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Regional Seminar on the Sustainable Development Goals for the Parliaments of Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia

Parliamentary cooperation for sustainable development: Combating poverty and promoting health-care

24–25 May 2018, Belgrade (Serbia)

OUTCOME DOCUMENT

We, Speakers and members of parliament from Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia gathered in Belgrade, Serbia, from 24 to 25 May 2018 for our fourth Regional Seminar on implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The seminar discussed the theme “Parliamentary cooperation for sustainable development: Combating poverty and promoting health care”. It was jointly organized by the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia and the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU).

The seminar built on the conclusions of our previous regional seminars by sharing experiences on topics that are crucial in attaining the SDGs in the region. We engaged in comprehensive discussions on the results achieved so far and on the parliamentary mechanisms we have created to oversee the implementation of the SDGs. We welcomed the active engagement of all participants as they shared their lessons learned, and benefited from the rich contribution of Government representatives, experts from the United Nations, the IPU and civil society.

We underlined the important link between the achievement of the SDGs and democracy, and the negative impact of poverty and insecurity on democracy. We also highlighted the key role of SDG 16 and its focus on effective institutions for achievement of all other goals.

We firmly believe that parliaments can play a crucial role in supporting implementation of the SDGs through their key legislative, oversight and budgetary functions. The SDGs are a unique opportunity for parliamentarians to demonstrate their commitment to improving people’s lives and the health of the planet.

We congratulate the Serbian National Assembly for being the first parliament in the region to use the IPU/UNDP SDGs Self-Assessment Toolkit to reflect on their capacity to engage with the SDGs and develop a shared vision of priorities for future action. We appreciate the commitment from the Serbian Parliament to renew the self-assessment exercise on an annual basis to ensure that Parliament is performing its role on the SDGs to the greatest possible extent.

Our debates focused on six main themes: (1) the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and priorities of the States in the region; (2) the results obtained by Parliaments in the region by overseeing the implementation of the SDGs: the role of self-assessment; (3) poverty reduction in the region: marginalized groups; (4) implementation of SDG 3: promoting health-care ; (5) climate change compounds poverty and

public health; and (6) inclusion of youth in social and political processes as a prerequisite for an efficient SDGs implementation

There are only twelve years left to implement the SDGs and action at all levels is urgent. With this in mind, we drew up the following strategies and recommendations to further advance parliamentary engagement with the SDGs in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia:

1. The SDGs are a comprehensive development framework that is intended to help focus and coordinate national policies towards a common vision for humanity. We commend the progress our countries have made and applaud the actions undertaken so far. We are pleased to note that countries in the region are increasingly translating the SDGs into a national strategy.
2. No country can reach all SDGs simultaneously and careful domestication of the goals is imperative. Each State needs to identify its own priorities and targets and to develop manageable and reliable indicators to guide national implementation of the SDGs. This process is underway but is not yet complete. We call on parliaments to continue to be active partners for government and society in the identification of national priorities.
3. Parliaments have a critical role to play in realizing the SDGs, as the State institution entrusted with the long-term vision for the country. Each parliament has to find effective ways to hold government accountable for the goals they have subscribed to, and to make sure that enabling laws are passed and budgets are adopted. Oversight mechanisms, such as parliamentary questions and committee hearings, inquiries and reports, are important tools for assessing the concrete impact of government policies and programmes. We encourage parliaments to study closely the recommendations for strengthening parliamentary oversight contained in the 2017 IPU-UNDP Global Parliamentary Report. We noted with concern that communication between parliament and government is often limited, and call for greater efforts to work together effectively on the SDGs.
4. Parliaments need to analyse their capacities to deliver on the SDGs as soon as possible. We strongly encourage all parliaments in the region to build on the Serbian experience and carry out the IPU/UNDP SDGs self-assessment exercise, and we commit to launching this process in our own parliaments. We believe that the SDGs offer a good framework for governing and opposition parties to work together constructively in the national interest. Parliament is well-placed to create a positive momentum within society and build networks with civil society in support of the SDGs.
5. We note with satisfaction that many parliaments have established sub-committees, task forces and other bodies dedicated to the SDGs, and believe that these structures are useful ways to coordinate parliamentary work and keep pressure on the government. At the same time, the SDGs should not be the sole preserve of a specialized committee. Each parliamentary committee, including the budget committee, needs to understand the link between its mandate and the SDGs and to find a mechanism to effectively translate the SDGs into their work. An appropriate means for coordination of committee work can be identified through the self-assessment methodology.
6. Financing for the SDGs is a key challenge. It is necessary to develop the political will to invest existing resources in a sustainable way. As parliamentarians we need to be persistent in seeking reform in favour of greater transparency and accountability, and fighting corruption.
7. Combating poverty and inequalities in the region is a priority for its sustainable development. Although there have been some advances in reducing the number of the poor at the regional level, further actions must be put in place in order to ensure that nobody is left behind. Poverty is not only an economic question, but also a question of being able to live a life in dignity and enjoy basic rights and freedoms. Vulnerable groups in society should be a source of constant vigilance to ensure that no-one is left behind.

8. We stress the importance of taking measures that integrate the specific needs of the poor and of vulnerable groups when designing SDG-related policies and programmes. We underline the need for taxation policies that target poverty reduction. As elected representatives of the people, members of parliament have an important role in reaching out to and engaging marginalized populations. They also have important responsibilities in ensuring that social protection, employment and other policies and programmes respond to real needs and consistently lift people out of poverty. Direct engagement with non-governmental organizations, academic institutions and research institutes can be very helpful in this regard.

9. We need the highest level of political commitment to health, which has to be fully integrated into development policy. The political choice to invest in preventing ill-health produces significant economic and social benefits and has a positive impact on achieving many of the SDGs. The economic threat of non-communicable diseases, for example, is often underestimated. We need comprehensive tobacco policies, fair pricing for medicines and stronger pro-poor policies to limit the need for out-of-pocket payments. No-one should become poor due to ill-health.

10. Robust indicators are essential for measuring progress against the national priorities that we have defined. Each country needs to constantly update and improve its statistical capacities to collect and process data, including in relation to identification of marginalized populations and programming for the poor.

11. We noted with concern that climate change, energy and environmental risk in the region is higher than the EU and global averages. Climate change further exacerbates existing poverty and affects the quality of health of the populations of our region. Parliaments should ensure that the negative impacts of climate change are addressed in the national health strategies and that state subsidies for non-sustainable activities, such as fossil fuels, are eliminated. Furthermore they should take stronger and more concerted actions to respond to climate change by maximizing their roles as legislators and supervisors and also by enhancing international cooperation and partnership to share information and experiences on the regional and global scale.

12. Partnerships are essential for the SDGs. Neighbourly cooperation on the SDGs needs to be of higher quality, including among parliaments. In addition, parliaments should engage in and advocate for strong sectoral, national, regional and international cooperation and partnerships on the SDGs. Particular emphasis should be placed on sharing of experiences and good practice, inclusive policy dialogues with the participation of the government, civil society, research institutes and private sector, and the development of joint projects between countries serving for peace, stability and prosperity.

13. The ultimate purpose of the SDGs is to improve the life of ordinary people. Parliamentarians need to devise effective strategies to mobilize people around the SDGs as a way to transform their society. We must ensure that we listen to all voices in society, including the poor, youth and other vulnerable groups. Many of the global challenges to development - e.g. education, employment, health - are especially salient for young people. It is extremely important to ensure their involvement and consultations in the SDGs implementation process. Thanks to their knowledge and innovative thinking, they could play a key role in the realization of the SDGs.

14. Parliaments in all countries should play an active role in preparation and oversight of the Voluntary National Report to the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF). Parliaments should also be represented on the national delegation to the HLPF in order to further strengthen the ownership of the report and facilitate the engagement of parliament in follow up to the results and recommendations.

15. In order to inspire action on the SDGs, we will bring this Outcome Document to the attention of our parliamentary colleagues through all possible channels. We also undertake to bring it to the attention of other relevant stakeholders.

16. We request the IPU to bring our conclusions and recommendations to the attention of the global parliamentary community at the 139th IPU Assembly in Geneva. We urge the IPU to promote

parliamentary engagement with the SDGs and continue to work with the United Nations and other relevant partners towards the successful implementation of the SDGs.