



Inter-Parliamentary Union

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**Delivered at the African Regional Parliamentary Conference:
Comprehensive Responses to Refugee Situations – Effective
Parliamentary Approaches**

Pan African Parliament Headquarters
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It gives me great pleasure to be here today. Allow me start by **thanking the Pan African Parliament and its President**, for hosting us so generously here in Midrand. My sincere thanks go as well to UNHCR, a long time partner of the IPU, for the invaluable cooperation and support we enjoy and have enjoyed for many years now. Allow me thank you all as well for coming here and dedicating the next three days to discussing efforts for enhanced responses to refugee situations.

Refugee protection is a matter at the core of the work of the Inter-Parliamentary Union and one that is personally very close to my heart.

In our world today, humanity, dignity and respect for rights are at risk. We have all witnessed recent large-scale flows of people on the move which shed light to the dramatic plight of persons who are forced to leave their homes behind.

More than 70 million people are currently displaced around the world because of conflict and natural disasters; and the numbers have been on the rise over the years.

70 million.

Colleagues, **behind these numbers are human beings**—women and men, girls and boys who are forced to leave their homes, whether because of conflict, human rights violations, or persecution and violence. Their lives are overhauled—they leave behind everything—home, family, community. They leave behind their dreams and future. As a result they find themselves in situations of extreme vulnerability in the face of heightened risks of exploitation and abuse. This is the daily reality of millions of refugees and internally displaced persons around the world.

34% of the global population of concern to UNHCR are on the African continent – this means some 24 million men and women, out of which more than 6 million are refugees and more than 500000 are asylum seekers. The majority of African refugees are below the age of 18.

We also know that more than 80 per cent of those fleeing their countries as refugees find protection in neighbouring countries whose people and governments are, in turn, often struggling to manage their own development and the impacts of neighbouring conflicts. We need to constantly remind

ourselves that impact of displacement within and beyond countries is far-reaching and touches a wide range of actors—those fleeing and those hosting and protecting.

These last years Africa has been witness to many ongoing conflicts. The numerous peace and development initiatives that have since seen light are elements of hope. These conflicts have brought along with them suffering and displacement. Many have taken to the road in their quest for a safe haven. **Faced with such a situation, African countries have responded with their traditionally strong hospitality which has to be emphasized, preserved, strengthened and supported.**

With the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals, countries from around the world committed to leaving no one behind, especially not the most vulnerable. This includes refugees.

We will be marking soon, in December this year, one year of the adoption of the **Global Compact on Refugees. This is an ambitious commitment** which is closely linked to efforts to achieve development goals, by seeking comprehensive and sustainable solutions to the plight of refugees. The Global compact places emphasis on international, regional and national level mechanisms for **equitable responsibility-sharing**, recognizing that a sustainable solution to refugee situations cannot be achieved without cooperation. The Global compact also places particular **emphasis on empowerment of refugees and their inclusion in solution finding.**

Colleagues, **effective and durable responses are possible – they however need to be humanitarian and political as well.** A humanitarian solution is indispensable to protect, assist and prevent. But it is neither sufficient nor sustainable. Sustainability will require political solutions to be found, so as to address root causes as well. Sustainability will require political commitment and action. And parliament and parliamentarians are at the heart of such an effort.

Building state systems that prevent and can respond to such human tragedies is a priority. Legislation and legislative reform are two of the primary aspects of responding to needs and of protecting those that are fleeing but also of host communities. The **development of such frameworks must however be inclusive and particularly sensitive to the needs of the most vulnerable.** We, as representatives of the people, are well placed to listen to the people we represent and to ensure that all voices are heard and taken into account. This also includes refugees and stateless persons.

We also all know that laws are only as good as the effort and **resources** put into them and into accompanying policies and programmes. This is where the power of the purse of Parliament is essential. **Budgets must allocate sufficient funding to translate into reality the objectives of policies and laws.**

Efficient implementation is also key. We have the power and tools to assess the impact of initiatives taken, ensure that they have the desired effect, or adapt them accordingly. **We have the power to hold our governments accountable** to commitments made. We simply need to systematically carry out our oversight roles efficiently keeping in mind the interests of all, especially the most vulnerable. *They* are the benchmark.

Lastly, the **link with citizens is of essence.** You will be discussing here how to address stereotypes and discrimination. This is of utmost importance. As opinion

leaders and shapers, we need to show the way, explain and address the many misconceptions that are linked to refugees. We also need to promote tolerance.

There is a lot to do and expectations are high.

Over 20 years ago the IPU began working on international humanitarian law and refugee protection issues because it discovered that parliaments were largely unaware of international commitments undertaken by States and their impact at the national level. Since then, and in cooperation with the UNHCR, we have worked to sensitize and support Parliaments and MPs in their efforts.

Our strategy has focused on several priorities.

1. **Information is crucial;** it is the starting point for any action. I am convinced that efforts would gain in strength through wider dissemination of the real issues at stake, the challenging of misconceptions and the sharing of good practices. And this is why we are all here today.
2. **Structures and skills are key.** We represent institutions that have a clear mandate to act for all people. We have structures we can use. We need however to build skills, support and access to expertise. This is where the IPU's partnership with UNHCR has been key. The development of tools for members of parliament, such as the Handbooks that the IPU and UNHCR have jointly produced, are also fundamental and go a long way in supporting parliament's work and involvement in this area.
3. **And my last point: partnerships.** The development of comprehensive responses to refugee protection requires a collective effort with the participation of a wide range of partners. **Building partnerships within countries and across borders** between members of parliament, representatives of government, civil society, the media, the private sector and international organizations is at the core of progress. **Building partnerships within a country** is also key , at all levels of government.

I have outlined some of the avenues or responses that fall within the realm of parliament's responsibilities and mandate. We will be discussing these strategies and others in the next coming days and I very much look forward to the outcome of our discussions.

The IPU is celebrating 130 years of existence this year. I believe **this conference** comes at a very timely and symbolic moment. It **reaffirms the core values at the heart of IPU's mandate to work for peace, democracy and the well being of all.** **What better way to mark the anniversary?** I therefore that we will hope we will determine together clear avenues for action and that we will clearly renew our commitment to protect and support the most vulnerable, those that require our attention and assistance.

This will require political will, courage and action. But I am convinced that by joining forces we can go a long way.