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**STRENGTHENING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PARLIAMENTS, IPU
AND UNITED NATIONS**

**Preliminary findings of the IPU survey on
How parliaments organize their work vis-à-vis the United Nations**

The present report contains the preliminary findings emerging from the survey which the IPU is carrying out on how national parliaments organize their work vis-à-vis the United Nations. So far 71 national parliaments have responded to the survey which seeks to determine how parliaments relate to the United Nations and its General Assembly, how they interact with special meetings and major negotiating processes at the United Nations that lead to new conventions and international agreements, how they work with UN country offices, and what the IPU can do to promote a stronger interaction between parliament and the UN.

How do parliaments relate to the United Nations and its General Assembly?

1. By and large, issues relating to the United Nations are mainly dealt with directly in the plenary or in the Committee on Foreign Relations/International affairs. In a few countries, UN matters are addressed in other parliamentary (standing or select) committees depending on the subject matter. That includes the committees dealing with human rights in Cyprus, human resources and social and community development in Namibia, capacity building in Bahrain and health in Kenya. A limited number of parliaments - Angola, Cameroon and Germany for example - have Committees or sub-Committees dedicated specifically to the United Nations.
2. In many countries, there is little or no direct interaction between parliaments and their country's Ambassador/Permanent Representative to the United Nations. Information and answers to questions from MPs generally seem to be relayed through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Instructions or national mandates given to the Ambassador at the UN are only occasionally addressed in parliament through debate or interpellation. A large majority of parliaments indicate that instructions on UN matters rarely require their approval.
3. Over seventy percent of respondents report that MPs are included in national delegations to the UN General Assembly. However, only thirty percent do so always or often. Australia, Denmark, France, Gabon, Georgia, India, Norway, Pakistan, Senegal and United Kingdom are among the countries that always include MPs in national delegations to the UN General Assembly. In most countries, this practice is more sporadic and ad hoc. About one third of the respondents indicate that MPs are never included in UNCA delegations.

4. While in most cases MPs do not stay for more than a week, for example during the opening of the General Assembly, MPs from Australia and India stay throughout the autumn session of the General Assembly.

5. The role and mandate of MPs in UNGA delegations varies. Generally, they come to attend, listen, observe and familiarize themselves with UN activities and processes. In only a minority of cases - Angola, Austria, Georgia, Namibia and Tunisia - do MPs assume a more active role by participating in UN Committee work, delivering statements, debating and bringing a parliamentary perspective to the proceedings of the United Nations.

6. In most countries, the government provides information to parliament on the national financial contribution to the United Nations (general budget, peacekeeping, etc), its agencies and programmes. This however is usually done indirectly, as contributions to the UN are listed under the budget executed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which goes to parliament every year for approval and adoption. When such budget information is not provided through regular channels, it can be made available upon request or through official questioning in parliament.

How do parliaments interact with special meetings and major negotiating processes at the United Nations?

7. There is little evidence of systematic parliamentary involvement in the preparation and follow-up to special meetings of the United Nations. Only about one quarter of the parliaments indicate that MPs are frequently or regularly included in national delegations to such special meetings. Even fewer - fifteen percent - systematically organize debates and hearings to prepare for and follow up on the outcome of such UN meetings. Twenty five percent never do so and about sixty percent only do so occasionally.

8. Most parliaments do not regularly monitor major international negotiating processes taking place at the UN. They do not audition the Minister who takes part in the negotiations, or provide instructions or mandates. Parliamentary involvement in negotiations leading up to the conclusion of legally binding commitments by States normally only takes place towards the end of the process. At that point, parliaments are informed of the outcome of the negotiations. More often than not Ministers simply report to parliament. At some stage, parliament is invited to ratify the agreement.

9. Only in a handful of countries is parliament part and parcel of the process of reporting on the implementation of international agreements. The Parliaments in Austria, Georgia, Namibia, and Tunisia have put in place procedures for country reports on the implementation of UN conventions to be submitted to parliament. Parliament organizes debates and hearings on these reports. Members of Parliament from these countries are part of the delegation attending the periodic review by the UN monitoring committee (where the country report is discussed). The recommendations subsequently issued by the UN monitoring committee are taken back, discussed and followed up in parliament. In most of these cases, a specific parliamentary committee is tasked with advising and monitoring progress in the implementation of these agreements.

10. Even when legislators are not directly involved in such a process, they are still in a position to secure information through reports of Foreign Affairs Ministries and parliamentary Committees, parliamentary libraries, IPU and UN meetings, and the media. In several countries it is standard practice for parliament to organize debates on key international issues or events, or to convene regular question and answer sessions with government officials.

How do parliaments work with UN country offices?

11. Very few parliaments have regular and systematic interaction with UN country offices. When it does take place it is generally ad-hoc, or takes place on the occasion of special anniversaries (International Days, the launching of UN and country reports and publications, etc). In many instances, it is the UN that initiates cooperation or joint activities in parliaments. Many parliaments report on activities – including technical assistance - initiated by UNDP and other UN bodies such as UNAIDS, UNHCR, UNICEF, UNIFEM, UNFPA, WB and the WHO.

12. Developing country parliaments appreciate support they receive from the UN in the form of capacity-building, technical assistance and development programmes. Ethiopia, for example, receives assistance from the UN to train parliamentary staff, improve its facilities, and obtain computers, books, and transportation and resource persons. Namibia receives UN funding which facilitates field missions by MPs to perform parliamentary oversight functions, whereas in Pakistan the UNDP runs a parliamentary development programme.

13. Many parliaments receive training and technical assistance from the UN in areas such as bill drafting, procurement, human resources and the improvement of facilities. This support is driven by supply rather than demand. There is generally a lack of strategic planning and engagement by parliaments in setting priorities and developing assistance projects.

Good Practices

14. The survey invited parliaments to provide examples of how they organize their work vis-à-vis the United Nations. The following examples were provided:

- Canada, Cyprus and Greece report that UN documentation is made available through parliamentary libraries and publications.
- In Algeria, Kenya and Luxembourg, MPs take an active part by raising questions in parliament on UN matters.
- In Brazil, Chile, Czech Republic, Gabon and Hungary, parliament is systematically involved in discussions and reviews to determine the country's position on UN matters, including through regular cooperation with UN country offices.
- The parliaments in Bosnia and Herzegovina, France, Latvia, South Africa and Spain organize debates and hearings on upcoming or ongoing international negotiations, major UN events or pressing global issues.
- Members of parliament from Austria, Denmark, Gabon, Georgia, Namibia, Tunisia and the United Kingdom are included in national delegations to the UN General Assembly and UN special meetings and are encouraged to participate fully as members of the delegation.
- The parliaments in Angola, Cameroon and Germany have set up a dedicated parliamentary committee or other body on UN Affairs to keep themselves updated and involved in UN matters, procedures and processes.

What can the IPU do to promote stronger interaction between parliaments and the UN?

15. The survey reveals several challenges and barriers to parliaments wishing to develop closer interaction with the United Nations.

16. One is the fact that many parliaments are still in an early stage of institutional development. They do not have the knowledge or professional and financial resources they need to be able to deal with the enormous diversity and depth of issues on the UN agenda and the huge volume of documentation and information that needs to be absorbed. Language also

acts as an important barrier since much of the material may not be available in national languages.

17. Time is a significant constraint. MPs are always dividing their time between different interests and commitments and have limited availability to reach out further; there is constant pressure to concentrate on domestic and constituency issues.

18. In some countries, international affairs are – by tradition – the exclusive purview of the executive. In other countries, parliament holds little power over the executive branch and is therefore hampered in its ability to engage the United Nations.

19. Members of Parliament are also unfamiliar with the complex bureaucracy of the UN. They view the lack of a formal position for parliaments within the UN system as a serious barrier to MP involvement.

20. Many of the respondents indicate an interest in building up their capacity to be more involved in UN processes. They suggest that the IPU could be helpful by:

- Facilitating a more regular and systematic communication and exchange of information between parliaments and the United Nations system;
- Conducting more seminars and training sessions for both MPs and staff on UN reform, global issues and international commitments;
- Developing new information tools such as handbooks for parliamentarians, guidance notes and brochures;
- Sensitizing MPs on the relevance and importance of their participation in UN-related activities and processes;
- Focussing more on development cooperation and aid effectiveness and organizing more needs assessment and fact-finding missions;
- Taking the lead in initiating parliamentary debate on “hot issues” such as the global economic and food crisis;
- Engaging more directly with parliamentary committees and individual MPs on specific issues pertaining to the global agenda;
- Working more closely with parliaments and helping them engage more substantively with the United Nations at the country level;
- Assisting parliaments in monitoring better the implementation of international commitments;
- Ensuring implementation of recommendations of UN General Assembly calling for more systematic involvement of legislators in national delegations to major UN conferences and events;
- Enhancing cooperation between the UN and regional parliamentary organizations;
- Bolstering and better utilizing its Committee on UN Affairs, as well as its related Advisory Group; and
- Consolidating and more formally institutionalizing the UN-IPU relationship.