



Inter-Parliamentary Union  
For democracy. For everyone.

# 132<sup>nd</sup> IPU Assembly

Hanoi (Viet Nam), 28 March - 1 April 2015



Assembly  
Item 3

A/132/3-Inf.1  
18 February 2015

## Concept note for the General Debate on *The Sustainable Development Goals: Turning Words into Action*

This note provides the conceptual background to the main theme of the 132<sup>nd</sup> Assembly - *The Sustainable Development Goals: Turning Words into Action*. Delegations may wish to refer to this note as they prepare their interventions for the plenary debate. The note will help ensure a focused discussion and an actionable outcome, which will be known as the *Hanoi Communiqué*.

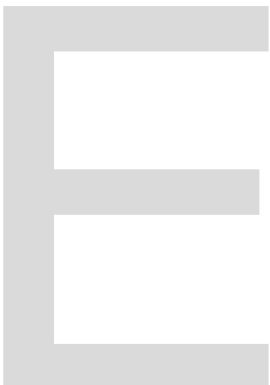
The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will constitute the centrepiece of a new global agenda for development that governments will proclaim at a United Nations Summit in September this year. The goals build on the expiring Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and will enter into force as of 1 January 2016. The SDGs are intended to help guide national action on poverty and sustainable development for the next 15 years.

Unlike the MDGs, the SDGs constitute a universal agenda, applying to both developed and developing countries. They will affirm that *all* countries must do their part to combat poverty (in absolute and relative terms), inequality, climate change and many other similar threats to life on the planet. Like other international agreements, the SDGs will be voluntary and non-prescriptive. Each country will tailor the goals to its own circumstances and each country will have policy space to determine its own way of achieving the goals.

After a long gestation within an Open Working Group of the UN General Assembly, a set of 17 SDGs and 169 targets has been negotiated. The goals will be accompanied by a formal *Declaration*, which governments need to finalize in the first part of this year. In addition, the whole framework, known as the post-2015 development agenda, is expected to outline a *mechanism for implementation* at the national and global levels.

The IPU has been steadfast in working to inject the views of parliamentarians into the design of the SDGs. A first broad vision of the goals was developed at the 128<sup>th</sup> Assembly in Quito, whose final document (see the Quito Communiqué at: <http://www.ipu.org/conf-e/128/quito-comm.htm>) called for a re-thinking of the prevailing consumerist growth model to include a stronger focus on human well-being. Furthermore, parliamentary hearings helped formalize the IPU's long-standing commitment to governance and institutional reforms, gender equality and human rights.

As a compromise, and in a bid to reconcile the views of all countries at the negotiating table, the new SDGs are not perfect and do not reflect all the concerns of the parliamentary community. On the other hand, they represent a breakthrough on many fronts: for the first time ever, governments made clear commitments on governance (Goal 16) and on inequality (Goal 10). A very comprehensive goal on gender equality and women's empowerment (Goal 5) has also been agreed. Goal 17, on means of implementation (i.e., finance, technology, capacity-building, trade and systemic issues), leaves the door open to an ambitious new agreement to be struck at the 3<sup>rd</sup> UN Conference on Financing for Development in July 2015. Goal 13, on climate change, captures some of the key actions that all countries will need to take to implement the agreement that is expected in December of this year.



Looking beyond the content of each of the 17 goals, what is remarkable about the whole framework is how it integrates in a cross-cutting way all three pillars of sustainable development: the social, economic and environmental.

With only months left before the formal adoption of the SDGs, the time has come for parliaments to consider how the SDGs can be “turned into action”. Parliaments are key to implementing the goals for at least four reasons: first, as legislative bodies, they can help translate these voluntary commitments into enforceable laws; second, as oversight bodies, they can hold governments to account for their policy choices, ensuring that these are aligned with the goals; third, as the most representative institution of government, they can help promote the goals among the people so that every citizen is empowered to demand action on the goals and to provide feedback on their implementation.

A fourth and most important role of parliaments is their unique responsibility to adopt the national budget and related laws in matters of finance, trade, and other policies to help mobilize the means of implementation for the SDGs. Only with adequate resources, estimated in the order of trillions of dollars a year, will the SDGs succeed. Parliaments therefore need to be actively engaged and sufficiently equipped to help mobilize domestic resources (through fiscal and regulatory reforms), incentivize productive investments, capitalize on trade opportunities, and improve both the quality and quantity of public finance (including aid, debt relief and innovative financing schemes such as carbon taxes, etc.).

As the IPU has found in working closely with parliaments on issues of development, peace and human rights over many years, a lot needs to be done to empower parliaments to step up to this implementation challenge. Many parliaments lack the resources or the legal authority to carry out their constitutional functions and to maintain their independence from the executive branch. The pressure of the short-term electoral cycle makes it difficult for parliamentarians to maintain the long-term perspective that is required to carry forward the SDGs. The decision-making process within parliaments tends to be dominated by particular interests instead of being driven by an overarching concern with the common good. Parliaments are often excluded from key processes such as the design and monitoring of national sustainable development plans. Lastly, most parliaments lack an appropriate institutional structure to mainstream such a comprehensive framework in their work, ensuring policy coherence and linking the various goals in an integrated manner.

With input from delegations on all of these issues, the Hanoi Communiqué will capture the main principles and approaches to inspire parliamentary action on the SDGs for years to come.

**Suggested questions for discussion:**

- What can parliaments do to communicate the goals to the public and promote national ownership?
- How can parliaments institutionalize the goals and targets that apply differently to each country so that they are mainstreamed in all legislative and oversight work?
- What are the key processes that parliaments can use to monitor the implementation of the goals domestically and globally?
- What capacities and legal authority do parliaments need in order to play an effective role in implementation?
- What can parliaments do to help mobilize the means of implementation that are required to support the goals nationally and globally?

**Further reading:**

- IPU brief on “The role of parliaments in monitoring the implementation of the SDGs” (January 2015) (<http://www.ipu.org/conf-e/132/ass-3-inf2.pdf>)
- Report of the Open Working Group of the General Assembly (containing the list of SDGs) (<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdgsproposal>)
- Report of the Intergovernmental Committee of Experts on Sustainable Development Financing (<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/intergovernmental/financecommittee>)
- Report of the 2013 Parliamentary Hearing at the United Nations (<http://www.ipu.org/Splze/unga13.htm>)
- Report of the 2014 Parliamentary Hearing at the United Nations (<http://www.ipu.org/Splze/unga14.htm>)

