



Inter-Parliamentary Union
For democracy. For everyone.

First IPU Global Conference of Young Parliamentarians Taking Democracy to Task



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Final report

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As young men and women parliamentarians from 61 of the world's countries, we gathered in Geneva on 10 and 11 October 2014 at the first IPU Global Conference of Young Parliamentarians in order to take stock of youth participation in parliament. The 180 participants (average age 37) were joined by some 20 leaders of youth parliaments and of the Pacific Forum of the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). Several of us are the youngest parliamentarians in our respective countries, and many of us were the youngest when we were first elected. Our Conference was organized with support from the Worldwide Support for Development (WSD) foundation, which we wish to thank warmly for its assistance and which made it possible for the IPU, among others, to establish a programme on youth participation in parliament.

The first IPU Global Conference of Young Parliamentarians, on the theme *Taking Democracy to Task*, allowed us to focus on young people's expectations of democracy. Our discussions were enriched by the many pro-democracy youth movements in numerous countries. Not only are young people challenging totalitarian regimes that they would like to see replaced by more democratic ones, as seen from the Arab Spring, but they are also challenging, in a broader sense, the way that politics is done. While careful to avoid generalizing, we agreed to say that young people are taking a stand against corruption, malfunctions in the economic and financial systems, political ossification and the inequalities of which they are the victims.

Young people use various forums to express their views on political issues, including the existing systems and the current social, economic and financial policies. These platforms include the social media, youth organizations, youth councils and, in some cases, even the streets. Young people also express themselves by becoming involved in politics and working to change the status quo from within. Many of them also show their discontent by losing interest in politics and proclaiming that they no longer believe in it.

The fact is that democracy is in need of renewal. There is a genuine imbalance between the way that politics is being done today and the way that young people are living. The connectivity, immediacy and globalization that make up their ordinary lives seem far removed from national political processes. The way that we vote, the long debates and the length of time needed for policies, once implemented, to bear fruit must all be reconsidered in order to bring more young people on board. It is absolutely essential to modernize politics, including through the use of information and communication technologies.

After making these points, we wondered whether the existing political systems, for their part, took youth into account and sought to meet its expectations. We believed that this was a legitimate question since, while young people are not a homogeneous group, they are bearing the brunt of the economic crisis, unemployment, poor education, migration and global warming. They also account for a large proportion of the population in many countries.

We summed up young people's expectations of politics and political leaders in three words: openness, transparency and effectiveness. It is time for politics to become genuinely open to youth, to become clean and above moral reproach and to deliver at last on its promise of development, equity and equality. We noted that young people's expectations were fully consistent with the guidelines advocated by the IPU in its publication *Parliament and democracy in the twenty-first century: A guide to good practice*.

We considered it important to stress that young people are not merely expressing their dissatisfaction with politics; they also want to be able to take part in it, make their own contribution and offer their own solutions. At present, however, apart from a few specific cases, the percentage of young parliamentarians worldwide is very low: less than 2 per cent for parliamentarians under the age of 30 and 10 to 20 per cent for those between the ages of 30 and 40. While this percentage is higher in some countries, particularly in Africa, because they have young populations, the overall proportion of young people in parliament in no way reflects their share of the population that they represent.

We wish to state loudly and clearly that while it is crucial for young people to be included in politics, their involvement must never be viewed as a gift to youth. Youth participation is beneficial to democracy and to the proper functioning of politics, the economy and society. Young people's talents, ideals, energy and skills, as well as their capacity to question, are essential if society is to run smoothly.

However, there are many challenges for young people in politics. While they do not all face the same problems, we found certain patterns:

- Young people are not taken seriously and are considered immature and inexperienced;
- Young people in politics face major financial challenges, even more so than their elders, who have been in politics for several years;
- Young people face legal obstacles to their involvement in politics since the minimum voting age and/or the minimum age of eligibility to run for office is high in some countries (in practice, young people aged 16 to 21 and even, in some cases, as old as 25, who account for a significant proportion of youth, cannot really take part in politics);
- Young men and women politicians do not always have access their elders' networks, in which it is difficult for newcomers to find a place;
- Young people's image of politics (as divisive, corrupt and so on) and the image that it is sometimes presented by political leaders are not always appealing to youth.

We noted, moreover, that some of these challenges were also faced by women of all ages. However, we consider that young women face specific challenges associated with the direct and indirect discrimination that they experience, the various forms of harassment and their responsibilities within the family unit.

We agreed on ways to include young people in politics:

- Young people must be introduced to politics at a very early age and civics must be incorporated into school curricula with a primary focus on democratic principles, political mechanisms, the functioning of governance institutions and citizenship. This goal should be pursued not only through youth parliaments or role-playing, but through education itself, in which it has a legitimate place. This would ensure that young first-time voters are prepared.
- It is essential to change attitudes so that young people feel appreciated. This can be achieved through awareness-raising campaigns led by young people themselves so that they can demonstrate their worth and their ideas, or by ensuring that they are invited to political meetings. These measures must be taken at the local, national and international levels.

- The media must be called upon to give young people visibility by providing them with an opportunity to express their views on current affairs.
- We young politicians must serve as role models for other young people by encouraging them and including them in our political actions and activities.
- As young politicians, we must ensure that reforms are introduced within our parties, including with regard to the selection of candidates. In particular, we could ensure that our parties' primary elections are open to young people without a prior membership requirement or find a place for them in our parties' candidate selection committees.
- It is important for politicians to consult young people, listen to them and speak with them in order interest them in politics and ensure that they contribute to it. Awareness-raising activities targeting young people should be carried out in order to encourage them to vote and make them realize, on the one hand, that the right to vote is not always a given and, on the other that abstaining from voting promotes extremism.
- It is important to encourage networking among young men and women politicians.
- Lastly, young political leaders, like their older colleagues and political hopefuls, must be protected from all forms of violence and discrimination, which should be strongly condemned wherever they occur.

We also drew up a list of robust measures to be taken immediately in order to strengthen young people's involvement in politics:

- Set quotas for young people in parliament and in political parties;
- Set quotas at the local level so that a new political class can emerge and establish itself at the national level;
- Reduce the minimum voting age and the minimum age of eligibility to run for office;
- Bring the minimum age of eligibility to run for office into line with the minimum voting age;
- Form youth political parties, if feasible under the country's constitution and legislation;
- Because we often elect candidates who are like us and because the more young people there are in parliament, the more young people will vote, include more young people in political parties' lists of candidates and executive bodies;
- Establish youth committees in parliaments and empower them to consider every piece of draft legislation and every policy, whether or not it has a direct bearing on youth;
- Monitor the implementation of youth policies; allocate funds to youth, education and training policies; and take young people into account in preparing national budgets;
- Protect the specific characteristics of young politicians, who should be able to continue to act like young men and women of their age and should not be required to lose themselves in the larger group of parliamentarians;
- Include young people in international debates, and not only in forums that focus on youth;
- In order to address young people's overall lack of political experience, training programmes for young politicians must be provided;
- Establish degree programmes for young political hopefuls in order to compensate for their lack of experience;
- Include youth involvement in political decision-making, governance and peace among the sustainable development goals, as requested by the Youth Forum of the United Nations Economic and Social Council.

Specifically, we requested the IPU to:

- Organize annual conferences for young parliamentarians, such as this one, since they provide both a training opportunity for young parliamentarians and a global forum for taking positions on youth issues;
- Organize regional or international thematic workshops to ensure the continuity of discussion between young parliamentarians;
- Function as a youth observatory in parliaments and, to that end, continue to gather information on youth participation in parliament;

- Conduct in-depth studies of youth involvement in various regions;
- Continue to encourage young people's involvement in its bodies and, by so doing, continue to set an example of political integration;
- Establish a support programme for young parliamentarians.

Through the IPU, we request the WSD to continue to support young people's involvement in politics and platforms that allow them to meet.

At the end of our deliberations, we expressed heartfelt thanks to the IPU for having offered us this unique platform. The Japanese delegation was pleased to announce that the 2015 Global Conference of Young Parliamentarians will be held in Tokyo and organized jointly by the IPU and the Japanese Parliament.