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Concept note for the General Debate

Parliamentary action for social development and justice

Social development is one of three intertwined pillars of sustainable development, alongside economic development and environmental protection. It refers to the process of improving the well-being of every individual in society so they can reach their full potential as part of a community of shared values. It aims to build an equitable, inclusive and just society, ensuring that all individuals have equal access to opportunities, rights and resources. In short, social development is about placing the well-being of people at the centre of sustainable development.

In modern times, this people-centred vision of social development was reaffirmed most solemnly by the 1995 Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development and has been further carried forward by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It has been affirmed constantly that none of the SDGs can be achieved without addressing structural inequalities and meeting the needs of the most vulnerable and marginalized. While the social development vision has not changed much over the years, the underlying ground has shifted considerably.

To begin with, the past three decades have produced a new wave of globalization and the attendant liberalization of trade and market rules, which have caused severe imbalances within and between national economies. Financialization has grown exponentially, replacing large segments of the real economy and promoting short-term speculative gains over long-term productive investments. The protective role of government has been diminished in favour of the discipline of the marketplace in many policy areas, including the social sector. The welfare state of the post-war era (where it exists) has been weakened through fiscal austerity and the privatization of public assets. A new era of technological development, driven by digitalization – as well as, more recently, artificial intelligence – has emerged to support a society-wide shift towards heightened individualism. Income inequality, often based on gender, as well as wealth inequality have grown sharply both within and between countries, resulting in a relatively small group of individuals owning the majority of the world's productive assets. Work, even when abundant, has become more precarious, with real wages rising much less than return on investments. These trends are occurring against a backdrop of growing climate change impacts, which are further hindering social development.

The UN Secretary-General pointed out in his 2021 *Our Common Agenda* report that what is needed most urgently at this juncture is a new social contract, based on human rights, between the people and their governments, and within the international community at large. As the UNSG suggests, elements of this new social contract should include universal social protections like healthcare and basic income security, adequate housing, education, and decent work for all. It would have to significantly increase participation in decision-making at all levels and in all sectors by women, youth and marginalized groups. And it would have "to measure and value what matters to people and planet", including through alternative measures to Gross Domestic Product as the main indicator of progress. What is needed is a new social contract to foster justice and solidarity as important means of nurturing social dialogue and strengthening communities. The International Labour Organization's Global Coalition for Social Justice offers a potential model for this approach.

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The [Second World Summit for Social Development](), which is set to take place in November 2025 in Qatar, will provide an opportunity to take stock of progress and setbacks on social development since the first ground-breaking Summit in 1995, and to set the course for the future. As the institutions that represent the people, parliaments have a key role to play in this process and in ensuring that social development and justice become a reality for all.

The General Debate at the 150th IPU Assembly, entitled ***Parliamentary action for social development and justice***, will therefore consider the following issues:

- Poverty eradication, including:

    - Universal access to basic services, including healthcare, education and housing
    - Social protection for all, beginning with the most vulnerable populations, such as older adults, persons with disabilities, and children
    - Progressive taxation and other fiscal policies that reduce inequality
    - An economic environment more supportive of small and medium enterprises
    - Increased access to private finance for productive investments, including microcredit

- Decent and productive work, including:

    - Fair wages and working conditions
    - Respect of workers' rights
    - Entrepreneurship, particularly among women, youth and marginalized groups
    - The transition from informal to formal work
    - Support of the social and solidarity economy, exemplified by cooperatives, social enterprises and mutual aid societies, among others

- Social inclusion, including:

    - Anti-discrimination laws to promote equal opportunity for all in education, employment and access to public services
    - The integration of migrants and refugees into society
    - Broad-based access to digitalization and technological development
    - Support of the family
    - Greater participation of women, youth and minority groups in decision-making at all levels

In addition to addressing some of these issues, the parliamentarians participating in the General Debate may wish to reflect on the following questions:

- What should be the main features of the proposed new social contract for humanity?
- How can people – as opposed to markets, finance and technology – regain control of social development, and prioritize people's needs?
- What reforms are needed in the global economy to support social development?
- How can economic growth be thought of differently in the light of growing social and environmental concerns?
- What new commitments should emerge from the Second World Summit for Social Development?