



Inter-Parliamentary Union
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Opening remarks by the President Hon. Saber H. Chowdhury

Parliamentary Hearing at the United Nations

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Thank you, Secretary-General Ban, and President Kutesa, for those remarks.

I am deeply honoured to represent the IPU and share the podium with you today. As the only global organization of parliaments, IPU's Membership embraces 166 Legislatures comprising 43,500 MPs representing 6.5 billion people around the world.

We are a unique organization with a rich heritage. Earlier this year, we celebrated 125 years of IPU and I believe we will also claim for ourselves a defining future.

I too look forward to the exciting times ahead, as the IPU and UN work together to make sure the SDGs are a giant step forward for the whole world, with strong political ownership and citizen involvement. The IPU is fully committed to this process and I intend to be personally engaged as well every step of the way.

Colleagues,

This hearing today is part of a journey we started in the spring of last year in Quito and continued with our hearing held in this very room twelve months ago.

The world is more complex than ever and faces manifold challenges such as climate change impacts and rising losses on account of disasters. In fact 2015 is a critical year for international processes and agreements. In addition to the SDGs, the Hyogo Framework for Action comes up for renewal in Sendai City and we look forward to new deal on climate in Paris.

How these processes and agreements connect and mutually reinforce each other will thus be very significant.

In this challenging context, our focus today is on ensuring a "*people-centred*" approach to the new sustainable development agenda. Driven by the conviction that people are the real wealth of a nation, the spotlight thus is on people as drivers and actors, as well as beneficiaries.

Whilst each of us is a free agent endowed with her or his inalienable rights, we all at the same need each other, because it is only when we care for each other that we fulfil ourselves as human beings. In Africa, I believe there is a term for this - "*Ubuntu*" – which generally translates as: "*I am, because you are.*"

A people centred approach embodies fundamental principles - of social justice, of human rights, of solidarity and equality and of the common good - as preconditions to human development and wellbeing.

These principles, though often articulated, are not in sync with today's ground reality of staggering rise in inequalities and social exclusion as well as the continuing degradation of the environment. All is not well with the social contract that binds us all together.

Of the three pillars of sustainable development – economic, social and environmental - I would submit that the *social* pillar is the one that needs to be strengthened first if we are to change our economy and mould our environment for the better. Let me cite a few examples.

The first two are from my own country of Bangladesh, where microcredit has proven to be one of the most successful anti-poverty initiatives ever. It is based on a simple premise: that by coming together socially and pooling together their small savings, the poorest of the poor can form a capital that some of them can then borrow from to start their own small business.

Although Bangladesh is one of the most affected and vulnerable countries to climate change impacts and disasters, it has shown impressive resilience and remarkable leadership in adaptation through social cohesion with communities coming and working together.

The “sharing economy” that is gaining ground everywhere and is almost entirely a private sector phenomenon, provides another good illustration.

Applied to the transport sector, for example, the idea of this model is that from both an economic and environmental standpoint, it is more efficient to sell “mobility” for everybody rather than to sell cars for private use. Companies in major cities around the world thus rent cars by the hour and car-pooling is gaining popular acceptance.

Clearly, individual car ownership for billions of future customers would not be sustainable, even assuming higher levels of fuel efficiency. So in transport as in almost any other sector of the economy, creative solutions that *bring people together* will be critical going forward.

This takes me to another aspect of “people-centred” approach – if we reduce progress to mere economic growth alone, we risk leaving behind the human being in all of his or her dimension, including intellectual and emotional. We are much more than what we have; more than “consumers” or “taxpayers” and certainly much more than productive assets.

Yet, the world today sends the exact opposite message, with more and more aspects of human interaction being commercialized because of the fundamentally flawed notion that ever growing production and consumption is the only way for an economy to function and for people to be happy.

Clearly, we need to reset and recalibrate our economic model so that *all* can benefit with more time and resources to enjoy life in all its dimensions while living well within our planetary boundaries. In Mahatma Gandhi's wise words: “*there is enough in this world for everyone's need, but not for everyone's greed.*”

Developing countries do need to grow dramatically but what needs to change in both developed and developing countries is the mind-set that we can grow fast now and worry

about the consequences to human wellbeing and the planet later. We need a more *organic* growth that goes hand in hand with improved human wellbeing.

This transformation presupposes reclaiming a strong role for governments to steer the economy in the right direction while also helping provide for safety nets and public goods like education, health, and a clean environment. It will also require ending our obsession with GDP as the sole indicator of progress and acknowledging that ultimately people's well being and their quality of life is the most important measure of whether development is **delivering**.

One of the reports from the ILO for this meeting shows that even some of the poorest countries can afford a basic pension system by merely re-allocating existing resources, including by reducing military expenditures.

Looking at the other end of the spectrum, over US\$100 billion is being spent on nuclear weapons annually (\$300 million a day, \$12 million an hour) diverting much needed resources away from health, education, climate change, risk-resilience and development assistance.

Nuclear weapons spending in 2010 was more than twice the ODA provided to Africa and equal to gross domestic product of Bangladesh, a nation of 160 million people. Underfunding development on the one hand and spending billions in over arming ourselves on the other is not smart.

Last but not least, there is another dimension of "people-centred" development and it is to do with the right of *all* people to participate in decisions about their lives, to have their voices heard, and to choose their own representatives. It is what we at the IPU call "democratic governance" as both an enabler of sustainable development and as an end in itself.

Growing concentration of wealth in fewer and fewer hands and deepening income inequality is a key obstacle and impediment to sustainable development and a grave threat to democracy everywhere. One percent of the world's families own almost half (46%) of the world's wealth and the bottom half of the world's population owns less than the richest 85 people in the world.

As one of the reports on our programme shows, in far too many places people no longer control the political process. Powerful interests are seeking to capture our institutions, resulting in fundamental rights being violated and the youth being disillusioned. Transparency and accountability are lacking at almost every level and in both public and private spheres.

The above represent an important context to IPU's campaign here at the UN and in Parliaments for a strong stand-alone governance goal among the SDGs.

Friends,

As people's representatives we share a common belief - public service is about helping people solve their problems and helping people live their dreams. A simple rule promotes this belief - improve on a situation relative to how you find it and this way our children and their grandchildren will inherit a better world than we have.

Glass ceilings still exist within our own countries, our parliaments and most importantly in some of our hearts and minds. To build this future, women and men alike need to understand the struggles of their sisters, mothers and grandmothers and ensure that women enjoy equal opportunities, dignity and respect.

As human beings, we are not perfect and never will be. This is all the more reason why we need each other to support when we falter, to encourage when we lose heart, to share in our joys and pains.

It is true that some will lead, some will follow but going it alone is not an option. Values we cherish, ideals we aspire to, dreams and aspirations we share are best ensured and advanced when we work together as a team.

Let's make the best of this moment, rise to the challenge of the future ahead of us, work collaboratively in partnerships and assume leadership.

Thank you.