



Inter-Parliamentary Union
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Fourth World Conference of Speakers of Parliament

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Report of the General Debate

The Fourth World Conference of Speakers of Parliament centred around a General Debate on the overall theme of *Placing democracy at the service of peace and sustainable development: Building the world the people want*. It also included two panel discussions, one on parliamentary oversight and another on translating the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into action.

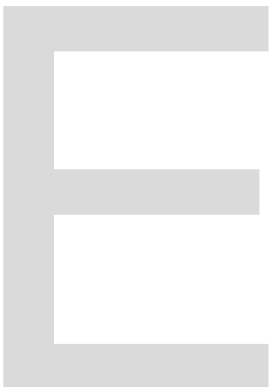
The General Debate featured over 150 statements by Speakers of Parliament and heads of regional and other parliamentary organizations. The IPU President, the UN Secretary-General, the President of the UN General Assembly and UNESCO's Special Envoy for Peace and Reconciliation delivered opening remarks. The Administrator of UNDP and the Executive Director of UN Women also addressed the General Debate.

Speakers offered various perspectives on democracy, the role of parliaments, sustainable development, violence and terrorism, governance and other issues. This report seeks to capture the key messages and recommendations that emerged from the General Debate.

Democracy

Many delegates described the situation of democracy and development in their own country or region. Democracy had grown steadily year after year from the 1970s until the first half of the previous decade. In recent years, however, there had regrettably been stagnation and even regression. For a variety of reasons, many aspiring democratic regimes were in danger of foundering or had already done so. All too often, too much emphasis had been placed on holding elections and too little on building lasting democratic institutions, embracing respect for differences, promoting dialogue and seeking the peaceful resolution of conflicts. Furthermore, some democratically elected leaders had undermined democracy from within by using their newly-won authority to give themselves almost unlimited powers. Democracy must never be a game of winner-takes-all.

Well-established democracies had to do their utmost to support ongoing democratic development in nascent and struggling democracies. In particular, they must encourage fragile States to take leadership of their processes and to commit to the future of their citizens. That must not take the form of demanding complete compliance with standards imposed from outside regardless of countries' traditions or capacity to implement them. Democracy is government by the people and for the people; it has to be something experienced in people's everyday life. Democracy is a process that requires continuous care with respect for the circumstances and specificities of each society. Parliaments must review national constitutions to ensure that they were in line with modern society's needs and with international standards. Electoral laws had to be reviewed as necessary to facilitate free participation in electoral processes and reflect the will of the people.



One essential component of democracy was the inclusion of civil society. In certain models of direct democracy, for example, civil society organizations or even simple groupings of individuals are entitled to make any topic the subject of a referendum. This leads to a distinct feeling of citizen ownership of the democracy so that people know that they are not just irrelevant bystanders in the process of government; they can help shape public policy and laws. Important, too, is the annual publication by some governments of their successes and failures, which parliament can debate, offer criticisms or suggestions and carry out audits.

Several Speakers described the advent or return of democracy in their countries after a period of authoritarian rule. This entailed restoring the principle of the separation of powers and (re-) establishment of respect for human rights and the rule of law. Often it would also involve training people to assume parliamentary responsibilities and the preparation of action plans for the future.

Democracy must be promoted by ensuring that it was participatory and inclusive, making a difference to the lives of vulnerable sections of society. In that context, it was encouraging that one of the SDGs sought to provide access to justice for all and to build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.

However, it could be said that there were certain governments that seemed to favour democracy for their own people only, supporting dictatorships and despotic regimes outside their borders. The practice of warmongering under the pretext of expanding democracy had resulted in attempts by some governments to enforce democracy in other countries with bombs and machine guns. Building democracy required patience and perseverance: without a strong foundation, the transition from an authoritarian regime to democracy had left a power vacuum that brought about unstable conditions in certain parts of the world.

Role of parliaments

In a modern society, the ultimate responsibility to protect democracy lay with parliament, which must lead the way in creating open and transparent societies founded on the rule of law. Parliament must ensure that appropriate structures were in place to prevent the abuse of power and its ensuing corruption. It must ensure that there was a clear division of power between the legislative, the executive and the judiciary.

In some countries, people were losing trust in the ability of the government to solve intractable problems, such as long-term unemployment or persistent violence. In some cases, people were also losing confidence in parliament's ability to oversee the executive.

It was vitally important to create mechanisms that secured the integrity of parliamentarians and the parliaments to which they belonged. With parliament being fundamentally about debate, if those systems were perceived as not working well, democratic rights and freedoms would come under threat. Safeguarding the rights of the opposition meant safeguarding the principle of agreeing not to agree, and creating a platform for discussion within a peaceful framework. It was those conditions that created trust between the people and their elected governing institutions, ensuring the broad societal participation that was so crucial for vibrant democracies.

Heeding the choice of the people and meeting their expectations was the common responsibility of parliaments and parliamentarians of all countries. Some Speakers stressed their parliament's readiness to work with those of other countries and international parliamentary organizations to make a more robust contribution to building a better world. Parliamentarians owed that to their constituents. In particular, parliamentarians had a duty to shoulder the heavy burden, working together to put the SDGs into practice, with a view to building the world that people want. Parliaments had a responsibility and a duty, too, to enact specific legislation and create an enabling environment to protect the most vulnerable and marginalized groups, recognizing the fundamental human rights and freedoms of all citizens, without distinction. Parliaments needed to provide opportunities for the debate and formulation of policies and enactment of legislation with a view to ensuring sustainable development.

The tasks of parliamentarians included promoting democratic reform in countries, ensuring a secure and just world, eradicating religious extremism, terrorism and violence, reinforcing law and governance, and promoting tolerance and intercultural/interfaith dialogue. Parliamentarians had a responsibility, too, to be constantly alert to the danger of compromising democracy in the pursuit of prosperity. That would be at least part of parliamentarians' contribution to the implementation of the post-2015 sustainable development agenda.

They also had a role to play in ensuring gender equality. There could be no sustainable development without gender equality and the empowerment of women. Several Speakers described the progress of gender equality in their country, often with specific reference to the growing number of women in the national parliament. Various suggestions were made for improving the situation still further, such as reviewing national objectives and legal frameworks to ensure that they responded to the needs of both men and women; adopting affirmative measures; supporting women's parliamentary caucuses; making parliamentary bodies gender-sensitive; and working to dismantle religious and cultural barriers to gender equality. Above all, parliamentarians had a duty to exercise their oversight power in order to hold governments to account for gender equality. They should also monitor the efforts of the government to craft legislation addressing violence against women: there could be no true equality between men and women without an end to gender-based violence.

A parliament's strategic plan should include initiatives to support and encourage youth participation and make the institution more open and accessible to young people and youth organizations. These initiatives should encourage them to turn away from violence and in the process redress the growing disconnect between politics and the people, especially young people. Many of today's youth were uncomfortable with decisions made on their behalf, in which they had little or no say, with policies and programmes imposed and promoted by leaders who were more concerned about capital accumulation than about capacity-building, profit rather than peoples' empowerment, with corporate giants that grew richer while the poverty gap widened in the developing world. The holding of open days, school visits, invitations to attend committee hearings and plenary sessions, as well as the hosting of national Youth Parliaments, were positive ways to encourage youth re-engagement.

Parliaments also had an important role to play in international relations, not only in ratifying international agreements made by governments, but also in consolidating the legal order that protected development for democracy, and thereby in achieving the objective of peace and sustainable development.

Several Speakers stressed the important role that parliaments played in approving or rejecting military budgets, one noting that if even one tenth of the budget spent on occupying Iraq and Afghanistan had instead been dedicated to development and prosperity, there would likely no longer be insecurity and terrorism in those countries. After the end of the Cold War, the international community had expected a comprehensive peace but instead there had been eruptions of local and ethnic tensions and violence, with such new conflicts constantly increasing military expenditures. Parliaments had a duty to stand together to fight the threats facing the international community, countering them with dialogue and cooperation.

From the MDGs to the SDGs

Several Speakers described the achievements of their countries in the context of the MDGs. There had been both successes and failures. The present time provided an opportunity to draw from the lessons learned from the MDGs, by observing what had succeeded and what had not, and working out how to do better in the future. Despite their limitations, the MDGs had been successful in lifting hundreds of millions of people out of extreme poverty; they had reduced child and maternal mortality rates significantly and had increased the number of children going to school in developing regions. But the job was far from done. The SDGs would take over in leading the way towards a more united, human-rights-based, just and environmentally sustainable world.

Agreement on the SDGs was an ambitious starting point that the world undoubtedly needed. But the key to success in such a great endeavour would be to ensure unwavering commitment to the Goals throughout the process. It was in that area that parliaments could play a major role, in passing legislation, making the required budget allocations and holding governments to account. Parliamentarians were also key actors in shaping public opinion. Active, open and inclusive public discussion on the importance of the development agenda would help create the right climate for implementation. Indeed, that was a key element in any democratic process for the common good.

The world had changed dramatically since the adoption of the MDGs 15 years earlier. Countries were more connected than ever before, despite some claims that globalization benefited only the strong. It was true that the results of the MDGs had been largely uneven. Climate change heightened the risk of conflict among them, with its threat of water shortages, land loss and drought. The issue of refugees had become geographically ever-wider. National decisions had an international impact, which meant that fair and widely applicable sustainable development policies must be adopted.

A global common approach to sustainability demanded that developed countries, which bore the historical responsibility for climate change and ecological degradation, and had better financial and technological resources, must take practical steps to lead the process. The onus of global sustainability could not be placed on developing countries alone. Therefore, a strong global partnership was needed to support the efforts of developing countries in the spirit of the whole world as a global village and, like the interdependence within a village, all must share the responsibility according to individual capacity and capability.

As difficult as it might appear psychologically, in the long run countries had to be able to break free from a pure growth-based approach in measuring progress. The shift had to be towards more well-being and happiness for humankind as a whole. There would undoubtedly be a need for greater solidarity to end poverty and for innovative solutions to achieve sustainable management of the world's natural resources.

Parliamentarians were faced with many challenges in terms of their institutional effectiveness as representatives of the people. Over and above the SDGs and the post-2015 development agenda, the Conference theme drew its inspiration from the broad consensus that the world and its people were faced with myriad problems and challenges in their quest to live in peace, free from the scourges of war and conflict, violence in all its forms, extreme poverty and hunger, unemployment, disease, climate change, and the list continues.

Politicians should not underestimate their ability to positively influence society. Their appeal to the more affluent sectors of society to surrender certain privileges, such as subsidies on basic amenities like water or gas, could lead to a greater sense of responsibility-sharing and solidarity with the less affluent sectors. At the international level, genuine relations of cooperation and solidarity between the developed and the developing countries were of fundamental importance.

There was thus a need for a profound transformation in how the world operates. In particular, there would be challenges in translating the SDGs into enforceable laws, including identifying the necessary financial resources for their implementation, which was an area where parliamentarians had a duty to press the government to allocate sufficient funds. It would also take time to build national ownership of the SDGs by the engagement of parliamentarians with their constituents, and to tailor the global Goals to specific national circumstances, including the drawing up of national sustainable development plans. Those challenges at the same time would provide a roadmap for each country to follow. Guidance and assistance from the IPU would be welcome.

Speakers from a number of small island developing States (SIDS) expressed appreciation for the inclusion in the sustainable development agenda of their particular concerns, namely climate change, global warming, and the resultant sea-level rise. Some saw the risks of climate change as being as grave as the recent Ebola crisis, and called for the same level of urgent attention to the problem. All hoped for concrete and meaningful progress as the outcome of the climate change Conference in Paris at the end of the year.

Ultimately, people needed to strike a balance between need and greed. A world without poverty or hunger is safer, better and fairer. In sustainable development, humans and nature co-exist in productive harmony. The question must be asked whether the future was sustainable using the present development model. In many ways, modern technology owed an apology to ecology.

Speakers agreed that every country faced specific challenges on the way to achieving sustainable development, and might follow different approaches, visions, models and tools, in accordance with its national circumstances and priorities. Some suggested that no sovereign country should be subjected to external oversight mechanisms or benchmarks with regard to progress on these goals. Others, however, pointed to the need to establish a robust mechanism to monitor responsibility and accountability, together with efficient measurement of the progress made in achieving the objectives of the new agenda.

Peace and security were components of sustainable development, and it had to be recognized that one of the main threats to sustainable development was the rise of terrorism and extremism.

Violence and terrorism

In many parts of the world, armed force seemed to have become the instrument of solving disputes, which ran completely counter to sustainable development. There was a disconnect between the brutal reality on the ground and people's lofty aspirations to bring about a world where peace reigns.

Some Speakers asserted that the terrorism perpetrated against their countries was being financed and encouraged, officially or unofficially, by the authorities of other countries, in order to topple the government or to achieve some other perfidious aim. However, such sponsors of remote-controlled terrorism were now realizing, too late, that they had unleashed a monster that could turn against them too. In other cases, such as the atrocities in Tunisia earlier in 2015, terrorists had deliberately targeted foreigners in order to undermine the economy and sow discord between the victims' home countries and the country where the attack took place. Other Speakers saw the sanctions imposed on their country as a form of economic terrorism, which might in turn lead disaffected youth, disenchanted by big-power politics, to head down the path of violence and terrorism.

There could be no peace, development or democracy in a world where terrorism, war and chaos prevailed. Whenever wars were launched, wherever terrorism was rampant and chaos reigned, the people mourned their loss of the gains they had achieved over years and decades.

Terrorism could be effectively brought under control only by not repeating the mistakes of the past. In the context of the immediate present, there was a need for a clear statement that the enemy was terror, not Islam. Islamophobia was as abhorrent and dangerous as anti-Semitism or racism and must be suppressed by all legal means. Islam must be perceived, along with all other religions, cultures and civilizations, as a precious gift of humankind. Islamic leaders, however, did have a role to play in speaking out against all forms of violence perpetrated in the name of religion.

It was suggested that the United Nations might assist in the struggle against violence and terrorism by holding an international conference to consider those scourges in all aspects, including the root causes and financing of terrorism. It was also important for parliaments to share information and enhance cooperation with a view to combating terrorism.

Violence and war resulted in the chaos of refugees fleeing to safety. In turn, that led to a rise in human trafficking, deaths along the journey, and a growing problem in the destination countries of how to absorb such a human flood. The inflow of refugees and migrants to Europe was a reminder that we do not live in isolation, and that State borders and frontiers between continents cannot, and should not, prevent people from escaping violence and persecution. Numerous statements and reactions showed the need for a coordinated international response. At the same time, in practice, political will for greater international solidarity and more responsibility-sharing seemed to be dangerously lacking.

But the outcome would be disastrous if countries did not work together. Parliamentarians must show more initiative, they must lead by example. They must tell governments to stop defending their own narrow interests and show greater solidarity.

As both a partial cause and effect of the migrant crisis, there had been a dramatic rise of intolerance, hatred and extremism: grave dangers for democratic institutions and peaceful co-existence. As a counter-measure, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) had launched the *No Hate Parliamentary Alliance*. That initiative should be extended beyond the European continent with all parliaments joining a network — for instance, within the framework of the IPU — to create one large movement, linking up with civil society, religious bodies and others to say "No" to hate and intolerance.

Good governance at the national and international levels

While the inclusion in the SDGs of priority areas such as energy, climate change, food security, water and sanitation, gender equality, reproductive health and rights was welcome, many Speakers felt that in order to successfully improve all of those areas, good governance was the best tool at hand. It was noted that the current draft of the SDGs, especially Goal 16, contained strong references to governance. Good governance was both an enabler and a driver of development. Inclusive participation, together with good governance, would promote peace and sustainable development.

No country was immune from global challenges or could deal with them on its own. Countries should abandon zero-sum thinking, embrace a new approach of win-win cooperation, and together build a global community with a shared future. They should accommodate the interests of others while pursuing their own and promote the common development of all countries while seeking their own.

Countries, irrespective of their size, strength and wealth, were all equal members of the international community, called upon to abide by international law and universally recognized norms governing international relations, to respect each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity, to refrain from interfering in each other's internal affairs, to seek peaceful settlement of differences through dialogue and to uphold international equality and justice.

Many Speakers commented on the complementary roles of the IPU and the United Nations. The latter was seen as the cornerstone of multilateralism and global cooperation, and the IPU was playing an important role in terms of developing a parliamentary dimension to the work of the United Nations. A new agreement on cooperation between the two bodies was being prepared, and it was to be hoped that the UN-IPU partnership would be further enhanced and placed on a stronger footing. This partnership was particularly relevant in the context of implementation of the major international commitments of 2015: the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, the post-2015 development agenda with its SDGs, and the Climate Change Agreement hoped for in December 2015. Those interlocking and mutually reinforcing processes, coupled with respective means of implementation, were critical for the future the people want.

Several Speakers also called for reform in the way that the Security Council operated, and more generally for greater accountability and transparency in the work of the United Nations.

Declaration

Many Speakers praised the final Declaration of the Conference – adopted by acclamation - as a document that would provide substantive policy guidance to parliaments and the IPU for the years to come.

It was agreed that to live in a world of peace, democracy, prosperity and happiness was the legitimate desire of each and every person on the planet. To translate such aspiration into reality, members of parliaments had to fulfil their responsibility as the highest representatives of the people. Parliamentary leaders were confident that the Conference Declaration would reflect the commitment of parliaments and parliamentarians to place democracy at the service of peace and sustainable development, and help build the world the people want.