

Regional Seminar for Parliamentarians in the Arab Region on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

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Keynote speech

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Thank you for taking time to attend this important seminar

It's not easy being an MP. You are

- More likely to be blamed when things go wrong,
- Than praised when you get them right.

So why do we do it? Why do we stand for election?

Mostly because we want to make a difference:

- to improve the welfare - the education and health - of the people we represent
- to argue for human rights and gender equality
- to strengthen our country's economy – and create jobs
- to cut crime, and strengthen our country's defence and security
- to improve our country's relations with its neighbours, or our country's or region's reputation

These things are not easy to achieve – but they are worthwhile. They all depend upon sustainable development.

I want to explain why sustainable development is a key to political achievement – which enables you, as a politician, to make a difference – in your own country and internationally. Committing to sustainable development will help you to build a good personal reputation which, hopefully, will remain long after you leave office.

I should like to share some of my own experience.

I was first elected as a city councillor in 1980, and as an MP in 1992. I held my seat, in the UK's House of Commons, for 23 years, until I retired in 2015.

Like most MPs I wanted to address the needs of the people who elected me – to make sure that I was re-elected.

So, during my first decade in Parliament I focussed mainly on health, social security, job creation and poverty reduction.

During my first five years in the House, my party was **in opposition**, and **I wrote and campaigned for policy proposals**, which later became law when, my Party was elected to be the government. So do not think you can do nothing in opposition. I like to think that my policy ideas appealed to the public and helped my party to win the election. They included:

- the creation of a technical commission, **the National Institute for Clinical Effectiveness**, to decide which treatments and medicines should be provided by the British National Health Service, to make sure money was spent on the most effective health interventions;
- a proposal to **ban tobacco advertising** – which was initially condemned by some MPs as an attack on freedom of speech, but is now accepted in the UK (and many other countries too);
- a commitment to create a government **Ministry for international development and to target UK aid on poverty reduction** – attacked, too, at the time as not being in the UK's national interests, and still criticised by some despite being supported by four successive Labour and Conservative Prime Ministers.

After my party won a general election in 1997, **I served in Tony Blair's government**, first in the Department of Health, and then as Minister for Social Security, and I had responsibility for introducing some of these policies:

- introducing the **National Institute for Clinical Effectiveness**;
- developing a policy to halve **child poverty in the UK** within 10 years, and abolishing it within a generation.

These were not the big achievements of the Blair government's first term – such as negotiating peace in Northern Ireland, halting the genocide against Muslims in Bosnia and Kosovo, introducing the UK's Human Rights Act and Freedom of Information Act, or creating the Department of International Development. They were simply things which I did while in the Government.

During this time I came to realise that many of the UK's domestic goals – public health, environmental protection, attracting investment and creating jobs, reducing carbon emissions to limit global warming, depend on international collaboration. So, too, do the UK's foreign policy, defence and development goals.

When I was dropped from the government in 2001, I thought long and hard about how I could continue to make a difference – to change things for the better – as a regular MP, rather than a Minister. And **I decided to work on international development**.

I have already mentioned that when my party came to power in 1997, it implemented the policy I had developed in opposition – to create a separate Department for International Development. At the same time Parliament created an International Development Committee to hold the Department for International Development to account.

So I got myself appointed to the International Development Committee.

In 2003 the UK chaired both the G7 and the European Union Council of Ministers. Prime Minister Tony Blair wanted to use the G7 and EU summits to win commitments from donor countries to double aid to Africa. I worked with the government and **the Prime Minister's Commission for Africa** to develop proposals for the summit – and the final deal, supported both by the UK and the African Presidents (Obasanjo, Mbeki, Mkapa) who were invited to the G7, was for donors to double aid, and for African countries to create a new economic partnership and to strengthen their governance, for example through peer review, to make better use of aid and thereby improve development outcomes.

It was a great step forward, and contributed towards implementing many of the Millennium Development Goals adopted by the UN in 2000 to guide development between 2000 and 2015,

But like the MDGs, the Africa Commission was largely a top down process, led by government leaders, which unfortunately undermined their effectiveness.

The public, the very people who were expected to benefit from the MDGs – women promised gender equality, children promised primary schools, men and women promised better health services – knew very little about what was proposed at the UN, or even by their own government.

During the 15 years when the MDGs guided development policy, it became apparent that **development works better when the people who are intended to benefit know about the policies, and are involved in shaping and monitoring them.**

Primary education received more money but it did not always get through to schools. Then an East African government (*Uganda, Kenya? Check*) required every school to pin a notice about its funding allocation on its door. **Parents were suddenly empowered,** and they kicked up a fuss if the money did not arrive.

I remember **a new road in Afghanistan** built by a well-meaning donor to enable farmers to get their produce to market in Kabul, but when I saw it the farmers were herding their livestock along the dirt beside the road. Why? The road out was well built out of cobble stones, which were fine for vehicles, but twisted the ankles of cattle and sheep, not to mention the farmers. Neither the donor, nor the local government, had consulted the farmers before they build the road.

Despite the setbacks the MDGs did much more good than harm, They raised 1 billion people out of poverty, and got a billion children into school (*check figures*).

As 2015 approached Governments, Parliaments and civil society organisations began to consider what would replace the MDGs.

The UK Parliament's International Development Committee launched an inquiry in 2012 make proposals for new “Post 2015 Development Goals”. The committee took evidence from:

- 70 development NGOs, think tanks and academics from the UK and elsewhere;
- UN officials, including Amina Mohammed, the Secretary General's Special Adviser on Post-2015 development goals;
- a former Dutch Development Minister;
- UK DFID officials and Ministers;

In January 2013 we published **our report** and recommendations, which **called for:**

- **better consultation by governments with the public and Parliaments** over the content and implementation of the new development goals;
- a recognition that “**poverty reduction and environmental sustainability are intimately connected**”;
- **the SDGs** should guide the policy of **all governments – rich and poor alike**;
- **the goals should** be flexible, and capable of modification to **apply differently in different places.**

The UN Secretary General appointed a High Level Panel led by the Presidents of Indonesia and Liberia, and the UK Prime Minister, David Cameron, to develop proposals for the Post-2015 approach, and the IPU lobbied successfully for Parliamentarians to be invited to speak to the High Level Panel at its meeting in Monrovia in January 2013.

Four of us were selected. We were led by Speaker Rebecca Kadaga from Uganda, and the team included MPs from Bangladesh, and Liberia as well as myself to express ideas from a donor country's perspective.

We stressed the need for the post-2015 goals to make specific reference to democracy – to ensure transparent and accountable government - and for governments to consult Parliaments and civil society organisations. The MPs from developing countries said that many Parliaments need more resources and capacity building to enable them to hold their governments to account.

I told the Panel that the development culture had changed: for example, ten years earlier the World Bank had agreed its country Poverty Reduction Strategies with governments alone, but now they advised governments to seek input, and ideally approval, for development strategies, from their Parliaments.

John Podesta, Bill Clinton's former Chief of Staff, who was a member of the High Level Panel, responded by making the following points:

- **Democracy is both a necessary end in itself, and a valuable means of achieving development goals;**
- **involving Parliaments, and seeking their approval adds legitimacy to development agendas;**
- **more support is needed to help Parliaments to strengthen their capacity to hold governments to account on their actions to implement development goals.**

Eighteen months later the UN General Assembly agreed **The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development**, which sets out the Sustainable Development Goals.

They include **Goal 16** to:

- “Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.”

That means us – **effective, accountable and inclusive Parliaments.**

When you drill down into **the small print in the 2030 Agenda** it sets it out clearly:

- “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. Governments and public institutions will also work closely on implementation with regional and local authorities, sub-regional institutions, international institutions, academia, philanthropic organisations, volunteer groups and others.”

and says:

- “We ... encourage Member States to conduct regular and inclusive reviews of progress at the national and sub-national levels which are country-led and country-driven.... National parliaments as well as other institutions can support these processes.”

So that's all right then. We are in the frame. Our governments are advised to work with Parliaments on passing laws to implement the SDGs and budgets to finance their development plans, and to

involve us in reviewing their progress in achieving the goals.

If only it was that simple. The reality is that government is difficult. Even with the best will in the world, and well-intentioned policies like the SDGs, things don't always go to plan. And when a government fails to set clear targets, or Ministers fails to implement targets which have been set, they do not usually advertise their failure. They hope that no one will notice. They may try again, or may quietly drop the policy into the “too difficult” box, and move on.

So, if Parliament is to fulfil its role, and its responsibilities under the 2030 development agenda, its **MPs must be proactive**; you must ask questions, call debates, work with your government auditors, and your national statistics authority, to find out what progress the government has made in implementing the SDGs; and propose how the government's policies might be changed to improve their performance.

There are **many good examples of this happening in the Arab region**.

- only last month MPs from Jordan and Lebanon met together to share experience about initiatives they are taking (*Olivier – this refers to your recent trip to Beirut – is my description reasonable?*);
- the Tunisian Parliament appoints members to the Commission for Sustainable Development and the Rights of Future Generations, established under the country's constitution;
- the Lebanese Parliament is pushing for a stronger national anti-corruption framework;
- the Moroccan Parliament is drafting conflict of interest, freedom of information and whistleblower protection laws; and it has established a Budget Analysis Bureau to help the both houses of the Parliament to analyse the government's budget, and assist members to propose amendments to it;
- the Jordanian Parliament also has a Parliamentary Budget Office;
- women make up 15 percent of the Jordanian Parliament (although that is much higher than the percentage of women in the UK House of Commons when I was first elected, twenty five years ago), and its Women's Caucus has taken an initiative assign a region of Jordan to each woman MP, and to hold public forums in the regions to bring citizen's views back to the Parliament.

There is a lot going on and the next speaker will talk in detail about what Parliaments can do to help their countries to achieve the SDGs.

Like any other field of public policy, development has its own technical tools, and jargon. And sometimes the jargon does not mean very much to people outside of government and politics.

MPs are in a unique position to link the people they represent to the government, and thereby to steer public policy towards goals which the public want. But to do this you will have to demystify the process – to strip out the jargon – and speak about things in the same way as the citizens you represent.

Goal 4 is to

- “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.”

That means getting as many girls as boys into school, and making it as possible for girls as boys to remain in school and get qualifications. If it is not happening you need to talk with parents,

teachers, Imams and community leaders about what is preventing it, and if the law or government budgets need to change, you might decide to raise this in Parliament.

Goal 8 says

- “Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.”

This means persuading people – the government, private bankers and entrepreneurs – to invest to create jobs, without polluting the neighbourhood; and to invest in training.

Development is not some special, complicated, or technical field which has no relevance to people's wants, aspirations and needs.

It is a collection of policies which directly address those wants aspirations and needs: their human rights; their access to health services and clean water; their children's access to education, and jobs. **Development enables you, as an MP, to help to improve the quality of the lives of the people you represent.**

It is true that **development for richer countries**, like the United Kingdom or generous Arab donors like Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, means transferring money to poorer countries which need financial help to implement the SDGs. But it is not a one way process. **Donors benefit from development spending too.** It may help to promote peace, which improves security for the region – for the donor country as well as a fragile state receiving aid. It may protect the environment – seas, rivers and aquifers shared by more than one country. It may promote trade, provide training or transfer know-how in a way which benefits the donor as well as the country giving aid. And if you are better off it is your responsibility to help others in greater need.

But **the SDGs do not apply only to poorer countries.** They apply to us all, and pose difficult challenges to countries like mine too.

Goal 8 seeks “productive employment and decent work for all”. The UK still has unemployment, and millions of people working for low wages which leave them living below our poverty line.

Goal 10 seeks to “reduce inequality within and among countries”. Well, inequality is still a big problem in the UK, and on many measures is getting worse, not better. And, I suggest it exists in better-off Arab states too.

Goal 13 requires “urgent action to combat climate change”. The UK, and other rich countries, produce more than their fair share of carbon emissions, and need to change their energy policies to make more use of renewables.

Parliaments in richer countries need committees to check whether their governments are on track to meet their own obligations under the SDGs, as well as to check how effectively they are helping others with their development co-operation policies. And there are things richer countries can learn from poorer countries about how to involve the public in development work and planning.

Development policy addresses basic human needs – water, sanitation, health, education, jobs, livelihoods, gender equality and human rights – in all our countries. It also provides a tool for tackling big questions of international policy: creating a Palestinian state; combating terrorism; responding to humanitarian crises; reducing refugee flows; limiting global warming.

We live in global world. The internet, mobile phones, international migration, 24 hour news and banking, all draw people ever closer together whether we like it or not. While national governments have clear responsibilities to implement to SDGs, no one government can do it alone, even in their own country. There has to be international co-operation to achieve international development, and there has to be Parliamentary oversight, in all countries, to make it happen.