

134th IPU Assembly in Lusaka: Speech

Mr President, colleagues. Giving voice to youth – how well are we succeeding in that in Germany?

Germany and Europe are ageing. While the birth rate is in decline, life expectancy is increasing. What does that mean for young Germans?

In principle, they receive far-reaching rights and responsibilities in Germany when they reach the age of 18. However, young Germans are making less and less use of the most important democratic right of all: the right to vote. In 2013, just 60% of young people turned out to vote, compared to 80% of older people. In 1970, by contrast, turnout was still around 90% in all age groups.

Perhaps that was a consequence of dictatorship, as the dark era of voicelessness was still present all around us.

Many young Germans take democracy for granted; they are in the fortunate position of never having known anything else. However, we policy-makers must raise awareness of the fact that fighting for freedom and democracy is worthwhile. Perhaps we can learn something from the many people who are coming to us after fleeing tyranny.

It is hardly a revolutionary argument, but education is undoubtedly the key in this context. However, we also need to talk to young people, be role models for them, and awaken their enthusiasm for democracy and its themes. This is often difficult, but we must all work to achieve it.

In the 21st century, we must adapt the ways in which we communicate to reflect the needs of young people today. Social networks offer expanded opportunities for political information and communication. The scope for participation is immense.

Schools give children a basic introduction to democracy. But in Germany, one in every 20 pupils leaves school without qualifications (5.6% in 2015). That is something we need to change, because young people without qualifications are particularly likely to become the victims of undemocratic movements in society.

It is undoubtedly the duty of the state education system to create the foundations to enable young people to participate in political structures. But this is a process in which society as a whole must also play its part, starting within the family, and continuing in clubs and associations.

If we parliamentarians succeed in involving young people in the search for solutions to the problems we face, then we will be on the right track. Because young people who see and value state structures as partners in their solutions to problems, as a means of organising a functional form of coexistence, will also help to continuously improve the overarching framework.