

## RAPPORTEUR'S SUMMARY

### IPU-UNICEF Parliamentary Forum on Children New York, 9 May 2002

#### Introduction

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1. The IPU and UNICEF convened the Parliamentary Forum on Children to help mobilize parliaments to address children's issues from a child rights perspective. The Forum's objective was to seek legislative strategies to promote the well-being of children, with a particular focus on measures to protect children's rights and to mobilize resources to implement the goals set by the Special Session.

2. Some 250 parliamentarians attended from 75 countries. Dr Najma Heptulla, President of the Council of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, and Chair of the Forum, gave a keynote address in which she restated IPU's commitment to the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* and asked participants to consider the comprehensive IPU resolution of Ouagadougou as their road map toward the fulfilment of the Convention.<sup>1</sup> André Robertfroid, UNICEF Deputy Executive Director, greeted participants on behalf of his organization. His intervention was followed by that of a representative of the Children's Forum which brought a sense of urgency to the event by focussing it on the personal experiences of children.

3. Two panellists launched the debates. Ms. Glenys Kinnock, Member of the European Parliament, addressed the theme of resource mobilization and budgetary decision-making. Mr. Ebrahim C. Saloojee, Member of the Parliament of South Africa, spoke about protection issues from a legislative perspective. Their thought-provoking presentations were much appreciated by participants and organizers alike.

4. The ensuing debate was lively, in-depth, and informative, with about 30 participants from all regions of the world taking the floor.<sup>2</sup> Child representatives also

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<sup>1</sup>[1] "Protecting and caring for children, the driving force of future society", Resolution of the 106<sup>th</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Conference, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso

<sup>2</sup>The representatives of the following parliaments took the floor (in alphabetical order): Albania, Algeria, Australia, Azerbaijan, Belgium, Bolivia, Brazil, Cambodia, Cape Verde, Central African Republic, Colombia, Cuba, Egypt, Estonia, Ethiopia, Gambia, Guatemala, Indonesia, Italy, Iran, Japan, Kenya, Liberia, Mexico, Mongolia, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Spain, South Africa, Sweden, Tanzania, Togo, Turkey, Uganda, and Zimbabwe. A representative of the United States Congress submitted a written statement. Representatives of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, the Latin American Parliament and the Flemish Regional Parliament also took the floor.

intervened several times to provide their own perspective as the principal stakeholders in the discussion.

5. On a general basis, discussion covered concerns of both developing and developed countries: both stressed the unmet needs and the suffering of children and young people. It was therefore evident that child issues are global in nature and that no country has achieved in its entirety the vision of a “world fit for children.”

6. The Forum stressed the fact that in this issue, as in many other development issues, the parameters are constantly expanding and that, as society progresses, so do the needs and aspirations of children. Policy must therefore constantly keep up with the evolving situation. In that connection, it was acknowledged that the child rights perspective has a powerful impact on how policies are made and how new accountabilities are defined.

### **Summary of the debate: key issues discussed**

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7. Basing themselves on the panellists' interventions, participants focussed their debate on:

- The use of child rights standards as a litmus test for legislative activity
- The need to develop an analysis of the national budget in terms of its impact on children ("child impact analysis" and to ensure appropriate budgetary allocations for children and their optimal implementation.

8. The main thrust of the discussion can be broken down and summarized as follows:

A. *Legislative measures to build a nurturing environment for children of all ages*

i) *In order to include a child rights perspective in parliament's legislative work and action, child rights standards should be a litmus test for legislative activity.*

ii) Children's rights should be enshrined in the constitution or other fundamental law of the nation.

iii) Legislation in all fields should take the best interests of the child as its underlying philosophy. The law should ensure basic services for each and every child. The main policy issues touched upon were: child labour, income support, abortion, the compulsory age of education, adoption, health. Land reform, in developing countries where the agricultural sector is dominant was also mentioned to raise household income, thus improving the well being of children in those countries.

iv) Under the question of war and child abuse, tough legislation to protect children was recommended. Protection should be afforded to children in armed conflicts and the *Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict* should be ratified universally. Parliaments should also ensure that the appropriate authorities conduct

thorough investigations of allegations of abuse and other human rights violations involving children, particularly in refugee camps. Furthermore, at the regional level, parliaments should cooperate to help resolve the refugee problems that such conflicts invariably cause. Under the specific heading of abuse, universal ratification of the *Optional Protocol on the sale of children, child prostitution, and child pornography* was also called for. Finally, the insidious violence that is done to children by war-games and toys that instill disrespect for human life was also stressed.

*B. Developing a "child rights" budget*

i) Since budgetary allocations can be directly or indirectly related to children, a "child impact analysis" should be made for the entire budget, prior to budgetary allocation stage.

ii) When planning the national budget, it is important to do as much as possible to address the needs of the nation's children while also aiming to fulfill, within the agreed deadlines, the various commitments that the country has subscribed to internationally (i.e. full enrollment in primary education and reduced child poverty, mortality and malnutrition levels).

iii) A holistic approach to budgeting for children was recommended. The need to ensure that children's rights are taken into account in all budgetary allocations, whether directly aimed at children or not, was stressed. For instance, it was noted that poverty eradication in the developing countries must start with economic and social measures that focus on children as the foundation of our society. Furthermore, the creation of specific budget lines for children was also recommended. Indeed, government spending on children should not always be subsumed under other general categories. This would help in identifying children's needs, establishing priorities, and measuring results.

iv) One important principle that should be followed in establishing allocations is that certain items, for example, education and school nutrition programmes, must always be budgeted together so as to maximize the benefit of the investments.

v) *The need for pro-child tax reforms as one important aspect of the budget-making process was also discussed.. The revenue side of the budget is as important in the mobilization of resources for children as the expenditure side.*

vi) The budget-making process should take geographic disparities into account: underserved areas must be properly identified so that nation-wide programs apply equitably and fairly. Particular attention should be paid to children whose needs are most desperate.

vii) Noting that today's children are tomorrow's workers, parents, and decision-makers, MPs stated that the best investment a country can make through its budget is on children, and particularly on their education and health. In that connection, several

participants stressed the importance of funding for HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment for youth, along with funding for sexual education.

*C. International cooperation in the best interests of the child*

i) The debt incurred by many developing countries was stressed as a key obstacle to the realization of children's rights because it diverts resources away from real needs. Debt relief and forgiveness must be targeted to children directly, with a large percentage of the money going to reduce child poverty, establish child nutrition programs, conduct HIV/AIDS education and prevention programs, and guarantee that a nation will not use children as soldiers.

ii) Resource transfer from developed to developing countries with a specific focus on child programmes was discussed and recommended.

iii) The institution of an international exchange system for foodstuffs to complement current financial transfers from donor countries was also discussed. Instead of destroying surplus agricultural production to control prices, excess production in the rich countries should be devolved to supply food to undernourished children and their families, especially in Africa.

iv) The effect of international sanctions and embargos that directly or indirectly deprive children of their rights was discussed. It was recommended that such sanctions be lifted and that parliamentary action in that field be strengthened.

#### *D. Implementation of legislation for children*

i) In order to facilitate the implementation of legislation, the overall efficiency of the institutional framework must be improved. For institutions to function properly and provide the required services and protection for children, they must be freed of all corruption in the form of undue interference, influence peddling, and administrative wrongdoing. Corruption often results in the diversion of funds away from children and other social priorities.

ii) Sensitization of society as a whole to the child rights perspective must be increased in order to develop grass root support and ensure respect for such laws. A top priority is to help change the view of children as mere beneficiaries to viewing them as active members of the community who can contribute to the amelioration of their own situation and of society at large. Parliamentarians, as decision-makers community leaders and advocates, have a key role to play in that regard.

#### **Recommended actions**

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9. In addition to the above points, participants expressed their support for the following actions, which parliaments and their members can undertake:

i) Instituting a parliamentary committee to report on the implementation and overall impact of budgetary measures for children, as well as on other legislative measures. As part of its working procedure, it is suggested that such committees hold hearings of children's organizations and other relevant bodies.

ii) Setting up, with adequate funding, a public advocate or ombudsman's office that would report to parliament and whose functions would be to inquire on gross violations of children's rights, either at the institutional or individual level. The office would report on such violations on an annual basis in order to provide an objective view on the situation of children and on required changes in legislation or administrative practices.

iii) Holding an annual parliamentary debate to assess the situation of children, identify legislative gaps, and chart the required course of action. Such a debate would aim at building a political consensus on the fulfilment of child rights and on how to structure the legislative agenda to reach that goal.

iv) Creating children's parliaments (where not yet established) to encourage youth to fully participate in the realization of societal changes guided by the norms of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*.

v) Holding of public debates on child rights by members of parliament in their constituencies. Grass roots support is important for MPs when advocating the integration of child rights in lawmaking in general, and at every step of budgetary decision-making in particular.

10. In addition, specific recommendations were directed at IPU itself, as the world organization of parliaments:

i) Encourage ratification by all States of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* and of its two Optional Protocols, namely, the *Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict* and the *Optional Protocol on the sale of children, child prostitution, and child pornography*

ii) Set up a sub-committee on children to monitor worldwide parliamentary action and progress on children.

iii) Hold regular debates on children's issues and ensure that all parliamentary debates within the IPU include a "child rights" perspective.

iv) Develop tools for parliaments to facilitate their action for children and promote the exchange of experiences and practices among them.

## **Conclusion**

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11. Participants voiced their appreciation to the two organizing bodies and expressed the hope that the meeting would open the way to more joint IPU-UNICEF initiatives and projects in the future. They pledged to continue the discussion initiated at this meeting within their national parliaments.