

Chapter 11

Enhancing Parliamentary Diplomacy for Sustainable Development

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Introduction

The international domain is growing more complex as it rapidly evolves into a multiplex world characterised by complex interconnectedness, interdependence, and inter-operability. Nation states are becoming more interdependent, and global issues are becoming more complicated and interrelated. It is now clear that no country can singlehandedly address global issues such as climate change, terrorism, violent extremism, natural disasters, and pandemic diseases. However, the legitimacy and functions of global governance and multilateral systems are in decline amidst a wave of protectionism, populist politics, and geopolitical contests. One key factor that has led to the disaffection with globalisation and multilateral systems is the lack of public participation in shaping a type of global governance that truly benefits people's lives.

In this respect, multi-stakeholder collaboration has been recognised as the fundamental approach to identify holistic and effective solutions to these shared challenges. Governance plays a critical role in realising the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The targets most relevant to governance are Target 16.6 on developing 'effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels'; and Target 16.7 on ensuring 'responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels'. Related to these objectives are Target 17.14 on enhancing 'policy coherence for sustainable development'; and Target 17.16 on enhancing 'global partnerships' and 'multi-stakeholder partnerships'.

The decline of globalisation and the weakening of global governance due to the return of great power politics, rising protectionism and populist politics, and inefficient multilateral systems pose a significant threat to global peace and prosperity. In this context, parliamentary diplomacy plays an increasingly important role in strengthening global governance and promoting multi-stakeholder consultation and partnership. This chapter explores the roles of parliamentary diplomacy and parliamentarian institutions in addressing global issues, with a focus on the realisation of the SDGs, and how the Asia-Europe Parliamentary Partnership (ASEP) can be used as a mechanism to achieve these ends.

Parliamentary Diplomacy and Global Issues

Global issues are becoming more complex, transboundary, and interconnected. Multiplexity has emerged as the new normal and main characteristic of an evolving world order shaped by multiple actors, including not only major powers but also middle powers, small states, international institutions, parliamentary institutions, multinational corporations, international nongovernment organisations, international social movements, and transnational crime and terrorist networks, amongst others (Acharya, 2017). This multiplex world order is characterised by (i) the absence of a single overarching global hegemonic power; (ii) the increasing number and diversity of actors; (iii) the persistence of cultural, ideological, and political diversity; (iv) increasing global and regional interdependence; and (v) multiple layers of governance. In this multiplex world, collaborative leadership is of utmost importance in maintaining peace, development, and justice (Acharya, 2019). The question is, what are the roles of parliaments in this evolving multiplex world order?

Since the end of the Cold War, the role of parliamentary actors in international relations has grown remarkably quickly. Parliamentary institutions engage in international affairs in four ways: (i) by enhancing their oversight capacity on their government's foreign policy, (ii) by conducting parliamentary diplomacy at both the bilateral and multilateral levels, (iii) by getting involved in international and regional organisations, and (iv) by conveying the concerns or messages of local people to international and regional organisations (Coefelice, 2017). The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) stresses that 'parliamentary diplomacy is an essential part of international cooperation, helping to building bridges between countries and peoples and seeking to contribute a parliamentary perspective to global governance as well as the promotion of peace' (IPU, 2019).

Parliamentary diplomacy generally refers to the use of parliamentary procedures and mechanisms to impact international relations and the conduct of foreign policy. It is about 'the construction of state actors', 'the pooling of power', and 'common ideals' (Gots, 2005: 276). It targets 'catalysing, facilitating and strengthening the existing constitutional functions of parliaments through dialogues between peers on countless open policy questions across continents and levels of governance' (Stavridis and Jancic, 2017). Parliaments have the important role of communicating policy, and can act as 'transmission belts' amongst governments, civil society, nongovernment organisations, the media, and the citizens themselves (Stavridis and Jancic, 2016: 115). Ample evidence demonstrates that parliamentary assemblies and parliamentarians are 'autonomous actors, prime movers, path breakers, agenda setters, and actors on their own initiative' in international affairs (Stavridis, 2016: 368).

In terms of activities, parliamentary diplomacy covers the full range of international affairs conducted by parliamentarians, with the aim to ‘increase mutual understanding between countries, to assist each other in improving the control of governments and the representation of a people and to increase the democratic legitimacy of inter-governmental institutions’ (Weisglas and de Boer, 2007: 93–94). Globalisation, socialisation, and technical cooperation enable parliamentarians to discuss various international issues and exchange best practices of control of their respective executives in international affairs (Stavridis and Jancic, 2017). In a parliamentary democratic system, parliamentary institutions are ‘autonomous foreign affairs actors that provide their own input into foreign policy making and have their own impact on it through parliamentary diplomacy’ (Stavridis and Jancic, 2017: 5).

Parliamentary diplomacy can be categorised into four layers at the intra-state, inter-state, intra-regional, and inter-regional levels. Parliaments are most effective at mobilising different actors and stakeholders, ranging from grassroots campaigners to political leaders, to address global issues (Fiott, 2011). Some of parliaments’ international roles are (i) to contribute to intergovernmental negotiations and institutional building processes, (ii) to carry out parliamentary oversight over international negotiating processes, (iii) to ratify and enforce international agreements, (iv) to promote multi-stakeholder dialogues on international issues and responses, and (v) to disseminate information on international issues and organisations to citizens.

Global issues such as climate change, epidemic diseases, and violent extremism have become more complex, with impacts that cross national boundaries. Parliaments have started to adapt their approaches to position themselves to address global issues effectively, having realised that the only effective way to address such issues is through international cooperation and partnership. Parliamentary diplomacy is a key means of enhancing the legitimacy of and public trust and confidence in international cooperation mechanisms and multilateral systems. The sources of parliamentary diplomacy include institutional capacity, legitimacy, knowledge, and access (Fanck, 2018).

Parliamentarians are key agents in communicating and gathering inputs for and from their constituents regarding international issues that affect their security and socioeconomic well-being. Given the increasing democratisation of opinion thanks to the omnipresence of information and communications technology, parliamentarians are compelled to communicate with their constituents more effectively to meet the people’s rising expectations. Parliamentarians, especially those who deal in foreign affairs, can invite leaders of government ministries and state agencies to give briefings and address probing questions on international issues, foreign affairs, and trade policies that affect their citizens.

In addition to being an effective and legitimate means of governmental outreach to the people, parliamentary institutions can influence foreign policy and international relations through the ratification of international treaties and enactment of laws relating to bilateral and multilateral cooperation, parliamentary oversight mechanisms such as hearings and petitions, approval of annual budgets for foreign activities, and bilateral and multilateral diplomatic negotiations, especially addressing transboundary issues and conflicts (Sayfullaev, 2016). In addition, parliamentary institutions play a critical role in regional conflict prevention, peacebuilding initiatives, and post-conflict national reconstruction (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2006).

In 2016, the IPU together with the UNDP issued a joint policy framework and assessment tool kit on the role of parliaments in realising the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, a groundbreaking global commitment to end poverty and set the world on a sustainable path to inclusive development. This ambitious people-centric development agenda, which was endorsed by government leaders at a UN summit in September 2015, centres on a set of 17 SDGs and 169 actionable targets. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development states that,

We acknowledge also the essential role of national parliaments through their enactment of legislation and adoption of budgets and their role in ensuring accountability for the effective implementation of our commitments... ‘We the peoples’ are the celebrated opening words of the Charter of the United Nations. It is ‘we the peoples’ who are embarking today on the road to 2030. Our journey will involve 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 – and all people. (UN, 2015)

To realise the SDGs, a whole-of-society approach is needed, meaning the people must be included at every stage, from initial policy design to implementation and monitoring. National and subnational parliaments must work to facilitate this. Parliamentarians have a constitutional responsibility and democratic accountability to support and monitor SDG implementation by acting as an interface between the people and state institutions, and promoting and empowering people-centred policies and legislation to ensure that no one is left behind. One of parliaments’ primary objectives is to establish a dialogue about the SDGs with local stakeholders that allows them to express how they want to see the SDGs implemented in their community. Such a dialogue should be a natural part of the interaction amongst governments, parliaments, parliamentarians, and the public (UNDP, 2017).

Parliamentarians play a critical role in policy-based leadership by framing and integrating the SDGs in national development agendas and instrumental leadership, crafting political consensus and specific policy solutions to realise the SDGs, sharing their reflections and inputs, and proposing recommendations on SDG implementation. Parliament speakers from around the world held an assembly in Hanoi in April 2015 and a conference in New York from 31 August to 2 September 2015 with the aim of contributing inputs to the SDGs. The Hanoi Declaration stresses the following:

We commit to doing our utmost to strengthen national ownership of the goals, particularly by making them known to our constituents. People must understand how the goals are relevant to their lives. As representatives of the people, we are responsible for ensuring that each and every voice is heard in the political process without discrimination and irrespective of social status... We commit to translating the goals into enforceable domestic laws and regulations, including through the critical budget process. Each country must do its part to ensure that all the goals are met... We urge governments to conduct negotiations keeping in mind the real needs and expectations of citizens and addressing the critical linkages between sustainable development, democratic governance and human rights. (IPU, 2015b)

The Declaration of the Fourth World Conference of Speakers of Parliament highlights parliaments' important role in implementing the SDGs.

We recognize the important responsibilities that are incumbent on parliaments to ensure implementation of the new SDGs. As Speakers, we are ready to do everything in our power to facilitate the consideration of relevant legislation and allocation of budgetary resources, and to hold governments accountable for the attainment of the goals. We will draw from a vast catalogue of actions to help build public awareness and national ownership, strengthen coherence within and between national and local administration and parliament, facilitate citizen involvement and evaluate and report on progress. (IPU, 2015a)

The key roles of parliamentary institutions in addressing national and global issues are related to their legitimate power and intervention in law-making, budgeting, oversight, and representation. It has been argued that,

...the parliamentarians give political impetus towards the domestication, implementation and monitoring of the SDGs. The parliaments in many developing countries are facing the challenges and constraints to effective parliamentary engagement are (a) insufficient capacities, resources, structures and processes, and lack of political will; (b) lack of easy access to aid, budget and information; (c) lack of systematic civic engagement; and (d) under-representation of women and key populations. (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2019)

Sustainable Development Matters for the Asia–Europe Meeting Process

The Asia–Europe Meeting (ASEM) process initiated a dialogue on sustainable development, with the aim of further promoting discussions and policy consultations as to how to achieve the SDGs. The first ASEM Dialogue on Sustainable Development, which took place in Budapest in 2012, focused on the role of water in sustainable regional development strategies. The Eighth ASEM, held in Siem Reap, Cambodia in 2019 on the theme ‘Enhancing Water Partnership Towards Sustainable Development and Inclusive Growth’, aimed to promote the exchange of knowledge, experiences, and best practices within the ASEM framework on key policy areas, such as the water–energy–food security nexus, climate change, and public–private partnership for achieving the SDGs.

The ASEM leaders have also paid special attention to enhanced interregional cooperation and partnership on sustainable development. For instance, the Statement of the 11th ASEM Summit in 2016 reads:

Leaders underlined the importance of adapting the relevant national policy planning process, development plans or strategies to integrate the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and of putting in place systematic and multi-layered follow-up and review of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda at the international and national level. They expressed readiness on the part of ASEM to contribute to the follow-up and review process of the UN and other organizations at the global level, including at the high-level forum on sustainable development under the auspices of the United Nations Economic and Social Council and the UN General Assembly. Recognizing the opportunities, but also the challenges that the implementation of the 2030 Agenda represents for ASEM partners, Leaders agreed to promote further cooperation, including sharing of the best practices and experiences among partners within the framework of the ASEM Sustainable Development Dialogue launched by the Budapest Initiative. (Chair’s Statement, 2016)

Moreover, the Statement of the 12th ASEM Summit in 2018 reads:

Leaders stressed their commitment to implement fully the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals and Addis Ababa Action Agenda with the aim of eradicating poverty and building an inclusive and sustainable future for all, with no one left behind and a strong focus on reaching the most vulnerable. Leaders emphasised the role of young people in contributing to sustainable development and the role that various stakeholders can play in pursuing social and economic inclusion, sustainable societies and people-centred development and the importance of public–private partnerships. Leaders also underlined the significance of science, technology and innovation cooperation in accomplishing the 2030 Agenda and tackling global challenges in a sustainable way. (Chair’s Statement, 2018)

At the ASEM foreign ministers meeting in 2019, the ministers called for ‘accelerated action’ and ‘full implementation’ of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Ministers emphasised the importance of the eradication of poverty in all its forms and dimensions, including extreme poverty, as well the protection of human rights, are indispensable requirements for sustainable development. They called for a paradigm shift to forge a virtuous cycle of environmentally-conscious growth, while stressing that sustainable development, security and human rights are mutually reinforcing. Ministers stressed the role of young people, civil society and various stakeholders, including responsible business. They highlighted the positive role of ASEM cooperation and the exchanges of best practices and capacity building on education, research, science, innovation and technology to fight inequality and poverty. (Chair’s Statement, 2019)

Parliaments’ Roles in Realising Sustainable Development Goals

To realise the SDGs, governments and international institutions must earn legitimacy in mobilising action and resources. The value judgements and trade-offs amongst economic, social, and environmental objectives cannot be determined by governments alone. The engagement of a wide range of stakeholders and a shared understanding of the nature and benefits of the SDGs are critical for building ownership and mobilising action. Multi-stakeholder engagement is essential in light of the long-term nature of the SDGs (Monkelban, 2019: 56).

Building global partnerships on sustainable development is expressed in SDG 17, which implies that international partnerships and multi-stakeholder collaboration are critical to realising the SDGs. The SDGs also stress the importance of inclusiveness – the participation of all segments of society – in order to mobilise and share knowledge and expertise, and provide necessary technical and financial resources.

Parliamentary institutions, which are a vital bridge between the state and society, are key stakeholders in mobilising resources and directing national agendas towards realising regional and international goals. Therefore, public-private and civil society partnerships are critical to concretising the SDGs. SDG 16 elucidates the importance of promoting peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development. The Declaration of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development states that, ‘we acknowledge the essential role of national parliaments through their enactment of legislation and adoption of budgets and their role in ensuring accountability for the effective implementation of our commitments’.

Parliaments have four important roles to play in realising the SDGs: oversight, legislation, representation, and budget scrutiny. To help fulfil this mission, parliaments can (i) increase national involvement, (ii) provide a platform for national and international discussions and dialogues, (iii) encourage debate and consensus building amongst national stakeholders, (iv) develop robust legal frameworks that motivate stakeholders to implement the SDGs, (v) collect input from citizens and civil society groups, (vi) allocate appropriate levels of funding, and (vii) conduct oversight using annual checks and requesting and reviewing reports from the relevant committees concerning progress made in achieving the SDGs.

Parliaments can contribute to the design and implementation of national plans on the SDGs by implementing a wide-ranging, public consultation process; formally adopting the national plan after a comprehensive review and formal debate; and asking governments for regular progress reports on the implementation of the national plan. The core parliamentary roles of law-making, budgeting, oversight, and representation of constituency interests are all critical to the full implementation of the SDGs (IPU, 2017).

Parliamentary contributions to voluntary national reviews (VNRs) help to evaluate and track progress regarding the SDGs. The key functions of the VNRs are planning and institutionalising, gathering inputs and data, writing and reviewing, and conducting presentations and follow up. The VNRs' deliverables are the enhancement of multi-stakeholder partnerships and promotion of active participation, along with a sense of ownership, amongst all relevant parties. Furthermore, prioritisation of the SDGs in national development planning, the raising of public awareness, policy advocacy, and the development of effective and inclusive assessment mechanisms regarding the implementation of the SDGs are considered vital.

With regard to SDG 16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions), parliaments have a critical role to play in meeting two specific targets: Target 16.6 on developing 'effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels'; and Target 16.7 on ensuring 'responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels'. Other targets refer to key principles of democratic governance such as the rule of law, justice, access to information, and fundamental freedoms. Parliaments must engage in the implementation and oversight of the entire SDG framework (IPU, 2017).

The key challenge for parliaments, especially in Asian countries, is how to increase their engagement and influence over the SDG agenda, as SDG programmes are mainly shaped by the executive body. International parliamentary forums such as the IPU, ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Assembly, the Asia–Pacific Parliamentary Forum, the World Parliamentary Forum on Sustainable Development, and the ASEP need to invest more effort and resources in developing international consensus as well as planning an engagement strategy regarding the SDGs.

Asia–Europe Parliamentary Partnership Meeting and the Sustainable Development Goals

The ASEP Meeting brings together parliamentarians from Asia and Europe to provide policy inputs and recommendations to the ASEM process. ASEP is the parliamentary arm of ASEM, and its first meeting took place in 1996, in tandem with ASEM. It is an informal forum and its declarations are not legally binding.

ASEP has two main objectives. First, it serves as a forum for inter-parliamentary contacts, exchanges, and diplomacy amongst parliaments, and as a vehicle to promote mutual understanding amongst the people and countries of Asia and Europe. Second, it provides a link between the parliaments of Asia and Europe and ASEM, thereby enabling active parliamentary contributions to the ASEM process, particularly in annual meetings. ASEP parliamentarians have underscored the relevance of inter-parliamentary diplomacy to deepen mutual trust and understanding further and boost multifaceted cooperation between Asian and European countries through reinforced political, economic, sociocultural, and educational cooperation.

Achieving the SDGs is one of the key areas of cooperation facilitated by ASEM. ASEP plays a significant role in promoting dialogues and impacting national and regional policies on the SDGs. In almost all ASEP declarations, sustainable development and inclusive growth are the two key terms. For instance, at the Eighth ASEP in Rome in October 2014, the parliamentarians stressed the importance of a holistic approach in addressing sustainable development, that is, the balance and integration of social, economic, and environmental dimensions. They also stressed the importance of food security and integrated water resource management, and the role of clean technologies.

ASEP Parliamentarians insisted on pushing for the exchange of best practices of European and Asian experiences of sustainable place-based development of agriculture and food systems... they emphasized the need to integrate water resource management in economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development... ASEP Parliamentarians agreed on the importance of sharing experience and knowledge on integrated water resources management [and]... underlined the important role of clean technologies (cleantech) as a cross-cutting element for enhancing competitiveness and promoting sustainable development. (ASEP, 2014)

At the Ninth ASEP Meeting on 21–22 April 2016 in Ulaanbaatar, the parliamentarians stressed that,

In line with the goals set in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, ASEP Parliamentarians reiterated the need to build peaceful, just and inclusive societies on the basis of transparent, effective and accountable institutions, including legislative bodies at all levels. Therefore, ASEP Parliamentarians emphasized the vital role of national parliaments in implementing the 2030 Agenda with a view to adopting relevant legislations, allocating budgetary resources and ensuring government accountability. They acknowledged the importance of dialogue and cooperation amongst ASEP Parliaments which are well supported by the exchange of best practices on parliamentary procedures, functions and administrative set-up in the form of capacity-building. (ASEP, 2016)

At the 10th ASEP Meeting on 27–28 September in 2018 in Brussels, the parliamentarians highlighted collective efforts to address climate change and achieve the SDGs.

ASEP 10 calls for the highest political commitment to the effective implementation of the Paris Agreement in all its aspects, including, inter alia, mitigation, adaptation, finance, technology development and transfer, capacity-building and transparency of actions and support, in reflection of equity and the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and capabilities... ASEP 10 expresses the need to set ambitious goals on production and consumption of plastic, particularly single-use plastic items, and invites ASEM to consider firm recommendations in this direction towards achieving significant progress to ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns (Goal 12 of the Sustainable Development Goals)... ASEP 10 expresses its serious concern about the continuing loss of biodiversity which has an overwhelming intrinsic value that must be protected for the benefit of future generations, and stresses the critical role of biodiversity in the Sustainable Development Goals. (ASEP, 2018)

Conclusion

Global issues, especially sustainability issues, have become more complex and interconnected. Sustainable development is a means of achieving sustainability, and implies a broad understanding of environmental, social, and economic systems. The lack of effective governance at the local, national, regional, and global levels in addressing sustainability issues is a matter of concern. Innovative shifts in thinking and acting are therefore needed. Addressing sustainability issues requires the participation of all stakeholders at all levels of governance; that is to say, a coordinated response across governance levels and amongst all sectors and actors in society.

Within the evolving multiplex world order, multi-stakeholder engagement and partnership building are critical. Parliamentary institutions are playing an increasingly critical role in addressing a range of complex and interconnected global issues. With respect to the SDGs, parliaments have several important roles to play, such as oversight, legislation, and budget scrutiny. However, to increase their influence in shaping and implementing the SDGs, the parliaments must strengthen their leadership and institutional capacity, and develop effective engagement strategies.

ASEP is a key international parliamentary forum that can further promote parliamentary dialogues and consultation on the SDG agenda, especially in promoting political consensus at both the national and international levels, mobilising action and resources, and building international partnerships and multi-stakeholder collaboration necessary to realise the SDGs. To this end, capacity building, knowledge sharing, and collective efforts on the SDGs must be further promoted.

Specific recommendations for ASEP are as follows: (i) encourage all ASEP members to carry out a VNR for their country and create a knowledge-sharing platform encompassing the results of those VNRs; (ii) institute capacity-building programmes in ASEP developing member countries on the SDGs for parliamentarians and their staff; and (iii) create an ASEP Special Envoy on the SDGs to engage effectively with the parliamentary members of ASEP and international organisations, such as the UN.

ASEM requires all its components to promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development in Asia and Europe. The 13th ASEM Summit (ASEM13) in 2021 is well placed to promote the ASEP into taking forward the above recommendations and to utilise the ASEP as a powerful arm of ASEM process.

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