



Inter-Parliamentary Union

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Speech by the IPU Secretary General, Martin Chungong

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It gives me great pleasure to be here today. Allow me to thank the Pan African Parliament President for inviting the Inter-Parliamentary Union and providing us with the opportunity to say a few introductory remarks on the important question of refugees, returnees and internally displaced persons and the need to work towards durable solutions to forced displacement in Africa.

These are matters that are at the core of the work of the Inter-Parliamentary Union and that are also very close to my heart.

In our world today, humanity, dignity and respect for rights are at risk. The President and Mr. Chanda have provided statistics that are telling. Millions of people are currently displaced around the world because of conflict and natural disasters; and the numbers have been on the rise over the years.

Behind this number are human beings—women and men, girls and boys who are forced to leave their homes, whether because of conflict, human rights violations, or persecution and violence. Their lives are overhauled—they leave behind everything—home, family, community. As a result they find themselves in situations of extreme vulnerability in the face of heightened risks of exploitation and abuse. This is the daily reality of millions of refugees and internally displaced persons around the world.

I understand more that more than 80 per cent of those fleeing their countries as refugees find protection in neighbouring countries whose people and governments are, in turn, often struggling to manage their own development and the impacts of neighbouring conflicts. We need to constantly remind ourselves that the impact of displacement within and beyond countries is far-reaching and touches a wide range of persons and protagonist—those fleeing and those hosting and protecting.

These last years Africa has been witness to many ongoing conflicts. These conflicts have brought along with them suffering and displacement. Many have taken to the road in their quest for a safe haven. Faced with such a situation, African countries have responded with their traditionally strong hospitality which has to be emphasized, preserved, strengthened and supported. The numerous peace and development initiatives that have since seen light are harbingers of hope.

With the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals, countries from around the world committed to leaving no one behind, especially not the most vulnerable - . Which includes refugees, IDPs and, I would like to add to that list, stateless populations - to finding sustainable solutions to poverty, people's wellbeing and development, to

respect natural resources and our planet. We all know that the agenda is ambitious, and we are far from being on track to achieving the set targets.

Mr. Chanda has referred to the Global Compact on Refugees adopted last December. Indeed it is also an ambitious commitment which is closely linked to efforts to achieve development goals, by seeking comprehensive and sustainable solutions to the plight of refugees. It places emphasis on equitable responsibility-sharing, recognizing that a sustainable solution to refugee situations cannot be achieved without international cooperation and an inclusive approach.

Effective and durable responses are possible – they need to include however two dimensions: a humanitarian and a political one. A humanitarian solution is indispensable to protect, assist and prevent. But it is neither sufficient nor sustainable. Sustainability will require political solutions to be found. Sustainability will require political commitment and action. And parliament and parliamentarians are at the heart of such an effort.

Building state systems that prevent and can respond to such human tragedies is a priority. Legislation and legislative reform are two of the primary aspects of responding to needs and of protecting those that are fleeing but also of host communities. The development of such frameworks must however be inclusive and particularly sensitive to the needs of the most vulnerable. MPs are well placed to listen to the people they represent and to ensure that all voices they represent are heard and taken into account.

Laws are only as good as the effort and resources put into them and into accompanying policies and programmes. Budgets must allocate sufficient funding. Here again, the power of the purse that you hold is essential.

Efficient implementation is also key. Parliament and its committees have a responsibility to assess the impact of initiatives taken, ensuring that they have the desired effect, or adapting them accordingly. Government have to be held accountable to commitments made. In carrying out their oversight role, parliaments should have in mind the interests of all, especially the most vulnerable. *They* are the benchmark.

Lastly, the link with citizens is of essence. As opinion leaders and shapers, you serve as models, and in the particular context of protection and respect of rights of refugees, returnees and IDPs, there are many misconceptions that need to be addressed and tolerance to be promoted.

Over 20 years ago the IPU began working on international humanitarian law and refugee protection issues because it discovered that parliaments were largely unaware of international commitments undertaken by States and their impact at the national level. Since then, and in cooperation with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, we have worked to sensitize and support Parliaments and MPs in their efforts.

Allow me to mention some of the priorities that our strategy as sought to address.

Our strategy has focused on several priorities.

1. Information is crucial; it is the starting point for any action. I am convinced that efforts would gain in strength through wider dissemination of the real issues at stake and the challenging of misconceptions. I therefore trust that our meeting today will also help achieve this objective.

2. Structures are key. This is where the role of parliamentary committees is so crucial. Through their oversight function these bodies can closely follow and assess the impact of initiatives taken, ensure that they have the desired effect or modify them accordingly.
3. Then come skills, support and access to expertise. Committees need to work with the support of expert staff and members of parliament need to have access to training and capacity-building initiatives. The development of tools for members of parliament is also fundamental. The IPU and UNHCR have collaborated over the years on the development of several handbooks for parliamentarians; our latest one being on building state asylum systems and another on nationality laws and statelessness. I believe such tools will go a long way in supporting parliament's work and involvement in this area.
4. Strong political will is a sine qua non for parliaments to act. Platforms such as the IPU Assemblies and meetings serve as powerful tools to strengthen cooperation and concerted effort. This is where I also believe the international community needs to scale up its efforts by giving greater visibility to the work of parliaments, valuing it and thereby supporting parliaments and their members in their work.
5. This leads me to my last point: partnerships. The development of comprehensive responses to refugee protection, IDPs, statelessness requires a collective effort with the participation of a wide range of partners. Building partnerships within countries and across borders between members of parliament, representatives of government, civil society, the media, the private sector and international organizations is at the core of progress.

I have outlined some of the avenues or responses that fall within the realm of parliament's responsibilities and mandate. But durable solutions will also require addressing root causes of displacement in a comprehensive way. This means tackling inequality, building societies that represent all voices with strong democratic institutions and promoting tolerance, and respect for human rights, building resilient societies, societies that can stand the test of national disasters and climate change.

I thank you for your attention.