



Inter-Parliamentary Union
For democracy. For everyone.

132nd IPU Assembly

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



Assembly
Item 3

A/132/3-Inf.2
18 February 2015

The role of parliaments in monitoring the implementation of the SDGs

Brief submitted by the IPU Secretariat

With the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) now well within view, the time has come for the world community to turn its attention to the key question of implementation. A constellation of effective processes, institutions and legal frameworks will need to be created or fine-tuned at the national and global level to support implementation of the SDGs consistently and over a long period of time.

Implementation is contingent on accountability: simply setting up an implementing framework does not guarantee results. As the primary institution of accountability at the national level, where the SDGs will apply most immediately, parliaments will play a critical role in carrying forward the new agenda. The SDGs will need to be translated into national legislation, including the pivotal budget bill, which is for parliaments to enact.

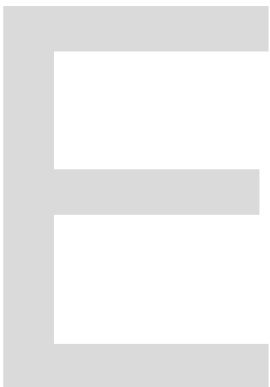
Like the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the SDGs will be *voluntary* and no international organization can enforce them. The goals themselves, and the priority given to each target, will need to be adaptable to each country's circumstances and allow countries sufficient policy space to determine how best to move forward. Not every SDG will apply to each country, but for those that do, there has to be a firm commitment to implementation by all national stakeholders, including parliament. Countries will need to develop national sustainable development strategies to translate the global goals into national ones, with corresponding country-specific targets.

The mitigated success of the MDGs can be attributed to a large extent to poor implementation, as opposed to problems inherent to the goals themselves. As a *universal* agenda that will apply to both developed and developing countries, the SDGs will set an even higher standard and demand a stronger commitment than the MDGs. What is needed to achieve the SDGs, then, is nothing short of their full *institutionalization* at all levels of decision-making, including parliaments.

This paper discusses some of the key conditions to be met for parliaments to do their part to implement the SDGs. An underlying assumption is that the SDGs will be crafted to target the real causes of poverty and unsustainable development rather than the consequences. This will be a key condition for ensuring parliamentary engagement in the process.

WHAT PARLIAMENTS CAN DO

Reform politics: It is self-evident yet often overlooked that the SDGs will not be met unless there is a strong political will to achieve them. Even the most sophisticated implementing framework will fail if the political environment is not conducive to progressive reform that will result in stronger democratic governance at all levels and in all countries.



One of the main obstacles to sustainable development everywhere is that too much of the political process is dominated by particular interests that overlook the common good and ultimately thwart the legislative and regulatory process. A second problem is the inherent tendency of politicians to sacrifice the long-term perspective that sustainable development requires to the short-term pressure of the electoral cycle. Third, in many countries the dividing line between executive and legislative powers is too permeable, with the executive often ignoring or steamrolling the legislative branch to avoid engaging in open debate.

To successfully implement the SDGs, parliaments will need to be better equipped politically to move the agenda forward, engage people from all constituencies, and create the conditions for a new era of consensus politics. As the branch of government most representative of the people, parliaments will need to ensure that the SDGs are truly owned by the people, raising their awareness and hearing their views, and that the public in turn applies pressure on decision-makers to work hard for implementation. In many places, this will require a new relationship with civil society and a stronger engagement with marginalized or vulnerable groups.

There is no easy way of getting around the influence that special interests tend to have on decision-makers in all countries, developed and developing, or the short-term horizon of the next election. Far-reaching reform will be needed to limit the influence of money on the electoral process, so that elected representatives will be free to act in the best interest of all their constituents.

More generally, parliaments themselves will need to be more open and accountable to the people. They need to focus especially on ensuring that all groups and sectors of society are represented in parliament, particularly women (worldwide, only 21% of parliamentarians are women), indigenous peoples and linguistic and cultural minorities. Information technologies (eParliament) should be used more consistently and widely to make parliaments more transparent and to allow for closer and timelier consultation with constituents.

Ideally, each parliament needs to perform a self-evaluation of its own working methods, rules and procedures, to make sure it is as representative, transparent, accessible, accountable and effective as possible. In some countries, the party system, a pillar of parliamentary life, may require thorough reform.

Review committee structures: An overarching problem in policymaking is that governments and parliaments tend to operate in silos. There is a ministry and/or parliamentary committee for the economy, one for the environment, one for trade etc., with too little coordination to effectively integrate all three pillars of sustainable development into a single policy approach.

This long-standing problem will be compounded by the SDGs, which will consist of a complex set of goals and targets. It will very clearly not be sufficient to parcel out each goal to a specific ministry or parliamentary committee, given that the goals will all be interlinked in one way or another. Similarly, there is a continuing need to promote greater policy coherence between ostensibly unrelated policy areas (trade, finance, development cooperation, monetary policy, etc.).

Parliaments are generally not equipped to promote this higher level of integration and coherence. Each parliament will need to carry out an internal evaluation of how equipped it is institutionally to carry forward the SDGs and from there determine the best way to proceed. What is needed in the first instance is a review of the committee structure and all related processes, so as to mainstream the new goals more effectively.

IPU studies show that, while not every parliament may need an SDG-specific committee or caucus (depending on the existing committee structure), it may be a good idea to establish such a body provided that it is given a strong coordinating and oversight mandate and sufficient resources. A properly functioning SDG committee that is inclusive of all parties can help vet all legislation emanating from the portfolio committees against the SDGs or an equivalent set of goals adjusted to the country's own priorities. This should include a participatory process of hearings with civil society, the private sector and other groups, direct interaction with all government departments, and the authority to demand reports or convene expert witnesses. To be most effective, such a committee should be made up of the chairs of the portfolio committees or other senior members. It may also need authority to block draft legislation until further review.

With respect to the key budget process, any SDG committee that may be constituted would ideally require a three-part mandate: first, to help determine a full costing of the SDGs at the country level, identifying the financing requirements and corresponding funding sources; second, to take the lead in ensuring that adequate provisions for the SDGs are made in the national budget; third, to monitor budget expenditure for the SDGs and evaluate its impact. Where a specialized SDG committee cannot be established owing to limited capacities, procedural constraints or other factors, a caucus or "task force" may be constituted to perform some of these functions.

In its committee structure review, each parliament should pay particular attention to other cross-cutting issues, such as gender equality and human rights. These issues are expected to feature prominently in the SDGs and in any case should constitute the litmus test of all legislation and of parliamentary oversight. Specialized gender equality and human rights committees (or caucuses) exist in many parliaments and have long proven their effectiveness. They should provide input to the SDG committee (where one is established) or directly to the portfolio committees in ways that effectively ensure that all issues are dealt with from the gender and human rights perspectives.

Engage in design and oversight of national plans: A mainstay of SDG implementation will undoubtedly be the design and effective oversight of national sustainable development plans (or their equivalents). The number of countries that have developed such plans over the years has risen steadily, yet little provision has been made for quality control and information on parliamentary oversight is insufficient.

Going forward, parliaments will need to be proactive and demand that their governments draw up a plan aligned with the SDGs and send it to Parliament for review through an open, consultative process involving all sectors of society. Once the plan has been adopted, Parliament should demand a yearly report on its implementation and hold regular public hearings in a process that should, in turn, lead to recommendations for future reform. In many countries, parliamentary engagement in the national planning process should be actively supported by the UN field operation.

An important entry point for parliaments to exercise oversight of the national plan may come from the international arena, through the peer review process that will be set up within the new High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development. Governments will be invited to present a progress report to the Forum at regular intervals; parliaments should demand to be involved in the drafting process or at least allowed to review the report before it is submitted. A similar process is being used, with assistance from the IPU, for reports to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and for the Universal Periodic Review. While this practice has yet to mature, it has great potential to provide effective support for implementation of the SDGs in each country.

Support national councils and other consultative/regulatory bodies: As a general practice, strengthening independent regulatory and monitoring bodies can help establish progressive norms and practices in ways that are less susceptible to political infighting and the short-term pressure of the electoral cycle. Primary among these bodies are the national councils for sustainable development, which can contribute greatly to the SDG debate in every country if they are appropriately empowered as independent watchdogs shielded from all political interference.

Parliaments should provide the legislative mandate and resources (through the budget process) to allow national councils to function as incubators of new ideas and approaches, stir debate and promote research (through academic and scientific bodies), including through a grant-making facility, and garner the views of all concerned groups. The national council's report to the Government should be sent to Parliament for a comprehensive review.

A similar dynamic applies to other independent agencies and consultative bodies that can play a key role in advancing the sustainability agenda, provided they are given adequate resources and a sufficiently strong mandate. Regulatory agencies should be given broad powers under the law to impose rules (consistent with the national sustainable development plan) at the industry or sector level. Supreme audit institutions will need the full protection of the law and adequate resources for data collection and analysis to provide an independent review of all budget expenditures, with reports submitted directly to Parliament.

Strengthen capacities: Parliaments generally have little capacity to support the legislative and oversight process, and not just in developing countries. There is an obvious tension between governments and parliaments when it comes to the allocation of resources between the two branches: governments want to be in control of the policy process and so tend to allocate more of their (often limited) resources to strengthening their own structures and processes. Few governments recognize the long-term benefit of strengthening the legislative and oversight functions of Parliament.

For their part, donor agencies are reluctant to invest in the capacities of parliaments for at least two reasons: the high risk and long-term commitment that parliamentary strengthening entails do not fit snugly within the short-term, results-based outlook of their technical assistance programmes, and they fear being seen as meddling in national politics. Recent surveys by the UN Development Cooperation Forum show that, on the whole, parliaments are less likely to receive support from international donors than other development partners and tend to be left out of national aid coordination structures. Yet, investing in parliamentary capacities is perhaps the best catalytic use of official assistance that governments can make.

With respect to the capacities of parliaments to perform their legislative and oversight functions effectively, the picture varies dramatically from country to country but there is one common denominator: almost everywhere, more should be done. For example, although more and more parliamentary budget offices are being established around the world, most have only limited capacities to provide long-term revenue projections, cost-benefit evaluations of public expenditures, and other such analyses to support parliamentary scrutiny of government policy.

Parliaments also suffer from the same lack of disaggregated data (by gender, social group, region, etc.) existing in other spheres of government. This makes it difficult for many parliaments to track progress on agreed policy objectives and to target policy at specific needs or vulnerable groups in society, a specific requirement of the SDGs.

Capacities are not limited to human resources, technical processes or physical assets. Another aspect of parliamentary strengthening relates to the legal authority that parliaments have to perform their functions. As the IPU has found, many parliaments, including several in developed countries, lack sufficient authority to engage in the negotiation of international loan agreements, which may have an indirect impact on the overall direction of development policy. This legal capacity will need to be reviewed in many parliaments with a view to expanding their authority to ask questions of the government or to participate in key government-led development processes.

CONCLUSION

Every parliament has a key role to play in ensuring that the relevant SDGs are implemented according to its country's circumstances and policy priorities. There is no single way to make this possible; what is needed is a constellation of processes and capacities that must come together to varying degrees in all countries.

UN Member States need to take stock of the role of parliaments as a key determinant of the success of the SDGs. To this effect, it will be critical for parliaments to be highlighted in the SDGs themselves as part of a stand-alone governance goal. A commitment to strengthening parliaments under this goal will support all of the SDGs for years to come.

* * * * *

References

Global Policy Forum, *Turning public budgets towards sustainability: A guide to environmental-social budgeting*, Germany, 2014.

International Development Committee, *Hearing on Parliamentary Strengthening*, House of Commons, United Kingdom, 18 November 2014.

IPU, *Parliamentary Oversight of International Loan Agreements and Related Processes: A Global Survey* (with the World Bank), Geneva, 2013.

- *Guidelines for Women's Caucuses*, Geneva, 2013.

- *Review of the Existing Parliamentary Structures and Processes related to the MDGs in the Parliament of Nigeria*, Geneva, 2012.

- *Enhancing parliaments' role in aid and development effectiveness (comparative study of four case studies: Cambodia, Tanzania, Viet Nam, and Zambia)*, Geneva, 2010.

- *Analytical Study of Parliamentary Mechanisms for MDGs*, Geneva, 2010.

UN Development Cooperation Forum, *Third Global Accountability Survey on Mutual Accountability*, 2014.

UNDP, *Parliamentary Engagement with the Millennium Development Goals: A manual for use in Parliaments*, 2010.