



Inter-Parliamentary Union
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Virtual workshop: Public engagement for universal health coverage

3 November 2022, 14:00 – 15:30 CET

REPORT

Speakers (in order of appearance)

Mr. José Ignacio Echániz, Member of Parliament of Spain, Chair of the IPU Advisory Group on Health
Ms. Tamar Chugoshvili, Project Officer, Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU)
Mr. David Clarke, Acting unit head, Health systems governance and policy, World Health Organization
Mr. Kenneth Leonard Jacobs, Member of Parliament of South Africa
Ms. Lorraine Clifford-Lee, Senator of Ireland
Mr. Faustine Ndulile, Member of Parliament of Tanzania

Moderators

Ms. Aleksandra Blagojevic, Programme Manager for International Development, IPU
Mr. Andy Richardson, Programme Manager, Parliamentary Standards Setting and Knowledge Generation, IPU

Introduction

Universal health coverage (UHC) means that all people have access to the health services they need, when and where they need them, without financial hardship. Participatory approaches to decision-making can help identify the barriers people face in accessing health services. The virtual workshop held on 3 November 2022 discussed how parliaments can leverage public engagement as part of efforts towards UHC, and how legal frameworks can help promote inclusive participatory processes. The event was attended by more than 50 parliamentarians and parliamentary staff from 22 countries.

Opening remarks by the Chair of the IPU Advisory Group on Health were followed by an overview of the key findings of the [2022 IPU-UNDP Global Parliamentary Report](#). A presentation from the World Health Organization (WHO) discussed the importance of legal frameworks to support participatory processes in health. Country perspectives from South Africa, Ireland and Tanzania further highlighted different models and experiences of public engagement.

Why public engagement matters

The 2022 Global Parliamentary Report examines public engagement in the work of parliaments. Speakers highlighted that public engagement was necessary for effective representation, building trust towards parliamentary institutions and practicing democracy every day. Parliaments were increasingly being strategic in their approach to public engagement and using digital technologies to adapt to changing circumstances. Another important aspect was the promotion of two-way communication, on one hand informing and educating the public and on the other listening to people's voices to ensure parliaments remained relevant. Inclusive participation, paying attention to youth, using new technologies and facilitating learning among parliaments were key areas for making parliaments more responsive and effective.

It was further stressed that participation was part and parcel of the right to health, and linked to important freedoms and the right to non-discrimination. The translation of these rights into the national legal framework

depended on country contexts and legal traditions, but for meaningful participation three important elements had to be considered: safeguards to ensure proportionate representation, clarity of roles and responsibilities and financial resources for implementation. Although legislation was not necessary for public engagement to happen, the institutionalization of the right to participation protected the existence of a public engagement mechanism. At the same time, legislation did not automatically translate into public engagement and attention should also be paid to laws potentially hindering participation, in particular of vulnerable and marginalized groups. The latter must be given careful consideration when designing legal frameworks for participation so as to recognize and re-set power imbalances.

Country experiences in public engagement for health

Different models and experiences of public engagement were presented. In South Africa, the constitutional mandate to facilitate the involvement of the public in the legislative process was used to undertake an extensive public participation process on the National Health Insurance Bill that was tabled into parliament in 2019. The process involved a wide range of stakeholders through a number of channels. Particular efforts were made to increase accessibility and to reach out to both urban and rural areas. The outcomes of the process showed broad support for the Bill and the principle of UHC, while concerns were raised on the affordability and sustainability of the proposed system. The inputs received would inform further deliberations of the parliamentary committee on health.

In Ireland, the model of citizen's assemblies was crucial in driving a constitutional revision on abortion and further legislative developments on access to sexual and reproductive health services. Although the citizen assembly in question did not have formal powers to enforce its recommendations, the outcomes of the process were institutionalized through the formation of a parliamentary committee. This experience showed the importance of public engagement for empowering citizens, decoupling sexual and reproductive health and rights from other political issues and party politics, and instituting a constructive dialogue between government, parliament and health stakeholders.

Finally, in Tanzania, the shift from communicable diseases to a greater burden of non-communicable diseases implied a greater focus on health prevention and promotion, requiring a bottom-up approach putting people at the center and involving communities. Community health workers provided a bridge between health services and communities, leading to better health outcomes. This approach helped empower the public, increase health literacy levels and uptake of health services, as well as promote social accountability.

The discussion in the workshop raised questions on how to initiate a public engagement process in the absence of a legal mandate; how to reach vulnerable groups, especially in areas with low literacy levels; and how to process high numbers of inputs received through participatory processes. The speakers pointed out the importance of investing in community approaches and citizen's empowerment and to adopt a step-to-step approach. The IPU will continue working with parliaments and partners on public engagement and UHC to provide knowledge and tools to strengthen parliamentary action.