PARLIAMENT
OF THE REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

21 September 2023

9TH INTER-PARLIAMENTARY UNION (IPU) GLOBAL CONFERENCE FOR YOUNG PARLIAMENTARIANS REPORT
15-18 SEPTEMBER 2023

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

4IR:	Fourth Industrial Revolution
AI:	Artificial Intelligence
AU:	African Union
COVID-19:	Coronavirus Disease
EU:	European Union
IPU:	Inter-Parliamentary Union
MEPs:	Members of the European Parliament
MPs:	Members of Parliament
NDP:	National Development Plan
NEET:	Number of young people not in Employment, Education, or Training
RISDP:	Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan
SADC:	Southern African Development Community
SDGs:	Sustainable Development Goals
STEM:	Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics
UN:	United Nations

1. INTRODUCTION

This report seeks to provide Members of Parliament with an overview of the 9th Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) Global Conference of Young Parliamentarians which took place from 15-17 September 2023.

2. BACKGROUND

The IPU's annual Global Conferences of Young Parliamentarians are unique platforms for young members of parliaments to get together, exchange, learn and define common and innovative strategies to advance empowerment for young parliamentarians and the youth. The 2023 Conference will focus on accelerating the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through digital transformation and innovation.

In 2015, during the 132nd IPU Assembly in Vietnam, the Hanoi Declaration was adopted on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): Turning Words into Action. As countries pass the mid-way point of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda), and with less than seven years remaining to achieve the SDGs, progress has been much too slow. According to the United Nations (UN), only 12% of SDG targets are on track, while 50% are moderately or severely off track. This situation requires the international community to make a breakthrough and stronger efforts to achieve the SDGs by 2030, including digital transformation, taking advantage of technologies, innovation, and accelerated efforts to explore new approaches and solutions while protecting and promoting cultural and human values. Young Parliamentarians, as political leaders closest to the youngest generations, are digital natives and have much to offer in harnessing the voices and talents of young people to contribute solutions.

During the 9th Inter-Parliamentary Union Global Conference of Young Parliamentarians, South Africa was represented by the following delegation:

- Hon Altia Sthembile Hlongo: ANC Member of Parliament, National Assembly
- Hon Bafuze Sicelo Yabo: ANC Member of Parliament, National Assembly
- Hon Fikile Andiswa Masiko: ANC Member of Parliament, National Assembly
- Hon Isaac Sello Seitlholo: DA Member of Parliament, National Assembly
- Dr Agnetha Arendse: Researcher

Photo of Delegation: From left (Dr Agnetha Arendse: Researcher; Hon Bafuze Sicelo Yabo: ANC Member of Parliament, National Assembly; Hon Fikile Andiswa Masiko: ANC Member of Parliament, National Assembly; Hon Isaac Sello Seitlholo: DA Member of Parliament, National Assembly; Hon Altia Sthembile Hlongo: ANC Member of Parliament, National Assembly).

3. CONFERENCE OVERVIEW

The 9th IPU Global Conference of Young Parliamentarians provided an opportunity for young MPs from around the world to discuss parliamentary actions and, to promote the role of young people in accelerating the achievement of the SDGs through digital transformation, innovation, as well as cultural and human values.

The Conference focused on three main themes:

    (i)   Digital transformation;
    (ii)   Innovation and start-ups; and
    (iii)   Promoting respect for cultural diversity in support of sustainable development.

The theme of the Conference: ***The role of youth in accelerating the achievement of the SDGs through digital transformation and innovation***

The conference was attended by nearly 300 young parliamentarians to affirm commitment in accelerating the achievement of the SDGs, especially through digital transformation and innovation. The average age was 38.4 years and approximately 44% were women MPs, along with representatives from global and regional organizations, youth groups, start-ups, academia, and influential leaders of the IPU and Viet Nam. The Conference coincided with

the United Nations' International Day for Democracy on 15 September and marked the eighth anniversary of the Hanoi Declaration on the SDGs, adopted by the IPU in 2015 and setting out the commitment of parliamentarians to address global development priorities. It is noted that countries are at the midway point of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda).

It should be emphasized that with less than seven years remaining to achieve the SDGs, only 12% of SDG targets are being well implemented, while globally, countries are lagging behind on 50 % of the targets are still behind on 50% of the targets, with levels ranging from moderately to severely off track. These results warrant not only reflection but resolute action, especially drawing attention to gaps in achieving the goals related to education, gender equality, decent work, economic growth, climate action, peace, justice, and strong institutions, which are of vital concern to youth. At least 258 million young people are still out of school. There is thus a need for universal education that leaves no one behind.

The Number of young people not in Employment, Education, or Training (NEET) is increasing considerably, rising to 23.3%. Young women remain worse off than young men, being roughly two-thirds as likely to be employed. There is still inequity when it comes to the representation of women and young people in politics. Less than 27% of Members of Parliament (MPs) around the world are women, and only 2.8% of MPs are 30 years of age or under. There is thus a need to work faster, more creatively, and with a far greater sense of urgency, to achieve the agenda on which all agreed.

The world is characterized by the rapid growth of technology, digital transformation, and innovation. There is thus a need to harness their potential to accelerate progress towards the SDGs, especially for issues important to youth. For example, in education, digital tools can create educational and training opportunities to more young people through online means. By unleashing innovation, it can help scale up start-ups led by young people that in turn can employ more young men and women. When these are enterprises that help adapt to or mitigate climate change, investing in youth for the clean jobs of tomorrow can have multiplier positive effects.

The opportunities are clear, and they must be available to everyone, yet significant gender gaps persist. The fact that women are 26% less likely to own a mobile phone than men is unreasonable. Digital transformation and innovation must be opportunities that bolster gender equality by facilitating new avenues for empowerment.

The Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) pandemic demonstrated the strategic importance of digital tools in all Parliaments. These digital tools can contribute to more inclusive legislative, monitoring, and decision-making processes on important issues, making them more comprehensive, with greater transparency and increased public participation. Real-time engagement channels can enable immediate interaction between constituents and representatives. By facilitating participation, digital transformation can empower citizens, particularly youth, to actively engage in the political process and contribute to shaping policy decisions.

For parliamentarians, these digital tools offer greater opportunities for combining their work and private life, especially for those with caring responsibilities. The IPU self-assessment toolkit on the SDGs is welcomed as an innovative approach to helping parliaments integrate the SDGs into parliamentary work according to the specificities of each parliament and contributing to the effective implementation of the SDGs more coherently and sustainably.

It was noted that Science and technology are cornerstones for advancing peace and sustainable development and providing solutions to today's complex challenges. They enable evidence-based and informed policymaking, whether on environmental protection, development, or conflict resolution. Science and the common search for knowledge and solutions can unite in a collective cause, providing a neutral platform for cooperation and an incentive for peaceful coexistence. Young MPs can therefore play an important role in helping foster the next generation of tech-savvy and problem-solving youth to help realize sustainable development and peace.

When harnessing the power of technology and innovation in a transforming world, it is critical to maximize the positive outcomes that these bring, while mitigating unwanted risks. This includes taking an ethical and prudent approach to science and technology that ensures that they are used for the betterment of humanity and the environment, as well as privacy, security, and well-being. At the same time, the pursuit of digital transformation and innovation should not push us towards global homogeneity. Rather, it should amplify our rich tapestry of cultures, experiences, and perspectives. Cultural diversity is a strength for sustainable development, which should not only be protected but embraced, as it is an indispensable ingredient that can nurture even more creativity and innovation.

4. SOUTH AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

South Africa has a constitutional democracy. The Constitution is the supreme law of the Republic and lays the foundations for a democratic and open society in which government is based on the will of the people and every citizen is equally protected by law. It stipulates the values and mechanisms of governance for our uniquely people-centred democracy. Parliament continues to strive towards the vision of an activist and responsive people's Parliament that improves the quality of life of South Africans and ensures enduring equality in our society. Its mission is, to represent the people, and to ensure government by the people in fulfilling our constitutional functions of passing laws and overseeing executive action.

Parliament represents the people and provincial interests to ensure government by the people, under the Constitution. Such representation takes place in the activities of passing legislation, overseeing, and scrutinising executive action, and the facilitation of public involvement, co-operative government, and international participation.

Figure 1: The interrelatedness of Parliament's functions

The strategic priorities of Parliament are strengthening oversight and accountability, enhancing public involvement, deepening engagement in international fora, and strengthening co-operative government and legislative capacity. Overseeing the implementation of the National Development Plan remains the central theme.

In terms of country performance, South Africa has ranked 110 out of 166 countries. South Africa's overall score is 64% of the total progress towards achieving all 17 SDGs. Despite the slow progress, South Africa has made some strides with the implementation of the SDGs by establishing a national coordinating mechanism to strengthen the implementation of development policies. The coordination arrangement facilitates national engagements and reporting in a coordinated and integrated manner on the developmental agendas of the UN 2030 Agenda, the African Union (AU) Agenda 2063, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan (RISDP) as well as our own Vision 2030, as encapsulated in the National Development Plan (NDP).

With this background South Africa was well represented at the IPU Global Conference by making compelling contributions to the conference discussions. These included amongst others:

- **Digital Transformation:** Parliament has a significant role to play in the Digital Revolution and should therefore improve oversight and evidence-based law-making. Various initiatives must be prioritized that can gain traction in the state's response to evolving technologies. Parliament must ensure that broader civil society, such as organised labour, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), the media, etc. are well informed to engage knowledgeably and meaningfully on the complex and rapidly evolving issues pertaining to this Digital Revolution. It is particularly in this domain that Parliament, in its public involvement, oversight and legislative functions can make a major contribution. Parliament is ideally placed through its public participation function to increase awareness, education, and discussion on the 4IR amongst all sectors of society.

There is thus a need to develop policies, legislation and regulations that create an enabling environment for innovation to allow the economy to grow. A regulatory framework is thus key to ensuring effective oversight within a rapid digital transformation and innovation system. Parliament must prioritise the development of a legislative framework to address the gains and challenges of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR). Parliament should ensure evidence-based oversight over the 4IR initiatives of the Executive.

- **Innovation and Start-ups:** Entrepreneurship is a dynamic and vital driver of innovation, job creation through startups, and productivity growth. Startups, known for their ground-breaking ideas and disruptive approaches, serve as vibrant hubs for introducing new concepts and technologies into the market. Startups generate high-wage employment opportunities that cater to the evolving needs of the workforce.

  The unemployment rate in South Africa stands just below 34%, with projections from the International Monetary Fund indicating it could soon exceed 35%, positioning the country's jobless rate as one of the highest globally. South Africa does not have a dedicated Start-up Act, however, there are complementary initiatives aimed at creating an enabling environment that empowers aspiring entrepreneurs and facilitates the growth of startups.

  By minimising red tape, entrepreneurs can focus their energy and resources on innovation, job creation, and economic development, propelling South Africa towards a more inclusive and prosperous future. Young parliamentarians should thus monitor and ensure the implementation of policies that build institutional capacity, foster innovation, and strike a balance between advancement and risk mitigation.

- **Promoting respect for cultural diversity in support of sustainable development:** The 4IR is fundamentally changing the world, and technological advances such as artificial intelligence, machine learning and digitization are increasingly affecting how people live, work, communicate, learn, and play. Accordingly, a new set of moral, ethical, and legal values must be codified and become the global norm.

  The 4IR thus requires organizations to be compliant and avoid any unethical practices including side-lining employees in favour of a machine. As such, Parliamentarians must ensure that governments implement the roadmap for digital cooperation, to contribute to a future where connectivity is universal, digital rights are protected, cooperation is strengthened, and innovation drives sustainable economic growth.

5. KEY OBSERVATIONS

- All countries shared best practices within their contextual environments;
- The IPU established a Forum of Young Parliamentarians. This led to many of the Parliaments to establish a Parliamentary Forum for Young Parliamentarians;
- Access remains a challenge when it comes to digital transformation;

- Digital inequality and gaps are cause for concern as such it was reiterated that no one must be left behind;
- Budget allocation for digital transformation is imperative;
- Training programmes should be developed for digital literacy to enable a competent digital workforce;
- Continued sharing of best practices within and across countries to strengthen and support especially developing countries;
- Local Government is key to providing access to and promoting Small Businesses;
- A Legislative Framework is pivotal to ensure regulation and oversight over digital transformation initiatives;
- Cultural diversity must be promoted through legislation;
- Parliament is mandated to protect citizens and guarantee active citizenry;
- Awareness and Education is key for the digital revolution;
- Intellectual Property of entrepreneurs and small businesses must be protected through legislation;
- A common parliamentary approach is thus recommended in this regard.

5.1   The EU AI Act[1]

The European Union (EU) is developing the EU Artificial Intelligence (AI) Act which is the first regulation on artificial intelligence. The use of artificial intelligence in the EU will be regulated by the AI Act, the world's first comprehensive AI law. It aims to build a common language as it relates to definitions, risks, mitigation, etc.

As part of its digital strategy, the EU wants to regulate Artificial Intelligence (AI) to ensure better conditions for the development and use of this innovative technology. AI can create many benefits, such as better healthcare; safer and cleaner transport; more efficient manufacturing; and cheaper and more sustainable energy.

In April 2021, the European Commission proposed the first EU regulatory framework for AI. It says that AI systems that can be used in different applications are analysed and classified according to the risk they pose to users. The different risk levels will mean regulation. Once approved, these will be the world's first rules on AI.

Parliament's priority is to make sure that AI systems used in the EU are safe, transparent, traceable, non-discriminatory, and environmentally friendly. AI systems should be overseen by people, rather than by automation, to prevent harmful outcomes. Parliament also want to establish a technology-neutral, uniform definition for AI that could be applied to future AI systems.

On 14 June 2023, Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) adopted Parliament's negotiating position on the AI Act. Talks are in progress with EU countries in the Council on the final form of the law. The aim is to reach an agreement by the end of 2023.

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[1] European Union (2023).

6. CONFERENCE STATEMENT: PROPOSED ACTIONS[2]

To help accelerate the achievement of the SDGs through digital transformation and innovation, the following actions were proposed for Members of Parliaments.

6.1 Theme 1: Digital Transformation

a) Update parliamentary rules and working methods to allow for greater virtual participation of MPs, utilize interactive platforms that facilitate inclusive direct communication between constituents and representatives, and foster meaningful engagement of specific demographic groups, particularly youth, in the work of parliamentary committees;

b) Consider developing or strengthening forward-looking parliamentary bodies, such as Committees of the Future and other suitable mechanisms with respect to each country's specific conditions, to help parliaments anticipate and respond to long-term trends or potential shocks, and ensuring that youth are involved in such bodies;

c) Ensure all parliamentarians are equipped with the necessary knowledge and technical support to fully participate in online proceedings; enhance the use of virtual assistance to support parliamentarians; use AI tools to enhance the quality of legislative work; and develop a digital library of legal documents;

d) Adopt laws and policies that help close the digital gap and ensure accessibility to all, including through low-cost access, building of digital infrastructure and skills-building;

e) Develop suitable legal frameworks and strengthen international cooperation to protect their respective digital sovereignty to bring about a safe, healthy network environment and sustainable development;

f) Adopt adequate policies and procedures to prevent and respond to any form of technology-facilitated harassment and violence against members of parliament, including violence against women parliamentarians;

g) Advocate for the development of effective mechanisms and methods for collecting information and data to monitor the implementation of the SDGs;

h) Support the role of the United Nations in developing standards and legal frameworks on cyberspace, digital transformation, and AI based on consensus.

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[2] Inter-Parliamentary Union (2023).

6.2 Theme 2: Innovation and start-ups

a) Strengthen the innovation and start-up eco-system, including by developing legal frameworks for innovation and start-ups, scaling up our budgets to support youth-led and youth-inclusive enterprises, start-ups, and innovation initiatives, including through funding, grants, and technical assistance, and making sure they are aligned with the SDGs, especially on empowering young women;

b) Promote education curricula that provide the necessary skills to prepare the next generation of innovators and entrepreneurs, with an emphasis on digital skillsets; special focus should also be given to young women, including by incentivizing more to study in the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields;

c) Urge the IPU to consider possible avenues within existing structures for engaging on innovation and digital transformation issues;

d) Promote global networking of young parliamentarians in digital transformation and innovation, within the framework of the Forum of Young Parliamentarians, in close cooperation with the IPU Centre for Innovation in Parliament;

e) Strengthen the nexus between the scientific and parliamentary communities to create more space for science to contribute to peace and sustainable development, with a priority being the involvement of youth;

f) Encourage start-ups and innovation initiatives among youth and students, especially women, strengthen gender mainstreaming in accordance with the SDGs, and develop a separate programme for digital innovation and start-ups;

g) Promote innovation and sustainable entrepreneurship in all fields, with a focus on FoodTech, to actively contribute to the process of implementing the SDGs, by solving food security issues and ending famine.

6.3 Theme 3: Promoting respect for cultural diversity in support of sustainable development

a) Help develop a common parliamentary approach to establishing a framework of principles and values in the decision-making, research and development around science and technology, such as the forthcoming IPU International Charter on the Ethics of Science and Technology, which aims at ensuring that the development and application of science and technology are carried out in a responsible, ethical, and sustainable manner;

b) Contribute robustly to efforts intended to stem online violence against women and girls, including by promoting gender equality, curbing hate speech, and regulating and managing AI in a way in which women and girls are protected and new technologies do not perpetuate gender biases;

c) Strengthen data protection framework laws and other statutory instruments, especially concerning personal data and cyberthreats, and promote transparent and open-source algorithms;

d) Promote inclusivity, intercultural dialogue, and respect for cultural diversity and local knowledge as drivers of sustainable development, prosperity, and peaceful coexistence;

e) Promote culture as a driving force of sustainable development, commit to protecting and promoting cultural diversity, affirm the role of the creative economy and cultural industries and the role of culture and cultural diversity in the process of solving the difficulties and challenges facing humanity today, especially climate change, and prevent illegal trafficking and transfer of cultural heritage property;

f) Promote respect for cultural diversity in the context of the fourth industrial revolution; strengthen cooperation for economic innovation, increased efficiency, and drivers for economic growth; at the same time, help State agencies operate more transparently and effectively on the roadmap for digitalization to narrow the development gap and ensure personal privacy in cyberspace, while keeping in mind national sovereignty.

7. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The delegation expressed gratitude to the National Assembly of Viet Nam for having considerately, successfully, and professionally hosted this Global Conference of Young Parliamentarians, championing youth participation and promoting the achievement of the SDGs, including through the IPU and international and regional inter-parliamentary mechanisms.

The 4IR is well underway and so far, at a slow pace, South Africa is dealing with the ethical challenges that it is presenting. As the world enters the digital age, a more grounded approach to technological development is required to ensure that organizations do the right things from

an ethical perspective. Leaders and governments are expected to be well informed of the technological developments of the 4IR and their impact on society at large. In addition, 4IR requires organizations to be compliant and avoid any unethical practices including side-lining employees in favour of a machine.

There is a need to step back, pause, and regain consciousness of what is happening around us. Not necessarily to discard new technology, but rather to engage it with informed minds. Minds that have a clear view of whether it is helping or hindering our humanity. The multitude of ethical guidelines being produced around the world are not going to provide the answer. Instead, there should be boundaries for engaging with technology. Key questions that must be asked – What is technology doing for us, what is it doing to us, what is gained and what is lost, why this and not that?

Failure to be proactive in this regard risks losing power to machines and altering the course of humanity without fully understanding the consequences. It also risks creating massive inequality between the "techno super-rich" and a large underclass. To avoid this outcome, leaders across all sectors who are looking to benefit from these technologies should ensure that the proper legislation/policies are in place and being adhered to by all sectors.

Those in decision-making positions are thus encouraged to always consider where they are, to see if technology is appropriate for their context, and learning needs. Policymakers are urged to ensure that no one is left behind, always ensuring that the marginalised are accommodated. It is further noted that careful consideration should be given to whether there is adequate evidence of impact and enough information on the full cost needed to make informed decisions. Finally, policymakers should ensure that their plans fit their vision for sustainable development.

There is a need to develop a legislative framework for digital transformation. The EU AI Act will therefore be pivotal in guiding Parliaments to develop customised AI Acts in line with their contexts. The South African Parliament has made many strides within the context of the 4IR. As such, the South African Parliament is well-positioned to develop a legislative framework for digital transformation.

South Africa continues to build a capable developmental state able to respond to the needs of the people. To achieve the aspirations of a capable developmental state, the country needs a transformative Parliament that acts as an agent of change which ensures acceleration of service delivery, strengthens legislative capacity, enhances oversight and accountability, strengthens public participation, enhances co-operative government, stabilises the political-administrative interface, professionalises the public service, upgrades skills and improves co-ordination.

The IPU has a Forum for Young Parliamentarians. The Forum ensures that the youth voice is heard in global political decision-making both through greater participation of young MPs at our meetings, and through formal inputs into outcomes. It also ensures there is a youth perspective in all our work and builds bridges with outside organizations. The Forum is represented at the annual Global Conference of Young Parliamentarians which is a vital platform for empowering young leaders which focuses on how to draw more young people

into the formal democratic process. It is thus recommended that South Africa consider the establishment of a Parliamentary Forum for Young Parliamentarians to boost the participation of young people in Parliament and to help ensure young MPs play a full part in the work of Parliament and participate in the IPU Forum for Young Parliamentarians.

The South African delegation thus commits to continue to harness the power of technology and innovation for the SDGs, in a responsible way that leaves no one behind, especially not future generations, while respecting the United Nations Charter and international law. Furthermore, the delegation pledges to uphold the promises of the 2015 Hanoi Declaration, and to answer the urgent call of the 2030 Agenda.

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