



Inter-Parliamentary Union
For democracy. For everyone.

136th IPU Assembly

Dhaka, Bangladesh, 1- 5 April 2017



Report of the Standing Committee on United Nations Affairs

*Noted by the 136th IPU Assembly
(Dhaka, 5 April 2017)*

The President, Mr. A. Avsan (Sweden), opened the meeting. The three new members of the Bureau were confirmed: Mr. A. Toumi (Morocco), Ms. C. Crexell (Argentina) and Mr. S. Gavrilov (Russian Federation). Mr. Toumi introduced himself. Mr. Avsan then invited the President of the IPU, Mr. S. Chowdhury, to make a few remarks on the role of parliaments in ensuring implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the main theme of the session.

Mr. Chowdhury provided the broader context of the debate, which stemmed from a strategic partnership between the UN and the IPU. The partnership had been further strengthened the previous year as a result of a new Cooperation Agreement between the two organizations as well as a resolution of the General Assembly on *Interaction between the UN, national parliaments and the IPU*. Mr. Chowdhury noted that the first year of the SDGs had already elapsed and that MPs needed to move quickly into action.

Mr. Avsan then proceeded to open the plenary debate, which consisted of two sessions.

Session 1:

The following panellists took part in the first session on the parliamentary follow-up on the SDGs in preparation for the 2017 session of the UN High-level Political Forum (HLPF) on Sustainable Development: Mr. S. Mukerjee, Country Director of UNDP Bangladesh, Mr. F. Rabbi, Deputy Speaker (Bangladesh), and Ms. J. Luveni, Speaker (Fiji). Ms. P. Torsney and Mr. A. Motter (IPU Secretariat) contributed remarks.

The debate highlighted the global review process for the SDGs undertaken through the annual session of the HLPF in July. The IPU was working to help prepare parliaments to provide input into that process and build their capacities to mainstream the SDGs in their work. The IPU-UNDP **self-assessment toolkit for parliamentarians** was designed to help parliaments review their own internal structures and processes to ensure that they were fit for purpose for implementation of the SDGs.

The IPU had provided parliaments with a **model resolution** highlighting the key steps that parliaments could take to institutionalize the SDGs, such as asking the government to create a national plan for the SDGs and report annually to parliament on its implementation. The IPU was working to engage parliaments in the **voluntary national reviews (VNRs)** presented by countries to the HLPF each year. In 2017, forty-four countries would present VNRs. The IPU had brought that process to the attention of the parliaments of those countries. It encouraged them to contribute to the VNR and report back to the Organization through a questionnaire by June 2017.

Bangladesh, the host country, offered a good case study of how the SDGs could be implemented, including through the engagement of parliament. As highlighted by Mr. Rabbi and Mr. Mukerjee, the Government had already taken several important steps: a special coordinator for the SDGs had been appointed in the Prime Minister's office, a directorate within the civil service supported work across all policy areas, an action plan for the SDGs was in the pipeline, a detailed costing of the SDGs was being performed, and the current five-year development plan (established before the SDGs) had been adjusted to accommodate the new development agenda before the next plan, which would fully reflect the SDGs.

Similar steps were being taken in the Bangladesh parliament: clusters of SDGs had been assigned to specific thematic committees to ensure systematic follow up; a motion on the SDGs, inspired by the IPU model, was expected to be tabled in May. Support provided by UNDP to the parliament included working to provide additional research capacities to the budget office, supporting draft legislation, and helping to promote dialogue between MPs and their constituents.

Other examples of parliamentary engagement in the SDGs were discussed in the course of the meeting. As Ms. Luveni noted, the previous year's IPU needs assessment mission to her parliament had provided many useful suggestions. Steps taken so far included: organizing regular Speakers' debates open to all citizens and providing all MPs with a diary whose pages featured the various SDGs as a constant reminder. The parliament of China had adopted a new national plan that reflected the SDGs and was organizing seminars for MPs. The parliament of Thailand would soon undertake an assessment using the IPU-UNDP self-assessment toolkit and would make sure to review a new 20-year national plan being completed by the government. The parliament of Zimbabwe had created two committees: a "thematic" committee to perform oversight of government departments and another committee comprising the chairs of all standing committees that provided policy coordination within parliament. In Sweden, the parliament had examined the SDGs and concluded that current policies and implementation tools were already aligned with the new agenda, and that only a few adjustments were required to meet all the goals by 2030.

Overall, the debate emphasized the strong role parliaments needed to play to build national ownership of the SDGs while ensuring the "domestication" of that global framework to each country's specific context. Parliaments were encouraged to persuade governments to produce regular progress reports on the SDGs, including voluntary national reviews to the HLPF. It was noted that financing would be key to the success of the SDGs and that parliaments must work to ensure sufficient resources through the budget process, including by diverting military expenditures towards development.

Session 2:

The second panel focused on the main theme of the 2017 HLPF, *Eradicating poverty and promoting prosperity in a changing world*. It featured Mr. N. Kumar, Chief of the Social Development Division of the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and Pacific (ESCAP), Ms. Hunter, UN Women country representative, Mr. S. Kinga, Speaker (Bhutan), Ms. C. Roth, Deputy Speaker (Germany), and Ms. B. Sampatisiri, MP (Thailand).

As the experience of the Asia-Pacific region amply illustrated, poverty could be conquered. Rapid growth over recent decades had helped to curtail poverty drastically. However, some 400 million people still lived in poverty in the region. Rising inequality, weak social protection, lack of access to education and health care, and a growing rural-urban divide were challenges that still needed to be tackled. Persons with disabilities, migrants and women were among the groups most likely to be poor or at risk of poverty.

Policies targeting the most vulnerable groups were key to poverty eradication. Discrimination, the main driver of poverty amongst women, was not always evident, especially when it occurred within the household. For example, girls from poor households were primarily those who married too young (under 18), sacrificing their education and professional prospects. Female-headed households might appear to earn more than men, but, in reality, they remained more vulnerable because of a lack of assets on which to fall back in the event of unemployment or illness.

Discrimination was responsible for lower wages and other important causes of women's poverty outside the household. Domestic workers, who were predominantly female, lacked basic protection because they were systematically excluded from labour laws. Public policy must target the most vulnerable women. Such policies could be designed and put in place only if parliamentarians made a special effort to reach out to the affected groups, seeking their input and ensuring that it was taken into account in policy development.

The question of whether poverty reduction depended exclusively on economic growth was debated. Mr. Kinga made the case for a different approach based on the pursuit of happiness as the main policy objective. He noted that, in Bhutan, the success of all economic, social and environmental policies was measured by the Gross National Happiness (GNH) index, as opposed to the traditional Gross Domestic Product (GDP) index, which merely measured the value of goods and services exchanged. The GNH consisted of five elements of human well-being: material, spiritual, emotional, cultural, and environmental. By applying the GNH approach, poverty in Bhutan had fallen from 23 per cent in 2007 to 12 per cent in 2012, and a further reduction to 5 per cent was expected by 2018. The key to making the GNH approach work was institutional. The parliament had simply redesigned all reporting requirements and entire parliamentary committees to reflect the elements of the GNH.

Thailand's experience with poverty reduction hinged on another innovative approach, namely the so-called "sufficiency economy philosophy." While not denying the importance of economic growth, that approach underscored the virtues of moderation and harmony with nature. Applied to farming, the approach had meant converting land from resource intensive monocultures to organic methods based on crop rotation and natural inputs, which had lowered poverty rates in rural Thailand.

Although poverty might not be as pronounced in developed countries as it was in developing ones, developed countries also had an obligation, under the SDGs, to look after their poor. Ms. Roth argued that developed countries like her own must take responsibility for the plight of the poor in developing countries. She noted that developed countries' agricultural subsidies damaged livelihoods in developing countries, and that arms sales from developed countries to developing countries enabled violent conflict and caused untold damage to development prospects. A drastic re-think of global trade and economic policies was required to give developing countries a real chance of succeeding against poverty.

The debate also highlighted the importance of submitting all policy proposals that the government brought before parliament to an SDG test. It was noted that many of the policy interventions that worked well against poverty started at the local level, which was where people expected jobs and essential services to be available. It might therefore be necessary to decentralize authority to local governments and empower local communities. Most importantly, parliaments must ensure that policies and budgets targeted the most vulnerable directly and in accordance with their human rights.

Forty-one delegations attended the Committee session. The vast majority of them were from developing countries, and no developed country intervened in the debate. That could be an indication that the SDGs had yet to gain traction among developed countries, which was inconsistent with the original intention of the SDGs as a universal agenda.