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2011 PARLIAMENTARY HEARING AT THE UNITED NATIONS Preliminary Summary by the Rapporteurs

Session I: Accountability of the General Assembly

The IPU has done a lot already to bring parliaments closer to the United Nations and the GA in particular. The meeting, however, showed that the road ahead is long. The GA does not fully respond to the will of the people and the consensus-based decision-making system does not always serve it well. GA resolutions are not enforceable and their implementation is left to the discretion of governments based on their own national agendas. Parliaments are often unaware of the outcome of GA decisions and most governments do not do a thorough job of communicating such decisions to parliament.

It is one thing to ask parliaments to push for the implementation of GA resolutions, but the real issue for both parliaments and their governments is the lack of political will. Parliaments must be able to go beyond their internal tensions and hold governments to account for their decisions in the GA. For example, will parliaments vote to increase foreign aid to the 0.7 per cent of GDP as pledged by their governments at the United Nations?

The meeting examined a new, ground-breaking GA resolution on the subject of political mediation. The resolution provides fertile ground for parliamentarians to help the United Nations mediate disputes before they turn into outright conflict. We encourage all of you circulate that decision to the relevant committees. Indeed, it was clear from our debate that this resolution, like most other GA decisions, should not be compartmentalized or limited to a single parliamentary committee.

We discussed various practical ways to help involve parliaments in GA decision-making. The list is long: forming parliamentary committees on UN affairs as some parliaments have already done; institutionalizing hearings with the country ambassador to the United Nations; and having foreign ministries forward for review by parliament all GA resolutions and similar official acts. In short, we need to put in place a concrete mechanism to institutionalize a process of continuous interaction between national parliaments and their governments on GA decisions.

Parliaments should know more about how their own government voted or what position it supported on decisions taken at the United Nations. The IPU can facilitate such involvement by building on practices that only a few years ago were considered unthinkable, such as inviting MPs to join national delegations to UN conferences, holding parliamentary hearings on specific issues, or facilitating contacts between parliaments and the UN operations in their countries.

Session II: Youth participation in politics

In order to effectively include youth in democratic processes, we have to rethink the concept of participation. Addressing solely the issue of decline in youth participation in traditional forms of political participation – during elections and in political parties – will prove inadequate. It has to be understood that economic and social exclusion not only fuels demands for change among youth around the world, but also impedes participation.

There is no one-size-fits-all solution to the problems young people are facing. The problems vary from developed to developing countries, and different needs will require tailored solutions. Often, MPs are not in a position to pinpoint the problems that are very clear to the minds of young people. In order to find feasible solutions, political leaders must not only involve youth in the decision-making processes, they must also build partnerships with them. Most importantly, young people must have the feeling that their participation in the political processes can make a difference, which is only possible in democracies where parliaments effectively fulfil their oversight roles.

The meeting identified a number of practical steps to increase traditional forms of political participation among young people. It was suggested that compulsory voting could encourage youth to become more involved in politics. Parliamentary quota systems are another way of attracting young MPs. This in turn might motivate young people to become involved as they see that the parliament is not only responsive but also accessible. However, it was noted that parliament as an institution is not the most appropriate platform for change, and that youth participation must start within parties to create a different political culture.

Achieving greater youth involvement will require more than just opening the doors to them and inviting them into the existing process. As long as the institutions that have traditionally excluded young people remain in place, the aim of political inclusion will remain at the level of a tokenism and not lead to real change. Political leaders need to step outside the box and understand the language and processes used by young people. Practical suggestions included e-voting and the use of blogs by MPs to communicate more effectively with their constituents, in particular youth.

Session III: Accountability of public funds

Transparent and open budgetary processes are key to democratic accountability. There is a clear need for a global budget transparency standard to set a basic level playing field for all parliaments to follow. Evidence shows that there is considerable unevenness between countries in how parliaments oversee public funds. However, it would be unrealistic to expect all parliaments - irrespective of level of development - to catch up to such standards without sufficient time and resources. Developing country parliaments are, in fact, the most disadvantaged.

The UN budget accountability process was discussed as a prime example. Its underlying principle is to provide unfettered access to timely and reliable information on decisions and performance. The UN process is considerably advanced in terms of budgeting for results, but it is also very cumbersome. This illustrates the need to make the budget process more accessible to a non-technical audience. The UN example also shows the delicate balance that must be achieved between the need for more stringent processes on the one hand, and the need for such processes to remain manageable and accessible to all stakeholders on the other.

In addition to making the budget more open to scrutiny, we talked about the broader question of keeping overall expenditures of taxpayers' money under control. It is for parliaments, as trustees of the public purse, to ensure this. In some countries, this is done by legislation that imposes a debt ceiling or mandates that, as a minimum, State budgets should be balanced in the course of the economic cycle. The question, however, is who is to assess the soundness of fiscal policy, and indeed of monetary and other economic policies? A growing number of unelected bureaucracies are in the lead and impose their standards on duly elected governments and parliaments.

Many parliaments lack the legal authority to exercise appropriate budget oversight. However, even when such authority exists, it is often underutilized because the actual practice of the budget process is not conducive to sufficient oversight and debate, including with the public at large. Parliamentary capacities need to be significantly improved in many countries where this is the case.

In reviewing country experiences in budget oversight, we discussed several practical approaches for improving both internal controls and openness to the public. These include ensuring the independence of auditor's reports, establishing parliamentary budget offices, making more time available for parliaments to review the budget proposal, disclosing to the public the government proposal, holding public hearings and publishing "citizens' budgets" to help people understand how their money is spent. Other steps may include enactment of freedom of information legislation, conflict of interest guidelines, whistleblower legislation, and anti-corruption legislation.

Session IV: The link between national institutions and civil society

A strong civil society, and the relationship between civil society and national institutions, are basic building blocks of any democracy. A democratic society is one where the different views of society are heard and reflected in policies. We heard that civil society plays a crucial role in providing services more efficiently and in a more cost-effective manner than governments. Strengthening civil society's role in the decision-making processes is thus a prerequisite for making democracy work. Not all countries develop at the same pace, but they should all move in the same direction.

Some concerns have been expressed about whether civil society organizations (CSOs) can fairly represent the common interest as opposed to private interests. These concerns are based on the reality that many organizations are dependent on international funding and many CSOs are aligned to political parties. Indeed, reconciling the wide range of views in society will be a challenge. Far too often, the ability of a CSO to advocate for a cause is contingent on its financial strength.

Civil society can only function effectively when the State cooperates with it in a spirit of partnership. Innovation and cooperation can come from the bottom up. International organizations can assist CSOs through capacity-building. However, it is up to national parliaments to establish a strong legal framework to ensure constructive dialogue, accountability and transparency.

New technologies and media may render CSOs obsolete as citizens can organize themselves in the absence of an organizational mediator. Parliamentarians must grasp the opportunities created by these new technologies and reach out to the citizens to improve dialogue. It is up to us to ensure that civil society is not trapped between States that do not listen and markets that do not care.