



Inter-Parliamentary Union

For democracy. For everyone.

Chemin du Pommier 5  
Case postale 330  
1218 Le Grand-Saconnex  
Geneva – Switzerland  
www.ipu.org

# Speech by the Secretary General of the Inter-Parliamentary Union Martin Chungong

## Parliamentary action to end statelessness

25 February 2021

It gives me pleasure to welcome you all to this Webinar on parliamentary action to end statelessness. I am very pleased to see such a strong interest and participation and I would like to thank you all for joining us today. I would also like to thank our longstanding partners and friends from UNHCR. We greatly value this cooperation which has grown over the years and we look forward to doing more together.

I think we are all here because we know that there is no reason today for anyone to be deprived of or live without a nationality. For the majority of women and men, girls and boys in 2021, having a nationality is a given, an obvious fact of life. A right. And so it should be.

Article 15 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that "[e]veryone has the right to a nationality" and that "[n]o one shall be arbitrarily deprived of their nationality nor denied the right to change their nationality".

Every individual, everywhere in the world, has the right to have a legal connection with a State. Every individual has the right to a sense of identity, to the protection of a State and to the enjoyment of fundamental civil and political rights.

States have signed up to a multitude of international conventions and other legal instruments that govern the question of citizenship. And yet today, there are millions of women and men, girls and boys in the world that have no nationality and are therefore stateless.

This means that millions of people today cannot live a life that you or I would call "normal"; cannot enroll their children in school, own or lease property, work, marry, travel or vote. Or even bury their dead. These men and women are not entitled to dream or project themselves in the future – how could they when their present is non-existent. They are invisible.

Now, there is a light at the end of the tunnel, and that is the good news. We know that solutions exist and work. They are in the hands of States; they are in the hands of decision-makers. This is why I believe that Parliaments and their members have the moral responsibility to take action and step up to the challenge. After all, does it not stand to reason that they assume leadership given the legitimacy they wield as representatives of the people?

We know that building a legal framework that prevents and prohibits

statelessness is at the heart of sustainable and effective solutions. This means addressing discrimination in laws and in particular gender-based discrimination. Members of parliament have a responsibility to shine the spotlight on this in their countries, review laws and amend them, where necessary. And we have seen results – women MPs for instance working across party lines and initiating bills to address key inequality issues, defending the rights of those that are often not heard and are forgotten.

We also know that laws are only as good as the effort and resources put into them with budget allocations aimed at supporting enforcement programmes and structures. For members of parliament this entails regularly questioning the government on implementation and scrutinizing and adopting resources for impact. And here again, we have seen MPs holding their government to account, and reallocating resources during budgetary debates, to meet the needs of the most vulnerable and the voiceless.

Lastly, for laws to be effective, they must be enforceable, widely known and understood. We know that statelessness is often difficult to understand, visualize and monitor. Members of parliament, as opinion leaders can and should spread the word – as representatives of the people, they engage with constituents on a regular basis, they listen and explain so that those that have no voice are represented as well.

This is what the IPU believes in. It is an objective we have been striving to achieve over the years. Through our Committee on international humanitarian law, chaired by Dr. Vadai, we have worked to create awareness among MPs of humanitarian and human rights law and, more recently, of statelessness. Information is crucial; it is the starting point for any action. Resolving statelessness will gain in strength through wider dissemination of the real issues at stake and challenging misconceptions.

For parliaments to act, they also need to have tools and access to best practices. The Webinar today provides another opportunity to raise awareness and share strategies and lessons learned.

We have seen laws changed and amended, wrongs turned to rights thanks to the will and engagement of one committed man or one committed woman. We can certainly do more and the IPU will continue to support such engagement.

A little more than a year ago, the IPU submitted a series of pledges to the High-Level Segment on Statelessness, committing to pursuing parliamentary awareness and building political will through Parliaments.

2021 will be a crucial year – we are just a few years away from 2024, the set target to end statelessness. 2021 is also the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness. It takes will and courage, but I believe that with strengthened parliamentary action we can make the difference to end statelessness in the coming years.

I therefore thank you all for your presence – it is a strong signal of support and a promise of change.