



BACKGROUND PAPER ON THE UNITED NATIONS ALLIANCE OF CIVILIZATIONS

I. Introduction

1. The United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) was established in 2005 at the initiative of the Governments of Spain and Turkey. It aims to promote greater understanding and cooperation between nations and peoples across cultures and religions, thus countering polarization and extremism. By promoting the values of tolerance and cultural diversity, it endeavours to help create an environment where peace, security and development can thrive.

2. The UNAOC is supported by a Group of Friends – a community of over 125 UN Member States and international organizations and bodies. The Secretariat is based at the United Nations Headquarters in New York. In 2007, the UN Secretary-General appointed Jorge Sampaio, a former President of Portugal, as High Representative of the Alliance. The activities of the Alliance are financed through a voluntary Trust Fund.

3. The Alliance works in partnership with governments, international and regional organizations, civil society groups, foundations, and the private sector in support of projects and initiatives that aim to build bridges among diverse cultures and communities. Its main programme areas include youth, the media, education and migration. The Alliance encourages the elaboration and implementation of national strategies and plans for intercultural dialogue. It has helped facilitate regional strategies and action plans for South-East Europe, the Euro-Mediterranean area, and more recently, Latin America.

4. The Alliance organizes annual high-level Forums that provide a unique platform for interaction among partners and stakeholders, often leading to the launch of new strategies and initiatives. The Fourth Annual Forum of the Alliance of Civilizations will be held in Doha, Qatar, from 11 to 13 December, 2011. The Forum's plenary sessions this year will address how cultural diversity matters to development, new strategies for intercultural dialogue, and the role of tolerance and reconciliation in advancing development goals. Previous editions of the Forum were held in Madrid (2008), Istanbul (2009) and Rio de Janeiro (2010). Austria has expressed an interest in hosting the Fifth Forum in 2012.

II. UNAOC, national parliaments and the IPU

5. The IPU joined the Group of Friends of the Alliance of Civilizations in 2007 following the adoption at the 116th IPU Assembly in Nusa Dua, Bali, of a resolution on *Ensuring respect for and peaceful co-existence between all religious communities and beliefs in a globalized world*¹ - <http://www.ipu.org/conf-e/116/116-1.htm>

6. The IPU has contributed to all UNAOC annual Forums. In 2010, the IPU encouraged legislators to join their national delegations to the UNAOC Forum in Rio de Janeiro and actively participate in its proceedings. Together with the UN High Representative for the Alliance and the Parliament of Brazil, the IPU convened a pre-Forum parliamentary meeting and organized the Forum working session on the political participation of minorities and indigenous peoples. The half-day parliamentary meeting was attended by MPs from over 20 countries and three regional parliamentary organizations. It focused on the role of legislators in promoting intercultural cooperation and dialogue, with participants sharing national experiences and good practices. Recommendations included modalities to enhance access to and participation in political life for minorities and indigenous groups, better use of new information and communication technologies in modernizing parliamentary processes, and the need to place issues related to cultural diversity on the domestic political agenda.

7. The IPU has been encouraging greater involvement by parliaments in the elaboration and implementation of national strategies for intercultural dialogue. According to a review conducted by the UNAOC Secretariat, while more than 25 countries have adopted national strategies to date, parliamentary involvement therein has been sporadic, if not absent altogether. More recently, efforts have been made to bridge this gap. In Croatia, parliamentarians and the current interministerial working group entrusted with drawing up a national plan on intercultural dialogue have expressed an interest in consulting and working together. In Mexico, the National Commission on the Prevention of Discrimination, together with the Ministry of Education, have initiated a coordinated motion with members of Congress to draft legislation on the rights of Mexican citizens of African descent, thus addressing an issue contained in Mexico's National Plan for Intercultural Dialogue.

III. Recommendations and Challenges Ahead

8. During the ministerial meeting held at the UNAOC 2010 Forum in Rio de Janeiro, the High Representative recalled the need to increasingly embed the Alliance at the local and national levels, considering it to be one of the most compelling challenges ahead. From that perspective, parliamentarians represented the "missing link" required for greater national ownership and enhanced political support for the objectives of the Alliance.

9. Increased parliamentary involvement in the elaboration and implementation of national strategies for intercultural dialogue and understanding is crucial. The parliamentary meeting with the UN High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations, to be held on 17 October during the 125th IPU Assembly in Bern, may help answer a number of questions, namely:

- How can parliaments and parliamentarians best be involved in these national strategies?
- What mechanisms can be put in place to enhance the role of parliaments in advancing the objectives of national strategies for intercultural dialogue?
- What concrete measures can parliamentarians take to enhance implementation of the above-mentioned IPU resolution and promote the objectives of national plans in this area?
- How can parliaments exemplify the objectives of intercultural cooperation and dialogue in practice?
- Based on the Chiapas Declaration adopted by the International Parliamentary Conference on *Parliaments, minorities and indigenous peoples: Effective participation in politics* (<http://www.ipu.org/splz-e/chiapas10.htm>), how can the IPU's work in this area be pursued from a policy-oriented perspective?

10. Above and beyond national plans and strategies, parliaments and parliamentarians can be involved in other ways in ongoing efforts to enhance intercultural dialogue and cooperation, such as by:

- Organizing regular debates in parliament on issues relating to multiculturalism, cultural diversity, and intercultural dialogue;
- Establishing specific mechanisms to help maintain these issues on the parliamentary agenda;
- Developing the practice of including legislators in national delegations to the annual UNAOC Forums; and
- Encouraging more systematic participation of MPs in UNAOC programmes, for example the UNAOC Fellowship Programme for emerging leaders from the Arab world, Europe and North America (with a view to including young parliamentarians).