Policy Statement on Parliamentary Strengthening for Democratic, Peaceful and Sustainably Developed Societies

Board of the Parliamentary Forum on Small Arms and Light Weapons, meeting on the 22nd of May, 2019;

Democracy overall has made significant progress over the last 40 years and is widely considered essential for guaranteeing human rights, basic freedoms and equality, ultimately promoting peace and sustainable development. However, in recent years policymakers and scholars are pointing to tendencies of a decline of democracy worldwide and that the spread of democracy has stopped or even reversed. Recent research show that with new populist movements, challenges related to corruption and state capture, democratic institutions have become vulnerable. According to the Global Peace Index, in the last decade the number of conflicts climbed to a record high and the shift towards democracy began to stall.\(^1\) While some views, especially in the public opinion may be overly pessimistic, spurred on by alarmist or sensationalized media, democracy should not be taken for granted and there is reason to be concerned.\(^2\)

As an international organisation of parliamentarians, the Parliamentary Forum on Small Arms and Light Weapons (hereinafter: the Forum) believes that safeguarding democracy is fundamental to peaceful and sustainably developed societies and the need to strengthen democratic institutions and restoring faith in them is more vital than ever. The theory of change of the Forum is to contribute to the achievement of more peaceful and sustainably developed societies by enhancing parliamentary action in the implementation and universalisation of international frameworks relevant to the prevention and reduction of SALW-related violence through capacity-building, policy-shaping and awareness-raising.

As highlighted by Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 of the 2030 Agenda, strong institutions are key for sustainable development. Parliamentarians have a crucial role to play in their legislative;

\(^1\) Global Peace Index 2018, The Institute for Economics & Peace (IEP), page 34
oversight and awareness-raising functions. Studies\(^3\) provide evidence for this where conclusions show that working with parliaments is key to long term development and that parliaments need to be more central to development programmes. This is relevant not only at national level. As stated as the added value of the Forum, parliamentarians also have a vital role in bridging the gap between international instruments and the regional and national implementation level ensuring national ownership. In spite of this, parliamentarians are often neglected in development work, which means low parliamentary capacity and weak institutions in many developing countries. This in turn can lead to distrust in democratic systems and pave the way for more authoritarian rule.

In times when democracy is under pressure, it is important to note that investments in parliamentary institutions and organisations will be vital. Without overstating its role and objectives, the Forum’s work to build the capacity of its members is not only relevant in relation to Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW); it also contributes to increased ownership, political accountability and strengthening of the parliamentary role as a whole, ultimately strengthening democratic institutions.

In this light, investing in parliamentary organisations, regardless of thematic or geographical focus, should be a growing priority for governments and other donors where safeguarding democracy is a key priority. In addition to strengthening national parliaments; international, regional and national parliamentary organisations and networks also make important contributions to and have a significant impact on strengthening democracy and democratic institutions. They thus present unique relevant opportunities for donors to make such investments.

Another vital aspect characterising the Forum and several other parliamentary organisations, is productive cross-party work which is a cornerstone of democracy and building capacity for a strong opposition. A balanced number of active members from ruling and opposition parties, as well as the actions they take in relation to the objective of their organisation, is a positive reflection of the abilities of these organisations to inspire broader action.

In relation to the mandate of the Forum, parliaments and parliamentarians are particularly important for building sustainable peace and development and providing a platform for different interests to express views. Examining parliamentary strengthening in relation to SALW-related violence, it is clear that beyond the direct victims and their relatives, SALW-related violence has a tremendous impact on societies socio-economically and is an obstacle to sustainable development, human security and peace-building. It facilitates human rights violations, destabilises societies, constitutes an obstacle to sustainable development and human security and undermines democracy.

In this context, one should also remember that the links between democracy and peace have been debated by policy-makers and examined by scholars extensively. While the ‘democratic peace theory’ which postulates that democracies do not engage in conflict with other democracies may be largely

\(^{3}\) British International Development Committee inquiry into parliamentary strengthening 2015

[https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmintdev/704/704.pdf](https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmintdev/704/704.pdf)
undisputed, democratic transitions as well as elections can indeed generate instability and violence. Many democratic countries also experience high levels of armed violence, linked to crime as well as internal conflicts. In this light, strong institutions are key and the Forum affirms that parliamentarians are important stakeholders for action. Parliamentarians have the ability to take the necessary measures towards prevention and reduction of SALW-related violence. They contribute to controlling civilian acquisition and possession and addressing the demand for SALW at national, regional and international levels. They also contribute to responsible arms transfers, either in cases where countries have legislative councils advising on arms transfers, or by public awareness-raising and exerting pressure on their governments to adhere to and implement international instruments, such as the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) and United Nations Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in SALW in All Its Aspects (UN PoA). In relation to the latter, the Forum ensured active parliamentary participation and contribution at the Third Review Conference of the UN PoA (RevCon3) which proved productive as the phrasing of ‘encourage strong cooperation with parliamentarians’ was formally included as part of the final report of the RevCon3, acknowledging the key role that parliamentarians have in the control of SALW.

Lastly there is also an evident gender dimension to strengthening democratic institutions, and, in relation to SALW, strong links to the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda in accordance with the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 and subsequent resolutions. Studies confirm the important role women play in strengthening political institutions and many development policies and programmes naturally recognise the importance of women’s active and meaningful participation in peace and security. They also highlight the increasing, but still low, numbers of women in parliament. However, investments are often directed mainly towards advancing women’s leadership and decision-making in governance and public sector management. In this light, parliamentary organisations again present relevant opportunities to make concrete investments in women parliamentarians to strengthen their capacity, and increase sustainable meaningful participation in policy- and decision-making. From a democracy aspect, supporting women in parliamentary roles rather than solely government official roles, contributes to a strong opposition which is indispensable in modern democracies.

Moreover, attention needs to be drawn to violence and harrassment against parliamentarians. Investments need to be made to improve the conditions in which parliamentarians in general, and women parliamentarians specifically, operate. While the number of women in politics is increasing, there are still cultural and patriarchal attitudes hindering women from taking an active role.

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part in political life. A global study\textsuperscript{6} carried out in 2016 concludes that 81.8 % had experienced psychological violence, almost half of the group feared for their security and that of their family and 44.4% had received threats involving death, rape, beating or kidnapping. While the prevalence of other forms of violence is lower but still worrying; for instance sexual violence at 21.8% and physical violence at 25.5%. In addition, women face multiple challenges. Although they overcome barriers and attain political positions on paper, once in place, women may not have the same ability to influence as their male counterparts. These staggering figures of women parliamentarians facing widespread sexism, harassment and violence not only undermine gender equality but also democracy strengthening as a whole.

The Forum, as a parliamentary organisation, will thus continue to make determined efforts to promote increased parliamentary ownership, political accountability and reinforcement of the parliamentary role as a whole - ultimately contributing to parliamentary strengthening for democratic, peaceful and sustainably developed societies.

\textit{Objectives}

\textbf{The Board of the Parliamentary Forum on Small Arms and Light Weapons, meeting on the 22nd of May, 2019;}

\textit{Recognizes} democracy as essential for guaranteeing human rights, International Humanitarian Law, basic freedoms and equality, ultimately promoting peace and sustainable development and \textit{draws attention} to the trend of a decline in democracy over recent years;

\textit{Acknowledges} the problem with violence at elections and the risk it proposes to democratic institutions and the population, as well as the challenges faced by many democratic states in relation to high levels of armed violence and reducing the uncontrolled proliferation of SALW;

\textit{Welcomes and supports} Sustainable Development Goal 16 of the 2030 Agenda, to build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels, and \textit{calls} for immediate implementation of programmes to fulfil the goal and reach its targets;

\textit{Recognizes} the important and positive contribution of parliamentarians in efforts to maintain and promote peace and sustainable development, and \textit{understands} that effective institutional arrangements to ensure parliamentary participation in peace-building processes significantly contribute to international peace and sustainable development;

\textit{Promotes} increased parliamentary participation in processes on peace and sustainable development at regional and international levels and \textit{calls for} the establishment of structures in international processes to bring in a parliamentary perspective on aforementioned issues;

\textsuperscript{6} ‘Sexism, harassment and violence against women parliamentarians’ Inter-Parliamentary Union file:///C:/Users/%C3%A4garen/Downloads/en_issues_brief-women-23nov.pdf
Recognizes the important role women play in strengthening political institutions and recommends increase of policies and programmes aimed at advancing women's leadership and decision-making in governance, including women in parliament;

Promotes young people's participation in democratic processes on peace and security at national, regional and international levels and calls for the establishment of structures in decision-making processes at all levels to bring in young people's skills and perspectives on issues related to peace and security;

Acknowledges the need to improve the conditions for parliamentarians exposed to violence and harassments, in particular women parliamentarians; and the risk it proposes to democratic institutions;

Encourages on-going dialogue between civil society and public institutions on issues related to democracy, peace and sustainable development and recognises the importance of building trust and strengthening democratic institutions;

Acknowledges the important role of parliamentary organisations in strengthening democratic institutions; and encourages parliamentarians to take active part in initiatives to increase the impact of parliamentary action;

Encourages the donor community to invest in national, regional and international parliaments as well as parliamentary organisations as an effective way to strengthen democratic institutions, ultimately safeguarding democracy for peaceful and sustainably developed societies;

Mandates the Parliamentary Forum, its Members and the Secretariat to undertake all necessary efforts towards parliamentary strengthening for democratic, peaceful and sustainably developed societies.