

Agora Arab Digest- August 2014

Parliaments and the Post-2015 Development Agenda

How can parliamentarians respond to the development challenge in the Arab States?

I- The development agenda

The Millennium Declaration¹, signed by 189 world leaders at the UN Millennium Summit in September 2000, recognized the relationship between development, good governance and human rights and set out the values, principles and objectives for the international agenda for the twenty-first century. This underlined the collective responsibility of leaders to uphold human dignity, equality and equity for all people, especially the most vulnerable and marginalized. At the heart of this was a powerful vision of a global partnership to reduce poverty and inequality. Out of this document came an ambitious agenda for a global development framework that would run to 2015. The eight MDGs were chosen to reflect a broad spectrum of inter-related development challenges and include eradicating extreme poverty and hunger; universal primary education; gender equality; improved maternal and child health; combating HIV/AIDS, TB, Malaria and other diseases; ensuring sustainable development; and developing a global partnership for development.

In the lead up to 2015 - August 18th, 2014 marked the 500 day milestone until the target date to achieve the Millennium Development Goals- , there is a need to ensure that global dialogue and debates on the post-2015 development agenda address the economic, environmental and social dimensions of human development in an integrated manner.

This digest will shed light on achievements and obstacles in achieving the MDGs in the Arab States and will shed light on the role of parliaments in responding to the developmental challenges in their respective countries beyond 2015.

¹ http://www.agora-parl.org/sites/default/files/international_parliamentary_conference_on_the_post-2015_development_agenda_2013_toolkit_for_parliamentarians.pdf

II- The Arab Millennium Development Goals: Facing Challenges

The Arab region has achieved progress in many MDGs, including significant strides in health and education. However, there have been setbacks and constraints attributable to several factors, including the relatively poor economic performance in the 1990s and early 2000s, inadequate financing of social policies, and increasing political tensions and conflicts.

The Arab MDG report ²argues that good governance is the most critical missing link between growth and desirable development outcomes. The fact that some countries spearheading the recent round of social unrest are among the top performers on many MDGs raises serious questions about deficits in governance and participation, and underscores the importance of considering subnational inequalities in any measure of development. Regressions due to political volatility and conflicts in the region since 2010 have come most notably through increased poverty and inequalities.

III- Beyond the MDGs- Arab citizen's expectations

In line with planning the steps ahead, the United Nations and partners launched "My World", a global survey for citizens. The survey aimed at capturing people's voices, priorities and views, so that leaders can be informed as they begin the process of defining the new development agenda for the world.

Results emanating from the Arab world placed high priority on increased access to basic services, enhanced governance systems and more inclusion. Arab citizen's voices placed inclusive and responsive governments as the third development priority while keeping access to basic social services namely health and education as top regional priorities. Access country specific data by clicking [here](#).

The results were submitted to the Secretary General's [High Level Panel for Post-2015](#) and fed into their final report and recommendations for a new development framework in May 2013. The report sets out a universal agenda to eradicate extreme poverty from the face of the earth by 2030, and deliver on the promise of sustainable development.

² The full report as well as the country progress reports are available on the link below <http://arabstates.undp.org/content/rbas/en/home/library/MDGs/arab-states/>

In the [“A new global partnership: eradicate poverty and transform economies through sustainable development”](#) report, the Panel calls for the new post-2015 goals to drive five big transformative shifts: (i) move from reducing to ending extreme poverty after 2015; (ii) integrate the social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainability; (iii) transform economies to end extreme poverty and improve livelihoods; (iv) build peaceful and prosperous societies; and (v) forge a new spirit of solidarity, cooperation, and mutual accountability.

IV- Parliaments’ contribution to the development goals and objectives

How best to make the current commitments a reality?

Parliamentary development directly supports the achievement of the MDGs and the new set of goals which will come forward in 2015 because MPs represent the very constituents who are supposed to benefit from them while at the same time being responsible for passing the laws that institutionalize the changes required to meet them. MPs should represent, understand and reflect the interests of all their constituents and communities so that development is more equitable and effective.

Parliaments though have many functions and responsibilities but the main functions of the vast majority if not all of Parliaments include legislation, oversight, budget scrutiny and representation which puts them at the forefront of this exercise, because they play a critical role in meeting those requirements. Often, there is overlap and clear links between these four functions and the delivery of MDGs.

As national legislatures, Parliaments are key bodies in the law making process. Although the exact powers of Parliaments with regards to developing, amending or approving laws will be different from country to country, Parliaments in most African countries for example are the central bodies with regards to the passing laws.

The **legislative role** of a Parliament can ensure that the necessary enabling legislation to make progress towards the MDG targets is in place. The **oversight role** is a central responsibility in Parliaments and the MDGs provide a unique reference point to allow Parliaments to analyze whether the targets are on track to being met and whether poverty is being reduced in their respective country. If Parliaments do not take the lead in ensuring oversight of progress towards

the MDGs it is unlikely that any other national body will step in to fulfil this vital role. In addition, **scrutinizing and approving the national budget** is the responsibility of national Parliaments that are in a position to assess whether financial resources are being prioritized in the most effective way to make progress towards the MDGs³.

V- The twin track approach for the post-2015 framework

Parliamentary action points- Examples and good practices from the region⁴.

Parliamentary systems differ, so a 'one size fits all' approach will not help to determine the extent to which parliaments have been successful in building on political will and momentum to deliver on the MDGs. Parliaments around the world have played varying roles in contributing to their country's achievement of the MDGs.

Internal parliamentary mechanisms related to work on the MDGs also differ between countries. In some, working groups have been established that promote engagement and discussion of the MDGs within the Parliament. For example, to maintain economic growth and social stability, an effective system of legislation, oversight, and governance was deemed necessary by the **State of Kuwait**. In this context, the Kuwaiti Parliament only endorses and passes budgets which reflect the objectives of the National Strategic Development Plan set by the National Assembly-**majless al umma**- and which are aligned with the Millennium Development Goals.

The absence of dedicated parliamentary mechanisms for the MDGs has not prevented countries from achieving most of their MDG targets. Some of the lessons learned indicate that the existence of a parliamentary group on the MDGs has helped create awareness of the MDGs among MPs. The state in **Mauritania** has been quite active in promoting the MDGs within the government. Two groups have been established in parliament to support the MDGs at the Senate and National Assembly level, with the support of UNDP. Their activities have included establishing a network of Parliamentarians of the South for the MDGs, creating MDG focal

³ http://www.agora-parl.org/sites/default/files/background_note_-_accountability_for_achieving_the_mdgs.pdf

⁴ Read the full report on Parliaments and MDGs manual on this link

http://www.agora-parl.org/sites/default/files/manual_for_mps_on_mdgs-ar_0.pdf

points within the various key ministries, and organizing various high-level meetings around the MDGs, including two extraordinary meetings with the Senate and National Assembly.

But the key to success lies elsewhere. It is found, for example, in a strong national development agenda, in a strong executive–legislative working relationship, in a sufficiently resourced parliamentary committee structure, and in genuine parliamentary engagement on the national development agenda (where MDGs have been institutionalized in national targets and related development policies, including the MDG reports, and are discussed and debated in Parliament). Following the independence of the **Republic of South Sudan** in 2011, the statutory membership of the National Assembly was thereby reduced from 450 to 354. The 25% women quota came into force in 2005 when the newly appointed parliament enacted a new electoral law which instated the quota in the National Assembly- Majliss Watani-following the lobbying from the Sudanese Women General Union.

Many countries routinely prepare national MDG progress reports – although, regrettably, most processes leading to the reports produced so far have not been fully participatory. National MDG reports and the targets to which countries have committed themselves are rarely discussed in national parliaments. Yet, **Morocco** is one of the few countries whose Parliament has been pivotal in pushing the MDG agenda through promoting inclusiveness and access. 33 MPs from the commission for social sectors at the House of Representatives at the Moroccan Parliament –more than half of the commission-initiated an assessment to oversee public policies for people with disabilities and to assess the Moroccan Governments commitment to the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Optional Protocol. The parliamentarians also engaged in an evaluation of their oversight role in the promotion and protection of human rights.⁵

Parliamentarians can equally table activity recommendations and communiqués for committee and/or plenary discussions to be adopted by national/ regional parliamentary bodies. They may

⁵ <http://www.awepa.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Dyfan-Jones-Presentation-to-the-SADC-PF-UNDP-AWEPA-Conference.pdf>

as well increase engagement with their respective national and regional parliaments to promote learning and experience exchange.

VII- What next? Learning from past experiences

The need for country ownership, government accountability, and national policy was not sufficiently taken into account during the MDGs design and implementation, and is now being highlighted as a requirement to ensure that the new set of objectives is attained.

Lack of accountability has been identified as a major weakness in MDG implementation. From the Paris Accord to the Accra Declaration to the recent statements from Busan, the international community has continued to express its hope that countries' institutions be sufficiently capacitated to ensure internal supervision of a national government's international, regional and national commitments. A stronger accountability scheme requires that parliaments and others – including local level elected representatives and institutions – engage throughout the policy-making process and the associated stages of the budget cycle to promote and deliver the post-2015 goals. Such an approach will strengthen political commitment and offer incentives for better service delivery for all.

Empowering parliamentarians to participate effectively in and positively influence the architecture of the post-2015 development agenda is paramount to its success. The need for country ownership, government accountability, and national policy was not sufficiently taken into account during the MDGs design and implementation, and is now being highlighted as a requirement to ensure that the new set of objectives is attained. Parliaments are at the forefront of these imperatives, because they play a critical role in meeting those requirements through their lawmaking, budgeting, and oversight functions.

Concretely speaking, parliaments can make a direct difference and be more involved in the post-2015 agenda through the following actions or mechanisms namely:

A- Policy Frameworks- Legislation and Oversight

The debate on what should follow the Millennium Development Goals when they expire in 2015 is thoroughly underway. The role of democratic governance is paramount in promoting and achieving the new development objectives. An acknowledged shortfall of the MDGs is the lack of translation of global trends and goals into national policy-making. All too often, international commitments are made without legal standing in a country unless and until those commitments are translated into laws and policies. **Parliaments, as governance vehicles have a specific role in adopting national legal frameworks that reflect and domesticate international commitments from the post-2015 development framework.**

Concretely Parliaments can:

- Implement nationally relevant development plans and budgets that are compliant with associated priorities defining the post-2015 development framework.
- Conduct **annual parliamentary reviews of proposed government expenditures** to ensure adequate funding is allocated for the achievement of the post-2015 objectives, and that funding is spent properly to allow laws to be translated into action throughout the country.
- Strengthen accountability frameworks at national, regional and global levels by engaging throughout **the policy-making process and budget cycle to deliver on post 2015 goals.**
- Establish parliamentary committees to review draft laws and policies related to post 2015 agenda implementation on the basis of best practices.

They can adopt legislation that specifically responds to these critical challenges, for example by passing laws that are sensitive to climate change, that foster employment and job creation, or address patterns of inequalities, demographic change/population growth, urbanization, infrastructure, and migration.

In many situations, the parliament is responsible for appointing and monitoring the work of independent agencies, such as the state auditor, an anti-corruption commission, or a human rights commission. The parliament should not interfere in the work of these bodies, but should ensure they remain independent of the executive branch, have adequate funding required for their assigned jobs, and are working in the interests of all citizens.

- Undertake effective oversight via the committee system of executive achievement of the goals through the various tools and mechanisms.

B- Engagement and Outreach:

While it is vital to engage parliaments in the process following the establishment of the new set of goals, it is also important to stress their involvement in the process leading up to the agreement. This was not fully the case with the MDGs, because parliaments were not engaged in the process until later. It is only in the last five years that the work with parliaments has started to be recognized as an important part of a strategy to achieve the MDGs. Parliaments and parliamentarians can:

- **Engage in national, regional and global fora responsible for promoting awareness of the 2015 sustainable development goals**, and communicate the relevance of the goals to key domestic constituencies.
- **Participate in national, regional, and global consultations at the conception of the goals; thus become engaged them from the very outset, and ensuring they are equal signatories of the new goals.**
- Ensure that **media and key constituencies are sensitized to the post-2015 Agenda** and its relevance to their communities through using the means at their disposal to stimulate dialogue about the goals and the progress being made nationally on their achievement.

This will not only ensure country ownership of the new goals but also boost domestic accountability and influence the post-2015 development agenda.

Way forward

National parliaments have largely been overlooked as development actors and partners in MDG achievement. Yet, ensuring inclusive and open parliaments is critical for promoting “citizen expectations for voice, the rule of law and accountability”, as stated in Outcome 2 of UNDP’s new Strategic Plan (2014 - 2017). Inclusive parliaments need to ensure that all sectors of society

– particularly the poorest and marginalized groups, including women, youth and minorities – are equally and fairly represented, and are given equal opportunities for participation. Although demand for inclusiveness is strongly voiced in the Arab region recently, it needs to be reflected in democratic transitions and wider development processes in all regions⁶.

Evidence shows that the presence of a strong legislature is an unmixed blessing for democratization. Achieving the post-2015 development agenda must include interventions and support to parliaments and political institutions to overcome the hurdles that prevented the achievement of MDGs and ensure success of the new set of goals. Parliaments thus should act and be perceived as development actors involved since the onset of setting the new development objectives and be at the forefront of their implementation.

For more information you can:

- Take part in the discussion by visiting the dedicated group [“Parliaments and the post-2015 Development Agenda](#) on Agora’s new Interactive platform.
- Read the UNDP’s Issue Brief: [Parliament’s Role in Defining and promoting the Post-2015 Development Agenda](#)
- Access the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (UK Branch) [toolkit for Parliamentarians and the post-2015 agenda](#)

For additional information or details, please contact Ms. Reem Askar, Arab States Facilitator at reem.askar@undp.org.

⁶ http://www.agora-parl.org/sites/default/files/parliamentary_development_newsletter_-_june_18_2014_final.pdf