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Statement by the Secretary General, Mr. Anders B. Johnsson

Interactive Dialogue on Elements for an Accountability Framework for the post-2015 Development Agenda

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Thank you, Amina,

I am pleased to take part in this panel and to try to answer some of the questions that you have put to us.

Unsurprisingly, my focus will be on parliaments, and will take the cue from a recommendation of the UNSG himself, in his report early this month on interaction between the UN, national parliaments and the IPU, which states: “Parliaments are essential to ensure the implementation of major international agreements. The United Nations and the IPU should therefore work closely to incorporate a clear role for parliaments at the global level and jointly support country-led efforts that need to accompany the post-2015 sustainable development goals.”

Now, before I delve into the details of what this might entail, let me start with a few general comments on the meaning and purpose of accountability.

Generally, there are at least two kinds of accountability: horizontal, as in the system of checks and balances between the executive and the legislature; and vertical, as in the system whereby both branches of government are accountable to the people, or where global institutions are accountable to their Member States. In terms of modalities, there are soft and hard ways – and they all have their place, especially if combined together in the same architecture.

Whether at national or global levels, strong accountability depends on many things. It is not a single event, or a simple one-way relationship, and there is no magic formula. Anyone who claims to play a role in development needs to be held accountable.

A recent paper by Professor Ocampo discusses the components of accountability, such as answerability, responsibility and enforceability. Enforceability is of course the key: unless you can force those responsible for a commitment to finally deliver or to correct the course they are on, then the whole accountability effort comes to naught. In other words, the true test of accountability is in the results: if there is no behaviour change and no detectable improvement on the ground, then accountability has failed.

What makes enforceability possible, and at what level does it apply? As we know, development commitments are not legally binding at the global level. It is only at the national level that we can talk about enforceability, since this is where commitments must find their way into national development plans and ultimately into law, including the budget bill. Accountability, therefore, is strongest from the national level up. And of course, it is at that level that we find the institution of parliament as the one body endowed by the Constitution to play this role.

Whichever system of governance a State has adopted, it contains all over the world a parliament that is tasked with two fundamental responsibilities: to legislate and to hold government to account. An accountability framework should clearly incorporate and build on this fundamental facet of the State governance structure. It is the function of parliaments everywhere to hold government to account for the implementation of commitments to both the people and to the international community.

Each parliament will devise its own system for fulfilling its responsibilities. They will differ from one country to another. But there will also be many common traits. Parliaments hold governments to account by asking questions, which Ministers are legally obliged to answer. They conduct special enquiries and investigations. Parliamentary committees undertake studies, publish reports and make recommendations on specific areas of policy.

Parliamentary reports place an issue in the public domain. Accountability through parliament leads to greater public awareness and enhanced scrutiny of government actions. A good case in point in this country is the recent publication of the Senate Intelligence Committee's report into the interrogation practices of the CIA.

Parliaments hold public debates and invite civil society, private enterprise and others to contribute their views. They scrutinize the budget and examine public accounts. A fully representative parliament with parity between men and women can speak with unequalled legitimacy on behalf of society as a whole. Moreover, they are constantly exposed to the views of the citizens and are better placed than most to understand how well public programs reach and benefit citizens.

In short, parliaments have all the tools of the trade at their disposal to monitor implementation of development policies and programs. The post-2015 sustainable development agenda (and indeed a future global climate change agreement) should make the best use possible of this existing accountability mechanism.

Accountability is not about creating difficulties for government. It is about facilitating its work and promoting efficiency in the delivery and allocation of resources.

There are many examples where parliaments have played this role in relation to the MDGs. A singularly powerful example of horizontal accountability was provided by the parliament of Uganda in 2012 when it influenced the passage of the State budget so that funding for health care was substantially increased. Many parliaments have used, maybe less spectacularly, their committee procedures to monitor health coverage and influence progress in achieving MDGs 4 and 5.

What is true for parliaments is also true for the IPU. As an example, the IPU is a strong supporter of the UNSG's global strategy "Every Woman, Every Child". We focus on the countries with the highest maternal and child mortality burden and help build capacities of MPs to hold governments to account for commitments they have made. The outcomes of this work are reported annually through the independent Expert Review Group.

One of the many lessons we are learning from the MDGs is that accountability becomes stronger when it incorporates international human rights standards. These standards have been agreed to by States and are directly relevant to achieving sustainable development. For example those relating to equality and non-discrimination to mention but two central examples are absolutely essential to be able to ensure access to treatment for HIV and AIDS and hence for attaining MDG 7. Moreover, including these standards facilitates accountability because it then becomes a matter of enforcing legal and not discretionary rights.

Moreover, fundamental freedoms of expression, information, assembly and association are essential to accountability. Without them, people cannot participate in a meaningful manner in decision-making processes and report on and challenge actions taken by public officials. Respect for these basic rights is central to achieving accountability in any country.

Another lesson we have learnt is that to strengthen accountability we need to strengthen the parliaments both in their domestic functions and in terms of their linkages to the global level. This in turn raises the question of reinforcing the role of parliaments across the board, which means more capacities, better institutional processes, and clearer mandates for parliaments to carry out their oversight functions.

It is enough to consider the latest DCF survey on mutual accountability to get an idea of the kind of support that parliaments will need if they are to play a stronger accountability role. Looking at the role of parliaments in development cooperation processes at the country level, the DCF survey showed that parliaments continue to play a limited role in mutual accountability at the country level, are seldom consulted on aid policies, do not participate regularly in national aid dialogues, and receive limited donor funding for capacity building.

Here at the UN, there has been an opening for parliaments to be more involved not just in terms of providing input to policy debates but also in helping evaluate implementation of global commitments. A number of soft mechanisms have been put in place – too many to describe - but they will need much more work to mature into a functioning architecture.

The Development Cooperation Forum of ECOSOC has provided an opening not only for parliaments and MPs but for other stakeholders to come together at regular intervals to contribute to new thinking but also take stock of the state of affairs in development cooperation, particularly through global surveys on mutual accountability. Among other things, the DCF is helping define the responsibilities of the various stakeholders in the area of development cooperation. The problem though is that the DCF's progress reports are on a global scale only and do not focus on individual country performance.

A much harder accountability structure is given by the national reporting and review mechanisms of the UN. With support from the IPU, parliaments have been linked to the national reporting exercise on the implementation of the CEDAW at the regular sessions of the CEDAW Committee. The IPU alerts concerned parliaments of the report that is to be submitted to the CEDAW by their government, encourages members of parliament to join their government delegation to the relevant committee session, and subsequently transmits to the parliament, for information and further follow up, the outcome of the committee's deliberations.

This well-tested practice is now being used in relation to the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of the Human Rights Council. As recommended by a specialized panel, accountability for human rights commitments could be strengthened considerably by involving parliaments in a comprehensive national consultation process to prepare the national report to the Council, by including members of parliament in the official delegations to the Council, and by providing for the UPR recommendations to be presented to each concerned parliament. This makes all the more sense since an overwhelming majority of the recommendations coming out of the UPR require legislative and other actions by parliaments.

This could provide a model for the recently created High Level Political Forum (HLPF) on sustainable development, which will oversee the implementation of the future SDGs. We will need to know more about the specific mechanisms of the HLPF and particularly its review process. However, it is likely that recommendations formulated by the High Level Political Forum will require action by parliaments and it therefore makes sense to incorporate from the very beginning some form of parliamentary role in that setting.

Now, before I conclude, let me add one more consideration to this whole argument that may easily escape our attention: If we want to make sure that there will be accountability for the implementation of the future SDGs, we should also look at the SDGs themselves and how they could be designed from the start to support this whole accountability mechanism at both national and global levels.

What I mean by this is that the SDGs should include a specific goal on democratic governance, as well as a specific target, under such a goal, on strengthening parliaments. If it becomes a global commitment that the key accountability institution that every country has, parliament, ought to be strengthened and

supported, then it follows that the pursuit of this one target will help with the implementation of the entire SDGs framework.

Looking back at the implementation of the MDGs and indeed of all other development commitments, and how so much is left undone, it is clear to me that we would be further ahead today had a governance goal been included in the package back in the year 2000. Perhaps we were not ready then, but the times in which we live today compel us to take this bold step now.

Thank you.