

**Opening remarks
153rd IPU Assembly – General Debate
Arusha, Tanzania
6 October 2026**

Madam President, Tulia Ackson,

**Honourable Mussa Azzan Zungu, Speaker of
the National Assembly of the United
Republic of Tanzania,**

**Honourable Speakers and Members of
Parliament,**

IPU Secretary-General Anda Filip,

Dear colleagues and friends,

Habari za asubuhi.

**It is a great pleasure to be with you here in
Arusha, in Africa, my home continent, and to
address the IPU Assembly once again.**

Allow me to congratulate Dr Tulia Ackson as she completes her term as IPU President, and to thank her for her leadership. I also congratulate Ambassador Anda Filip, the first woman to lead the IPU Secretariat, and I thank Martin Chungong for many years of partnership with WHO.

Over the past several years, WHO's partnership with IPU has been a very important part of our work.

As a former parliamentarian myself, I know the vital role you play in translating laws, budgets and oversight into real results in people's lives.

WHO's long-standing partnership with IPU, renewed through our 2024 Memorandum of Understanding, has focused on three key priorities:

Universal health coverage; global health security; and promoting healthier populations.

In particular, we have emphasized the health of the most vulnerable, including women, children and adolescents.

Your leadership has been essential in making progress on each of those priorities.

Today, I ask for your continued leadership, in four key areas.

First, I ask you to make universal health coverage a reality in your countries.

Every person should be able to access the health services they need without suffering financial hardship.

But universal health coverage cannot be judged only by national averages. Its real test

is whether it reaches those who are most often left behind.

The health of women, newborns and children is a litmus test of political accountability.

For that reason, I commend President Samia Suluhu Hassan for her leadership in championing maternal, newborn and child health.

I urge every parliament represented here to scrutinize the results, finance the services, and hold governments accountable for ensuring that every woman and every child receives quality care – including sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Second, I ask you to make the transition from aid dependency to health sovereignty based on sustainable domestic financing.

That is the objective of the Accra Reset led by President John Mahama of Ghana.

One powerful tool for making that transition is health taxes.

Well-designed taxes on tobacco, alcohol and sugary drinks can reduce harmful consumption, prevent disease and save lives, while generating revenue for health and development.

And this is where we need your leadership.

You know the budget debates in your own countries better than anyone. You know where resources are allocated. And you have the power to advocate for investments in health.

As you know, WHO was also affected by funding cuts last year.

In response, we reduced our budget, restructured our organization and cut costs.

But the impact of the cuts was significantly mitigated by reforms that we began nine years ago, which have helped place WHO on a much more sustainable financial path.

We must remain on that path.

Third, I ask you to help complete and implement the WHO Pandemic Agreement.

As you know, WHO Member States adopted the Agreement last year, and are now working to finalize its Pathogen Access and Benefit Sharing, or PABS, Annex.

The Agreement cannot be opened for signature until the PABS Annex is adopted. Finalizing the Annex is therefore essential to enable signature and ratification.

I ask you to work with your governments to conclude those negotiations as soon as possible.

We continue to see significant misinformation about the Pandemic Agreement, including false claims that it cedes sovereignty to WHO.

That is simply not true.

I ask you to help explain clearly to your constituents what the Agreement is, and what it is not.

Fourth, I ask you to ensure that artificial intelligence and digital technologies serve health.

As President Macron and I wrote recently, our task is not to celebrate or condemn technology.

It is to ensure that digital innovation serves health and well-being while protecting people from harm.

A growing number of countries are recognising that protecting children online is a public health imperative and are introducing stronger safeguards.

Parliamentarians have a critical role in establishing the guardrails that ensure AI and digital technologies narrow inequalities rather than deepen them, and protect children rather than exploit them.

Honourable parliamentarians,

As you know, this is the last time I will address an IPU Assembly as Director-General of WHO.

So my call to you is stronger than ever.

Use your legislative power to make universal health coverage a reality.

Use your budgetary power to advance towards health sovereignty.

Use your oversight power to prepare for future pandemics and ensure that technology serves people.

And use your political voice to defend the right to health, especially for those whose voices are too often unheard.

At a time when multilateralism is under strain, health reminds us why international cooperation remains indispensable.

Viruses do not respect borders. Neither do antimicrobial resistance, climate change, or digital threats.

From here in Africa, where I began my own journey in public health, I ask you to continue raising your voices: for health, for equity, and for the people you represent.

Health can, and must, remain a bridge that brings us together.

Thank you.

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