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## **Webinar: Lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic: parliamentary action to reduce risks, strengthen emergency preparedness and increase resilience**

**28 April 2020, 2–3 p.m. CEST**

### **REPORT**

#### **Speakers**

Mr. Martin Chungong, IPU Secretary General  
Ms. Mami Mizutori, Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Disaster Risk Reduction, and head of UNDRR  
Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General  
Dr. Michael Ryan, Executive Director, WHO Health Emergencies Programme  
Dr. Maria Van Kerkhove, WHO Technical Lead for COVID-19  
Ms. Petra Bayr, Member of Parliament, Austria; Member of the IPU Advisory Group on Health  
Ms. Loretta Hieber-Girardet, Chief of UNDRR Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific (Moderator)

#### **Introduction**

Following the first reported cases of pneumonia of unknown origin on 31 December 2019 in China, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a public health emergency of international concern on 30 January 2020. As of 27 April 2020, more than 2.8 million confirmed cases of COVID-19 were reported globally.

In response to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR) and WHO partnered in organizing a webinar for parliamentarians and parliamentary staff on the role of parliaments in health security, emergency preparedness and disaster risk reduction.

The webinar on 28 April was attended by close to 500 participants from 84 countries, mainly parliamentarians and parliamentary staff.

It provided parliamentarians and parliamentary staff with an overview of the current status of the pandemic and its cascading risks and consequences for a country, including the impacts beyond the health sector. The webinar also drew lessons learnt and best practices from the emergency to reflect on how to ensure enhanced disaster risk management, including preventive measures and preparedness for effective response to pandemics in the future. In addition to the addresses by the agency heads and a presentation by WHO experts, a parliamentary perspective was provided by a member of the IPU Advisory Group on Health. A large number of questions were received before and during the webinar, which were answered by the panellists, either through the live chat or after the event.

#### **Governance and leadership**

The webinar highlighted the importance of governance in preparing for and responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Effective emergency response requires both a whole-of-society and a whole-of-government approach, with the involvement of all sectors – including the legislative branch. Such an approach in times of crisis relies on national unity that goes beyond ideological and political differences. With respect to the latter, the responsibility lies with parliamentarians, who have an important role to play in building unity and promoting trust between citizens and institutions. The need for evidence-based measures and policies also requires an ongoing conversation between the scientific community and policymakers.

National unity is the foundation of global solidarity and cooperation. Past experiences, such as the eradication of smallpox, have taught us that countries need to come together to fight the pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic must also be seen as an opportunity to build back better, and to bring parliaments to the forefront. The measures taken by countries to slow down or stop the spread of COVID-19 have far-reaching consequences for the lives of citizens and the economy. These budgetary and legislative measures must be subject to parliamentary scrutiny and inclusive decision-making processes.

For parliaments, it is therefore crucial to keep functioning, regardless of the different types of solutions implemented at the country level for social distancing and/or remote work. Parliaments must be able to act and take decisions for the benefit of their people during the crisis. National and international partners need to work with parliaments and continue supporting them to exercise their democratic mandate and strengthen parliamentarism.

### **Responding to the COVID-19 pandemic**

WHO provides guidelines on preparedness, readiness and response actions to be taken by countries depending on different transmission scenarios. However, the response to COVID-19 must also take into account concurrent crises linked to natural disasters, climate change and other diseases. An important aspect to consider is the impact of COVID-19 and of measures introduced to address it on access to health, especially for vulnerable and marginalized groups. Even under current circumstances, it needs to be stressed that access to free basic health services is a public good. Continuity of non-COVID health services, including sexual and reproductive health and rights, must be ensured. Vulnerable groups such as refugees require specific measures to shield them from the disease and improve their access to hygiene and clean water. Particular attention should be paid to children's medical care.

Although health is the primary concern, livelihoods cannot be forgotten. Protection of workers in both the formal and informal sectors and measures to tackle unemployment are therefore needed. Solutions to reach out to children regarding education and good nutrition, among other issues, also need to be developed, taking into account specific national contexts and access to information and communication technologies.

It is also crucial to focus on the needs of health-care workers. Front-line workers should be provided with all the equipment and resources they need.

There are currently no licensed therapeutics nor vaccines for COVID-19. WHO and partners have launched various initiatives in this regard. "Solidarity" is an international clinical trial to help find an effective treatment, while on 24 April the "Access to COVID-19 Tools Accelerator" initiative was launched for the development and production of a vaccine, with a commitment to ensure equitable access.

The webinar called on parliaments and parliamentarians to safeguard parliamentary democracy, including by involving all MPs, and to take action by implementing evidence-based recommendations, advocating for and adopting a whole-of-government approach, and documenting and sharing good practices and challenges.

### **Enhancing preparedness and risk reduction**

COVID-19 has made it clear that national and global preparedness for a pandemic was not adequate. The webinar stressed the importance of understanding the risk we are currently facing, and of going beyond the response to COVID-19 to embrace a proactive approach to prevention and resilience.

A strengthened approach to disaster management requires a better understanding of risks through science. Although 81 countries already adopted national strategies for disaster risk reduction, enhanced governance of risk management is needed: biological hazards must be included in national strategies, and regulations and legislations need to be adopted to enact those strategies and promote implementation at the local level.

Investing in prevention should also include strengthening health systems and taking steps to achieve universal health coverage. In particular, COVID-19 showed the importance of protecting health workers and providing them with adequate resources and capacities.

There is a collective responsibility to use the lessons learnt from the COVID-19 pandemic for better preparedness and response to future emergencies. As part of its campaign [“Parliaments in a time of pandemic”](#), the IPU is collating best parliamentary practices. The IPU and WHO will also collaborate on developing concrete asks for parliamentarians as a practical advocacy tool, as well as a handbook on the role of parliaments in strengthening health security. Moreover, the IPU and UNDRR are collaborating on an advocacy toolkit on disaster risk reduction.