



Inter-Parliamentary Union

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Speech by IPU Secretary General Martin Chungong

Laureates and Leaders for Children Fair share for children summit

9 and 10 September 2020

Excellencies, dear Members of the Steering Committee,
Dear Kailash,

Thank you for inviting me to the third *Laureates and Leaders for Children* summit. And congratulations on organising this great event, despite all the Covid-19 constraints. It is testimony to your unwavering commitment to the noble causes you pursue: building a better environment where children's rights can be fully developed, especially for the most vulnerable; combating child labour, trafficking, forced labour and modern slavery; and promoting accessible education for all.

The IPU, shares your commendable commitment to championing children. Parliaments represent society's diversity. They are a forum where decisions affecting the people are taken – through legislating, allocating and scrutinising budgets and overseeing government action. Parliaments therefore have a primary role in promoting children's rights, especially in the fight against child trafficking and labour.

I was told to be concrete. I offer 4 courses of actions in which parts can and should contribute to protect child rights. Let me briefly share how we think parliaments can contribute:

- **They can ratify international treaties** against child labour and forced labour, and translate them into domestic legislation. I am thinking in particular about International Labour Organization conventions, such as Convention 138 on the minimum age for employment, Convention 182 on the worst forms of child labour, and the 2014 forced labour protocol.
- **Parliaments can allocate sufficient resources** to implement policies and programmes. No paucity of what can be done with those resources. This includes supporting child labour victims psychologically and emotionally; reintegrating them into professional and educational life; enabling poor families to generate income; empowering women; and establishing basic and widely accessible social services, such as education, apprenticeships and health care.
- **Parliamentarians can raise awareness** in their constituencies about how reprehensible it is to use child labour. Sadly, we know that trivialising child labour can often perpetuate it. And so, when MPs raise awareness in this way, they help to prevent child labour being downplayed or dismissed. Parliaments can also highlight the importance of registering births and issuing birth certificates to ensure children are officially acknowledged for legal purposes. In the recent years, the IPU has joined global mobilisation to promote birth registration

- **Parliaments can scrutinize** how their governments implement public policies designed to tackle child labour.
- **IPU involvement: mobilize part to keep children on the radar screen of global parliamentary community.**
- **Parliaments can engage** with other institutions, such as the Executive, the judiciary, trade unions, civil society and the private sector. MPs make on-site visits to improve their understanding of realities on the ground. This helps them to make relevant recommendations, including to companies about working conditions for their employees.

It was in 2001 that we first committed to stepping up our advocacy for the rights of the child, especially the most marginalized. And we have been encouraging robust parliamentary action against trafficking and child labour since 2010.

Data shows that, across world, there are consistently about 152 million child labour victims, 72 million of whom are in Africa. The majority of child labour victims are in the West and Central Africa subregion, which is where we have focused our attention. We have also combined regional and national strategies, including by supporting the ECOWAS Parliament, whose recommendations are relayed to national parliaments in countries such as Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire and Togo.

Legislation and awareness-raising have yielded encouraging results, which I will expand on during our discussion. We have implemented these initiatives in collaboration with the International Labour Organization, with whom we have published several handbooks for parliamentarians, including *Eliminating the worst forms of child labour* and *Eliminating forced labour*. We have also worked with UNICEF, and *Global March against Child Labour*, the network led by Nobel prizewinner Kailash Satyarthi, who is with us today. Thank you for such an excellent partnership, Kailash.

Referring to our theme today, unless we act now, the pandemic could ruin our valuable achievements in the fight against child labour over recent years.

For example, **many parliamentary awareness campaigns** highlight that children should be at school rather than in farms or factories. But to counter the pandemic, education centres in numerous countries have been closed for a long time. For some, distance learning has been the only alternative. For others, the digital divide has made even distance learning inaccessible. As a result, Covid-19 is having a profound impact on education systems that are already fragile in many countries. According to the NGO Save the Children, nearly 90 per cent of children worldwide were out of school in June 2020. Many of them have become involved in various jobs as a source of cheap labour, either helping their parents or replacing them if they are sick.

Parliamentary action needed now more than ever before

I believe parliamentarians should increase their vigilance. They should propose alternatives to school closures by funding remote education that uses widely accessible channels, such as radio or television. In some countries, these sorts of initiatives are already happening. They could save thousands of children from premature work and reduce global productivity losses induced by the pandemic. They could also contribute to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals on children's access to education. And when budgets are next voted on, parliamentarians should ensure that education resources are maintained, if not

increased, as education is crucial to children's success.

Other ways in which parliamentary action could combat child labour in global supply chains include:

- A greater focus on improving private sector working conditions. Relevant laws should be regularly updated to clarify what constitutes fair recruitment, a decent salary and a favourable working environment for employees.
- Legislation encouraging companies to set up systems to trace their national suppliers' products, so that any possible child labour can be detected and stopped.
- Strengthening support to education and birth registration processes (as I mentioned earlier on).

Time is of the essence indeed. No complacency. The IPU stands ready to bring on-board parliamentary perspective to your efforts.

I thank you for your attention.