



INTER-PARLIAMENTARY UNION

Statement by:

The Honourable Anne S. Makinda
Deputy Speaker of the Parliament of Tanzania on behalf of the Inter-
Parliamentary Union

High-level Meeting of the General Assembly on the midterm review of
the implementation of the Programme of Action for the Least
Developed Countries for the Decade 2001-2010

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Madam President,
Excellencies,

I am honoured to address you all today on behalf of the Inter-Parliamentary Union. I am a member of parliament from one of the 50 LDCs, Tanzania, and this debate offers me the opportunity to explain how, at the parliamentary level, both globally and nationally we can advance the Brussels Programme of Action in the next five years and beyond.

The UN Secretary General's report that concluded the yearlong review process provides many clues as to the actual state of affairs in the LDCs on many fronts, including political and economic. We share the view that progress in the LDCs is occurring, but at too slow a pace. What is needed is both a qualitative and quantitative leap forward if we are to raise living standards and lower inequalities in countries where the vast majority of people still go without basic necessities and are simply denied the opportunity to make a decent living, send their children to school, fight disease, live in peace and in a clean and safe environment, and participate in decision-making.

We have learned during this session and read in the report of the Secretary General of many good ideas to help the LDCs. We support them all. But for the IPU, a political organization devoted to strengthening democracy and good governance, the crux of the matter comes down to this: the LDCs will only be able to mobilize their own human, natural, and financial resources for development, and make the best of external support, when their principal decision-making organ, parliament, assumes its rightful role in the development process.

In spite of some progress in recent years – with more regular and fairer elections, and an overall improvement in the performance of parliaments – LDC parliaments are still very far from being able to exercise an effective oversight of government action as well as their legislative and budgetary roles. Distortions in the political process have thus impacted the economic and social domains, providing at least some of the explanation as to why (income poverty remains basically the same as five years ago in most LDCs, in spite of higher economic growth.

As we heard again last Friday, at a parliamentary debate that the IPU and the Office of the High Representative for the LDCs organized together here at the United Nations, the truth is that parliaments in many LDC countries continue to be confronted with a series of grave difficulties foremost among which is the over-bearing attitude of the executive branch, sometimes backed by the military. Indeed, many LDC parliaments continue to suffer the legacy of rubber stamp. They are also plagued by inefficient practices and working methods and lack of

co-operation with civil society. There is also a disconnect between the people and their representatives and the latter are not always seen as articulating the interests of the former. In addition, independent media organizations, properly acquainted with parliamentary procedures, are scarce, making it difficult to have a balanced and fair view of parliamentary proceedings.

Underlying all this is a lack of resources and skills to empower parliaments and their members. Resources are critically needed to acquaint newly elected parliamentarians with the rudiments of their job, hire qualified support staff for constituency and legislative offices, build infrastructure like parliamentary libraries and research services, and enable parliaments to broadcast what goes on within their walls to the outside public. In this connection, the potential offered by the new information and communications technologies still needs to be harnessed with a view to greater efficiency.

The IPU has devoted a great deal of time and effort in improving governance and building capacities in the spirit of Commitment II and III of the Brussels Programme. Technical assistance programmes have been developed in support of parliaments in countries such as Afghanistan, Burundi, Ethiopia, Equatorial Guinea, and Rwanda, with a view to improving their functioning both internally and vis-à-vis constituents and the executive branch. Regional seminars have been conducted in Africa and Asia in a number of areas, such as the translation of international treaties and other instruments into national law, or the more active participation of women in political life. They have also focussed on the role of parliaments in promoting sustainable development and security sector reform.

The IPU is also working hard to raise the bar of what constitutes a democratic parliament. In this respect, a comprehensive study was recently published, entitled *Parliament and Democracy in the Twenty-First Century: a guide to good practice*. Based in part on a worldwide survey of parliaments, to which several LDC parliaments contributed, this practical tool for parliamentarians and practitioners alike provides the main elements for parliaments to measure their own performance with respect to five key principles: representation, transparency, accessibility, accountability, and effectiveness. The guide offers a golden opportunity to highlight success stories in parliaments' endeavours to promote democracy and good governance.

Madam President,

If the parliamentary institution is central to good governance and democracy, and by extension to development, in the LDCs, it follows that more needs to be done to support it. We in the international community must join forces and take full advantage of our complementarities to help focus more attention on the needs of LDC parliaments in the next five years. Three practical steps should be considered urgently:

First, as a matter of policy, the international community needs to increase its technical assistance to parliaments as a share of total funding. Donors must be more focused on the critical role of parliaments in the further development of the LDCs and in the attainment of the Brussels Programme. It is critically important that funds meant to build the capacities of parliaments be given to and managed directly by them, thus facilitating their transition toward greater independence from the executive branch. This does not preclude the need to ensure accountable management of such resources. We need to increase several times the number of seminars, publications, and amount of equipment, including information technologies, which parliaments badly need to improve their working methods and acquire their own educational tools as well as access to independent sources of information and analyses.

A comprehensive needs assessment of LDC parliaments should also be performed to establish priorities in the performance of tasks among agencies and the distribution of funding over the five-year period.

Second, together with the UN, we must work to ensure that the national development strategies that UN Secretary General's report invites LDC governments to put in place are truly owned and driven by the people through the parliamentary process. The same applies of course to the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers. The IPU made a contribution in that direction last year, when it encouraged LDC parliaments to participate in the preparation of the national reports as a first step toward the midterm global review of the Brussels Programme. But it is high time that the UN too, in its resolutions and operational activities, placed more emphasis on the role of parliaments in these exercises.

Third, it is important that parliaments and not only governments and international agencies be seen increasingly as actors in building South-South as well as North-South cooperation. We should not underestimate the importance of inter-parliamentary cooperation at the regional level, which in some cases is already bearing fruits. We need to help parliaments to learn from one another, compare experiences, and exchange information on best legislative practices and policies. Parliaments should also be seen increasingly as forums that can assist in peace-building and conflict resolution in those LDC countries that are either at risk of or are emerging from conflict.

In all this, the IPU stands ready to assist with its expertise and direct access to the parliaments themselves. Together with the United Nations and its development programmes, including now the new Democracy Fund, the IPU will continue to engage and work closely with the LDCs in their quest for democracy and development.

Thank you.