



Statement by Hon. Dithapelo L. Keorapetse, MP, Speaker of the
National Assembly of Botswana

150th INTER-PARLIAMENTARY UNION (IPU ASSEMBLY
5th – 9th April, 2025, Tashkent, Uzbekistan

THEME: 'Parliamentary Action for Social Development and Justice'

- Honourable Chair and President of the 150th Assembly;
- Honourable Speakers and Members of Parliament;

- Distinguished Guests;
- Ladies and Gentlemen;

It is both a privilege and an honour to address this August Assembly for the first time, as the 10th Speaker of the National Assembly of the Republic of Botswana and as the youngest Speaker in my nation's history - the youngest in the Southern African region - the second youngest in Africa and among the youngest in this global body. I stand here humbly not as a symbol of youth, but rather as proof that democracy renews itself when given a chance to do so.

Botswana's Democratic Turning Point

In October 2024, Botswana was one of the seven countries in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and among 72 world Parliaments which held Elections. It was also one of the two countries where there was a peaceful transfer of power.

Our country holds an impeccable record as the only post independent African country to have maintained multiparty democracy characterized by a quinquennial review of the

government's mandate through elections and relative good governance. We have once again, in November 2024 through a smooth, seamless and orderly transition of power from one political party to another, affirmed that we were, are and will always be a great nation. We are not only the diamond heart of Africa and a peaceful nation, but we are indeed an African miracle.

We witnessed a historic democratic transition in which after nearly six decades of rule by one party, our people spoke unequivocally for change, and power shifted peacefully to the Umbrella for Democratic Change under the able leadership of President Advocate Duma Gideon Boko. This process was not merely an election but a rebirth of the principles of accountability, and a demand, through the ballot box, for a new order in which there is social development and justice. It signified the consolidation and maturity of our democracy as it was a sharp contrast from the trend of Unconstitutional Changes of Government witnessed elsewhere on the African continent.

Sir Seretse Khama, the first President of our great Republic once said that "Democracy, like a little plant, does not grow or

develop on its own. It must be nursed and nurtured if it is to grow and flourish. It must be believed in and practiced if it is to be appreciated. And it must be fought for and defended if it is to survive."

As a new government, we have fought gallantly for our democracy and we therefore commit to nurturing this democracy through robust democratic reforms to ensure that it is indeed a government of the people, by the people and most importantly for the many people and not just for the few.

The 2024 elections also highlighted a sobering reality as our Parliament now has fewer women at only 9% or 6 women MPs. In comparison to other Parliaments the world over, these are very low and disappointing statistics. Therefore, this calls for us to reflect and introspect on the IPU's call for gender parity, which should not be viewed just as an idealistic reform; but also as a reminder about the urgency of electoral reforms that will help us realize this important objective. On a more positive note, about 36% of the members of the 13th Parliament of Botswana are young Parliamentarians as per (IPU standards).

Members of the 13th Parliament of the Republic of Botswana are an educated and diverse group whose mandate is to be a model of excellence in democracy through the following democratic pillars:

- providing transformative legislation that uplifts the marginalized,
- Relentless oversight to curb corruption,
- Robust Capacity-building to equip MPs as stewards of justice, and
- promote parliamentary diplomacy to forge alliances to amplify these goals and objectives globally.

Botswana's new administration has placed human rights at the centre of its activities and processes. This has seen a restructuring of our foreign policy where we place human rights at the centre of our engagements with external actors and partners.

The human rights approach is not only a moral imperative, but a reflection of Botswana's commitment to democratic principles, justice and equality. Botswana thus strives to engage with other nations from a position of integrity and conviction. By adopting a human rights based approach, the government of Botswana

supports causes promoting peace, stability and sustainable development both at home and abroad.

I stand before you to address the critical importance of parliamentary action in fostering social development and justice as captured by the Theme of this Assembly.

Parliaments are the voice of the people, and hold the sacred responsibility of championing policies and legislation to uplift the lives of all citizens, especially the most vulnerable.

We must be proactive in enacting laws that promote the economic empowerment of our citizens, creating an enabling environment for sustainable job creation, entrepreneurship, and skills development. This includes promoting access to finance, technology, and markets for all our citizens, regardless of their background.

Within this equation, quality education and accessible healthcare are other key areas which are fundamental human rights.

We must invest in building more schools and hospitals to ensure that every child has the opportunity to learn and that all children have access to basic medical care.

We must also strengthen our social welfare programs, to ensure that they are effective, efficient, and reach those who need them

the most.

Honourable Chair, Speakers and Members of Parliament, gender equality is not just a matter of fairness; it is essential for social and economic progress. In this regard we must enact laws and policies that promote equal opportunities for women and girls in all areas of life.

Good governance and accountability are also key elements of social development and justice because transparency, accountability, and the rule of law, are essential for social development and justice. We must therefore strengthen our institutions, combat corruption, and ensure that all citizens are not short-changed and have equal access to justice.

Parliaments must also play a crucial oversight role to ensure that government policies and programs are implemented effectively and efficiently. We must hold the executive accountable for its actions and ensure that public resources are prudently and justly allocated.

We must create a conducive environment for social development and justice through enacting and amending laws that promote social welfare, equity, and justice; provide adequate funding for social development initiatives, promote inclusive economic and social transformation; engage citizens in decision-making to ensure responsiveness to societal needs

and holding the government accountable for the implementation of these social programs.

To this end, Botswana possesses a well-established social protection system that relies on budgetary allocations approved by Parliament. The country's social protection initiatives encompass various cash transfers, in-kind assistance, feeding programs, fee exemptions, public works, and initiatives aimed at improving the employability and livelihoods of youth and other vulnerable groups, as well as pension schemes.

Although in some cases, Botswana's social protection system is afflicted by implementation and impact challenges. Its programs collectively account for approximately 3.6 percent of the country's GDP. This being financed by the government, entirely.

In terms of legislation, the Parliament of Botswana has been central in enacting legislation that underpins social development policies and legal frameworks. Examples of such legislation include: The Constitution of Botswana which guarantees fundamental rights and freedoms, providing a foundation for social justice; The Employment Act which protects workers' rights, contributing to fair labour practices;

Legislation on Gender Equality to guard against gender discrimination and promote women's empowerment in all spheres of life; the Legal Aid Act which facilitates access to legal services for all; the Ombudsman Act to hold government departments to account for their actions, where any injustice has been caused to members of the public; and the Refugee (recognition and Control) Act which protects and manages asylum seekers and refugees in Botswana.

Collectively, with conviction and devastating agility, we must recognise that the effectiveness of these laws relies on their enforcement and implementation, which are often subject to budgetary restrictions and a lack of capacity to implement them within the relevant government agencies. Truly speaking, we must remove all hurdles for the achievement of good. If its budgetary constraints, we must look for the money, if its bad laws, let's change these laws. If the hindrance is people in positions of authority, let's remove them. Let us all agree that we have talked too much, for too long and it is now time to act.

Other challenges that negatively affect social development and justice are limited public engagement and inadequate monitoring and evaluation. This too, is not a good excuse. These challenges, which I believe are not unique to Botswana,

are significant, but not insurmountable. If we are deliberate, intentional and have conviction anchored on the desperate aspirations of our people, nothing is impossible. We would achieve all we intend to do, and that which our people require us to do.

In this respect, Parliaments can enhance their contribution to social development and justice by considering the following key actions: strengthening parliamentary capacity; enhancing parliamentary oversight; promoting public engagement; fostering a culture of constructive dialogue and collaboration across party lines; and improving implementation.

As I conclude, let me remind you of the vital role that you play in shaping and driving the social development and justice agenda. While progress has been made in enacting legislation and promoting social policies, challenges remain in ensuring that these efforts translate into tangibles in the lives of our people. By strengthening parliamentary capacity, enhancing oversight, promoting public engagement, addressing political dynamics, and improving implementation, we can contribute more effectively to building a more just, equitable, and socially developed world. Continuous evaluation and adaptation of

parliamentary action is crucial to ensure relevance and effectiveness in addressing evolving social needs.

Let's take solace in Nelson Mandela's words of wisdom that, "What counts in life is not the mere fact that we have lived. It is what difference we have made to the lives of others."

Let us all rise to the occasion and fulfil our mandate as Parliamentarians, to serve the people and build a more just and equitable world. It is now or never!

I Thank You.