



Inter-Parliamentary Union

For democracy. For everyone.

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Speech by Mr. Martin Chungong, IPU Secretary General

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It is my great pleasure to address you at the opening of this important Summit. I wish to thank Mr. Leite and UNITE for convening us virtually and for inviting me. COVID-19 has shown us once again how an invisible pathogen can change the world's course of action and impact the lives of each and every one of us. But we should not forget that other infectious diseases continue to have devastating consequences for millions of people worldwide, while climate change contributes to the emergence of new health threats. This is why the topic of this Summit is so relevant today to realize the promise of the Sustainable Development Goals by addressing communicable diseases.

We often hear that COVID-19 must be an opportunity to build back better, scale up efforts towards a carbon-neutral economy, invest in health systems, and strengthen multilateralism. The Inter-Parliamentary Union is a strong promoter of this view. Last month, more than 115 Speakers of Parliaments came together virtually at the 5th World Conference of Speakers of Parliaments to reiterate their commitment to robust parliamentary action for a safer, healthier and more prosperous world.

Each one of us is responsible for this course correction, the only that can give us hope for the future. However, I must ask: have we finally learnt the lesson? We already have all the instruments: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is the most ambitious agenda to end poverty, ensure people's well-being, and safeguard our natural environment. The current pandemic is a set-back in the achievement of the SDGs, but even before progress was not enough. And not enough means that people are hungry, ill, unable to attend school and get decent jobs, victims of violence and discrimination – and dying.

In 2019, the 179 member parliaments of the IPU adopted a landmark resolution on universal health coverage. The resolution recognizes the link between UHC and global health security and calls on parliaments to prevent the spread of diseases through immunization, strengthened surveillance systems and the full implementation of the International Health Regulations. It also has a strong focus on women, girls and vulnerable groups, urging parliaments to respond to their specific needs, including on HIV-AIDS.

This resolution and other instruments exist and testify to the commitments of governments and parliaments worldwide. So, why are we lagging behind? Why are we not living up to these promises? If we do not answer these questions, the "opportunity" of COVID-19 will be another empty promise. What is preventing bold action in the interest of the people, especially the most vulnerable and marginalized? And how can we demonstrate leadership and build solidarity to work together for the greater good?

Ladies and gentlemen,

Parliaments must be at the centre of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing economic crisis. They have the great responsibility of representing the people who are affected by COVID-19, the ones who have lost their livelihoods, and those who are still facing challenges in accessing health care. But an even greater responsibility is that of understanding how political action is affecting them. Science is working hard to provide the scientific response to prevent and treat COVID-19 and other diseases. But it is the political response, which is shaping the trade-offs between individual freedom and collective protection; it is decisions on resource allocations that determine what sectors and groups are to be prioritized; and negotiations at the international and national level will be guiding distribution of a vaccine. The oversight function of parliaments has never been so important, and we welcome the capacity of parliaments to innovate and continue functioning in these challenging circumstances.

The IPU continues supporting parliaments to exercise their democratic mandate, and our campaign “parliaments in time of a pandemic” is collecting valuable information on how they operate during COVID-19. We learned for example that in Tanzania, 40% of all of those allowed to take part in the business of the Parliament during the crisis need to be women. In Sierra Leone, parliamentarians visited their constituencies to sensitize people on measures to prevent infection; while in the United Kingdom, the parliament announced an inquiry into the human rights implications of the Government’s response.

We also keep working with our partners like UNAIDS and WHO to empower parliamentarians and strengthen parliamentary institutions. This means promoting equal representation of men and women and political participation of youth for more inclusive decision-making. It also means reiterating the centrality of the SDGs as the global framework for addressing the pandemic and implementing recovery plans that deliver social and environmental sustainability.

I am looking forward to the next two days of discussions. I am confident we can together identify and agree on concrete steps that parliaments and parliamentarians can take to address communicable diseases. My call to you is: let this not be just another “opportunity” – let’s make this the time for real change. I wish you a successful Summit.