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Reforming the United Nations: Findings of a parliamentary mission to New York

On 26 and 27 June 2006, a high-level delegation of parliamentarians from a representative group of countries went to the United Nations headquarters in New York for talks with Permanent Representatives of Member States and United Nations officials on the subject of United Nations reform.

The visit was organised by the Inter-Parliamentary Union. Its findings, which will be shared with the broader parliamentary community, are set out below.

I. Background

Negotiations on reforming the United Nations have intensified over the past year. The Speakers of Parliament who met at the United Nations at their world conference in September 2005 pledged their support for a reformed United Nations to meet the challenges of the 21st century. By the same token, the outcome document of the 2005 World Summit of the United Nations called for “*strengthened cooperation between the United Nations and national and regional parliaments, in particular through the Inter-Parliamentary Union, with a view to furthering all aspects of the Millennium Declaration in all fields of the work of the United Nations and ensuring the effective implementation of United Nations reform*”.

The reform process of the United Nations is today at a very critical juncture. Although most Member States agree that their organization, founded some 60 years ago, needs to be made more effective and more representative, significant differences of opinion remain on proposals such as expanding the Security Council, modernizing internal oversight and accountability, performing an overall review of the work of all programmes and decision-making bodies of the United Nations, or increasing the management authority of the Secretary General. At the time of the IPU mission, the

organization was operating under a spending cap that expired by the end of June*. The spending cap threatened to bring the work of the organization to a halt unless Member States agreed to a comprehensive reform package.

At the same time, recent developments have shown that the reform is possible, and that it can be moved forward under the appropriate conditions. Over the past year, while implementing the decisions of the 2005 World Summit Outcome, the UN has established a new Human Rights Council which is already operational, a Democracy Fund, a Peacebuilding Commission to restore post-conflict societies, a Central Emergency Relief Fund (now worth over 250 million USD) to enable immediate response and assistance to countries hit by natural disasters and other emergencies, an ethics office and a system of whistle-blower protection. Negotiations are also under way on establishing management oversight, accountability and transparency, and on mandate review, which would streamline and eliminate hundreds of mandates (tasks, missions, mechanisms) that are either outdated or redundant.

II. Main findings

The United Nations remains poorly understood by people around the world and its work is not fully appreciated. While headlines focus on the occasional scandal or political failure, the tremendous work that the United Nations and its agencies conduct daily in areas such as health and education, poverty reduction, peacekeeping, terrorism, and many others often escape public attention. There are efforts to improve communication to the outside public, especially through an increased use of information technologies, but they have still a long way to go. As a result of this information gap, two extreme views of the United Nations have come to prevail in the public domain: at one end of the spectrum the organisation is seen as an omnipotent body called upon to intervene in every problem in the world; at the opposite end, it is seen as useless, inept, and corrupt. Neither view is correct.

The so-called wide-spread corruption at the United Nations is a myth created by a few isolated incidents that have been blown out of proportion. Even the so-called oil for food scandal is not, in reality, an organization-wide failure, since the programme was run by the (very limited) membership of the Security Council.

All these difficulties should not obscure the fact that the United Nations is an indispensable tool to maintain world peace, advance the development agenda, provide assistance and relief to the vulnerable, and bring countries together to address issues of common concern. The United Nations – a global public good - should be the centre of multilateralism, a place where countries can resolve disputes and find common ground on issues that can no longer be confined within national borders. Yet, it is more and more in danger of being sidestepped by unilateral action and disregard for international law.

* The General Assembly budget committee finally lifted the cap on United Nations spending on June 28th. Although the decision passed by consensus, without a vote, the United States, Japan and Australia (which together account for 43% of the assessed UN budget) declared they were officially dissociating themselves from the decision, which might carry significant financial and political consequences for the UN.

Decision-making at the United Nations is not as representative and as inclusive as it should be. Developing countries feel that they are not adequately represented at the top echelons of the organization. The democratic principle of one-country-one-vote, at the core of the United Nations Charter, is countered by power politics, and the main United Nations contributors tend to wield great influence.

The recent spending cap on the United Nations may have led to some decisions on reform, but it has also caused division and mistrust between developed and developing countries, “poisoning” - as many have observed - the atmosphere of cooperation and confidence at and in the United Nations.

Claims that the scale of a contribution to the UN budget should somehow confer greater or lesser political authority do not hold up when compared to international commitments and countries’ actual ability to pay. Some large contributors, for example, are still far below the official goal of 0.7% of GDP in development aid. It was pointed out that many developing countries would be willing to consider an increase in their UN contribution, provided their concerns for more equitable distribution of responsibilities were adequately addressed.

The Security Council does not reflect today’s geopolitical realities and has assumed too much power; its overhaul is needed more than ever. This body of the United Nations reflects a 1945 balance of power that no longer exists. In the eyes of the world and within the United Nations itself, it has come to assume more power vis-à-vis the General Assembly than is warranted under the UN Charter.

The case of the Security Council illustrates that when it comes to UN reform, divisions among Member States can also occur within regional groups and do not always reflect a simple North-South polarization. Some Member States posit the reform of the Security Council as a condition to all other reforms. Others are willing to set aside this issue in order to make headway on the other aspects of reform. All agree, however, that as long as the Security Council is not changed it will be hard for the UN to truly change.

Management reform is key to improving the legitimacy and effectiveness of the United Nations, but is currently mired in political squabbling. Recent proposals by the Secretary General to reform the management of the UN include: giving the Secretary General more managerial autonomy by allowing him to directly manage a small portion of the budget without having to wait for General Assembly approval (in particular, this would allow the Secretary General to reallocate posts and assets to meet special contingencies); overhauling procurement to increase transparency while cutting costs for the organization through more competitive public bidding (the United Nations as a global provider of services needs to benefit from the best possible procurement system); and dramatically increasing and standardizing the use of information technologies throughout the whole UN system to increase productivity, accessibility to documentation, and oversight of internal processes.

Some Member States are concerned that such management reform may end up further emasculating the General Assembly as the principal decision-making organ of the United Nations. Other Member States argue instead that the General Assembly should not be bogged down with every management decision that needs to be made and should focus instead on more important political decisions. All agree, however, that the United

Nations needs management reform in order to become more effective and adequately respond to the needs of the world today.

Ultimately, the solution will have to entail a bargain whereby more flexibility is given to the Secretary General in exchange for more accountability. Part of this may involve the creation of a new expert committee of the General Assembly with accounting and auditing responsibilities, similar to those found in parliaments.

An inventory of all decision-making bodies and their activities is needed to avoid waste and overlap, but disagreement persists as to how to do it. There are over 9000 “mandates” currently active at the United Nations (i.e., on-going activities that are mandated by the General Assembly, budgeted for, or formally part of the UN agenda). These mandates have expanded over the last few decades without systematically checking for coherence, and without a corresponding increase in available resources. While everyone agrees that a comprehensive mandate review is necessary, the time period (i.e., mandates older than five years), number (all or only a certain percentage), and categories of mandates to be reviewed (regular versus politically-sensitive mandates) remain to be clarified.

To facilitate matters, all active mandates have been collected in a database that is posted on the UN website. However, Member States need to be more aware of the complexity of the task and should not allow the matter of mandate review to forestall progress on more urgent reform issues.

Improving coherence among development activities of the UN remains a huge organizational challenge. At the operational level, some improvement has occurred in the past few years with the creation of the United Nations Development Group (the umbrella body that brings together all agencies to coordinate their work programmes) and the strengthening of UN country teams under a single office. Since last year’s World Summit, there is also a perceived need to better integrate the Millennium Development Goals into country’s poverty reduction or national development strategies than is usually done in cooperation with the World Bank. Yet, much remains to be done to ensure that national development strategies are truly nationally owned and involve all stakeholders in the process. As long as this is not done the development work of the United Nations in the field may not produce the intended results, with a corresponding erosion of image and political support. The results of the High-level Panel on system-wide coherence may provide guidance and direction in this process.

Parliamentary involvement

The leaders of the world’s parliaments are well aware that the reform agenda that the United Nations is currently grappling with is not going to be completed in the short term. Nor do they overestimate the contribution that parliaments will be able to make to pushing the agenda forward. They are also respectful of the constitutional prerogatives that generally determine the supremacy of the Executive branch in matters of foreign policy.

There are nonetheless certain ways in which a stronger presence of men and women who carry an electoral mandate can make for a more inclusive, and ultimately more

successful, reform process. The recommendations agreed upon in the course of the recent parliamentary mission are set out below.

III. Recommendations

1. Parliaments should take a much more active interest in scrutinising the reform of the United Nations. To do this, members of parliamentary standing and select committees should hold hearings with Ministers, senior UN officials, civil society representatives and others to discuss UN reform on a more systematic basis.
2. Parliaments should also seek to be better informed of their government's position on major United Nations issues. Along with the traditional methods of scrutiny mentioned above, this could also be done by holding regular hearings with their Permanent Representative to the United Nations, who should be in a position to respond directly to parliament on any issue of concern. The appointment of the Permanent Representative should always be put before parliament, as is already the case in several capitals.
3. National parliaments need to become more familiar with the work of the United Nations in general, and with the position of their governments on UN reform in particular. This necessitates a better flow of information between the United Nations and parliaments. Information from the United Nations must reach parliaments in a more systematic fashion, and the IPU is called upon to help engineer this change in partnership with the United Nations.
4. Parliaments should also seek stronger contacts with the United Nations at the country level through its resident representatives, especially in developing countries. Parliaments ought to be more involved in national development strategies that are being drafted by governments with UN support, and should be informed more regularly and comprehensively about UN programmes on the ground.
5. Parliamentarians, working daily with their constituents and interest groups, should play a more active role in building local and national support for UN reform, thereby helping to rebuild trust and confidence in the world organisation.
6. On the question of funding of the United Nations, some creative thinking is needed to offset the natural tendency of larger contributors to expect a greater say. While they may contribute more in absolute terms, all countries contributions are assessed in terms of the capacity to pay. In an endeavour to level the playing field, parliaments should examine ideas for alternate sources of funding for the activities of the United Nations alongside the assessed contributions. Parliaments, entrusted with budgetary authority and the management of the taxpayer's money, should put this important question on their agenda.
7. Parliaments also have valuable contributions to make to support the work the new bodies set up under the United Nations reform, and the IPU is called upon

to assist in this process. Parliaments should also play a part in ensuring that United Nations reform adequately addresses the issue of gender equality. Thanks to their own institutional involvement in gender streamlining, parliaments and the IPU could contribute much to this process.

8. For their part, Member States should seek to include members of parliament more systematically in their delegations to the General Assembly and other major UN conferences and processes. Greater involvement of parliamentarians will make the connection between negotiations and national implementation more coherent, realistic and practical, and solder the link with the people who ultimately benefit from international commitments.
9. In conjunction with the foregoing, the IPU should consolidate and develop its practice of holding specialized parliamentary meetings at UN Headquarters on issues that are high on the United Nations agenda. This will contribute substantially to bringing the UN realities closer to the national parliaments, and will allow for a meaningful parliamentary input into major UN processes.

ANNEX I

Members of the IPU delegation to the United Nations:

Mr. Mostafa Al-Gindy (Egypt), MP

Mr. Yoshio Nakagawa (Japan), MP

Mr. Ghaleb Al-Zubi (Jordan), MP

Ms. Ruth Oniang'o (Kenya), MP

Mr. Finn Martin Vallersnes (Norway), MP

Mr. Mewa Ramgobin (South Africa), MP

Mr. Goran Magnusson (Sweden), MP

Ms. Maria Amparo Canto (Mexico), Personal Envoy of the President of the Senate

Permanent Representatives who met with the IPU delegation:

Ambassador Dumisani Shadrack Kumalo (South Africa), G-77 Chairman	Group of 77 and China
Ambassador Heraldo Muñoz (Chile)	
Ambassador Maged Abdelfattah Abdelaziz (Egypt)	
Ambassador Rosemary Banks (New Zealand)	JUSCANZ Group
Ambassador Kenzo Oshima (Japan)	
Ambassador Gilbert Laurin (Canada), Deputy Permanent Representative	
Ambassador Francis Wilson (Australia), Deputy Permanent Representative	
Ambassador Mark D. Wallace (US), Deputy Permanent Representative	EU
Ambassador Gerhard Pfanzelter (Austria), EU Presidency	
Ambassador John William Ashe (Antigua & Barbuda), Chair of the UN Committee on Budget and Administration	

United Nations high-level representatives who met with the IPU delegation:

H.E. Mr. Jan Eliasson, President of the United Nations General Assembly

Mr. Robert Orr, Assistant Secretary-General for Strategic Planning

Mr. Bruce Jenks, UNDP, Assistant Administrator and Director, Bureau for Resources and Strategic Partnerships