Inter-Parliamentary Union
125th Assembly and related meetings
Bern, Switzerland
16–19 October 2011

Governing Council
Item 10

CL/189/10(a)-R.1
20 September 2011

REPORTS ON RECENT IPU SPECIALIZED MEETINGS

(a) PARLIAMENTARY FORUM AT THE FOURTH UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE ON THE LEAST DEVELOPED COUNTRIES

Istanbul, 8 May 2011

SUMMARY REPORT

Opening:

The Parliamentary Forum brought together some 160 Members of Parliament from 55 countries, including several Speakers of parliament. It was convened by the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the Grand National Assembly of Turkey in cooperation with the Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Countries, and Small Island States (OHRLLS).

The Speaker of the Grand National Assembly, Hon. Mehmet Ali Sahin, and the Secretary General of the IPU, Mr. Anders Johnsson, welcomed participants along with the United Nations Secretary-General, Mr. Ban Ki-moon, and the Prime Minister of Nepal, Mr. Jhal Nath Khanal, as Chair of the LDC Group. Their introductory remarks underscored the importance of involving parliaments in the implementation of the nascent Istanbul Programme of Action and also acknowledged the progress made in the negotiation of the document where an agreement on the role of parliaments had already been reached.

PART I - Session I:

Taking a hard look at the LDCs today: progress and setbacks, and their political underpinnings

The session was introduced by Ms. Fazilet Çiğlik, MP (Turkey), Mr. Cheick Sidi Diarra, Secretary General of the Fourth UN Conference on the Least Developed Countries (LDC IV), and Senator Kim Yeat Chhit (Cambodia). Senator Luis Fraga (Spain), served as moderator. Interventions from the floor were made by the delegations of Mali, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Senegal and the European Parliament.

This session looked at the LDCs today, their progress and setbacks over the past decade (under the Brussels Programme of Action) and their political underpinnings. The following main points can be drawn from the presentations made and the ensuing debate:

- Analysis of national reports, regional reviews and proceedings of LDC IV pre-conference thematic events show that the LDCs have made significant progress in many areas and particularly in economic growth, increases in capital formation, reduction of interest rates and narrowing fiscal deficits and progress in the realization of some of the Millennium Development Goals.

- Despite these advances, half of the population of 880 million in the LDCs are living in extreme poverty, productive capacities remain weak, institutional capacities are lacking, and the number of unemployed continues to rise particularly among the youth. The usual challenges faced by LDCs are further aggravated by the numerous global challenges such as the economic and financial crisis and rising food and fuel prices. Consequently, the LDCs are becoming more susceptible to external shocks and are being further marginalized from the global economy.

- Some of the major lessons learned include the need for LDCs to be committed and proactive in their own development. The new Istanbul Programme of Action (IPOA) must be fully integrated into national development plans to ensure national ownership and therefore its effectiveness. Increased resources and capacity are required to ensure implementation of the IPOA. There is a need for greater accountability by all partners, both globally and nationally, with LDCs taking full ownership by leading with examples of good governance as well as improved South-South cooperation.

- Good governance is a necessary condition to development. Parliaments, as pillars of good governance, have a crucial role in all aspects of the implementation monitoring and review of the Istanbul Programme of Action and must be able to exercise their legislative, oversight and representative function across the full range of development issues. Furthermore, increased participation of women in politics is a key component of better parliaments.

PART I - Session II:

Overview of the Istanbul Programme of Action (IPOA)

The session was introduced by Ambassador Gyan Chandra Acharia of Nepal, as one of the lead negotiators of the IPOA, and Mr. Danny Singoma, Network for the Promotion of Democracy and Economic and Social Rights, based in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Ms. Petra Bayr, MP (Austria), served as moderator. Interventions from the floor were made by the delegations of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Saudi Arabia, Madagascar, Bangladesh, Solomon Islands, Iran, Maldives, and Malawi.

The discussion focused on the expectations of the IPOA and helped provide an overall sense of how the IPOA measures up to the actual needs and realities of the LDCs at this particular point in time, taking into account both progress and setbacks over the past decade.

The following main points can be drawn from the presentations made and the ensuing debate:

- The previous Brussels POA fell short of expectations because governments were not fully committed. There was not enough buy-in by the government themselves and their development partners. In addition, the oversight role of parliament was weak if not missing altogether. Where graduation did occur, as in the case of the Maldives, it was always thanks to strong bipartisan and multi-stakeholder commitment.

- Lack of commitment explains in part why aid, debt relief, and trade reforms, among other things, all fell short of the mark. Though aid went up, it did not achieve the official targets; while debt relief did take place for many countries, it still leaves the LDCs at risk of falling back into the debt trap. Trade conditions also improved, but the overall share of global trade that is accounted for by the LDCs remains too small.

- For the IPOA to succeed, it will need to include clear targets, indicators and timetables. The IPOA will need to address both the underling structural problems of the LDCs, but also the crises of food security and climate change. The IPOA needs to be bold and address politically sensitive issues like the problem of large land purchases by foreign agribusiness, and how these undermine local farmers and rural development. The IPOA will also need to commit to a stronger partnership for development, including through South-South cooperation.

- The main objective of the IPOA will be to bring a much more significant number of LDCs to graduation by the end of the decade, while also providing for support to newly-graduated countries so that they don't fall back into the category. Graduation can only be possible through collective efforts at both national and global levels.

- The IPOA will place more emphasis than the BPOA on the need to strengthen the productive capacities of the LDCs. However, and very appropriately, the IPOA also recognizes the need for institutional reforms and capacity building. While it may be difficult to prioritize between these two factors, it is clear that they go hand in hand and must be made to work in a mutually reinforcing way.

- The IPOA's strong acknowledgement of the role of parliaments in overseeing development plans, in strengthening governance, and in supporting the overall implementation of the new commitments for the LDCs was greeted enthusiastically. Parliaments are finally recognized as key partners in a major global compact for the LDCs. In developed countries in particular, parliaments must push the government to fulfill their side of the deal in the IPOA.

- Parliaments will need to help enact legislation that is in line with the IPOA. To this effect, parliaments should consider forming dedicated committees or working groups to help focus attention to the IPOA. Similarly, parliaments will need to strengthen their linkages to civil society in order to better represent the needs and concerns of the people.

- In many places, parliaments too need to be reformed so that they become more democratic, i.e., more accountable to and representative of the people. The electorate needs to become more informed of the IPOA as well in order to place more pressure on both parliaments and government.

- Because LDCs remain generally aid dependent (though not always getting their fair share of aid), it will be important for the IPOA to address the basic constraints that affect aid effectiveness in those countries. Parliamentary oversight of aid therefore needs to be strengthened. That said, all LDCs should strive to become self-sufficient by developing their own resources.

PART II – Session I:

Working group discussions

The first session of the afternoon was devoted to working group discussions ("knowledge café") on the question of how to translate commitments into action and how to mobilize parliamentary support for the IPOA. Small groups of participants were put questions relevant to parliamentary capacity and the IPOA and asked to discuss their experiences and ideas. The session concluded with each group presenting their most useful suggestions, many of which focused on the need to improve the capacities of parliaments to oversee the IPOA.

Feedback received from the groups highlighted the need to:

- Strengthen the research, monitoring and reporting capacities of parliament on the IPOA;
- Ensure greater access to relevant information and documents concerning the IPOA;
- Improve mechanisms for sharing of information and coordination between the specialised parliamentary committees concerned with different aspects of the IPOA
- Strengthen relations with the executive to ensure complementarity of each other's work in the implementation of the IPOA;
- Improve relations within parliament to establish cross-party priorities and policies related to IPOA commitments;
- Develop effective public consultations on relevant legislation or a policy of interest to the IPOA;
- Improve people's understanding with regard to the real function of parliaments;
- Enhance oversight capacities, including oversight of the budget and foreign aid, to allow parliamentarians to effectively monitor funding allocated to implementation of the IPOA;
- Increase awareness by parliamentarians of the IPOA and their own national development problems;
- Include parliamentarians in thematic working groups and multi-stakeholder bodies relevant to areas of the IPOA at the national level.

Further general comments received from the working groups referred to the importance of parliaments, with their budgetary, legislative, representative and oversight function, as fully fledged partners at the national and global level in the implementation of the IPOA. Participants also reiterated the need to create mechanisms within parliaments to oversee and monitor implementation of the IPOA.

Many LDCs need to implement numerous international development plans and commitments. In order to effectively do so, and allow for development to take place, it is essential to ensure that international development commitments are tailored to address specific national priorities and are wholly integrated into national development plans.

PART II – Session II:

Presentation of the IPU-UN project proposal and discussion on a Parliamentary Action Plan

Mr. Alessandro Motter, IPU Senior Advisor for Economic and Social Affairs, Mr. Sandagorj Erdenebileg, Acting Director (OHRLLS) and Executive Secretary of LDC IV, and Mr. Saber Chowdhury, MP (Bangladesh), elaborated on a joint IPU-OHRLLS project proposal and accompanying parliamentary action plan (Annex I) to get parliaments actively involved in the future implementation of the IPOA. The session was moderated by Mr. Phil Matsheza, Policy Adviser, UNDP Democratic Governance Group.

The IPU-OHRLLS project would run at first over the next five years. At the country level, the project revolves around the creation of focal points in both LDC and non-LDC parliaments to help review the parliament's working methods and structures (committees etc.), liaise with UN and government focal points on the ground, and generally assist with the mainstreaming of the IPOA into the entire policy spectrum. At the global level, the project seeks to plug MPs into future reviews of the IPOA, foster cooperation and technical assistance between parliaments, and stimulate the sharing of best practices and policy advice between parliaments.

The model action plan was presented to provide parliaments with overall guidance as to the activities and outcomes they ought to consider in order to carry forward the IPOA. Parliaments were invited to adapt the plan to their particular needs and circumstances. It would be for the parliamentary focal points to initiate a discussion around the plan in their respective parliaments.

The meeting generated general support for the two approaches put forward. Comments received included:

- Parliamentary focal points ought not to act in isolation. They need to reach out to others and seek to build bridges across the political spectrum. It would be good for parliaments to appoint at least two focal points, from the majority and the opposition respectively, and with due consideration to gender balance.
- A partnership between focal points in developed and LDC countries ought to be nurtured. Parliaments in non-LDCs where the IPOA may resonate less must also proceed to appoint focal points. In the LDCs, focal points will need more support and resources to do their work.
- Key to the support of the focal point mechanism in each LDC parliament will be the creation of corresponding focal points in the UN's country office (Resident Coordinator). The UNRC must provide regular information as well as support in the form of capacity building and policy advice.
- The possibility of establishing a new committee, working group or caucus dedicated to the IPOA should be considered carefully. Alternatively, improved coordination and sharing of information relevant to the IPOA between existing committees may be sufficient.
- The Action Plan will need to be translated into national languages in order to be of immediate relevance to all parliaments. More important, it will need to include clear targets and indicators according to the specificities of each parliament.

Closing:

The meeting was brought to a close by the IPU Secretary General and the President of the Turkish IPU Group, Ms. Fazilet Çiğlik, MP. They thanked participants and encouraged them to take home and share with colleagues the main messages of the meeting. Participants were also invited to follow the UN conference closely and attend as many of its side events as possible.