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Encouraging good governance for SDGs and health: The critical role of parliaments

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Honourable Ministers and Secretaries,
Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to address this august gathering on behalf of the IPU, its 171 Member Parliaments and the 47,000 members of parliaments out there in the world.

Let me thank the Government of the People's Republic of China and my good friend, Dr. Margaret Chan, Director General of the World Health Organization, for the invitation to attend this important forum. In so doing, we are taking further the strong partnership that has been established between the WHO, the global health organization and the IPU, the global organization of parliaments.

Indeed, many people might be wondering what the Secretary General of the organization of parliaments is doing at a conference intended to promote health. Let me take you back to what many previous speakers at this conference have said time and again: health promotion cannot be done successfully by any one person or organization alone. It is a multi-stakeholder endeavour, requiring a multi-sectoral approach and involving a host of actors. It requires the involvement of parliaments alongside other key partners.

As I speak, I am mindful of the transformational goals that are the SDGs and I would like for us to pause for a while and reflect on two key goals in this new development agenda. Goal 16 refers to the need to promote just, peaceful and inclusive societies, with emphasis on the development of effective, accountable and transparent institutions. If we read this Goal alongside Goal 3, which seeks to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages, we begin to understand the inter-relatedness of the SDGs.

Goal 16 has to do with the promotion of governance, which we have all recognized as a key enabler of the other goals. I think therefore that we are on safe ground when we conclude that effective, accountable and transparent institutions are key to the achievement of healthy lives for all. If I put on my lens as Secretary General of the IPU, I see parliaments as those effective, accountable and transparent institutions.

It is for this reason that the 2030 Agenda acknowledges the central role parliaments can play in advancing the SDGs by adopting enabling legislation, including the key budget bill. It also recognizes that parliaments are uniquely placed to hold governments to account for the effective implementation of the SDGs. I would like to add that, as representatives of the people, parliaments are well-placed to articulate and implement the aspirations of the people for a better life.

From this podium, therefore, I wish to make the case for a more robust partnership between the governance community, including parliaments, and the technical/scientific community embodied by the WHO. I wish to stress the importance of such a partnership being built at both the international and the national levels.

If you will allow me, I would like to reflect on my vision for the involvement of parliaments in and their contribution to the promotion of health:

1. Parliaments are the institutions that are called upon to translate international instruments and commitments into the national legislative framework and devise policies for their implementation. They should be more active in performing this role.
2. Parliaments should be able and willing to exercise oversight and demand accountability for the implementation of health commitments and policies. They are the critical link on the ground between policies and actual implementation of health projects in an efficient and transparent manner.
3. Parliaments should play their budgetary role more robustly and ensure through their resource allocation functions that the health sector is well funded.
4. Parliamentarians, as representatives of the people, have an important advocacy mission for health in their communities. They are the bridge between the people and the powers that be. They are community leaders who should lead by example and sensitize their constituents to healthy lifestyles.

The leitmotiv of the SDGs is that no one should be left behind. Parliaments and parliamentarians have a bounden duty to ensure this. It is only then that they can be seen to be inclusive not only in their composition but also in the way they deliver effectively to the people, to all the people. After all, is it not said that a democratic parliament is one that articulates the interests of society as a whole and in which society, in all its diversity can identify itself?

But then we need to be realistic: many parliaments around the world lack the expertise and resources to perform their duties. It is therefore imperative that efforts be dedicated to building the capacities of parliaments in the health sector, for instance. When I began my career, parliaments were considered to be highly-sensitive institutions politically and many external actors were reluctant to engage with them lest their actions be construed as interfering with the internal affairs of States. While it is still true that parliaments remain politically-sensitive institutions, there is no legitimate excuse today to not engage with them. Parliaments are indeed opening up in response to a fast-moving world and partners such as WHO should be more forthcoming in engaging with them. This means for instance that parliamentarians should be involved in national dialogues, including those facilitated by partners, with a view to formulating national health policies. It means that WHO must be more willing to engage with health-related committees in parliaments to provide the expertise, data and analyses needed to develop sound legislation and policies.

I am pleased to see such engagement in a number of countries, including:

- Uganda where, with joint support from WHO and the IPU, the Parliament has established its own maternal, newborn and child health plan of action that mirrors the government's own plan and is thus able to pursue robust oversight. Successful pressure by parliament on the government a few years ago for an increase in the health budget should be lauded, as well as the participation of parliamentarians in vaccination campaigns. As I speak, WHO and the IPU are currently running an inception seminar for the Ugandan Parliament on RMNCH to build the capacity and knowledge of the recently elected MPs.
- In Bangladesh, parliamentarians are at the forefront of the national campaign to ban early child marriage, including through relevant legislation.
- We are indeed proud to have supported the development of renewed legislation on sexual and reproductive health by the Parliament of Rwanda, again with assistance from WHO.
- In September this year, I was privileged to inaugurate in the National People's Congress in Beijing the first-ever inter-regional parliamentary seminar on the SDGs for African and Asian parliaments. Health was a major focus at that seminar.
- Early this year, Bangladesh hosted an IPU summit of South-East Asian Speakers of Parliament on the SDGs and Margaret will be pleased to note that the entire summit was dedicated to efforts required from parliamentary leaders in the tobacco control effort. A parliamentary action plan has been designed and will be taken forward at the next summit in India next February. This initiative exemplifies the type of senior leadership and commitment required for the success of the sustainable agenda. Parliaments are ready to rise to the challenge.
- We heard yesterday from the Deputy Speaker of the Chinese National People's Congress that China's new basic health care law was going to be a top priority for the NPC during its next legislative year.

In conclusion, I argue that the pace of change in the world today, the increasingly complex nature of the issues at stake, and the evolving expectations of the people mean that, for parliaments and their partners, it can no longer be business as usual. Parliaments must deliver. They must articulate and implement the wishes and aspirations of the people effectively. They are required to be ever more representative and inclusive so that no one is left behind. They have the constitutional powers to do so. They must be steadfast in using those powers for the common good, especially in ensuring healthier lives for their people.

The IPU remains committed to mobilizing parliaments for the implementation of that vision, in partnership with WHO and other technical partners. The SDGs offer parliaments a golden opportunity to demonstrate that they can be and are relevant to the people they are meant to serve. Health is a matter of equity, justice and survival. We must all rise to the challenge together, by building a more robust governance environment founded on the rule of law and human rights.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this important debate.