



***Strengthening political accountability
for a more peaceful and prosperous world***

Parliamentary Hearing at the United Nations

28 – 29 November 2011



Summary and Main Conclusions

Opening Remarks

The Hearing was addressed by H.E. Mr. Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser, President of the United Nations General Assembly, H.E. Ms. Asha-Rose Migiro, Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations and Mr. A. Alonso Díaz-Caneja, Vice-President of the Inter-Parliamentary Union.

Mr. Al-Nasser underscored the IPU's role in ensuring that parliaments provide direct input to the work of the United Nations, and in helping to translate global commitments into national legislation and policies. He encouraged delegates to familiarize themselves with General Assembly decisions and to help implement them at the national level. Ms. Migiro emphasized the need for parliamentarians to be accountable to their constituents by inter alia ensuring that people's voices are heard and by respecting the rules of democratic institutions. A former parliamentarian herself, she argued that it was parliamentarians who must be the front-line defenders of democratic governance and constitutionality. Mr. Díaz-Caneja reminded the delegates that consultations with Member States would soon begin to pave the way for a forthcoming General Assembly debate on how to further strengthen interaction between the United Nations, national parliaments, and the IPU. The outcome of these debates should boost parliaments' efforts to ensure that national governments are accountable to both citizens at home and the international community at large. The complete opening statements can be found on the IPU website at: <http://www.ipu.org/Splz-e/unga11.htm>.

The discussion was structured around four topics of particular relevance to today's global context, in which political accountability plays a key role, namely:

- The role of the UN General Assembly in strengthening global accountability;
- Youth participation in the democratic process – Challenges and opportunities;
- Accountability in the management of public funds – Good practices and model legislation for budget transparency; and
- Strengthening the links between national institutions and civil society – Towards more open societies.

The Parliamentary Hearing was attended by over 180 parliamentarians and professional staff from 50 countries, as well as representatives of several regional parliamentary assemblies.

Session I: The role of the United Nations General Assembly in strengthening global accountability

Panellists: Mr. Mélégué Traoré, former Speaker of the National Assembly of Burkina Faso and acting President of the IPU Committee on United Nations Affairs; Mr. Oscar Fernández-Taranco, United Nations Assistant Secretary-General for Political Affairs; Ambassador Camillo Gonsalves, Permanent Representative of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines to the United Nations and outgoing Co-Chair of the Ad Hoc Working Group on the Revitalization of the General Assembly; Ms. Cora Weiss, President, Hague Appeal for Peace; and Ms. Barbara Crossette, former foreign correspondent and Bureau Chief of *The New York Times* (moderator).

Mr. Traoré brought to bear the point of view of the IPU Committee on United Nations Affairs, while Mr. Fernández-Taranco offered a perspective from within the UN Secretariat, with particular reference to the recent General Assembly resolution on mediation. Ambassador Gonsalves provided some food for thought on General Assembly accountability and Ms. Weiss examined the issue from the civil society standpoint. Their presentations and the subsequent discussion are summarized below.

Over the years, many Member States have lamented that the Assembly seemed to be losing ground to the Security Council, criticizing the latter's encroachment. It has therefore been very heartening to see the General Assembly's newfound relevance and its impressive record of ground-breaking achievements over the past few years, reaffirming its position as the world's premier standard-setting body. Examples can be seen in the seminal 2005 World Summit Outcome and its endorsement of the responsibility to protect, or the 2006 Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy. More recently, the General Assembly succeeded where the Security Council had failed just a few weeks earlier, namely in condemning the brutal crackdown in the Syrian Arab Republic. The latest example of the General Assembly's newfound relevance on peace and security issues is its recently adopted resolution 65/283 on "Strengthening the role of mediation in the peaceful settlement of disputes and conflict prevention and resolution", to be discussed later in the meeting.

In spite of these improvements, the complexities of the issues addressed by the General Assembly prevent it from being as effective as it was designed to be, and there is only limited accountability for its failures to find adequate solutions to problems that can only be solved on a global level. Its responses to three of the more critical issues facing the international community in recent times – climate change, the economic crisis and the Arab Spring – have been either deficient or non-existent. The climate change debate has morphed into an endless series of meetings in exotic venues, where process trumps substance and even the most watered-down agreements remain unimplemented. On the economic crisis, the United Nations held a major conference in 2009, but the prescriptions in its consensus outcome document were promptly ignored. Other than the one on Syria, there has been no meaningful General Assembly resolution on any aspect of the Arab Spring.

A major challenge to the General Assembly's effectiveness -- and therefore to its accountability to its global community as the only global forum for decision-making -- is that Member States can seek alternative platforms for finding solutions, which may not entail a truly global approach. For small States, the Assembly remains the primary and sometimes only venue for multilateral engagement, one where they are guaranteed a seat at the table. On the other hand, larger countries, if dissatisfied with the General Assembly as a forum, can afford to take their concerns elsewhere: to the G20, to the Security Council or to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. They can deal with climate change issues unilaterally, or in non-representative groups as occurred in Copenhagen. Part of the issue lies in the numbers – in the General Assembly, with each country however big having only one vote, the

developed countries are disadvantaged and outnumbered, and so they have turned to other and more limited forums where they maintain their influence.

The General Assembly has tried to address its weaknesses inter alia by creating an Ad Hoc Working Group on Revitalization. But progress in that Group has been hindered by a fundamental disagreement on the nature of the problem. The developed countries see the issue as procedural – to be resolved by measures such as starting meetings on time, distributing documents electronically and the like – while the developing countries see it as a political process whose principal objective must be to strengthen the role of General Assembly as the main deliberative body at the United Nations and to resist the encroachment of the Security Council or other bodies. Efforts to enhance the accountability of the General Assembly must therefore be accompanied by a clearer delineation of the roles and responsibilities between it and other bodies, and of who is accountable to whom.

The gulf separating the undertaking of international commitments from their implementation at the national level is one of the main difficulties facing the General Assembly and thus the United Nations as a whole. A major shortcoming in the General Assembly's effectiveness and, thus, its accountability to the whole body it represents, is that it has no means of obliging individual governments that have voted for a resolution to actually implement it, and no way of imposing a timetable by which an adopted resolution must be turned from a vote into reality. Bridging that gulf is a matter of political will and national buy-in. International commitments are by definition binding on governments, but they really only take hold when all stakeholders feel involved in them and are able to play their role. For that to happen, stakeholders need to understand the different implications of the commitments undertaken and the measures needed to help governments honour the pledges they have made.

Thus the modern General Assembly is at a crossroad. It has the legitimacy of universal membership, and a Charter mandate that encompasses a wide variety of subject areas. But that legitimacy is being undercut by the increasingly inefficient manner in which the Assembly operates, by the encroachment of other bodies on its functions, and by the fact that many resolutions, even those adopted by consensus, remain unimplemented.

By comparison with the situation in national legislatures, political accountability in the General Assembly is fragmented and indirect. Membership of the General Assembly is not the result of direct elections and delegates respond to capitals in 193 different countries. But this does not make the Assembly unaccountable, nor does it absolve parliaments of their role in ensuring its accountability. On the contrary, there is much that parliamentarians can do. Through their policy-making and oversight roles and their power of the purse they can exercise significant influence over their respective governments' positions and actions at the United Nations and ensure appropriate mechanisms to implement UN resolutions and treaties at the national level.

Every parliamentarian present here has experiences and innovations to share. Importantly, you also have at your finger tips the practical tools to realize our common goals. Each of you, therefore, has a responsibility and critical role to play in building global prosperity.

H.E. Mr. Abdulaziz Al-Nasser,
President of the United Nations General
Assembly

The role of national parliaments is crucial in raising the profile of international issues domestically, as well as in ensuring that the international commitments their governments undertake reflect the national debates and interests and are, subsequently, also implemented. To do so, it is important that parliaments have a UN affairs committee, which must remain abreast of what the country's envoys to

the United Nations are doing. If necessary, those representatives should be called to report to the committee.

Parliamentarians must also take a much more active interest both in General Assembly revitalization and in Security Council reform, intended to make both bodies more transparent, with a more nimble and activist agenda. These issues should be discussed at the parliamentary level and the outcome should feed into the UN process in a more meaningful manner. Very often, the deliberations at the United Nations are a matter of Great Power balancing, but input of parliaments to bring a more people-centred approach to the deliberations would be particularly useful and might in fact make the decisions of the Assembly more attractive and thus more implementable.

For parliaments to be able to do so, however, they must be informed and engaged on UN-relevant issues. This is why meetings such as the annual Parliamentary Hearing at the United Nations are so important. It is a welcome development that parliamentarians are now routinely included in national delegations to major UN meetings and conferences. The Secretary-General, taking the lead, regularly addresses national parliaments in the course of his travels. Similarly, UN representatives on the ground should actively engage parliaments.

As permanent representatives report to the foreign ministry, that ministry should distribute to other relevant ministries the resolutions being voted on. The resolutions should be posted on websites, in the national language, easily accessible to the public, together with an explanation of the vote and a schedule of the actions planned at the country level to implement them. Also, a mechanism similar to the Universal Periodic Review conducted by the United Nations Human Rights Council for human rights issues should be developed for General Assembly resolutions, with Member States coming before their peers to report on what they have done to implement them. To help give a strong parliamentary dimension to UN activities, in 2007 IPU Member Parliaments decided to create a Committee on United Nations Affairs. This body meets once a year, offering a framework for direct interaction between parliamentarians and high-level UN representatives and for parliamentary input to the major international conferences and summits.

Over the years, the General Assembly has adopted by consensus a number of resolutions on cooperation between the United Nations, national parliaments and the IPU, reflecting a growing will to go beyond traditional practice and favour an integrated dialogue-based approach. This, in turn, will ensure a parliamentary perspective to the debates on major international challenges and boost buy-in with respect to international commitments. In its most recent resolution, 65/123, the General Assembly also decided to engage more systematically with the Inter-Parliamentary Union in organizing a parliamentary component of major UN deliberative processes. This very ambitious resolution opens up a host of new prospects.

The problem is that the General Assembly has no muscle to enforce its resolutions.

Janós Horváth,
Doyen of the Hungarian Parliament

Dissenting voices argued that placing the onus of implementation of UN resolutions on parliamentarians is not realistic. A resolution calling for a moratorium on the death penalty was cited as an example. Even if parliamentarians campaigned during elections for capital punishment, will they seriously try to make their government implement the resolution? On the resolution calling for fulfilment of the pledge to provide 0.7 per cent of gross domestic product as official development assistance (ODA), if parliamentarians genuinely consider that in the present economic times their

government cannot afford to do so, how active are they going to be in telling the government that it must comply? Moreover, on a pragmatic level, should the obligation to implement resolutions apply only to those adopted by consensus, or only to those for which a country has actually voted, or to all of them?

All the suggested means of ensuring accountability, however, beg the question of what Member States want the General Assembly to be. Should it take a maximalist approach, claiming for itself all functions enumerated in the Charter, to the exclusion of other groupings, or a more moderate approach, leaving space for other bodies to act in their areas of expertise? Member States themselves have to reach that decision, but, again, there is a divide between the developed countries that see the issue as one of procedure, and the developing ones that think that there are fundamental philosophical issues to resolve.

In parallel with its consideration of the issue of accountability for resolutions in general, the Hearing also paid specific attention to resolution 65/283 adopted just four months previously, and asked how parliaments could contribute to the implementation of this important new commitment. The resolution acknowledges the growing interest in and provision of mediation, as well as the need for cooperation among the actors involved in a specific mediation context, and encourages Member States to develop national mediation capacities, as applicable, and to promote the equal, full and effective participation of women in all forums and at all levels of the peaceful settlement of disputes.

The resolution requests the UN Secretary-General to submit a report on its implementation and to develop guidance for more effective mediation, and to that end, the Secretary-General will be holding a broad consultation process with Member States and civil society. The United Nations strongly encourages parliaments, through the IPU and national governments, to contribute to that process.

Violence prevention depends on the ability of civil society to organize. It depends on local peace committees, peace education, working for non-violent elections and using home-grown methods of conflict resolution. Parliamentarians should call on their ministries of education to integrate peace education into school curricula, covering human rights, gender equality, sustainable development, social and economic justice, disarmament and traditional peace practices.

The existing United Nations-IPU framework of partnership should help operationalize the resolution. As one of its specific requests is for the Department of Political Affairs to establish a roster of well-trained and geographically diverse experts to act as mediators, the IPU could help by calling on parliamentarians to volunteer. A mechanism might be developed for ensuring the involvement of women in mediation, similar to the processes very successfully adopted by the IPU to promote the participation of women parliamentarians in national delegations to the General Assembly.

Key findings:

- Effective oversight requires concrete mechanisms to institutionalize the process of continuous interaction between national parliaments and their governments around General Assembly decisions. A case in point is the recent ground-breaking resolution on mediation, where parliaments can play an active role in implementation. Such mechanisms could include parliamentary committees on UN affairs, regular hearings with the country ambassador to the United Nations, and requiring foreign ministries to forward all General Assembly resolutions to parliament for review.

- In order to fulfil their oversight role, parliaments must be able to go beyond their internal tensions and hold governments to account for their decisions on the international stage.
- The IPU plays a crucial role in facilitating parliaments' involvement through practices that only a few years ago were considered unthinkable, such as inviting MPs to join their national delegations to UN conferences, holding parliamentary hearings on specific issues, or facilitating contact between parliaments and the UN operations in their own countries.

Session II: Youth participation in the democratic process – Challenges and opportunities

Panellists: Hon. Farroq Hamid Naek, Chairman of the Senate of Pakistan; Ambassador Jean-Francois Zinsou, Permanent Representative of Benin to the United Nations; Ms. Daniela Bas, Director of the United Nations Division for Social Policy and Development; Ms. Sena Hussein, Online Community Manager, Global Youth Action Network/TakingItGlobal; and Mr. Abderrahim Foukara, Bureau Chief, *Al Jazeera* (moderator).

In this session, Mr. Naek outlined how Pakistan was trying to encourage young people to become involved in politics. They were the ones who had played a defining role in the revival of democracy in Pakistan in 2008. Ambassador Zinsou discussed the position of youth in the politics of the developing world, and also referred to the findings of the United Nations High-level Meeting on Youth, held in July 2011, at which he had served as co-facilitator of the outcome document. Ms. Bas described the approach to youth political participation taken by the United Nations Division for Social Policy and Development, and like Ambassador Zinsou, spoke of the benefits drawn from the World Programme of Action for Youth. Ms. Hussein described her organization's interactions with young people involved in various non-traditional political actions around the world.

Young people's potential contributions to parliamentary democracy must be encouraged through investment in capacity-building. That must include empowering them through greater access to human development opportunities, for which both the executive and the parliament bear responsibility. The United Nations High-level Meeting on Youth came to the conclusion that the youth policies and strategies adopted to date have yielded uneven results, in part because of the negative economic and social consequences of globalization and climate change. Unemployment among youth, even educated and well-qualified youth, accounts for much of their frustration. The choices made by decision-makers are not neutral: they can either benefit or disadvantage young people. The High-level Meeting recognized the responsibility of the United Nations to guide the activities of States seeking to promote policies to overcome the obstacles in the way of young people's full development. The UN Secretary-General was entrusted with making recommendations to improve youth-related UN programmes and structures, and with developing a set of indicators associated with the World Programme of Action for Youth and aimed at helping States evaluate young people's situation and gauge the performance of youth-related policies.

It is undeniable, and regrettable, that the voice of young people, who have a legitimate and important role to play in society, is not heard adequately and that their contribution to society is not recognized. Most unfortunate of all is that young people today are perceived as being incapable of making decisions on their own, with the result that their contribution to decision-making processes is minimal. Parliaments must take significant strides towards promoting partnership between youth and the legislative process, which could help groom the politicians of the future. Political awareness generates a sense of responsibility among young people and empowers them to make informed decisions about their choice of government.

In the discussion that followed, there was broad agreement that in most countries, young people are turning away from traditional political processes, understood to be partisan politics, election campaigns, and voting. However, there was considerable disagreement among participants on the value of some of the unconventional actions taken by young people instead.

We can no longer only include the types of youth voices that we want to hear. We need to include the ones that are fighting to be heard.

Sena Hussein

Young people are expressing their political stance, their conviction that current models of society have failed, through two often related avenues: expressions of opinion on electronic media and social networks; and direct action in the streets, as seen in the Occupy movements in the United States and elsewhere, the *Indignados* movements in Spain and Latin America, the Arab Spring, and some events in London.

There was consensus that several of the direct-action movements around the world are highly political expressions of frustration with conventional processes. To many young people, these processes do not seem to offer a way to express their discontent with the world as it is today, with the inequalities they see around them and by which they are disproportionately affected and, notably, with the damage that is being done to the environment. It was suggested that the young people who are turning away from conventional political processes might not so much be expressing a disdain for the concept of politics per se as an intense desire to see politics working in a different way, going beyond its traditional boundaries.

Various reasons were advanced for youth's current disenchantment with traditional political processes. One very fundamental explanation is simple ignorance of how such processes are intended to work. If traditional parliamentary processes seem obscure and opaque to young people, they will not be able to imagine how they could use those processes to change the structure of a world they perceive as unjust. This will hold true even more in those countries where parliaments do not have a real political role, but which merely rubberstamp government decisions. Youth will question how such parliaments can empower them when they themselves are so lacking in power. Noting, too, the lack of young people in traditional political institutions, they will wonder what possible interest such institutions could have in their concerns and in solving them.

There is a difference between youth action in the developed and the developing world, with many of the facilities on offer in the countries of the North – computers, Internet, social media, smartphones – not being nearly so freely available in the South.

Hon. Farroq Hamid Naek, Pakistan

Other speakers felt that young people have turned their back on those traditional mechanisms, feeling that even in advanced democracies, the whole process has been skewed to the benefit of a small elite.

Several possible remedies for this situation were discussed. In Pakistan, for example, Youth Parliament Pakistan serves as a valuable forum for the expression of young people's views about a range of national and international issues. The debates in the Youth Parliament are intended not only to help young members in their personal development as citizens, but also to allow for their views on vital issues facing the nation to be articulated and conveyed to the government. A number of

other projects are in the pipeline to mainstream youth into events concerning national development, democratization, social harmony and progress. Pakistan has also initiated a national internship programme to encourage youth involvement in public sector organizations.

Representatives of other countries described their own youth parliaments or similar institutions. Other approaches tried and tested in various countries include addresses by parliamentarians and political workshops at schools and colleges to nurture and promote the democratic ideal, or internships and junior office positions within parliaments. On a global level, consideration is being given to the best way to involve young people systematically in the work of the United Nations. Already, the Division for Social Policy and Development is involved in internship and Junior Professional Officer programmes within the Secretariat. There may also be opportunities for young people to participate in delegations to the General Assembly, whether they be young parliamentarians or young people who are not (yet) involved in the political process.

The overriding aim is to create political awareness among youth, leading to a sense of political responsibility. The first stage is simply to instil awareness and knowledge of how politics, or governance at its various levels, actually works. The desire to participate, it is hoped, will then follow. Even in remote rural areas, political awareness among young people can be fostered by using traditional itinerant story-tellers to impart concepts of civics, democracy and politics. Implementation of the United Nations World Programme of Action for Youth has been found to provide tools and guidance, enabling young people to become more active and capable political actors.

Political institutions have to be prepared to make adjustments too. If politics-averse youth, who evidently have strongly-felt concerns about their society, are to be brought back into the ambit of traditional parliamentary processes, then parliaments throughout the world will need to examine their procedures with an eye to making them more accessible and less obscure to the young. It is up to parliamentarians and other politicians to take the first step. A second necessary adjustment is for traditional political authorities to recognize that the street movements are a legitimate political expression, not something to be simply suppressed by the security forces acting at the behest of the established order. Similarly, the social media and networks being used by young people to voice their views should be regarded as a legitimate form of free expression, not something to be censored and forced out of existence, and certainly not to be shut down under the guise of flimsy excuses about combating online piracy. It might be disturbing to some governments to think of such a free-floating world of ideas beyond censorship or control, but they have a duty to recognize that such forums fall under the concept of freedom of expression, which they are duty-bound to uphold.

Do not give us the pulpit if all you really want to do is abate your privileged guilt by hearing us speak or parading us around in NGOs or youth cabinets. That will only make us want to hit back and fight for these substantive changes without your cooperation.

London demonstrator, quoted by Sena Hussein

In many places, politicians and government officials ought to rethink their approach to youth, seeing them as an opportunity instead of as a problem. Engaging with the ideas of youth can invigorate democracies, spur innovation and create societies which are more responsive to all citizens. However, as political institutions seek to involve more young people in their activities, they must guard against an approach that could be interpreted as tokenism. If such institutions were originally built on the premise that youth had no active role to play, then simply reserving a token number of seats for young people is inadequate. Instead, the fundamental understanding of such institutions

needs to change. Radical young people will be prepared to cooperate with traditional political institutions if the latter allow them space to realize their aspirations to liberty, dignity and equity. Young people do not wish to remain on the sidelines or to act as simple foot-soldiers for political parties; they want to be counted among the decision-makers.

Key findings:

- Addressing solely the issue of decline in youth participation in traditional forms of political participation during elections and in political parties will not suffice to effectively include youth in the democratic processes. It has to be understood that economic and social exclusion is not only a cause for demands for change among youth around the world, but that economic and social exclusion also impedes participation.
- In order to find workable solutions to the diverse problems that individual countries are facing, political leaders must not only involve young people in the decision-making processes but they must build partnerships with them. More importantly, young people have to feel that their participation in the political processes can make a difference, which is only possible in democracies where parliaments effectively fulfil their oversight roles.
- Some practical steps that parliaments can take to increase traditional forms of political participation among youth include mandatory voting and parliamentary quota systems, which in turn could motivate young people to become more involved in politics. However, parliament might not be the appropriate platform for change, but youth participation must start within parties to create a different political culture.
- As long as political institutions that have led to the exclusion of youth remain unchanged, political inclusion will remain nothing but a token and cannot lead to real change. Political leaders need to think “outside the box” and learn to understand the language and processes that are used by young people. Practical steps to achieve this include e-voting and the use of blogs by MPs to communicate more effectively with their constituents, in particular young people.

Session III: Accountability in the management of public funds – Good practices and model legislation for budget transparency

Panellists: Hon. Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe; Ms. Ivonne Passada, former Speaker of the House of Representatives of Uruguay; Ambassador Jim McLay, Permanent Representative of New Zealand to the United Nations; Ms. Angela Kane, United Nations Under-Secretary General for Management; Mr. Vivek Ramkumar, Manager, Open Budget Initiative, International Budget Partnership; and Professor Peter Rajsingh, Gallatin School and Stern School of Business, New York University (moderator).

In this session, Mr. Çavuşoğlu spoke from the perspective of the Council of Europe while Ms. Passada offered reflections from her region. Ms. Kane described the budget process at the United Nations, Mr. Ramkumar outlined the views of civil society and Ambassador McLay gave insights from his involvement in budget issues in his different capacities: as a lawyer, a politician, an investment banker and most recently as a diplomat.

Many developed countries have now entered a vicious circle in which years of imprudent spending and living beyond their means have eroded national capacity to maintain living standards and invest in a better future. Worse, this vicious circle is also eroding national sovereignty in a number of

countries as foreign creditors aggressively claim their due, and the spectre of insolvency cannot be ruled out. At the same time, duly elected officials are losing control of decisions regarding fiscal, monetary, and economic policies as these decisions are increasingly becoming matters discussed in unelected bureaucracies. Because of this, many countries are now under pressure to impose fiscal austerity and reduce debt burdens. Whether such measures are fully justified or not depends on each country's macroeconomic situation. In any case, people will only accept austerity measures if they feel that funds are well spent and that appropriate accountability systems are in place.

Worldwide, there is a growing demand by the citizenry for greater accountability in their governments' budget processes. Gradually and to varying extents in different countries, governments are responding to those demands, thereby enabling the creation of budgets that are in line not only with the political purposes of the government but also the social needs of the populace. Parliaments have an important role to play in bringing that process to fruition. Uruguay is the only country in Latin America with a five-year budget, i.e. one that spans the entire term of a government. In each of those five years, parliament undertakes an evaluation of the budget. However, improvements are needed, particularly in assessing the return on investments made. Research has shown that countries that have close scrutiny and evaluation of their budgets by independent bodies demonstrate improved social development in comparison with others. Examples in Latin America include Brazil, Chile and Costa Rica. However, in numerous other countries of the region, the supreme audit institution is subordinate to the executive branch, which undermines the necessary objectivity of these institutions. Where independent audits of State accounts do not yet exist, parliaments should put in place the necessary legal framework. In addition, parliamentarians should strive to enhance transparency in public procurement and, where applicable, privatization processes. This can be done by establishing appropriate codes of conduct and adopting legislation on conflicts of interest and corruption.

The budget process of the United Nations is highly transparent. The regular UN budget is US\$ 2.2 billion, and is subject to scrutiny by Member States, which are the conduit to further public involvement. (This does not include the peacekeeping budget, which is in the order of US\$ 8 billion.) In the budget planning cycle for each biennium, a strategic framework is derived from legislative mandates, and in turn forms the basis for formulating the programme budget. A number of intergovernmental expert bodies deliberate on all steps of this complex process, including the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions (ACABQ), the Committee for Programme and Coordination, the Fifth Committee of the General Assembly, and others. Lastly, the General Assembly, the plenary of all 193 Member States, adopts the budget.

This full involvement of Member States in all aspects of the budget process ensures transparency. Furthermore, the United Nations is currently working to further strengthen accountability in the system, the overall aim being to put in place a model that effectively links political accountability (Member States), with personal accountability (senior managers) and managerial accountability (management and staff). Relevant tools include the financial disclosure policy that covers all senior managers and those involved in financial and procurement-related decision-making – over 3,500 staff – and the newly-launched Contributions Portal that allows all Member States to see the level of their respective contributions in real time. In addition, the United Nations is in the process of introducing the International Public Sector Accounting Standards (IPSAS) to ensure that it is following current best practices.

However, the downside of this very comprehensive budget system is that there is in fact too much information available, making it very difficult to see the forest for the trees. In the current budget

cycle, for example, 344 documents have been issued - a staggering total of 6,499 pages. Moreover, Member States can also ask questions about any aspect of the budget, and in the current year, over 1,000 pages have been issued in response. An overriding problem is that once a mandate is in existence, Member States will never allow it to be cancelled: no committee is ever dissolved, no function ever terminated.

The UN budget process needs therefore to be rethought in its entirety, to become more strategic and focused, with a greater emphasis on results and with far less micro-management. The UN Secretary-General has called for an overhaul, the aim being to streamline the process by having a single UN budget document, written at a much more strategic level of information, containing all the salient facts and figures but being far shorter than what is currently produced. By supporting these recommendations in their respective jurisdictions, parliaments can help create more transparency and accountability in the management of public funds at the United Nations.

Public finances tend to be scrutinized much more closely than company accounts, and there are ways to strengthen oversight. In the audit process, there is room for private-sector auditors to examine specific government agencies, even though the overall audit of the government's finances should remain in the hands of a public-sector auditor. An important role, but one in need of improvement, is that of the media. Generally speaking, the media does not do a good job of scrutinizing public expenditure, relying basically on parliamentarians to expose problems, which they in turn publicize. A third important aspect of accountability in the management of public funds entails whistleblowers and legislation to protect them.

The multi-stakeholder Global Initiative for Fiscal Transparency (GIFT) has recently been created to advance the development of global standards. At present, the initiative includes the Governments of Brazil, Philippines, United Kingdom and the United States of America, as well as international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank and civil society organizations (CSOs) such as the ONE advocacy and campaigning organization or Greenpeace International. The International Budget Partnership has informed the leadership of the Inter-Parliamentary Union about the initiative and would welcome the active engagement of the IPU and its Member Parliaments in it.

The Open Budget Index was developed by the International Budget Partnership in response to difficulties faced by its membership in obtaining accurate information on government budgets. It shows how different countries rank on openness standards, notably on the basis of whether their governments publish and disseminate to the public eight key budget reports. The survey also assesses the extent of effective oversight provided by legislatures and audit institutions.

Governments should develop multiple forums for public engagement in budget matters, including drawing on existing mechanisms such as participatory budgeting and social auditing. Prior to any consultation, they should issue notifications about opportunities for public participation, so that citizens can be prepared to provide input. Governments should issue reports on the input received through public consultations and report on how it has been addressed in budget decision-making.

There is a need for a new budget transparency standard. While there are several existing standards, such as the 2000 OECD Best Practices for Budget Transparency and the 2007 IMF Code of Good Practices on Fiscal Transparency, or those developed by CSOs, the problem is that they are inconsistent and contradictory. Moreover, they do not attribute sufficient weight to parliament's oversight role.

Some speakers felt that a global budget transparency standard should not be coercive, because the degree of appropriate budgetary openness would vary from country to country. The United Nations and the IPU should play a leading role in creating such a standard, by promoting the participation of international organizations and civil society in order to gather best practices and promote experience-sharing among parliaments at the regional and international levels, with meaningful engagement of all stakeholders. Any new global budget transparency standard should be created in a manner that is relevant for all countries in the world. One way of achieving this would be to consider a graduated approach, in which different standards are created for countries currently at different stages in the development of budget transparency practices. Also, such a norm should underscore the role of legislatures and audit institutions.

A key challenge facing civil society organizations and legislatures is getting access to timely, comprehensive and high-quality information on government budgets.
Vivek Ramkumar

A legislative framework such as New Zealand’s Fiscal Responsibility Act, dictating how an economy is managed over an economic cycle, was seen as a highly desirable instrument for ensuring public scrutiny of government budgeting. Freedom of information laws constitute another key legislative instrument, to

be invoked if governments are reluctant to open their budgeting to scrutiny. It was suggested that governments should be compelled to make some form of presentation of the public accounts in a format understood by both parliamentarians and the wider public.

Some parliamentarians regretted that their public accounts committees and audit offices lack independence and resources, which has a serious impact on the quality of audit reports, making it difficult for the public or for parliamentarians to evaluate accountability. In addition, many parliaments lack the legal authority or power to make effective changes to national budgets or the budgetary process, such as the provision of sufficient time for the legislature to discuss pre-budget policy statements and to scrutinize the final executive budget proposals.

The government has a duty to inform the public of how to understand the budget, and to provide all the information needed for citizens to have a firm grasp of what is at stake. Also, the government has a responsibility not to constantly change the way the budget is presented, which can confuse those examining it. Both parliament and the public have to be given time to study the budget thoroughly. Pressure from government to rush through the process must be resisted. Consequently, parliamentarians must insist that pre-budget hearings be held, involving the country’s key stakeholders. Such hearings must be open to the public or broadcast live. Through new information technology, it is possible to gather the views of large numbers of people in a short time. Particularly in countries with a high level of illiteracy, campaigns must be mounted to raise awareness of how the budget is being spent.

Why does the United Nations continue with such an archaic process? Because Member States are not willing to change it. We have made proposals to make the process more user-friendly, in part by building on the good practices of other international organizations, but so far those changes have been resisted.
Angela Kane

Today bureaucracy and unaccountability seem to prevail over democracy. Italy has surrendered its monetary sovereignty by joining the euro, not its political sovereignty, but now we are ruled by an unelected government. Lagarde, Draghi, Barroso: they have never been elected, at least not to their present positions; even Sarkozy and Merkel have not been elected to govern Italy. How can believers in democracy remain silent at this outrage?

Senator Antonio Martino, Italy

For parliamentarians to fulfil their task of scrutinizing the budget, parliaments should have a standing committee on financial and budget affairs. Such a committee should be chaired by a member of the opposition, a practice that is already followed in some countries. However, the opposition should not use the budget hearings to score short-term political gains. Such committees, to be effective, must have the power to subpoena people and documents. They also have to be provided with adequate resources. There should be

a regular review of how they function, with improvements where necessary. In parallel with a “general-purpose” budget committee, it may be advantageous to establish specialized parliamentary committees, or rapporteurs, to monitor specific ministries’ fields of activity, or to concentrate on certain particularly challenging budget-related issues, such as ODA, which is often handled by several ministries and is thus difficult to track.

To ensure that the oversight role is real and not just a mere formality, some other requirements need to be fulfilled. First, mechanisms must be in place to ensure that any doubts or questions on the budget raised by the opposition cannot be simply vetoed by the government, thereby negating the parliamentary oversight role. If parliamentary oversight takes the form of questions to ministers, then they must be compelled to give real answers, not just vague and meaningless platitudes.

Key findings:

- There is a clear need for a global budget transparency standard for all parliaments to follow in order to ensure democratic accountability. However, we should not expect all parliaments - regardless of their level of development - to catch up to such standards without adequate time and resources.
- Examination of a highly transparent but cumbersome budget process pointed to the need to make a more stringent budget process also more accessible to a non-technical audience.
- Even where parliaments have the legal authority to exercise appropriate budget oversight, lack of capacity often prevents them from doing so. Oversight capacities can be enhanced by ensuring the independence of auditor 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.
- Parliaments are increasingly losing control of the budget process as more and more unelected bureaucracies impose their standards for fiscal, monetary, and other economic policies on duly elected governments and parliaments. Political accountability of the budget process requires that parliament’s authority vis-à-vis these bureaucracies be restored.
- In some countries, certain funds – frequently external aid or oil revenues – are not recorded in the budget and are not scrutinized by parliamentarians. There was general agreement that such a lack of oversight is dangerous.

- In examining the budget, parliamentarians must not only concentrate on appropriations, but also think about the sources of the country's income. Countries that are large recipients of development assistance find it difficult to come to terms with the fact that donors are also running short of money. This makes it all the more important for parliamentarians to question where money is coming from and how it is being spent, in order to try to find ways to reduce the country's dependency on aid.

Session IV: Strengthening the links between national institutions and civil society – Towards more open societies

Panellists: Hon. Ranko Krivokapic, Speaker of the Parliament of Montenegro; Ambassador A.K. Abdul Momen, Permanent Representative of Bangladesh to the United Nations; Ms. Corinne Woods, Director, United Nations Millennium Campaign; Mr. Jeffery Huffines, UN Representative of the World Alliance for Citizen Participation (CIVICUS); and Ms. Evelyn Leopold, former Reuters Bureau Chief at the United Nations (moderator).

In the fourth session, Mr. Krivokapic examined the political role of civil society, while Ambassador Momen focused more on its role in development. Ms. Woods talked about the role of civil society in achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and Mr. Huffines gave an overall sociopolitical perspective.

Respect for the law and its uniform application have long been recognized as prerequisites for building the trust of citizens in State institutions. The State must guarantee fairness to its citizens and they in turn must respond with trust in the institutions. The fundamental duty of the public official is a commitment to the public good, regardless of whether the official is from the legislative, executive or judicial branch of government.

Partnership among democratically elected authorities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the media and the citizens represents a fundamental principle of an open society, with civil society functioning as an organized autonomous voice of the public. In particular, it can act as a counterweight to collusion – possibly quite unwittingly – between politicians and bureaucrats, which potentially carry the seeds of corruption. However, the activities of NGOs cannot replace legal and constitutional authority because a democratic structure of power is needed to guarantee observance of human rights, enforcement of accountability and personal responsibility.

Freedom does not exist if it is not guaranteed by the State, but only the State controlled by the citizens can offer a true feeling of freedom.

Hon. Ranko Krivokapic

However, an NGO might well be able to partner with the State to help provide cheaper and faster public services.

The Balkans have demonstrated that the fall of one system does not necessarily result in a better one, but can lead to periods of great instability. Sustainable democratization takes a lot of time and effort, and this is a very important lesson for those involved in the changes in the Arab world.

Bangladesh has a vibrant and well-organized civil society and its organizations contribute significantly to the advancement of various groups, in particular women, children and vulnerable groups. The government strongly encourages the involvement of NGOs in development activities both locally and centrally, and its development initiatives have a “human face” precisely because of civil society engagement in the process of achieving sustainable economic growth, peace and development. While the constitutional and statutory laws provide for

protection of fundamental freedoms and human rights, civil society acts as a watchdog to ensure their fair implementation. The vigilance of civil society has contributed positively in the field of safeguarding human rights, reducing corruption, promoting women's political participation, even-handed law-enforcement and pro-people decision-making.

Partnerships between civil society and national institutions require the creation of a culture of openness, accountability and representativeness in which each side respects the criticism and suggestions of the other and cooperates to create stronger democracies. Non-governmental organizations that are funded by foreign agencies or are acting on behalf of a specific interest group need to review their position and strike a balance between the interest of their funding organizations or interest group and the national interest. For NGOs to be seen as acting in the general interest, it is important that they are not too closely associated with any political party - ruling or opposition.

National institutions will be able to achieve their mandates only when there is a strong and vibrant civil society, ready to provide support. It is important for all stakeholders to participate in national development, as this promotes ownership and accountability to achieve common goals.

The achievement of a global undertaking such as the MDGs hinges upon an important factor beyond technical expertise - political will. It is in the space created by the global commitment to achieve a vision such as the Millennium Declaration that the links between national institutions and civil society can be strengthened, through a constructive citizen-State engagement process. National institutions plan and deliver services, but ensuring their effectiveness requires feedback on quality. At the local level, awareness has to be created to ensure citizen confidence and buy-in to that feedback process. Modern communication technologies can help facilitate citizen feedback, transmitting citizens' voices directly rather than mediated through the organizational layer of an NGO. Such technologies also offer possibilities for interaction between citizens and national institutions upon which the foundations of the post-2015 framework for achieving the MDGs can and should be built.

***The MDGs provide a framework,
new technology provides an
opportunity.***

Corinne Woods

The Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street sprung from social movements that are contained within a new sphere, not from organized NGOs, which may become obsolete. It is thus futile to try to define how to interact with traditional NGOs as the nature of civil society is changing. Instead, parliamentarians should be focusing on what forms citizen participation will take in the immediate future. There might be a need for new institutional processes or frameworks to be set up, through parliaments, for the purpose of engaging with civil society in this new and less structured paradigm.

Looking at the situation of civil society at the end of 2011, the UN representative of CIVICUS said that the heady optimism of the 1990s following the fall of the Berlin Wall, and its promise of a global wave of democracy and freedom, were quickly followed by a decade of the war on terror used as an excuse to restrict freedom of information, expression and assembly.

Even the financial implosion of 2008 and the resultant economic and fiscal crises did not yield significant changes, as governments deemed banks too big to fail and citizens too small to matter. The financial crises exacerbated the pressures on civil society, the erosion of political support for the interests of "the other" and the prioritization of economic interests over human rights and political freedoms. The seismic shift in geopolitical equations meant that countries that had been champions of democracy and human rights became more willing to turn a blind eye to violations if the States perpetrating them were important sources of capital or resources. Between 2009 and 2010, CIVICUS

tracked 90 countries that changed laws or policies intended to rein in civil society: a concerted criminalization of dissent.

Then came 2011. The Arab Spring renewed faith in citizen action around the world and catalyzed citizen movements such as Occupy Wall Street, as the people often labelled as “ordinary citizens” finally lost patience with being trapped between States that do not listen and markets that do not care.

These popular movements are challenging the conventional definitions of State, market and civil society and the relations between them. They are resisting the imposition by stealth of new social contracts that reduce civil society to low-cost providers of public services rather than advocates for the excluded and watchdogs of the exercise of power. They are challenging definitions of national sovereignty already blurred by global threats such as climate change, pandemics and terrorism. Empowered by new technologies, they are radically redefining norms of accountability and participation. They are united in their fluid, horizontal forms of organization, and their use of new technologies is helping them reclaim an active say in governance.

One definition of civil society is that it is the sum of institutions, organizations and individuals located between the family, the State and the market, in which people associate voluntarily to advance common interests.

Jeffery Huffines

In the run-up to the United Nations review of the MDGs in 2013, CIVICUS and other organizations are seeking to engage citizens worldwide in national debates about the world they want. How can civil society and parliaments work together to address the democratic deficit and poor distribution of power at the global level so that the voices of all citizens may be heard?

In the discussion following the panellists’ remarks, several delegates described the frameworks in their countries within which NGOs interact with the government. It was suggested that while the developing world faces a problem of a lack of communication between parliamentarians and civil society, the developed world struggles with unequal access of civil society to parliamentarians due to the activities of lobbyists and special interest groups, who distort the relationship through financial contributions. A fundamental question is thus how interaction among parliamentarians, political leaders and civil society can be enhanced, bypassing the groups that have their own exclusive interests. The answer seems to lie in the creation of an institutional framework within the parliamentary system. For example, the parliamentary committees on any given issue should reserve some space for civil society input and advance its views on important national issues. Mutual respect is fundamental, whether or not there is agreement on the views expressed.

While citizen participation should be welcomed, some participants warned against having too idealistic a view of civil society. In some cases, NGOs are working to undermine, through non-democratic means, the government or the parliament. There are also cases where they are corrupt and lack accountability mechanisms. Caution should be exercised in determining what groups are recognized as civil society, and who and what they represent. Clarity is needed on the laws governing CSOs, the composition of their governing bodies, and their rules and statutes.

Other speakers suggested that there are many international NGOs operating in dozens of countries, which means that foreign funding of NGOs is neither a novelty nor necessarily a bad thing. What is important is that NGOs supported by foreign funding abide by national laws and, in particular, refrain from taking measures that might incite political violence. A code of conduct should be created

to frame the activities of the representatives of the various organizations, and to regulate their financing. This is a task for parliamentarians, who have to craft laws ensuring that civil society, like government, is accountable. At the same time, it is the responsibility of government to defend the right to free speech and assembly, including for those expressing dissent and criticism.

Key findings:

- Strengthening the relationship between national institutions and civil society is the basis for sustainable democracies. Not all countries develop at the same speed, but all countries have to move in the same direction.
- Civil society can only function effectively when the State cooperates in a spirit of partnership. It is up to national parliaments to establish a strong legal framework to ensure constructive dialogue, as well as accountability and transparency of CSOs.
- New technology may make CSOs obsolete as citizens can organize themselves without an organizational intermediary. Parliamentarians need to seize the opportunities that are created by these new technologies and reach out to the citizens to improve dialogue. It is up to parliamentarians to ensure that civil society is not trapped between States that do not listen and markets that do not care.

Summary of the meeting and closing remarks

Mr. Anders B. Johnsson, Secretary General of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, thanked all the participants for their valuable contributions. Following the presentation of the summaries from the four main sessions of the Hearing, he stressed that the recommendations for action made by the IPU would be submitted to its governing bodies for consideration of the best way to implement them. He added that in the spring of 2012, the General Assembly is due to hold a special debate on interaction and cooperation among the United Nations, national parliaments and the IPU. Clearly, parliamentarians have a huge stake in the outcome of that debate, and consequently, the IPU will be inviting them to take part in a discussion on the related issues, that will take place leading up to, and during, the IPU Assembly in Kampala. The thoughts expressed during the present parliamentary Hearing will feed into that discussion, with the aim of developing a shared understanding of the way forward towards creating a stronger engagement between the United Nations, parliaments and the IPU.