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Side event to the United Nations High-Level Meeting on HIV/AIDS: The role of parliaments in addressing inequalities to end AIDS by 2030

7 June 2021, 15:00 – 16:30 CEST (Geneva)

REPORT

Speakers (in order of appearance)

Mr. Duarte Pacheco, President, IPU
Mr. Mitch Fifield, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Australia to the United Nations; Co-facilitator of the UN High-Level Meeting
Ms. Winnie Byanyima, Executive Director, UNAIDS
Mr. Marc Angel, UNAIDS Champion; Member of the European Parliament
Ms. Barbara Lee, Member, United States House of Representatives
Ms. Sylvia Mthethwa, Senator, Kingdom of Eswatini; Vice-Chairperson on Health, Labour and Social Affairs at the Pan African Parliament (PAP)
Mr. Charles Goerens, Member of the European Parliament
Ms. Felicita Hikuam, Director, AIDS and Rights Alliance for Southern Africa (ARASA)
Mr. José Ignacio Echániz, Vice-Chair of the IPU Advisory Group on Health; Member of Parliament, Spain

Moderator

Ms. Petra Bayr, Member of the IPU Advisory Group on Health; Member of Parliament, Austria

Introduction

Forty years since the first cases were identified, AIDS remains an urgent global crisis and with 34.7 million deaths globally in this period one of the deadliest pandemics of modern times. Stigma, discrimination and underlying inequalities continue to fuel the HIV epidemic, to marginalize and criminalize communities, and restrict access to health, education and other essential services. A virtual side event to the United Nations High-Level Meeting on HIV/AIDS was organized in collaboration with UNAIDS on 7 June 2021 to discuss the new Global AIDS Strategy 2021-2026 and how parliaments could contribute to its achievement and ensure adequate investment in HIV and health. It also considered how inequalities were driving the HIV epidemic and what the impact of law was on the HIV response, including in the context of the colliding HIV epidemic and COVID-19 pandemic.

“As co-chair of the bi-partisan and bi-cameral HIV/AIDS Caucus in the United States Congress, I have been fighting alongside Representative Jenniffer González-Colón to advance bi-partisan legislation that addresses the HIV/AIDS epidemic.... In Congress, sustained bi-partisan support for US leadership in ending AIDS has helped ensure continued progress ... [that has helped] save millions of lives at home and across the globe and supported access to education, care and life-saving treatment.... It is unacceptable that legal structures place additional burdens on individuals solely as a result of their HIV status.”

Ms. Barbara Lee, Member, United States House of Representatives

The event was attended by more than 180 participants from 56 countries, including parliamentarians, parliamentary staff and other stakeholders involved in the HIV response.

The welcoming remarks by IPU President Mr. D. Pacheco and Ambassador M. Fifield were followed by keynote addresses by Ms. W. Byanyima (UNAIDS) and Mr. M. Angel (European Parliament) who both highlighted how the new Global AIDS Strategy 2021-2026 aimed to get the HIV response back on track to end AIDS by 2030. In her video message, Ms. B. Lee (United States Congress) reiterated the need to sustain action on HIV/AIDS. During the panel discussion the representatives of the Parliament of Eswatini, the European Parliament and ARASA – speaking for civil society – presented their views on how parliaments could drive progress. The panel discussion was followed by an interactive discussion where participants shared their respective countries' experiences.

Strengthening the global HIV response

Despite the significant improvements in access to HIV treatment and reduction of AIDS-related deaths, the global targets that had been set for 2020 have been missed. The achievements of some countries, including low-income countries, testify that progressive laws and policies, and inclusive health systems are key enablers of better health outcomes.

In the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, which is threatening the gains already made, the United Nations High-Level Meeting on HIV/AIDS provided an opportunity to reinvigorate the HIV response. The event stressed the importance of global and regional cooperation in mobilizing commitments and resources across all relevant sectors. Nevertheless, parliaments and parliamentarians had an important responsibility in implementing priority actions at the country level.

Inequalities fueling the HIV pandemic

The new Global AIDS Strategy 2021-2026 centers around the need of ending inequalities fueling the HIV epidemic, which could prevent 1.7 million deaths by 2030. Participants agreed on the interconnectedness of health and gender, as women and adolescent girls – especially in sub-Saharan Africa – were being left behind. Stigma and discrimination also continued to prevent people living with HIV and key populations from accessing the services they needed.

“We [should] not neglect that not only are we members [of parliament] to speak for our people but there are people living with HIV who are members of parliament.... I have tried in my country, Zambia ... to really rally the support for people living with HIV, to also showcase that people living with HIV are not just vulnerable people, they are people in decision-making. And we also have the vulnerable faces ... of mostly women and girls.... Indeed, our men are needed for this cause if we are going to win it.”

Ms. Princess Kasune, Member of Parliament, Zambia

It should not however be forgotten that HIV/AIDS did not affect exclusively vulnerable and marginalized communities. Greater awareness about people living with HIV was required by those in decision-making positions.

The role of parliaments

The event highlighted that many strategies already in place were successful in addressing HIV/AIDS. They included partnerships across party lines, building bridges with activists and civil society, and evidence-informed programmes that engaged key populations and communities that were able to reach marginalized groups.

Parliamentarians were called upon to put the fight against inequalities at the center of their work. That included the removal of punitive laws criminalizing people living with and at risk of HIV, and the expansion of supportive laws to address stigma, discrimination, gender-based violence and gender inequality. Parliamentarians could also strengthen public trust and champion the rights of all those affected by HIV/AIDS.

The inclusion of HIV/AIDS in national development agendas and sustainable and predictable funding would also be instrumental. However, mobilizing domestic resources and strengthening finance ministries and tax authorities were significant challenges in the context of the COVID-19 response and recovery. The high turnover of parliamentarians in some countries when elections occurred could also affect leadership and sustained action in the HIV response.

Building resilience

The COVID-19 pandemic was exacerbating inequalities and constituted a setback especially for the prevention of new HIV infections. However, participants agreed that the HIV and COVID-19 responses could be mutually reinforcing by addressing inequalities, protecting human rights, strengthening health systems, and identifying populations most at risk.

An effective response to HIV/AIDS would help build resilience and increase the ability of countries to address COVID-19 and other health emergencies. Participants called for more effective strategies to respond to epidemics to ensure the right to health and achieve progress across the Sustainable Development Goals.

The IPU adopted a statement on the occasion of the High-Level Meeting on HIV/AIDS to mobilize parliaments globally. The Organization remained committed to further strengthening its long-standing collaboration with UNAIDS to support parliamentary action on HIV/AIDS, human rights and development.