence against women, while the Secretary-General's Panel on System-wide Coherence will make recommendations regarding the manner in which the United Nations system addresses women and gender issues. These issues are increasingly at the forefront of the political agenda in parliaments and figure regularly and prominently in debates at the IPU. This is the area in which the IPU has made the most significant progress in ensuring coherence in its own work. The IPU will therefore be examining measures it can promote through parliaments to follow up on the recommendations contained in these two studies.

The General Assembly will soon be formally adopting a new human rights convention on the rights of persons with disabilities. The IPU has started work with UNDESA and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to develop a specific tool to facilitate parliamentary follow up on this convention.

CONCLUSIONS

The IPU enjoys a close working relationship with national parliaments. It offers them a permanent forum for dialogue and exchange of experience, technical cooperation and support, and a vantage point from which to interact with the United Nations system. Through its multiple activities, the IPU raises awareness in parliament on the need for action on specific issues that are high on the international agenda and facilitates such action.

This action can be made more effective through a more systematic participation by the IPU in the relevant coordinating mechanism of the United Nations system. The United Nations system stands to gain from having a better understanding of how parliaments work, how their agendas are set, what can be expected from parliaments and what can be done to expedite parliamentary action as it develops system-wide strategies and policies. Like no other organization, the IPU can contribute to this process.

Geneva, 14 September 2006

