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REPORT ON HOW PARLIAMENTS ORGANIZE THEIR WORK WITH THE UNITED NATIONS

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In 2007, in order to better respond to the growing cooperation between the IPU, its Member Parliaments and the United Nations, the IPU's governing bodies established a Committee on United Nations Affairs. The Committee meets in plenary once a year and is tasked with examining how parliaments and the IPU organize their work vis-à-vis the United Nations, convening hearings with senior UN officials, looking at the overall working of the United Nations and its reform, and evaluating progress in IPU-UN cooperation and proposing strategies for further action.

As part of its evaluation exercise, the Committee decided to draw on the experiences of national parliaments in dealing with the United Nations: their needs and expectations, good practices that they have developed, and challenges and opportunities for improvement. Under the Committee's guidance, a survey was developed and submitted to parliaments for their response.

Ninety-six parliaments took part in the survey, which examined how parliaments relate to the United Nations and its General Assembly, how they interact with special UN meetings and major negotiating processes that lead to conventions and international agreements, how they work with UN country offices, and what the IPU can do to promote greater interaction between parliament and the United Nations. The main findings of the survey are presented below.

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

By and large, issues relating to the United Nations are dealt with 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. Such is the case for 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 small number of parliaments, such as those of Bangladesh, Germany and Sudan, have dedicated UN committees or sub-committees.

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 to the United Nations are only occasionally addressed in parliament through debate or questions. The vast majority of parliaments indicate that instructions on UN matters rarely require their approval.

Over 70 per cent of respondents report that MPs are included in national delegations to the UN General Assembly, with 46 per cent doing so always or often. Australia, Bangladesh, Denmark, France, Gabon, Georgia, India, Norway, Pakistan, Senegal and the United Kingdom are among the countries that always include MPs in national delegations to the UN General Assembly. In most countries, this practice tends to be more sporadic and of an ad hoc nature. About one third of the respondents indicate that MPs are never included in UNGA delegations.

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, Hungary, Kenya, Morocco and the Netherlands remain throughout the autumn session of the General Assembly.

The role of MPs in UNGA delegations varies. Generally, they come to attend, listen, observe and familiarize themselves with UN activities and processes. In only a few cases - Austria, Bangladesh, Italy, Islamic Republic of Iran, Namibia and Sweden - 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.

In most countries, the Government provides information to parliament on the nation's financial contribution to the United Nations (general budget, peacekeeping, etc), its agencies and programmes. This, however, is usually done indirectly, as contributions to the United Nations 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?

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 respondent parliaments indicate that MPs are frequently or regularly included in national delegations to such special meetings. Even fewer - 12 per cent - systematically organize debates and hearings to prepare for and follow up on the outcome of such UN meetings. Twenty-six per cent never do so and about 60 per cent do so only occasionally.

Most parliaments do not regularly monitor major international negotiating processes taking place at the United Nations. They do not regularly hold hearings with 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.

Only in a handful of countries is Parliament part and parcel of the process of reporting on the implementation of international agreements. The Parliaments of Austria, Gabon, Georgia, Ireland, Namibia and Tunisia have put in place procedures whereby country reports on the implementation of UN conventions are 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 conveyed, 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.

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?

Very few parliaments (about 12 per cent) 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 United Nations that initiates cooperation or joint activities in parliaments, though developing country parliaments do request seminars and training. Many parliaments report on activities – including technical assistance - initiated by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and other UN bodies such as the Joint UN Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the World Health Organization (WHO).

Developing country parliaments receive support from the United Nations in the form of capacity-building, technical assistance and development programmes. Ethiopia, for example, receives assistance from the United Nations 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, while in Pakistan, UNDP runs a parliamentary development programme.

Many parliaments receive training and technical assistance from the United Nations in areas such as legislative 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.

The issue of how parliaments work with UN country offices is also analyzed in the context of the programme of work of the IPU Committee on UN Affairs and of the Committee’s Advisory Group. The Advisory Group undertook field missions to Tanzania (September 2008) and Viet Nam (February 2009), to examine the process of One UN reform, which is aimed at building greater coherence in the delivery of international development assistance.

In both cases, the findings of the field missions underscore the fact that parliamentary involvement in overall development assistance to the country remains deficient, and that significant efforts are required to redress this situation. In order for parliament to enhance its role in the elaboration and implementation of national development strategies, the

parliamentary leadership in the two pilot countries have committed themselves to review their own mechanisms for engaging with the United Nations through a more dynamic use of existing mechanisms and the application of new ones, a better flow of information, and the establishment of more functional linkages with the United Nations at the level of select parliamentary committees and the Office of the Speaker.

Good practices

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 reports that UN documentation is made available through its parliamentary library and publications.
- In Algeria and Kenya, MPs play an active part by raising questions in parliament on UN matters.
- In Brazil, Botswana, Hungary and Tunisia, 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 of Bosnia and Herzegovina, France, 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 of China, Italy and Tanzania invite local UN offices to attend visitor galleries during sessions or to attend meetings as envoys.
- The Parliaments in Bangladesh, Germany and Sudan 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?

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

One is the fact that many parliaments are still in an early stage of institutional development. They do not have the knowledge or resources they need to be able to deal with the enormous diversity of issues on the UN agenda and the huge volume of documentation and information that needs to be absorbed. Language is also an important barrier since much of the material may not be available in national languages.

Time is a significant constraint. MPs are constantly dividing their time between different interests and commitments and have limited opportunities to address matters that go beyond domestic and constituency issues.

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

Members of parliament are also unfamiliar with the complex bureaucracy of the United Nations. They view the lack of a formal position for parliaments within the UN system as a serious barrier to MPs' involvement.

Many of the respondents indicate an interest in building their capacity to become more involved in UN processes. They suggest that the IPU should seek to facilitate a more systematic exchange of information between parliaments and the United Nations system. It should organize more seminars and training sessions for both MPs and staff on UN reform, global issues and international commitments. It should also develop specific information tools such as handbooks and guidance notes for parliamentarians.

The IPU should continue to sensitize MPs to the importance of their participation in UN-related activities and processes. In order to help bridge the implementation gap of international commitments, there is a need to ensure that legislators are well-informed and actively engaged. Many respondents stress that the IPU should take the lead in initiating parliamentary debate on burning issues such as the global economic, financial and food crises.

There is also great value in the IPU engaging with select parliamentary committees and individual MPs on specific issues pertaining to the global agenda. This helps to better mainstream the global agenda into the work of national parliaments. It also serves to add a parliamentary dimension to the work of the United Nations, and hence help bridge the democracy gap in international relations.

The IPU and the United Nations should pursue their cooperation in strengthening the capacity of parliaments in the development, oversight and implementation of national policies. Many parliaments still require assistance in developing mechanisms to better monitor the implementation of international commitments.

Several respondents suggest that the IPU should focus more on development cooperation and aid effectiveness, including through the organization of more needs assessment and fact-finding missions. Parliaments need to be included in the decision-making structures set up between the United Nations, donors and the executive at the country level; greater access to information on aid flows and modalities is required; and parliament's capacity to analyse annual budgets and other related legislation must be enhanced. From this perspective, the importance of transparency and accountability in the management of international aid is underscored, not least by making sure that incoming funds are reflected in the national budget and hence open to parliamentary scrutiny.

The IPU is invited to help parliaments engage more substantively with the United Nations at the country level. The IPU should also encourage a more coherent and systematic approach to how the United Nations itself relates to national parliaments as key institutions of democratic governance. Strengthening the institution of parliament and providing relevant capacity building and technical assistance should be recognized as a priority for the international community as a whole.

At the international level, the IPU is encouraged to ensure the implementation of relevant UN General Assembly resolutions, particularly those relating to UN-IPU cooperation

and those calling for more systematic involvement of legislators in national delegations to major UN events. The IPU Committee on UN Affairs and its Advisory Group need to be bolstered and better utilized. In general, respondents feel that there is scope for the UN-IPU relationship to be further consolidated and formally institutionalized. Lastly, the IPU has a particular role to play in helping enhance cooperation between the United Nations and regional parliamentary organizations.

Concluding remarks

The IPU and its Committee on United Nations Affairs are grateful to all the parliaments that have responded to this Survey. The input received has been very useful in gaining a better understanding of the realities on the ground, and the needs and expectations of parliaments as they seek to play a more active role in addressing global issues and in engaging with the United Nations system. The conclusions and recommendations formulated by the respondents to the survey will provide the Committee on United Nations Affairs with an important basis for its future work, including strategies for future action.

List of countries that responded to the survey (as at June 2010): Albania, Algeria, Andorra, Angola, Argentina, Armenia, Australia, Austria, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Belgium, Benin, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Botswana, Brazil, Bulgaria, Cambodia, Cameroon, Canada, Chile, China, Congo , Costa Rica, Croatia, Cuba, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Ecuador, Estonia, Ethiopia, Finland, France, Gabon, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, India, Indonesia, Iran (Islamic Rep. of), Italy, Ireland, Japan, Jordan, Kenya, Kuwait, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malaysia, Mexico, Monaco, Mongolia, Morocco, Namibia, Netherlands, New Zealand, Nigeria, Norway, Pakistan, Palau, Panama, Paraguay, Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Republic of Korea, Romania, Rwanda, Samoa, Saudi Arabia, Senegal, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Sudan, Tanzania, Thailand, The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Togo, Tunisia, Turkey, Uganda, Ukraine, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, Uruguay, Viet Nam and Zambia.