



Inter-Parliamentary Union  
For democracy. For everyone.

# WHO-IPU African Parliamentary High-Level Conference on Strengthening Health Security Preparedness

## Outcome document

Accra, Ghana, 08 – 10 November 2023

### **Moving towards stronger and safer Africa**

We, Members of Parliament of 20 countries, assembled in Accra, Ghana, from 8 to 10 November 2023, at the African Parliamentary High-Level Conference on Strengthening Health Security Preparedness, organized jointly by the World Health Organization Regional Office for Africa (WHO AFRO) and the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) confirm the urgency of strengthening health security preparedness in the African region.

The Conference enhanced inter-parliamentary dialogue on the role of parliamentarians in strengthening health security and building the resilience of health systems in Africa. It raised awareness among African parliamentarians of relevant global and regional strategies and processes, and provided a forum for an exchange of ideas, building of political support, strengthening of capacities and fostering of coordination in driving sustainable action for global health security.

We recognize that the Conference comes at a crucial time when countries worldwide are negotiating the first-ever global Pandemic Accord to strengthen pandemic prevention, as well as amendments to the International Health Regulations (IHR) in response to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Over two and a half days we, Members of Parliament, gained a comprehensive understanding of the key elements, scope, potential implications and benefits of

the IHR, Pandemic Accord and regional strategies for Africa, as well as of the roles of different stakeholders, including the key role of parliamentarians.

We welcomed the active engagement of all participants who shared their valuable experiences, lessons learned and views on the subject, and the precious contributions of parliamentarians, and WHO and IPU experts.

The WHO African regional health security and emergencies strategy 2023-2030, which was endorsed by the WHO Regional Committee for Africa in Lomé, Togo, reaffirms the importance of an effective legislation framework as a core pillar of the emergency preparedness and response flagship initiative Promoting Resilience of Systems for Emergencies (PROSE) that aims to strengthen preparedness capacities of WHO Member States. This is instrumental for the African region, as it experiences more epidemics than any other part of the world, with over 100 health emergencies annually. These emergencies do not only impact health, but also national economies, development and livelihoods.

We are deeply aware of the challenges Africa faced in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. While many countries took early measures to limit the spread of the virus, significant obstacles emerged in Africa, notably the inequitable access to pandemic-control tools such as diagnostics, treatments and vaccines. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, we realize the importance of improving the global health architecture and ensuring that it is based on the principles of fairness, equity and solidarity. Central to the proposed Pandemic Accord is the commitment to ensure equitable access to pandemic prevention tools, healthcare and expertise for all populations. Hence, we will advocate for Africa's priorities to be adequately reflected in the ongoing negotiations of these key global health instruments. The African region has a lot to gain from a fair, equitable and transparent international Pandemic Accord. We highlight the importance of partnering with multilateral organizations such as the IPU and WHO in these efforts. We call for the IPU and WHO to continue providing a platform for parliamentary engagement in global health security processes, as well as required technical assistance to build the capacities of national parliaments to play a stronger role in health emergency preparedness and response, especially in developing countries.

During the Conference, we developed a vision for a strengthened regional health emergency preparedness and response policy, and identified the following priority areas of action for parliaments in the African region.

## **Inform about, engage and involve parliaments and parliamentarians in championing health security preparedness**

We, parliamentarians, through our core functions of law-making, budgeting and oversight, as well as our mandate to represent constituencies, commit to foster multisectoral action across government sectors, engage in international partnerships, and play a more prominent role in advancing global health security and universal health coverage, and in implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

We recognize the need to enhance parliamentary awareness of global health security instruments and the relevant ongoing negotiations. The aim is to assist parliaments in identifying key actions needed to conclude the Pandemic Accord and the amendments to the IHR that are fit for purpose of the future African health security preparedness and response. Such actions include: advocating with governments to sign the Pandemic Accord; ensuring the negotiations are informed by real-life experiences of people; and preparing for ratification. By engaging with communities, especially the most vulnerable ones, on the impacts of health emergencies, parliamentarians can ensure community needs are considered in health security preparedness and response. Epidemics, pandemics and other health emergencies disproportionately affect populations in vulnerable and marginalized situations, increasing inequalities and poverty.

Reaching out and engaging population groups facing social, cultural, or economic barriers in accessing health services is fundamental for designing health security preparedness and response measures that adequately respond to their needs and rights. Trust-building is also instrumental to address misconceptions and misinformation around disease outbreaks, preventive and response measures.

## **Legislation and policy**

We reaffirm our commitment to enact laws and policies that align with international health regulations and guidelines proposed by the WHO, and to prepare legal frameworks for the domestication of the new Pandemic Accord and IHR amendments. It is crucial to discuss how to support measures to ensure that we have strong and resilient health systems that provide adequate and quality services, and that are able to ensure an effective national response to health emergencies. The discussions also focused on ways in which parliaments and parliamentarians could better engage to strengthen legislation and policies on health security preparedness.

We, parliamentarians, acknowledge that there can sometimes be a disconnect between government and parliament. We therefore encourage parliamentarians to find a voice to represent constituents on health security. We recommend the establishment of a multisectoral parliamentary collaboration across committees, and we call upon partners, such as the WHO and IPU, to support this process by organizing relevant meetings addressed to the parliamentary community, as well as meetings within the framework of IPU Assemblies.

## Governance

Parliaments can foster and promote collaboration at the national and local levels with the health, finance, education and transportation sectors, engaging with different government ministries and agencies involved in pandemic response. Parliaments can contribute to coordination and information sharing among relevant stakeholders; can raise awareness about public health issues, including pandemics, by engaging in public debates, discussions; and can promote health emergencies preparedness campaigns. Parliament's roles in good governance for health security preparedness encompass legislation, oversight, budgetary control, advocacy, international cooperation and accountability. By fulfilling these roles effectively, we, as parliamentarians, can contribute to the development and implementation of robust health security policies that can further strengthen health systems that protect the population from international public health threats.

We recognize the importance of the IHR (2005) and the Pandemic Accord, and we recommend that:

- The WHO works closely with Ministries of Health (MOH) to ensure that parliamentarians have the necessary knowledge and resources to oversee health security preparedness initiatives effectively.
- The WHO Country Offices, in consultation with MOH, engage further with parliaments and provide them with more information on the IHR and Pandemic Accord.
- The WHO supports parliaments in consultation with the MOH, providing clear guidance in situations of epidemics or public health emergencies for the latter to be able to provide evidence-based information to constituents.
- Parliaments develop a framework to facilitate oversight on health security preparedness.

## Sustainable financing for health security preparedness

Parliaments have the power to allocate funding and resources to support national and international efforts in pandemic preparedness and response. They can approve budgets, secure financial resources and monitor the effective utilization of allocated funds; conduct regular oversight of government actions and policies related to pandemic preparedness and response; hold government agencies accountable for their performance; and ensure transparency in decision-making processes.

As parliamentarians who attended the present WHO-IPU Conference, we:

- Emphasize the need for government to allocate resources at the national level for the implementation of the IHR (2005), and eventually, the Pandemic Accord, which is currently under negotiation by WHO Member States.
- Encourage parliamentary health committees to move motions to increase financing for health security and to engage other committees to support this motion; and to propose budget lines in the national budget dedicated to improving health infrastructure and training of health workers.
- Propose to identify mechanisms that can generate revenue, such as taxation, to increase financing for health emergency preparedness.

## Accountability and monitoring

Parliament's oversight function is critical to ensure that the government's commitment to fund and strengthen preparedness and response capacities is maintained. Parliaments should systematically include the review of health emergency preparedness plans and other mechanisms to strengthen the work of relevant parliamentary committees on health security. In addition, through their constituents, parliamentarians can promote dialogue and, for accountability purposes, establish feedback mechanisms for affected populations.

We, parliamentarians, who attended the present WHO-IPU Conference:

- Recognize the importance of sharing information within our respective parliaments and raising awareness of health security preparedness, including the promotion of the IPU-WHO handbook [\*Strengthening health security preparedness: The International Health Regulations \(2005\)\*](#).
- Encourage the involvement of communities and civil society organizations, especially in public hearings and consultations on health.
- Work to ensure that our respective parliaments are duly represented at the World Health Assembly.

To follow-up on the outcomes of the present WHO-IPU Conference, we further commit to continue sharing information and to follow-up on the recommendations at relevant regional and global forums before May 2024. We recommend the WHO and the IPU organize parliamentary dialogues in the context of the World Health Assembly and other major gatherings. Finally, we recognize the importance of building the capacities of our respective parliaments in health security and call on the WHO and IPU to support these efforts.

The National Action Plans on Health Security (NAPHS) offer a comprehensive framework for addressing health security challenges at the national level, and could include parliamentary actions.

## Conclusion

This high-level awareness raising conference provided a deeper understanding of the current discussions around the strengthening of the global health architecture. Parliamentarians have an important role to play in fostering ownership and transparency of the Pandemic Accord, as well as in the efficiency of the future International Health Regulations. Furthermore, parliamentarians' active engagement and advocacy will help raise awareness on the importance of global health cooperation, including at the regional level, and will contribute to foster a sense of shared responsibility in tackling pandemics, leading to a healthy, safe and just world. It is essential to acknowledge the critical role of Ministries of Health in guiding and coordinating health security and preparedness efforts at the national level. Close collaboration with parliamentarians and other stakeholders is instrumental in ensuring the effective implementation of health policies and strategies to safeguard public health and well-being within their respective countries.

International and regional cooperation, such as engaging in international parliamentary forums and collaborating with counterparts from other countries to share experiences, best practices and lessons learned, is of central importance. Political will and leadership in support of national, regional, and global initiatives for pandemic preparedness and response will help foster coordination in driving sustainable action for health emergencies preparedness in Africa.

During the Conference, parliamentarians demonstrated their commitment to global solidarity and cooperation. Such commitment fosters partnerships between countries, facilitates the sharing of information, resources and expertise, and strengthens collective preparedness and response efforts for a safer, fairer and healthier Africa.

## Annex: Background

High-level reviews of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic emphasized the importance of state capacity, social trust and leadership when it comes to health emergency preparedness. Parliaments and parliamentarians play a unique and decisive role in strengthening these three aspects. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the many flaws in the global system to protect people from pandemics. It has exposed the gaps in national, regional and global health emergencies preparedness and response systems, but has also allowed for the identification of opportunities to strengthen the international health architecture.

At the Special Session of the World Health Assembly held in December 2021, WHO Member States took the decision to establish the Intergovernmental Negotiating Body (INB), representing all regions of the world, to draft and negotiate a WHO convention, agreement or other international instrument on pandemic prevention, preparedness and response (Pandemic Accord). The main goal of the Pandemic Accord, rooted in the WHO Constitution, would be to foster a comprehensive, multi-sectoral approach to strengthen national, regional and global capacities and resilience to future pandemics. The process further recognizes the need to prioritize equity and to promote ownership, transparency and solidarity. Negotiations by WHO Members States are currently on-going, and the INB is mandated to submit its outcome for consideration by the Seventy-seventh World Health Assembly in May 2024.

In addition, the International Health Regulations (IHR, 2005) are an important tool of international law, reflecting the commitment by States to prevent, detect and respond to emergency health risks. The deficiencies in IHR implementation identified during the COVID-19 pandemic, require that these gaps be addressed promptly. In this context, countries are engaged in the IHR amendments process to identify key modifications that target essential aspects of the IHR, including ensuring compliance, enhancing collaboration, and streamlining communication for better effectiveness of future health emergencies preparedness and response.

The WHO has recognized the important role of parliaments in advocating for and strengthening health emergency preparedness and response through its cooperation with the IPU. In 2022, the WHO together with the IPU developed the [handbook for parliamentarians on health security preparedness](#) that can support and help guide parliamentarians how to best utilize their different roles and functions in ensuring, strengthening and advancing health security preparedness capacities in their countries.