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Reports on recent IPU specialized meetings

(g) Parliamentary meeting at the UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development

New York, 17 July 2017

Eighty MPs from 34 national delegations were in attendance.

Mr. **Saber Chowdhury**, President of the IPU, welcomed participants to this side event of the IPU at the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF). He noted that attendance had more than doubled from last year both in terms of individual MPs and parliaments represented, which showed that the IPU was making inroads in connecting the parliamentary community to the UN-led global review process for the SDGs.

Mr. **Martin Chungong**, IPU Secretary General, moderated a panel with Mr. **José Carlos Mahía**, Speaker of the House of Representatives of Uruguay, Ms. **Petra Bayr**, MP, National Council of Austria, Mr. **Amadou Cissé**, MP, National Assembly of Mali, and Ms. **Shazia Rafi**, President and Convener, AirQualityAsia.

Mr. Chungong opened the meeting referring to the spring session of the IPU Committee on UN Affairs, in April 2017, which provided a first opportunity for MPs to take stock of parliamentary action on the SDGs and discuss the main theme of the HLPF—poverty eradication. He then went over IPU's recent efforts to help parliaments integrate the SDGs agenda and play a role in their implementation, which included: a self-assessment toolkit, prepared with UNDP, to help parliaments institutionalize the SDGs; a number of regional seminars for parliamentarians to help raise awareness of the SDGs and address key policy questions; and a model parliamentary resolution outlining the key steps parliaments need to take to strengthen accountability and national ownership of the SDGs.

Mr. Chungong further elaborated on the results of a survey questionnaire sent to the parliaments of the 44 countries presenting national progress reports to the HLPF. The survey showed that only nine parliaments had been engaged, to some extent or another, in the government-led national consultations for the report to the HLPF, and that only three of these parliaments had had an opportunity to review the report before it was submitted to the UN. To the extent that this survey provides a gauge of parliamentary engagement in the global review of the SDGs, the results show that there is still a long way to go.

The panel presentations and the ensuing debate provided strong evidence of the policy guidance SDGs were providing to parliaments around the world. The discussion also provided many examples of concrete steps parliaments were taking to mainstream the SDGs in their legislative and oversight work.

#IPU137

Main messages and recommendations

- The SDGs signal the need for a more pro-active stance in economic, social and environmental policy. All of the goals require legislative and regulatory reforms that parliaments are well positioned to initiate or support. As shown in countries as different as Uruguay, Spain and Kenya, for example, pro-active legislation and increased budget support helped reduce poverty rates, narrow inequalities, and provide universal health care. In Sierra Leone, legislation helped reduce malnutrition and prevent teen pregnancies through sexual education. A number of parliaments have passed gender equality legislation to increase the representation of women in politics.
- In addition to issue-specific legislation, parliaments can adopt framework legislation to provide an enabling environment for civil society and the private sector to contribute to the SDGs. In Benin, for example, a new law on public-private partnerships created better conditions for foreign investments.
- The inter-connected nature of the SDGs requires an all-of-parliament approach to overcome silos and look at every issue from several perspectives at once. This is particularly true in the response to poverty—the main theme of the HLPF— which must be measured and approached multi-dimensionally, going beyond the basic income definition. The simple issue of air quality, highlighted from the panel, crosses over a number of SDGs. Reducing air pollution drastically improves health, raises productivity and helps combat climate change. Parliaments need to be clear as to the main drivers of such a problem and take action to tackle it by, among other, investing in air quality monitoring, setting national targets, tightening anti-pollution regulation, and cutting subsidies to fossil fuels.
- Institutionalizing the SDGs in parliaments requires engaging all members, not just those from development committees. In many parliaments, development thinking is still rooted in the MDGs framework, which posited development as a process pertaining only to developing countries. In many developed countries' parliaments, many MPs have yet to take stock of the SDGs as an agenda that relates to them when addressing high poverty levels, growing inequalities, and questions of good governance as well as environmental issues. In all countries, parliaments must insist that the government appoint a focal point for the SDGs to streamline communications with parliamentarians as well as with the various parliamentary committees.
- The SDGs challenge MPs to make full use of the legislative and oversight powers that almost everywhere are granted to parliaments under the constitution. Parliaments can organize their own response to the SDGs by improving coordination between committees, by setting up a parliamentary caucus or a specialized SDGs committee, by ensuring that a national plan for the SDGs is drawn up and a progress report presented to parliament, and by reviewing all acts of legislation, including the budget bill, through an SDG lens.
- Participants from Denmark, Kenya, Mali, Nigeria, Mexico, Sierra Leone, Togo, and the UK reported that their parliaments either retooled existing committees or set up new parliamentary structures such as a caucus, a working group, or a specialized committee to coordinate legislation and other acts of parliament on the SDGs. Typically, membership in these bodies is open to all members from all committees. SDG committees tend to be composed of the chairs of the portfolio committees who can control their committee's respective work programmes. The Parliament of Ecuador created a "fiscal unit" to curb tax evasion and raise revenue for the SDGs. The Parliament of Jordan adopted a plan to review all existing legislation from the standpoint of the SDGs.
- While a coordinated parliamentary response to the SDGs is taking root, there remain many challenges and gaps to be filled in terms of parliamentary capacities and legal authority to oversee implementation. In Jordan, for example, parliament has only a limited role in the budget proposal presented by the government. By contrast, Morocco's Parliament has strong authority to review the budget and request amendments but lacks the capacities, in terms of expectations, to fully perform those functions. Echoing the initial remarks by the IPU SG, a parliamentarian from Belgium lamented that only a few parliaments were engaged in the voluntary national reviews, which cast doubt on the claim of inclusiveness made by many governments. An MP from Austria noted that none of the main panel discussions of the HLPF featured a parliamentarian.

- At the closing of the meeting, Mr. Anti Avsan, MP, President of the IPU Committee on UN Affairs reminded participants of the important function of his committee, whose spring session each year functions as a forum to facilitate a regular exchange of best practices and lessons learned in SDGs implementation. He encouraged all present to work with colleagues on an SDGs motion based on the IPU model and to consider performing the self-assessment facilitated by the new IPU toolkit.

Conclusion

The discussion during the HLPF as well as the information IPU collected from parliaments over the past year show a rising level of awareness of the SDGs in parliaments worldwide. Several parliaments are retooling and establishing structures and processes to mainstream the SDGs while holding their respective governments to account.

However, this picture is very uneven both geographically and in terms of the actual capacities of parliaments to follow suit. The results of parliamentary processes for the SDGs are likely to vary greatly across countries and will need to be tested further. The universal nature of the SDGs has not fully been understood by all parliaments, particularly those in developed countries.

Going forward, the IPU and the donor community will need to invest more resources in strengthening the capacities of parliaments to institutionalize the SDGs. Governments will need to pro-actively engage parliaments in the voluntary reviews to the HLPF and in the national delegations to the HLPF's session proper.