

The 2030 Agenda, its Sustainable Development Goals, Democratic Participation. The Role of Parliaments¹

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The document “Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” was adopted on 25 September 2015 by the United Nations General Assembly as a resolution and a call for action². The 2030 Agenda offers with its 17 universal, transformative Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) a comprehensive action plan to master or at least mitigate the greatest challenges: poverty and hunger, inequalities, unrest, unregulated and unsafe migration, climate change and weak institutions.

The importance of parliaments

The agenda recognizes the “essential role” of parliaments in the effective implementation of a number of commitments (see paragraph 45). Depending on the global, regional and country-specific conditions, they are required to make every effort to reach the SDGs by 2030. The life of the people shall be improved and resilience against economic and ecological stress situations and shocks must be enhanced.

It is up to the various stakeholders to implement the great narrative of transformation towards a better world – also and not least to parliaments that owe their legitimacy to democratic participation and are committed to democracy and human rights in their efforts to contribute to a dignified life.

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² The Agenda consciously upholds: “We recognize that there are different approaches, visions, models and tools available to each country, in accordance with its national circumstances and priorities, to achieve sustainable development.” (UN General Assembly 2015, paragraph 59)

Parliaments and members of parliament (MPs) are called upon to be drivers and powerful agents of the transformative Agenda, while also building bridges between ethics of moral conviction (idealism) and ethics of responsibility (realism).

System competition between democracy and autocracy

The system competition between democracies and autocracies is virulent in many areas of the world. While the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of 2000 didn't talk of democracy and parliaments, Agenda 2030 abolishes the dichotomy between more visionary, fundamental statements and more operational, practical sustainability goals. The Agenda clarifies that the aspired 'transformation of our world' needs at its core a strengthening of parliaments, human rights, democracy, political participation, participatory decision-making and good governance. The political framework of the Agenda 2030 is clearly oriented towards the paradigm of sustainable, human development ensuring a life of dignity, while economic governance does not clearly outline the principles of a social, ecological market economy.

Democracy has different forms and quality. Key institution or the heart of democracy is a parliament with its ideally six tasks and core competencies: making laws, deciding on the budget, holding governments accountable and exercising control of executive action, electing the parliamentary officers and the executive, functioning as forum of the nation, influencing foreign policy/international relations ("Parliamentary hexagon", Holtz 2003:18f.).

Politically speaking, the parliaments are moving on a continuum between weak rubber stamp legislatures and strong shaping legislatures. The promotion of democracy and parliaments from outside can mainly play a supportive role: the greater the internal demand of citizens for democracy and ownership in the design of polity, the higher the success rate.

Today, democracy is recognized worldwide as a political regulatory framework. The Universal Declaration on Democracy, adopted by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) in 1997, describes democracy as a universally accepted ideal, a form of government and the only political system that has the capacity for self-

correction (IPU: 1997). At the suggestion of the IPU as well as in recognition of the resilience and universality of democratic principles, the UN General Assembly declared in 2007 - seven years after the Millennium Summit - that the 15 September should be celebrated each year as the International Day of Democracy.

Moreover, no dictatorship is viable in the long run, because it contradicts the innermost desire of human beings for freedom and a life in dignity.

The concept of democratic security often carries further than that of the alleged stability of autocratic regimes.

A parliamentary agenda for the implementation of Agenda 2030

The pragmatic vision of the Agenda 2030 needs a comprehensive political will to implement it, especially by the parliaments – from the local to national and international levels (the latter is not addressed in the Agenda).

A parliamentary agenda for the implementation of Agenda 2030 offers the following priority areas of action:

1. Parliaments and MPs must accept their essential responsibility for the effective implementation of Agenda 2030 and SDGs. This requires recognition of their importance for their own country and, ultimately, for the entire globe, for example fighting the causes of flight. It must be accompanied by an appropriate awareness-raising for the public and themselves, for example through annual parliamentary debates, the election of Agenda officers or the establishment of parliamentary intergroups serving as Agenda focal points.
2. The implementation of the 2030 Agenda and SDGs requires a holistic approach that integrates the economic, social, environmental and political dimensions of sustainable, human development (agenda-quadrangle).
3. A close relationship exists between human rights, democracy, good governance, the rule of law and an enabling environment at national and international levels, on the one hand, and the implementation of Agenda 2030 and SDGs on the other (Agenda 2030: para. 8, 9; IPU 2017).

4. Political parties, though not mentioned in the Agenda, should include in their programmes and other relevant policy documents the SDGs as their own important, priority objectives.

5. Parliaments play an essential role (see para. 45) in the embedding of SDGs into corresponding laws or legal frameworks, e.g. with regard to sustained and sustainable economic growth and decent work for all (SDG 8), the combat against climate change and its impacts (SDG 13), sustainable use of oceans and seas (SDG 14), protection, restoration and sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems and forests, the combat against desertification, the achievement of a land degradation-neutral world and the halt of biodiversity loss (SDG 15) (legislative main-streaming of SDGs).

6. In budgetary matters and, in particular, in the adoption of budgetary plans relevant to the SDGs, parliaments bear a special responsibility for adequate funding (cf. para. 45) – and foremost for their contribution towards ending poverty and hunger (SDG 1 + 2), promoting quality education (SDG 4), ensuring access to sustainable water and sanitation and energy for all (SDGs 6 + 7), building resilient infrastructure (SDG 9), making cities and settlements resilient and sustainable (SDG 11) and providing access to justice for all (SDG 16). In particular, SDG 17.2 addresses the efforts of industrialised countries. It is best for them to ensure - by means of binding timetables - that their commitments in the field of official development assistance/cooperation (ODA) be respected. This includes the often made commitment to achieve the target of 0.7 per cent of gross national income for ODA to developing countries and 0.15 to 0.20 per cent of ODA/GNI to least developed countries. In addition, ODA needs an Agenda-compatible transformation.

7. Realizing gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls will make crucial contribution to progress across all the Goals and targets (para. 20 and SDG 5). Parliaments, MPs and political parties must achieve a breakthrough in putting this key finding into practice. It is important to ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life (SDG 5.5).

8. Of paramount importance for the implementation of most SDGs are the establishment of effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels (SDG 16) and a decision-making process that is responsive, inclusive,

participatory and representative (16.7). The bi-and multilateral development policy should support more than before adequate own efforts for the realisation of the two objectives as well as for the building of strong democratic parliaments.

9. Parliaments must also play an important role in ensuring accountability for the effective implementation of promised commitments and in supporting review processes of progress at national and subnational levels. (para. 45, 79).

10. The parliaments should also take on board the call of SDG 17 to strengthen the means of implementation and to revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development - including the enhancement of policy coherence for sustainable development (SDG 17.14) - or the hope and expectation of multi-stakeholder partnerships in involving governments as well as parliaments, the United Nations system and other international institutions, local authorities, indigenous peoples, civil society, business and the private sector, the scientific and academic community (para. 52).

Conclusion

Parliaments are essential for the creation of a political general will. They are important agents involved in the implementation of Agenda 2030 and its SDGs at both national and international levels. In the latter case, examples include (i) the European Parliament, which has to set Agenda 2030 as an important framework for the external relations of the European Union (EU) and should push the EU's pioneering role in the promotion of a rules-based, open, non-discriminatory and equitable multilateral trading system (SDG 17.10); (ii) The Pan-African Parliament, which should, among other goals, urge sustainable industrialization (SDG 9) and call for peaceful, inclusive societies for sustainable development (SDG 16); or (iii) a new United Nations Parliamentary Assembly, whose most noble task would be to critically accompany the implementation of the Agenda throughout the UN system.

Literature

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