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Report of the Standing Committee on Democracy and Human Rights

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Interactive debate on *Sharing our diversity: The 20th anniversary of the Universal Declaration on Democracy*

The debate took place on Monday 3 April with the Committee President Ms. B. Tshireletso (Botswana) in the chair. It was introduced by the IPU Secretary General and the three Rapporteurs of the next resolution, Ms. S. Dev (India), Mr. N. Schrijver (Netherlands) and Mr. I. Umakhanov (Russian Federation). The Rapporteurs recalled some of the fundamental points of the Universal Declaration. Democracy was both a set of principles and a form of government. The extent to which people were able to exercise their human rights, such as freedom of expression and freedom of assembly, was a significant marker of democracy. Democracy was essential to progress and led to happier and more open societies. Non-democratic societies tended to create the conditions where human rights were eroded, where people were under pressure to remain silent and where corruption could flourish.

The question of minority rights was a prominent part of the discussion. The universal character of the core principles of democracy was reaffirmed by everyone who spoke. Participants also drew attention to the national, ethnic and religious particularities of each country, which meant that there could never be one form of democracy alone. It was necessary to pay constant attention to people's rights. One third of the world's population continued to live in conditions of low levels of human development. The most marginalized, including groups such as women and girls, people living in rural areas, and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual people, often had limited negotiating power to influence institutions.

Delegates raised a number of issues of general or specific relevance to the discussion on the state of democracy in their countries and in the world. Representatives of Cyprus and Zambia emphasized the need to develop a participatory culture and the importance of educating young people about the values of democracy. The representative of Jordan called for citizens to be active and highlighted that country's law on decentralization as a means of developing a "bottom-up" democracy.

The representative of Iceland noted that people had limited means to influence government between elections and called for new forms of participation that would allow people to express who they wanted to be. While noting that social media could help to give individuals a voice, many representatives warned of the risks of relying on emotion when making decisions. Public opinion polling could provide valuable insights, but more reliable methods were required to ensure the accuracy of opinion polls.

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The representative of South Africa noted that elected leaders needed to respect the time limits of their constitutional terms of office, and called for powerful systems of transparency and accountability. The representative of the United Arab Emirates told the Committee that the country had created a Ministry of Tolerance and Happiness, whose aims were to strengthen social cohesion and to ensure that everyone had a chance to achieve social justice. The representative of Sri Lanka pointed out that the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development explicitly included the principles of democracy in Goal 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions), which underlined how important democracy was to development.

In conclusion, the Rapporteurs noted that democracy was a process that was never fully achieved. The road to democracy was not easy, and required a constant commitment to work with the people. The interventions from the representatives had demonstrated a “wonderful world of pluriformity and diversity” in the practice of democracy and the issues each country faced. At the same time, there was strong agreement on the universality of the principles of democracy, as set out in the Universal Declaration on Democracy.

Report on the debate *Act now for adolescents: the role of parliamentarians in promoting adolescent health and well-being.*

On Tuesday 4 April, the Committee held an interactive debate on *Act now for adolescents: the role of parliamentarians in promoting adolescent health and well-being*. The President, Ms. B. Tshireletso (Botswana), was in the Chair and the debate was moderated by Ms. H. Fogstad, Executive Director of the Partnership for Maternal, Newborn and Child Health. The panellists were Dr. V. Chandra-Mouli (World Health Organization), Ms. M. Fairouz (Restless Development Nepal), Mr. C. Sebuho (Rwanda) and Ms. S. Khan (UNAIDS Bangladesh).

The main causes of death among adolescents across the world were road traffic injuries, suicide, unsafe abortion and early maternity. However, hundreds of millions more suffered long-term health consequences as a result of harmful habits developed during adolescence, including the use of tobacco, alcohol and drugs. In many societies, menstruation remained a taboo subject. Girls sometimes had no knowledge of it until their first menstrual period, and might have limited access to sanitary products and support. Adolescents were not a priority in the Millennium Development Goals and the United Nations had only recently incorporated their specific needs into its global health strategies.

Panellists' introductory remarks and interventions from the floor highlighted the importance of policies and laws that addressed the health and well-being of adolescents. There was a need for accessible, youth-friendly health services and for greater awareness among adolescents of their health rights. Systematic data was needed to help governments and parliaments take informed policy decisions. Budgets must be allocated, and policy outcomes closely monitored to check that they were achieving the intended results.

Legislation was necessary, but not sufficient, to tackle harmful norms and habits. Dr. Chandra-Mouli noted that the proportion of adolescent boys who thought it was acceptable to beat their wife in certain circumstances was practically the same as in older generations. Parliamentarians had a responsibility to speak out so that attitudes evolved, particularly towards teenage girls.

Parliamentarians from 28 countries (of whom 12 were women) shared numerous examples of initiatives to promote adolescent health and well-being. Representatives from many countries, notably in Africa, pointed out that a very significant percentage of their population was young, making it even more important to ensure their well-being.

The parliament of Rwanda had been raising awareness for many years about the issues discussed during the debate, including by ensuring sexual and reproductive health was part of the school curriculum. The representative of Botswana noted that its Children's Act provided for a series of protections for people under the age of 18. Under the country's criminal code, which was widely used by the police, the criminal age of responsibility was 14. Laws must be harmonized, and awareness raised at all levels of government.

The representative of Italy noted that more attention should be given to adolescents who were migrants or refugees. The representative of South Africa said that that country provided free education to all and had increased the numbers of one-stop centres to help victims of gender-based violence. The representative of Kenya noted that a multi-sectoral approach was needed to improve the health and well-being of adolescents. Sectors such as health, education and transportation should deliver as one. The representative of Sweden stated that investments in sexual and reproductive health yielded significant social and economic dividends. The representative of Cuba shared a successful case in the fight to end early pregnancies involving the introduction of sexual and reproductive education in schools.

In conclusion, despite some progress and a number of good initiatives, there was much more that parliaments and parliamentarians could do to improve the health and well-being of adolescents. Passing laws, allocating budgets, and monitoring the status of adolescent health and well-being were necessary steps. It was also crucial that parliamentarians advocated for change to the social norms that continued to hamper the healthy development of young boys and girls.