



International Parliamentary Conference

Parliaments, minorities and indigenous peoples: Effective participation in politics

31 October - 3 November 2010

Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas (Mexico)

Opening remarks

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Tuxtla Gutiérrez, 31 October 2010

Mr. President, Mr. Governor, Mr. Mayor, UNDP Resident Coordinator, Honorable Members of Parliament, Ladies and gentlemen,

I am honored to welcome you to the opening ceremony of this Parliamentary Conference on parliaments, minorities and indigenous peoples.

The IPU is deeply grateful to the Government and people of Chiapas for receiving us in your magnificent State. Your generosity and the facilities you are putting at our disposal augur well for a successful conference. It is particularly meaningful to discuss minority and indigenous participation in politics in Chiapas, where a significant proportion of the population is indigenous. Thank you for making this possible.

I also want to extend my thanks and appreciation to the Congress of Mexico for its invaluable support and cooperation in organizing this event. Likewise, I would like to thank our partners - the United Nations Development Programme; the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights; the United Nations Independent Expert on minority issues; and the Minority Rights Group International for their substantive contribution to this conference.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The effective participation of minorities and indigenous peoples in politics is essential to democracy. Democracy requires that the voice of all citizens be heard equally without distinction. Discrimination and exclusion weaken democracy. They plant the seeds of conflict in society.

Parliament is the national forum for mediating competing interests in society. It is precisely in parliament where fundamental issues confronting society can be resolved through dialogue. Parliament has a vested interest in ensuring that all citizens can participate equally in politics. Where there are cases of exclusion, it must correct them.

The presence of representatives of minorities and indigenous peoples in parliament is important both symbolically and substantively. Symbolically, it transmits a clear message that they are part of the national community; that they take part in the decisions about the future of the nation. Substantively, minority and indigenous parliamentarians can provide a direct channel to influence the work of parliament and promote the interests and concerns of their communities.

Yet minority and indigenous issues are not the sole responsibility of minority and indigenous parliamentarians. They are the responsibility of all parliamentarians, and indeed of all of us.

Greater inclusion in politics has a positive impact on the social and economic well-being of minorities and indigenous peoples; it decreases their marginalization, poverty and exclusion.

That said, until recently parliaments have largely been composed of men from the dominant sectors of society. What can be done to change this? To a large extent, the answer lies with men and women just like you. Many of you are members of parliament, you participate in political parties and you help shape public policy.

I would like to propose seven avenues for your consideration. They are based on the findings of a project carried out by the IPU and the UNDP on the representation of minorities and indigenous peoples in parliament, which we will be presenting to you over the coming three days. My proposals also draw on work being done within the United Nations system, and in particular the Forum on Minority Issues and the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

And some of the findings draw inspiration from the work the IPU has carried out for the last 30 years to promote women's political participation. We help raise awareness of the need for women to be an integral part of parliaments. We identify ways to bring more women into politics. We track progress and we help hold countries to account. We identify ways in which parliament can become more gender sensitive, more receptive to women members of parliament and more effective in mainstreaming a gender perspective in all legislation.

The first finding relates to the difficulty of gathering precise data on minority and indigenous peoples who are members of parliament. There are obvious ethical reasons why it is difficult to gather this data. From a human rights perspective, everyone has the right to choose their own identity, or multiple identities. It is not acceptable to categorize people on the basis of their name or origins. Self-identification must be the norm when determining who makes up a minority or indigenous people.

Clearly, this principle can make it complicated to provide data, but it should not be an insurmountable challenge. There are however unspoken political reasons. Some parliaments do not want to answer the question because the subject matter is uncomfortable for them.

The lack of effort to record the number of minority and indigenous parliamentarians creates a fertile environment for patterns of under-representation to continue unchecked. I would suggest that parliaments should collect better data on the representation of minorities and indigenous peoples, while balancing privacy concerns and the right to self-identification.

The second finding is in fact a confirmation of something that is widely known: that the issue of recognition of minorities and indigenous peoples is a challenge for many countries. Recognition of the rights of minorities and indigenous peoples is an important precondition for their effective participation in politics. The task of recognizing minorities and indigenous peoples and defining their legal status ultimately rests with parliaments. I would urge parliaments that have not already done so to adopt resolutions or motions that recognize diversity in their societies and the importance of reflecting this diversity in public institutions, including parliament.

Third, our research found support from parliamentarians from all backgrounds for special electoral measures to ensure the presence in parliament of minority and indigenous representatives. Many parliaments have already adopted special measures in the form of reserved seats and lower electoral thresholds. Parliaments should consider a periodic evaluation of the effectiveness of such measures together with minorities and indigenous peoples, and adjust them where necessary. We should be careful to avoid vesting the control of reserved seats among a small group of people that leaves little space for women or alternative voices within the community.

Fourth, political parties have responsibilities to bring greater diversity into parliament. Even in the absence of special provisions in electoral laws, parties can be much more inclusive, open to dialogue with minority and indigenous communities and preparing candidates for office. Inside parliament, political party leaders influence which draft bills will advance through the legislative process. Their support across the political divide in parliament is essential since the small number of minority and indigenous parliamentarians places a natural limit on the amount of influence they can have.

Fifth, not surprisingly, resources must be provided to ensure that the participation of minorities and indigenous peoples can also be effective. Parliamentary committees with a mandate for minority and indigenous issues require trained staff and financial means to support their work, to organize public hearings with minority and indigenous communities, to reach out to rural areas that are expensive and difficult to access.

Six, parliaments will need to do a better job at holding government to account for the implementation of laws and other measures intended to fulfil minority and indigenous rights. Implementation is a huge challenge in many countries, and not only in the area of minority and indigenous rights. Successful implementation requires resources and political will. Parliament can do much to ensure this happens. It has a powerful oversight role; it must be put to good use.

Parliament's oversight role extends to the implementation of international commitments made by States. Parliaments are all too often not even aware of the existence of the international human rights treaty mechanisms and how they work. This is detrimental to the enjoyment by people of their fundamental rights. Parliaments have to take an active part in these processes.

Seven, and lastly, we must address the concerns and sometimes opposition of the general public to policies and measures intended to benefit minorities and indigenous peoples. Public support for minority and indigenous causes is a driver for change, just as public opposition renders any political progress difficult. Parliaments can greatly assist in raising public understanding of minority and indigenous issues.

As individuals we hold enormous responsibilities. We can do much to foster greater tolerance by engaging citizens in debate on minority and indigenous issues. But we must also avoid the temptation to use these issues for short term electoral advantage. Raising awareness of all parliamentarians on minority and indigenous issues is an important step towards creating a more favourable political environment.

In conclusion, I would like to make a call for greater political tolerance and more inclusive parliaments. My conviction is that stronger parliaments lead to stronger democracies. The effective participation in parliament of minorities and indigenous peoples is an essential component of democracy. This conference will be a success if we are collectively able to chart a course of action that can lead to more inclusive parliaments.

Thank you.