

REPORT OF THE IPU COMMITTEE ON UNITED NATIONS AFFAIRS

Noted by the 127th IPU Assembly (Québec City, 26 October 2012)

The IPU Committee on United Nations Affairs met from 22 to 26 October in Québec City, Canada, during the 127th IPU Assembly. The United Nations General Assembly resolution on interaction between the United Nations, national parliaments and the Inter-Parliamentary Union (resolution A/66/261, adopted by consensus in May 2012) provided the background to the meeting, along with a number of recent UN processes.

The Committee's first sitting took the form of a round-table discussion on *Multilateralism and the role of parliamentary diplomacy*. The round table brought together representatives from regional parliamentary bodies involved in various ways in international efforts to promote national reconciliation, peace-building and conflict prevention. It provided a unique opportunity for the participants to share information and experiences, and to identify the means of making parliamentary diplomacy more coherent and effective.

During the round table, the participants discussed the various aspects of parliamentary diplomacy and its limitations in practice. The limitations include the fact that in many countries foreign policy is traditionally considered to be the prerogative of the executive branch, and parliaments often lack capacity in this domain. It is clear that parliamentary diplomacy will gain ground and recognition only if it brings to the table more innovative thinking or if it complements official diplomatic action. Similarly, parliamentary diplomacy must be made more accountable to citizens and taxpayers, and focus more on results.

The participants found that parliamentary diplomacy is not just about the resolution of disputes but also about conflict prevention. The *soft* diplomacy that parliaments are best equipped to carry out can help build trust between countries, shed light on different cultural perspectives, or simply convey information that is not normally available through official channels. Another advantage of parliamentary diplomacy is that it can help ensure continuity in multilateral relations in the face of frequent changes at the helm of government. A common approach on the ground is election monitoring, in which outside parliamentary observers from other countries can help diffuse tensions.

At the same time, however, several participants found that the current proliferation of parliamentary assemblies or associations is not problem-free, in particular given the growing overlap in terms of catchment areas and political terms of reference, which needs to be addressed. Regional parliamentary bodies, which are rooted in local cultures, are often best placed to address local disputes. The direct relationship between global and regional parliamentary efforts needs to be strengthened. The sitting therefore concluded that further discussion was required, and that the IPU should take the lead by carrying out a study on existing good practices and convening further consultations with the regional parliamentary organizations, the United Nations and other partners.

To mark United Nations Day (24 October), the Committee's second sitting took the form of a debate on the question *Does the United Nations take democracy seriously enough?* The sitting touched on a number of areas in which the UN and the IPU are working together, in particular the rule of law, integrity of elections, and the promotion of good governance and greater transparency in the work of parliaments.

The Committee considered the matter from the perspectives of both the UN inter-governmental process and UN field operations. In terms of the UN political agenda, the concept of democracy lacks a universally agreed definition, and as such it does not figure prominently on the General Assembly agenda. The UN decision-making process continues to be flawed, with the voices of the few often prevailing over those of the many. This is particularly in evidence at the Security Council, where reform

of membership and veto rights is as urgently required as ever. When it comes to UN assistance for emerging democracies or fragile States, a fairly uneven picture emerges, ranging from almost unmitigated success in the case of Timor-Leste to disappointment in Haiti.

Admittedly, since the 2000 Millennium Declaration, UN member States have pledged to uphold some of the main principles of democracy, but more needs to be done to articulate those principles and put them into practice. This contrasts, for example, with the UN's strong investment in development following the establishment of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). On the other hand, the UN has made great strides forward on democracy-related subjects such as human rights and the empowerment of women, with the establishment respectively of the new Human Rights Council and UN Women.

Another recent development was the adoption of the UN Declaration on the Rule of Law, which enshrines the principles of this key pillar of democracy for the first time. The Declaration also formally acknowledges the role of parliaments and of the IPU in support of the rule of law, thus setting the stage for greater cooperation between the two organizations in this area. In this connection, the participants noted the publication of *The Rule of Law - A Guide for Politicians*.

The discussion on the rule of law was followed by a more expansive debate on the importance of free and fair elections as a necessary, although insufficient, condition of democracy. A report by the International Institute for Democracy and Election Assistance (International IDEA) on electoral violence brought home the point that honest and transparent elections foster greater political accountability, support development and contribute to political stability.

In addition, the Committee heard a presentation by the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the Sunlight Foundation and the Latin American Network for Legislative Transparency on the recently adopted Declaration on Parliamentary Openness. The Declaration is a distillation of the work conducted by parliamentary monitoring organizations on how parliaments ought to become more transparent and accessible to the public as a way of further developing a culture of democracy. As the Declaration affirms, the information that a parliament produces belongs to the citizens that it seeks to represent.

The Committee underscored that democracy remains a work in progress for virtually all States, and that it takes much more than the work of the UN to bring it to fruition. Ultimately, democracy requires a supportive culture that must be constantly nurtured at the national level. Parliamentarians play a pivotal role in this respect, as representatives of citizens and civil society as a whole. Likewise, parliamentarians can do a great deal more to influence the position of governments and give greater prominence to democracy at the UN.

To mark UN Day, the Committee also launched the latest [IPU Handbook for parliamentarians on supporting nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament](#). The Handbook builds on the work conducted in the years following the adoption in 2009 of the landmark IPU resolution entitled *Advancing nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament and securing the entry into force of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty: The role of parliaments*. It identifies good practices and model legislation in this area, offering a series of recommendations for further parliamentary action. The Handbook is the result of cooperation with Parliamentarians for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament (PNND) and the World Future Council, and was made possible thanks to a generous contribution from the Swiss Federal Department of Political Affairs.

The Executive Secretary of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO), the senior adviser to the United Nations High Representative on Disarmament Affairs, the President of the IPU Standing Committee on Peace and International Security and the co-Chair of the PNND Canada Chapter joined the lead authors in presenting the Handbook to the Committee. Several participants, including the Speaker of the parliament of Kazakhstan and prominent legislators from India, New Zealand, Egypt, the Philippines and Costa Rica joined parliamentarians from all regions of the world in calling for determined parliamentary action to make the vision of a nuclear-weapon-free world a palpable reality.

On 25 October, the Committee took stock of the outcome of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD, also known as Rio+20), in a sitting entitled *What prospects for sustainable development?* The Committee underscored that the UNCSD was a disappointment, as it broke no new ground and led to very few new commitments. This was ascribed mostly to a lack of political will and the inability of governments to tackle certain issues effectively. On the other hand, Rio+20 also helped return the whole sustainable development agenda to the top of the international agenda. What counts now is what all stakeholders are willing to do both to implement the Rio outcome and to take it to the next level of commitment.

The Committee agreed that the UNCSD's main achievement was the mandate it gave for the establishment of a new generation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that will replace the current MDGs in 2015. The SDGs are intended to apply to both developed and developing countries, providing a set of goals that should synthesize the three pillars of sustainability: economic, social and environmental. The Committee deemed it important for the SDGs to have two clear core objectives: eradicating poverty and narrowing inequality. It is also crucial that they be fully owned from the start by all stakeholders, including parliamentarians, civil society and the private sector. Most importantly, the SDGs should come with clear reporting and monitoring mechanisms to assess progress. The main lesson learned from the MDGs is that progress is possible when there is ownership and leadership, and when communities are empowered.

The overarching challenge of the SDGs will be to build bridges between nature and people at a time when the world population is growing and in a context of limited natural resources. The post-Rio agenda must aim at rethinking growth in terms of human well-being and not just material expansion. The Committee also agreed that a human rights perspective will need to be embedded in future discussions about the post-2015 development framework, including the right to food and new rights such as the right to water, which provide useful entry points for pursuing all three pillars of sustainability in an integrated manner. Upholding the right to food implies a discussion of power relations and the concentration of power in a few hands, as reflected in the current wave of land grabbing in many countries around the world. Food security will only be ensured if smallholders, especially women, receive more proactive support.

Going forward, parliaments will have a critical role to play in advancing the post-Rio agenda in tandem with the global process led by the UN. They should play an active part in the new UN Consultative Forum, created in Rio as a multi-stakeholder platform. They should also provide input at an early stage for the new General Assembly Open Working Group on sustainable development goals and the Secretary-General's High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda. The place to begin is at the national level, where the UN is also conducting consultations that will feed into the global intergovernmental process. A good example has been set by Parliament in the United Kingdom, which is already conducting hearings on the new development framework.

The Committee's last sitting examined the progress made and obstacles encountered in the implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, five years after its adoption in 2007. The Declaration sets minimum standards for the survival, well-being and dignity of indigenous peoples. The participants noted positive developments, such as the adoption of a national plan of action in the Democratic Republic of the Congo for implementing the Declaration, and the Declaration's incorporation into Bolivian national law. Overall, however, there remains a wide gap between the standards and their implementation.

The participants enquired about good practices for obtaining the free, prior and informed consent of indigenous peoples to legislative and administrative measures affecting them, a principle that is enshrined in the Declaration. Good practices are in fact rare – many States are struggling to engage effectively with indigenous peoples, if they seek to do so at all. This is clearly an issue for parliaments to take up.

The United Nations will convene the World Conference on Indigenous Peoples in September 2014. The preparatory resolution invites stakeholders, including parliamentarians, to participate in this process. The way in which governments will engage with parliaments, indigenous peoples and others in the preparation of the World Conference remains largely to be determined, but parliaments have an opportunity to engage their governments and hold them to account.

Several people noted the low level of participation at this sitting. They underlined that everybody should be concerned by indigenous rights. Indigenous concerns should be shared more broadly, among parliamentarians and in society in general. In the words of an indigenous parliamentarian from New Zealand, the realization of indigenous peoples' rights is "a journey, for indigenous and non-indigenous, hand in hand".

At the close of its annual meeting, the Committee pledged to redouble its efforts to enhance interaction between the United Nations, parliaments and the IPU. This report will be circulated among IPU Member Parliaments and in the broader UN community, with a view to articulating a robust programme of work for the years ahead.