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PARLIAMENTARY BRIEFING AT THE UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT (Rio+20)

Rio de Janeiro (Brazil)
20 June 2012

MEETING REPORT

The Parliamentary Briefing at Rio+20 was organized by the IPU with the sponsorship of the Brazilian Inter-Parliamentary Group.

The Parliamentary Briefing was an opportunity for members of parliament attending Rio+20 to come together for a collective assessment of the new international agreement on sustainable development and a reflection on their role in carrying it forward. The Briefing reviewed the following themes:

- The extent to which the new international agreement acknowledges a clear role for parliaments;
- The substantive content of the new agreement and whether this constitutes a decisive step forward;
- Key provisions of the agreement, particularly those that may relate to the establishment of new sustainable development goals or the constitution of a new international framework for sustainable development.

The themes were introduced by Mr. Alfredo Sirkis, Chair of the Special Subcommittee on Rio+20 of the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies; Ms. Joan Walley, Chair of the Environmental Committee in the UK Parliament; and Ms. Margaret Mensah-Williams, Member of Parliament from Namibia. During the ensuing debate the following conclusions were made:

The outcome document of the Rio+20 conference pays only scant attention to parliaments. However, the members of parliament attending the Briefing wondered if parliamentarians themselves were to blame for this. In everyday politics the common good is very often sacrificed to particular interests, and there is little incentive to try to satisfy the needs of the many against those of the few. Another complication is the natural tendency for politicians tied to electoral cycles to make decisions based mostly on the short-term as opposed to the long-term outlook. Furthermore, at the national level few parliamentarians are interested and committed to the issues underlying sustainable development, and those who are find it rather difficult to get more of their colleagues interested in these themes. As a consequence, very few parliaments - if any - managed to put a joint political front to pressure their governments to push for a stronger role for parliaments in the Rio outcome document.

The participants agreed that the main innovations that came out of Rio+20 are the decisions to: a) develop a set of sustainable development goals to replace the existing Millennium Development Goals when they expire in 2015, b) push for a green economy, and c) establish a high-level political forum on sustainable development. However, they believed that there is a lot of uncertainty both in countries and at the United Nations about what all this constitutes, particularly the concept of the green economy. Members of parliament have an important role to play in keeping the debate around the green economy alive and pressuring their governments to translate the global commitments into concrete action at home. The participants recommended that, for example, each parliament should make sure that financial commitments for the green economy are made in their countries despite the fact that the outcome document comes short of making any financial commitments at the international level.

The participants felt that parliaments should contribute to the elaboration of the sustainable development goals. According to the Rio outcome document, these goals would take a more comprehensive approach and would apply almost as much to developed countries as to developing ones. The IPU should implement the mandate given to it through the recent resolution of the United Nations General Assembly on interaction between the UN, parliaments and the IPU, and it should therefore play a strong role in this process.

Members of parliament attending the Briefing also exchanged information about what they were planning to do in their parliaments upon their return from Rio. They were unanimous in saying that parliaments and governments have to define first what they want to do with the key concepts of Rio and develop concrete national targets to push for. Without this being done first, it would be very difficult to make any concrete steps towards making development more sustainable. They pledged to inform their constituents and other parliamentarians about Rio and its outcomes, and push for a debate on the impact of sustainable development on daily life in countries.

Finally, the participants recommended to the IPU to find a way to make parliamentarians more aware about how they can work through the IPU and other fora to make development more green and sustainable. It is important to facilitate exchanges among parliaments and the IPU had an important role to play in this. They welcomed the IPU efforts to work in the area of sustainable development and urged it to ensure strong parliamentary contribution to the processes emerging from Rio+20.