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IPU Statement

Regional seminar on the SDGS in the
parliaments of Central and Eastern
Europe

Session I: The SDGs and why they
matter to the region

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Distinguished parliamentarians,
Dear friends,

Many people go through life without a plan. Sometimes this takes them to a good place. It's called serendipity, or simply good luck.

But our own life experience tells us something else: it is better to have a plan, or at least a general idea of the direction we want to follow, the interests we want to nurture, the kind of life we want to have, and the world we want to bestow to our children.

Time, not nature, and certainly not money, is our most precious resource. Each of us has only so much time in this world. Success is more likely when you know what you want and then concentrate all your efforts toward it. So it is when it comes to public policy at all levels, national and global.

The SDGs are an expression of this. They come with a time horizon of only fifteen years because that is really how much time we have to set the world on a new course: one that is truly conducive to social justice and that resets our relationship with nature. If we fail at this, life on the planet may become quite impossible for the vast majority of people.

Deepening inequalities, persistent poverty, and worsening environmental conditions are only the tip of the iceberg, when I look at the future in front of us. Think of a planetary temperature increase that is projected to double the maximum advisable to avoid tremendous devastation and loss of life; think of a much more crowded planet, with two billion more people added by 2050; think of the two to three billion people effectively living without basic necessities, adequate food or health care; think of an economic model that is unable to provide for millions of jobs for young people, and that puts GDP growth ahead of human well-being.

The MDGs that the SDGs build upon were a framework for countries at a fairly low level of development. Since most if not all of your countries are middle income (though some maybe at the very bottom of a large income range) and are not generally

considered “developing” countries, I suspect you are relatively unfamiliar with the business of global goals and what they mean.

So you may wonder: what is in the SDGs that applies to you, and why should you pay any attention to these global goals?

In a nutshell, the SDGs have been designed as a universal framework that applies to all countries in the world, rich and poor alike. They are meant as a single transformative plan that combines synergistically all of the actions we need to undertake, as a global community, to reverse the course we are on.

There may be no *absolute* poverty in this region by the bare bone income definition of \$1.25 a day. But surely there are huge pockets of *relative* poverty combined with growing inequalities; there are consumption and production patterns that are not sustainable in the long run; there is a rising health toll from non-communicable diseases like diabetes, cancer, and heart disease; there are persistent gender disparities; there are more frequent and devastating natural disasters; and there is clearly an over-reliance on fossil fuels.

The list of current and potential issues in the region is very long, and I am only scratching the surface here. My point is that all of these issues are part of a global problem that must be resolved. And it can only be resolved *if every country does its part*. There can be no derogating to others this time: we either pull together as a global community or all of us fail.

The fact that the SDGs are not legally binding, technically speaking, should not deceive us. Global goals always generate peer pressure to do something about them. This particular set will come with a stronger accountability mechanism than the MDGs and with much higher expectations. Parliaments will need to be at the forefront of that.

Given how pivotal the SDGs were going to be, very early on the IPU began to organize a parliamentary input to the UN so that the goals would include the views of parliamentarians. I think it fair to say that, together with many others, we helped secure the governance goal (goal 16), which among other things calls for more accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels – which for us include parliaments. We also gave a boost to what are now goal 5 on gender equality, and goal 10, on inequalities within and between countries.

At our 132nd Assembly in Vietnam we had a long discussion on the role of parliaments in the implementation of the goals. That discussion gave rise to the Hanoi Declaration. It will be taken up again at the upcoming 4th World Conference of Speakers of Parliament from 31 August to 2 September, in New York.

So this seminar today is a first opening salvo for IPU into the implementation phase of the SDGs. We begin here because we were invited, but also because this region presents with an interesting “case study” of how countries that were not directly involved in the MDGs can now make sense of the SDGs. The lessons we will learn

these two days will contribute to our own thinking about our own strategy to support the implementation of the SDGs around the world.

What is expected of you, in practice?

Without getting into the details of each session, let me just say that the first order of business is making sure that each of the parliaments in the region is “fit for purpose.” The broad outline of this can be put in four points: one, “domesticate” the global goals so that you clearly identify which within each goal speaks to your countries’ concerns; two, make sure that there is a national plan in place to support country-specific goals and targets; three, find effective ways to hold governments to account for the implementation of national plans; and last but not least, make sure your constituents are familiar with the national plans for the goals and are consulted regularly with regard to their implementation.

To be able to do all this, each parliament will need to evaluate its own institutional processes. How will you be able to institutionalize the goals so as to capture the synergies and build coherence at the policy level?

The overarching challenge when it comes to sustainable development comes down to this: you must be able to integrate all economic, social and environmental considerations in every law and regulation you adopt, including of course the most pivotal budget bill.

The budget document is particularly important in this process in that it is there that you must find the resources to pay for the goals in your countries. This may require a whole new approach to fiscal policy, for example, so that you redistribute the tax burden across the board, close loopholes, or provide incentives for more sustainable production and consumption.

Parliamentary action may also be required to support regional and even international cooperation, particularly when it comes to facilitating technology transfers, trade, capacity building, and possibly financial assistance to lower income countries. This is part of the vast agenda for the means of implementation that is captured by Goal 17.

Finally, let me say a few words about one of the most important innovations of this new agenda. It has to do with the people themselves and how, thanks to social media and other new modes of political participation and communication, they will increasingly be involved both in helping chart the course ahead in each country and in providing feedback to decision-makers, including of course parliamentarians.

As you will hear this afternoon, the SDGs are being born on the heel of one of the most successful global surveys of citizens ever organized by the United Nations. The survey, called My World, asked people around the world to rank their priorities out of a list of sixteen that had been given to them. Well over seven million people participated and helped provide validation for several of the goals and targets proposed around the negotiating table.

Going forward, we can expect public perception surveys like My World to continue and grow in importance. While public perceptions must always be read against hard data, I think being able to hear directly from the people in a timely manner how satisfied they are with the goals in their countries will prove a decisive factor in our implementation efforts globally.

We often say that it is the job of parliaments to hold their governments to account. But it is also true that parliaments and individual parliamentarians are themselves accountable to the people. The more the implementation of the SDGs is inclusive of all people the higher the chances of success.

Good luck will not help us with the SDGs. It will take pro-active action by all concerned - and with you as parliamentarians in the lead.

Thank you.