



INTER-PARLIAMENTARY UNION

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**Statement by Honorable Dr. Theo-Ben Gurirab
Speaker of the National Assembly of Namibia and
President of the Inter-Parliamentary Union
at the United Nations High Level Meeting on Non-Communicable Diseases
(20 September 2011)**

Mr. President, Mr. Secretary-General,
Distinguished Ministers,
Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to congratulate you, Mr. President, for your election, and to renew our commitment to contribute to the ideals and activities of the United Nations. This High Level Meeting today takes place at a critical time as policymakers and health practitioners try to come to grips with an unprecedented impact of non-communicable diseases on people and societies.

Mr. President,

Discussions about non-communicable diseases are plagued with misconception. Although they have been thought of as diseases of the wealthy, the truth is that almost 80% of deaths due to diabetes, cancer, respiratory and cardiovascular diseases worldwide now occur in low- and middle-income countries. The situation is particularly acute in Africa, the continent I come from, where mortality rates caused by non-communicable diseases are rising much faster than anywhere else in the world. The burden of non-communicable diseases, alongside the burden of HIV and AIDS, threatens to undermine years of progress and hold back the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals. If we want to secure our future and that of our children, we must put in place appropriate interventions and we should act fast.

For the IPU, the spread and impact of non-communicable diseases are not just health issues. They are also political questions that have to deal with lifestyles. Parliamentarians therefore have an important role to play – advocating for change and shaping behavior, helping citizens make healthy choices, standing up against the commercial interests of powerful corporations, allocating resources, legislating and promoting constructive policies, including increased taxation, reduced marketing and public awareness initiatives.

Mr. President,

The most important message that should be shared with parliamentarians around the world is that lives can be saved with effective regulations. We have heard throughout this meeting, for example, that tobacco use continues to be the leading preventable cause of death. In order to help overcome the non-communicable disease crisis, parliamentarians should make tobacco control an urgent policy priority. Signing and implementing the WHO Framework Convention for Tobacco Control is an important step in this direction. We hereby call on all parliaments to take action and translate this international instrument into sound legislative and regulatory frameworks at the national level.

We have no doubt that implementing change will be a challenging task. People in many parts of the world face major barriers to making healthy choices and are instead confronted with social and other pressures that lead to unhealthy ones. But a number of parliaments are taking action, such as the French parliament which has recently announced a policy to increase taxes on alcohol, tobacco and sugary drinks in order to boost its internal revenue and improve the health of the nation. Are other parliaments are also undertaking various initiatives.

We at the IPU will be encouraging all of our member parliaments to join the global effort to combat non-communicable diseases. We will start by informing parliaments and raising awareness around the outcome of this week's high-level meeting. We will further remain committed to engaging with legislators and sharing good practices, with a view to building political momentum and helping parliaments create enabling legal environments for the prevention and control on non-communicable diseases. We look forward to working closely with you all throughout this process.

I thank you for your attention.