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Webinar for the Parliaments of
the UN ECE region



UNECE

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The impact of COVID-19 on SDG implementation in the UN ECE region: What role for parliaments?

Organized jointly by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU)
and the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE)

Introduction

On 9 March 2021, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) jointly held an online event entitled *The impact of COVID-19 on SDG implementation in the UN ECE region: What role for parliaments?*

The webinar was part of a series of IPU regional webinars on SDG implementation in a time of pandemic and was intended as a contribution to the UNECE Regional Forum on Sustainable Development, by providing parliaments' input.

The event aimed to provide parliaments with a platform to:

- Acquire up-to-date information on the status of SDG implementation, as well as recommendations on how to accelerate transformative change in the region and ensure that COVID-19 recovery strategies incorporate the SDG lens;
- Exchange national experiences and discuss common challenges, as well as strategies to promote a green recovery and contribute to the achievement of the SDGs by 2030.

The webinar was attended by 117 participants from 38 countries, including parliamentarians, parliamentary staff, government representatives, members of regional parliamentary assemblies, members of civil society, and representatives of the UN and IPU.

Opening remarks by the co-organizers

Mr. Martin Chungong, Secretary General, Inter-Parliamentary Union

Mr. Chungong said that the current challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic could only be solved through global and coherent solutions that incorporated a holistic approach. Firm political will and international cooperation were essential. He highlighted that, as countries were now resetting their priorities and reallocating resources to deal with the pandemic, **parliaments should be in a position to influence policies and budgets to ensure that COVID-19 pandemic responses and recovery strategies incorporate the SDG framework in its entirety.** Parliaments should be at the heart of the national and global response to COVID-19, and should also be at the heart of transformational change. Going back to business as usual could not be an option.

Ms. Olga Algayerova, Executive Secretary, UNECE

Ms. Olga Algayerova stated that progress on the implementation of the SDGs was slow in all regions. The COVID-19 pandemic had affected and continued to affect the meagre gains made. Social and economic inequalities had been exacerbated. However, **COVID-19 should be looked on as an**

opportunity and parliamentarians had an important role to play, in particular in adopting relevant legislation, holding governments to account and making sure all voices were heard and the needs of all people were met. Ms. Algayerova said that, because the challenges were so immense, no country could confront them on its own. Regional and international cooperation were therefore critical for progress. Moving away from the linear economic model to a circular economy was an important step in this direction, in UNECE's view.

Segment 1: Setting the scene – the regional status of SDG implementation

Mr. Andres Vikat, Chief of Section, Social and Demographic Statistics, UNECE

In his presentation, Mr. Vikat stressed that regional cooperation was important for implementation of the SDGs. He announced that each UN Regional Economic Commission would soon launch a report on SDG implementation in their region, and the one for UNECE would be launched on 17 March. Among other things, the report highlighted the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women, and in some ways the elderly, in terms of several development outcomes, such as job losses, access to digital technologies, access to health services, etc. **International cooperation remained a key factor that could help foster new solutions and creative thinking.**

Ms. Senida Mesi (Albania), MP, Chair of the Sub-Committee on Sustainable Development

Ms. Mesi said that COVID-19 imposed significant challenges for the Albanian Parliament in terms of its regular work but they had been overcome on some of the most critical issues, such as the annual state budget, which had included increases for health and a range of other social and economic services. In 2020, the law on domestic violence had been amended to provide further protection for women and children. She said that oversight and monitoring through field visits had been heavily impacted by the pandemic, resulting in less engagement with the public and an inability to properly monitor the implementation of the SDGs. Regional cooperation would be important to help build the infrastructure in parliament to make it more resilient and assistance would be needed to better understand how to integrate the SDGs in the budget and have more inclusive economic growth.

Segment 2: Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals despite the COVID-19 pandemic – an exchange of experiences and good practices

Ms. Marianna Bolshakova, Regional Coordinator, Environmental Law and Governance, United Nations Environment Programme

Ms. Bolshakova stated that it was clear what needed to be done to turn the economy around but the process itself was not easy. **Parliamentarians were in the driving seat – the laws they would adopt in the coming period would have a long-term impact on the economy, environment. Incentives in legislation for green and sustainable investments could create job opportunities.** The note that the IPU and UNEP had produced was designed for parliamentarians and gave some of the basic steps that could be followed to ensure a green COVID recovery and socio-economic advantages such as job creation. Such areas included building green infrastructure, waste management, the circular economy, energy transformation and biodiversity.

Ms. Silvia Dinică (Romania), Senator and Member of the Bureau of the IPU Standing Committee on Sustainable Development

Ms. Dinică, currently working as a co-rapporteur on the IPU resolution on digitalization and circular economy, said that many of its recommendations were complementary or similar to those in the new IPU-UNEP publication *Green approaches to COVID-19 recovery: Policy note for parliamentarians*. The resolution also went further, giving recommendations to parliaments to engage on digitalization more broadly, including through the scaling up of new technologies, as well as on issues such as changing consumer behaviour. She said that the resolution would be debated and was set for adoption by the IPU Assembly in May 2021.

Segment 3: Experiences from the region with Voluntary National Reviews

Mr. Alessandro Motter, Senior Advisor, Economic and Social Affairs, Office of the Permanent Observer of the IPU to the United Nations

Mr. Motter said that the IPU promoted the involvement of parliaments in VNRs and conducted an annual survey to monitor the extent and impact of that engagement. Ten countries from the UNECE region had volunteered to conduct a VNR in 2021. The results of the 2020 IPU survey showed that parliaments were increasingly involved in the VNR process, however it was hard to gauge the extent of that involvement or how meaningful it had been. Mr. Motter highlighted **how important it was for parliaments themselves to request their governments to brief them about the plan for the VNR and to design a way in which they could get involved and make a contribution, drawing on their core functions of legislation, oversight, representation and budget.**

Ms. Petra Bayr (Austria), MP and Member of the IPU Advisory Group on Health

Ms. Bayr stated that Agenda 2030 was inclusive in nature, and the involvement of parliaments was therefore central for its implementation. The core functions of parliaments made it clear why they should be engaged. She affirmed that legislative power was key – the SDGs were not mandatory and had therefore to be translated into national law to have an impact – as well as the budget function – the prioritization of financing of programmes that were SDG-aligned should be high on parliamentary agendas. Parliaments could also act in terms of oversight and ensure that bills coming to them for approval were brought closer to the SDGs. On representation, parliamentarians were closest to the people and most aware of their needs, the culture and the environmental aspects, and could include those needs in a meaningful way in legislation. She concluded by saying that the challenges were particularly pronounced with the turnover of parliamentarians after elections, which is why it was crucial to have an introductory course on the SDGs for newly-elected MPs.