



PARLIAMENTS AND THE ISTANBUL PROGRAMME OF ACTION (IPOA) FOR THE LEAST DEVELOPED COUNTRIES (LDCS)

Mainstreaming the IPoA into the work of parliaments: Institutional options¹

The 2011-2020 Istanbul Programme of Action (IPoA) for the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) is a global plan that addresses the specific needs of that category of countries. Priority areas include: productive capacities; rural development; trade; commodities; human and social development; financial resources for development and capacity-building; and good governance at all levels. The IPoA comprises a number of actions, commitments and objectives that governments should meet.

The IPoA highlights, in several instances, the essential role that parliaments are called on to play to ensure its effective implementation. It underscores parliaments' oversight role and their contribution to enhanced good governance and strengthened democratic processes.

Parliament is responsible for representing the interests of all sectors of society, articulating them into relevant policies and ensuring that these policies are implemented efficiently. Parliaments are therefore pivotal to the achievement of development commitments. Parliamentary contributions to national development plans help create a broadly accepted national vision for development, which in turn provides institutions involved in national development with a common purpose.

However, with regard to mainstreaming the IPoA into parliaments' work and into the national development plan, many institutional challenges remain. In virtually all cases, parliament's portfolio committees (health, education, budget, etc.) are responsible for ensuring that the IPoA commitments and goals are taken into consideration and met. As the IPoA's objectives, like most development plans, are mutually reinforcing and interrelated, action will be required by more than one committee for successful implementation of the programme. Coordination and information-sharing challenges are frequently encountered among committees. Furthermore, as the IPoA shares common characteristics with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and other internationally agreed development commitments, effective coordination of the various internal mechanisms designed to ensure parliamentary follow-up to all such commitments is essential.

This Note is intended to provide guidelines to parliaments on possible institutional mechanisms for ensuring that all the relevant commitments in the IPoA inform the work of parliament. Without attempting to be exhaustive, and as a first instalment of a long-term reflection on this subject, the Note considers two basic models: an *informal* support group (for example, a working group, caucus, task force perhaps within a committee, informal group or forum) and a *formal* committee or subcommittee on the IPoA. Both mechanisms will provide parliament with a

¹ The material included in this Note is based on the IPU's experience and its discussions with MPs and parliaments on issues related to the LDCs, MDGs and women's caucuses. This includes the guidelines for support groups as agreed during the meeting convened by the IPU and United Nations in Bagamoyo (Tanzania) on 10 and 11 December 2007.

group of committed individuals who can give impetus to the parliament's involvement in the implementation of the IPoA. The Note also includes proposed terms of reference for parliamentary focal points for the LDC process (see annex 1).

While this paper focuses on the IPoA and the LDC process, the information it contains can be applied to other internationally agreed development commitments or used to supervise the undertaking of such commitments in general. Overall, it is clear that there is room for improvement in the coordination and tracking of internationally agreed development commitments.

Assessing existing mechanisms

It is up to each parliament to reflect on its rules, committee system and current circumstances, and accordingly decide whether or not it is necessary to create or develop an internal mechanism to better engage in national and international development as a whole, and with the IPoA in particular. Some parliaments already have a coordination mechanism to help mainstream international agreements through the work of portfolio committees, but it may still be useful for them to evaluate the effectiveness of such a mechanism and determine what improvements, if any, are required. In some cases, regardless of how effective the committee structure is, it may still be useful for an IPoA-dedicated mechanism to be set up in preparation of plenary debates and other processes in which MPs are engaged, within or outside the parliament.

The dynamics between parliamentary committees

- What are the relations like between committees in your parliament?
- How is information shared among committees? Do the relevant committees receive all information related to development, and subsequently select the issues that are linked to their scope of work?
- How is information on discussions held and actions taken within a committee shared with others?
- What is the modus operandi of a specialized committee compared with other committees?

The following questions can be used to assess existing mechanisms:

1. How effective is parliament in ensuring that international commitments are implemented at the national level?
2. How effective is parliamentary oversight of the government's development policy? Are national development plans and reports reviewed, debated and approved in parliament? If so, how effectively is parliament able to scrutinize and contribute to national development plans and reports and ensure follow-up on their recommendations? How is parliament's feedback included in the report and mainstreamed into parliamentary committees? Whose jurisdiction is it to oversee this?
3. Are there any special committees or entities in parliament with a specific mandate to monitor and follow-up of matters relating to internationally agreed development commitments or the IPOA in particular? If so, which body and what mandate does it have?

There are various factors to be considered prior to creating a new specialized body in parliament for engaging with the IPoA. If a parliament does create a mechanism, its objectives must be explained to all MPs, who must understand how they and their constituents can use it. A new body will need a clear mandate, defining its structure and working modalities and identifying a clear mission and goals. This will allow the body to be effective and contribute substantively to the work of parliament.

Aspects to consider	Reasons for consideration
National development level	The mainstreaming of the IPoA should be tailored to a country's national development strategy, plans and targets, while taking into consideration its development policies and approaches as well as its accomplishments.
Parliamentary resources	<p>The approach will depend largely on the availability of resources to support any new group or committee on the IPoA. A new structure (in particular a formal one) almost always requires a minimum of staff to coordinate its work both within the structure and vis-à-vis the rest of parliament (e.g., draft summary reports, conduct basic research, carry out administrative tasks, etc.). Resources to help develop the MPs' and their staff's understanding of the finer points of development policy may also be needed. In fact, members of the specialized body from different social, economic and professional backgrounds and may have capacity-building needs, including general knowledge about development.</p> <p>A specialized body on the IPoA will almost certainly have to address politically-sensitive issues and build consensus on solutions. Access to reliable information and expertise to guide its work and deliberations will therefore be critical. Similarly, staff and other resources will need to be devoted to building partnerships with (other) parliamentary committees, as well as with civil society and other national mechanisms involved in development.</p>
Party system	<p>The relationship between individual MPs and their political parties, which varies from country to country, should also be taken into consideration in assessing how to set up a new structure. Some political parties have an authoritative say on what issues MPs deal with and some members may therefore find it difficult to support the implementation of the IPoA if it is not in line with their political party's policy. Setting up a new structure may be less important at first than winning over the will of the leadership of the political parties as well as the will and commitment of individual MPs. In some parliaments, MPs from opposition parties may be particularly interested in having a structure dedicated to the IPoA in order to gain better access to information from the executive.</p> <p>In a multi-party system, a specialized mechanism has the potential to rally parliamentarians from the various political parties and develop cross-party priorities on development issues. This has the advantage of ensuring the continuity of parliamentary engagement with the IPoA and development policies throughout election cycles.</p>
Political situation	Political reform and instability will affect parliaments' will and ability to engage with the IPoA as well as its focus on graduating out of the LDC category. For example, if a country is experiencing or has recently experienced a civil war, the parliament's primary objective may be to consolidate the political process and ensure peace, with the development agenda remaining a secondary goal. However, considerations about how to organize the development work of parliament should still feature prominently in post-conflict assessments of the needs of parliament. As a general rule, the longer development goals go unattended, the greater the risk of relapse into conflict. Therefore, it is in the interest of all involved that soon after the conclusion of elections and other political processes that normally follow a conflict situation, the question of how parliaments can support the country's reconstruction and development plans should feature prominently.

Formal versus informal mechanisms

The assessment of the parliament's existing mechanisms for engaging with the IPoA will stand it in good stead for determining the objectives of the specialized mechanism. Generally speaking, a new mechanism devoted to the IPoA would fulfil the following functions:

- Help generate collective thinking within each parliament about the IPoA and help organize the work of existing portfolio committees accordingly;
- Become a gateway for information from the United Nations and related agencies and programmes on development strategies and approaches for the LDCs, and help disseminate such information among all relevant MPs;²
- Exercise oversight of government policies and activities in the context of the IPoA and related goals.

As detailed in the table below, the specific functions of a new body can vary from supporting information sharing among committees to overseeing the government's implementation of the IPoA. The desired degree of formality of the mechanism will contribute to whether a committee or a support group is created. Overall, the IPU's experience has shown that cross-party groups rather than formal committees have proved more effective.

The flexibility of a support group's structure, regulations and membership provides MPs with a more open and safe space in which they can address issues that they normally would not have the opportunity to address, critique current activities or actions, and provide concrete suggestions to improve the implementation of the IPoA. On the other hand, the constitution of a formal committee allows for official powers and access to the parliament's resources, the automatic inclusion of members of various political parties and the assurance of continuity of the parliament's engagement with the IPoA across electoral cycles.

An intermediate solution may be to establish an informal task force directly within a committee. Combining the

Possible objectives and modalities of work of specialised mechanisms on the IPOA

- Raise awareness of the IPoA and its various provisions within and outside parliament (a specialized body can coordinate with civil society organisations (CSO's) and constituents to raise public awareness and keep citizens informed)
- Rally MPs around issues of common concern, build solidarity among them and strengthen their support for development
- Share experiences and good practices from the national and local levels
- Bring MPs together to review national progress reports on the implementation of the IPoA and discuss related issues such as the monitoring and evaluation of government programmes and initiatives
- Oversee the allocation of special funds to IPoA commitments
- Organize hearings with government officials and civil society representatives and submit reports to the plenary
- Conduct studies and make recommendations to the government through the appropriate committee(s) or the plenary
- Liaise with the ministerial and UN focal points (where available) on the IPoA to obtain information and build or strengthen capacities
- Discuss a parliamentary action plan (PAP) for the implementation of the IPoA, present it to relevant committees, promote its adoption and track its implementation
- Ensure parliament is represented at national and regional meetings on development (including aid coordination meetings)
- Facilitate the participation of MPs in international debates on the IPoA
- Act as an entry point for CSOs and multilateral agencies that seek to work with parliaments on the IPoA or other internationally agreed development commitments
- Develop an implementation toolkit, in conjunction with civil society and government agencies, on overseeing development.

² If an entirely new structure dedicated to the IPoA is created in parliaments where parliamentary focal points for the IPoA are in place (see Annex 1), the structure would effectively carry forward the same functions currently assigned to the focal points. However, one or two MPs within the new structure (possibly the chair or co-chairs) would still need to function as the main focal points for the purpose of receiving and sharing information with the IPU, the United Nations and other entities outside parliament.

agenda-setting flexibility of the support group with the formal authority of a committee, the task force could identify the country's priorities within the IPoA and help organize the committee's work accordingly. Other possibilities include setting up a steering committee of (portfolio) committee chairs to coordinate work from an IPoA standpoint, or setting up an IPoA subcommittee under one of the main portfolio committees (e.g., budget, foreign affairs, etc.)

Either way, considerations about the inter-linkages, both horizontal and vertical, between committees and how these can be improved in order to mainstream the IPoA throughout the work of parliament are vital to this assessment as the IPoA touches on such a broad range of issues. The same assessment will also help support parliaments' overall engagement in the design of a national development plan and in the review of national progress reports on the implementation of the IPoA.

The table below provides a summary of the possible structure and membership rules of an informal or formal mechanism, as well as the pros and cons of each option.

	(IPoA) Support groups (working groups, caucuses, task forces, informal groups or forums)	Dedicated (IPoA) committee or subcommittee
Membership	Usually, membership of parliamentary support groups is open-ended and women and men members from different parties/political factions can join. There are however cases in which a support group can be limited to a set number of members.	Committees are often composed of a set number of men and women members from the different parties in parliament. Generally, the composition of parliamentary committees is representative of the parliament's political configuration.
Structure	The degree of formality varies. A support group can be very informal, with only basic, if any, rules of procedure. However, it is advisable that the members elect a Chair (two co-chairs are also possible) and a Secretary, as a minimum, to ensure continuity between meetings, coordinate agendas, circulate information to all members, etc.	Parliamentary procedures on subcommittees and committees vary from parliament to parliament. Most often, standing orders are required to constitute a formal committee, along with the authorization of the Speaker.
Advantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A flexible structure that MPs can shape according to their needs and objectives (addressing issues and carrying out activities that would be more difficult to do within the framework of the parliament's work). ▪ The open-ended nature of membership means that potentially a large group of MPs can be involved and a broader spectrum of skills and experiences brought together than in a committee restricted to a smaller number of MPs. ▪ Less prone to internal conflict because informal groups tend to attract more like-minded and committed people from the various parties, which is important for coalition- building. ▪ More direct contact with grassroots networks (e.g. farmers' and women's groups) to discuss policy options or assess development results. ▪ Provide a politically safe space for MPs to critique and suggest practical ideas. ▪ In bicameral parliaments, the group can comprise members from both Chambers. ▪ The group can decide on specific functions that it will seek to perform in each session of parliament, for example by raising questions and using parliamentary instruments to initiate debates. ▪ Easy establishment and dissolution of issue-specific working groups based on MPs own interests. ▪ Participation by MPs who may have been excluded (due to rules and regulations) from membership in formal structures. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Gathering of MPs from all political parties as a matter of rule may provide balanced political representation as well as traction. ▪ In bicameral parliaments, a joint committee can comprise members from both Chambers. ▪ Extensive powers to summon witnesses and conduct inquiries (this may not be granted to subcommittees). ▪ Official access to the parliament's resources. ▪ Continuity of the work between elections (vacant seats would have to be filled). ▪ Proceedings and decisions are fed into the parliament's official decision-making process, and the committee is automatically supplied with information and other inputs from the rest of parliament (according to the established reporting lines or other procedures).

Disadvantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Informal character of the group may restrict access to the parliament's resources.▪ Possible lack of continuity (depending on the structure chosen) in the work.▪ Possible lack of discipline among members, including poor attendance or poor preparation before meetings.▪ Weaker authority, if any, to summon witnesses or conduct inquiries▪ Difficulty disseminating information to the whole parliament.▪ The duration of a legislative mandate period is an important determinant of how MPs conduct their work and underscores the need for developing cross-party policies.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ A potentially cumbersome process to create the committee, often requiring the approval of a higher authority, such as the Speaker or the majority leader, which may be difficult to negotiate.▪ Closed membership may compromise individual skills and competences vis-à-vis the need to achieve political balance (between parties) and assign seats to MPs who could not be accommodated in other committees.▪ In some countries, participation and configuration of committees can change after an election.▪ The creation of an "IPoA ghetto", or possible overlap with the work of portfolio committees.▪ Less flexibility to address issues that are not included in ordinary parliamentary work.▪ The need to abide by the rules of procedure of parliament and the objectives set out in the resolution establishing the committee.▪ The need to build consensus or at least a common understanding between majority and opposition members, in order to reduce the risk of stalemate.
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PROPOSED TERMS OF REFERENCE FOR PARLIAMENTARY FOCAL POINTS FOR THE LDC PROCESS

The role of the parliamentary focal points involves ensuring parliamentary engagement with the follow-up, implementation and review of the 2011-2020 Istanbul Programme of Action (IPoA) for the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and the design of future programmes of action for the LDCs. Both LDC and non-LDC parliaments are encouraged to nominate focal points.

The focal points would liaise with other colleagues in parliaments as well as ministries, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), UN agencies, civil society organizations and community groups in order to share information and foster debate on the IPoA. Focal points should not to operate in isolation but rather seek to organize colleagues, either individually or as part of formal processes of parliament, into a collective, long-term effort to support the mainstreaming of the IPoA through the entire legislative and policy-making process. Their specific tasks might include:

- Lead an assessment of the parliamentary committee structure and overall process for mainstreaming the IPoA and track progress in its implementation. This may require organizing meetings with relevant parliamentary staff and colleagues from portfolio committees as well as the Office of the Speaker. Depending on the outcome of the assessment, further explore, together with colleagues, avenues for institutional alternatives (e.g. an informal group or committee on the IPoA, strengthening an existing development committee, etc.).
- Support the consideration and final endorsement by parliament of a Parliamentary Action Plan for implementation of the IPoA. This may require informal discussions with colleagues as well as formal proposals made to relevant committee chairs or other parliamentary leaders. Subsequently, help ensure that there is a suitable mechanism for the implementation and monitoring of the action plan.
- Receive and disseminate IPoA-related information within parliament such as: issue-specific policy papers; media stories; input received from outside constituencies; meeting reports (from the IPU, the United Nations or government processes); surveys and questionnaires; etc. To the extent possible, and as needed, help spur debate on the issues raised in those reports either directly (e.g., ask questions in plenary), or indirectly (e.g., ask the relevant committee chair to consider the matter in his/her committee).
- Pro-actively cooperate and coordinate with the ministerial and UN focal points³ with regard to implementation of the IPoA. This may involve sharing information about policy initiatives or parliamentary processes where the support of the UN country presence may be required, as well as requesting information and clarification on government proposals about the IPoA directly from the government focal point.
- Encourage the parliament's strong engagement with the national development plan and help ensure that such plans are debated in parliament from the perspective of the IPoA as well as other internationally agreed development commitments. This may entail inter alia ensuring parliamentary participation in the reviews and evaluations of the implementation of the IPoA.

³ (Where either ministerial or UN focal points have not been designated, the parliamentary focal points should take the lead in mobilizing colleagues and liaising with the IPU and other relevant organizations to make sure that all required focal points are established.)

- Keep apprised of LDC meetings and events nationally, regionally and globally, based on information received from the IPU or other sources, and help ensure strong parliamentary participation in such meetings.
- Enhance parliamentary awareness of the global review process of the IPoA led by the United Nations, as well as the activities (e.g., global meetings, national workshops etc.) organized by the IPU.
- Liaise with MPs from other parliaments (both LDC and non-LDC) to share information on good parliamentary practices to support the mainstreaming of the IPoA or lessons learned about relevant policy and legislation.