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# Parliamentarians must unite to build a healthier future for all of us

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Remarks delivered by UNAIDS Executive Director, Winnie Byanyima,  
at the opening session of the UNITE global summit of  
parliamentarians on September 7, 2020

The world has been disrupted by the COVID 19 pandemic and, as ever, the poorest are being hurt the most.

The COVID 19 crisis is widening existing inequalities.

Today, I want to address you in relation to three capacities.

First, as a global coalition of parliamentarians yours is a powerful voice – you have a strong advocacy role.

Second, you have the power of the purse.

And third in your legislative capacity you can enact laws which ensure and protect the human rights of all people.

You have an important role to play in turning this epidemic around and pushing for a strong, inclusive recovery.

We cannot afford to make the mistakes of the early AIDS response.

When people in rich countries were treated first and the poor were left to die.

As an African woman, I lived through those mistakes.

I helped to bury many of the people that should not have died.

I helped raise children orphaned by AIDS.

And we are still living with the legacy that HIV treatments were and still are available for some and not for others.

That's why I want parliamentarians to join our call for a People's Vaccine against the coronavirus.

More than 150 global leaders have backed the campaign for a People's Vaccine.

It is endorsed by the United Nations Secretary-General.

We have to ensure that when a vaccine is found that it is available to everyone everywhere free of charge.

We cannot afford to have a monopolistic approach to intellectual property for treatments and vaccines. Nor maintain a system which puts profits before the lives of people.

All countries and companies should contribute knowledge and intellectual property to the World Health Organization's COVID-19 Technology Access Pool (C-TAP) so that technology and treatments are shared for the benefit of all.

We need you to get on board and join the mounting pressure for a People's Vaccine.

Health care is a human right. For everyone, everywhere.

It is not a commodity for sale. How much money we have in our pocket should not determine whether we live or die.

The World Bank estimates that 100 million people are pushed into poverty every year by out of pocket health expenses.

Regressive health financing strategies rely on user fees increasing poverty and further widening inequalities.

In Africa, more than 40 countries charge user fees for health care.

Today, and every day, 10,000 people will die because they could not access health services.

We have to change this.

COVID19 has demonstrated that there is a close link between the health of people and the health of economies.

Parliamentarians must use their power of the purse to ensure that health budgets survive and increase during this crisis.

We need global corporate tax reform to increase domestic revenues so that countries can fund health care, education, and social protection.

We need to close tax loopholes and I urge you to join the call for corporate tax reform.

And too many countries are strangled by debt today. We need debt cancellation and for low income countries to benefit from Special Drawing Rights. This is critical to people's survival.

In recent years, Zambia's debt repayments have increased 760% while at the same time the country has cut its health budget by 30%.

Countries do not have a fighting chance with that level of debt!

Finally, as Parliamentarians in your legislative role, you are the custodians of the human rights of your citizens.

40 years of fighting HIV and 25 years of UNAIDS have demonstrated that pandemics are not just health issues and that human rights are central to fighting them.

If the rights of certain groups are not realized, they cannot access the benefits of science. And this denial of human rights means that there is no end to pandemics.

We must repeal all those laws that discriminate against certain groups of people, end stigma and discrimination and ensure equality of rights for all people.

I call on you to use your legislative power to protect the most vulnerable, including women and girls whose vulnerability to gender-based violence has increased with the lockdown. Strengthen those laws and put money behind their implementation!

My ask to you today is that as parliamentarians you unite behind the right to health for all, that you leverage your global role as advocates, your power of the purse and your legislative role for a strong inclusive recovery that resets the global economy so it benefits all people.