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Technical briefing on regional collaboration for health with parliaments in the WHO European Region

**Wednesday, 18 September 2019
13:00–14:30, Lounge area 9**

Background

1. Over the years, the WHO Regional Office for Europe has been progressively engaging, on a bilateral or subregional basis, with parliaments from across the WHO European Region. This engagement aims at supporting national parliaments, on request, in their discussions on public-health-related matters.
2. Considering the need expressed by a significant number of national parliaments for increased support on public health issues, the Regional Office is now examining options for setting up a framework for collaboration at the regional level with European parliaments. In a similar manner, the WHO regional offices for the Eastern Mediterranean and the Western Pacific have already established their own regional networks with parliaments in 2019 and 2015, respectively. The WHO regional offices for the Americas and South-East Asia are also initiating similar networks.
3. Parliamentarians play an essential role in health, not only by enacting legislation, and discussing and approving budgets (thereby mobilizing resources), but also by providing oversight to ensure government accountability and transparency, encouraging multisectoral action, ensuring national implementation of global commitments, fostering the participation of constituencies, and engaging in international partnerships. Parliamentarians have a crucial role to play in addressing health determinants such as climate change, air pollution, clean water, sanitation and food safety, in ensuring that health systems are strengthened and that medicines are not only safe but accessible, and in promoting healthy choices such as by taxing tobacco and other harmful products.
4. Parliamentarians have both the authority and the responsibility to promote the highest standards of health and well-being for their people and play a vital role in translating scientific evidence into political action. Actively engaging parliamentarians in global health is therefore critical.
5. Legal frameworks – legislation and other instruments of law, as well as the mechanisms and institutions necessary to implement them – are essential for advancing towards universal

health coverage (UHC) and achieving all of the health-related targets of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Legal frameworks organize and manage health systems, allocate responsibilities, set standards, authorize and constrain action, shape markets, alert people to health risks, and influence social norms about behaviour. Legislation for health extends beyond the health sector into sectors such as trade and industry, finance, education, agriculture, roads and transport, and the environment. However, countries often struggle to effectively design, implement and evaluate legal frameworks on health due to lack of evidence, policy coherence, consistent enforcement and monitoring mechanisms. Strengthening legal frameworks requires engagement with a wide range of stakeholders, including policy-makers, regulators, parliamentarians, health providers, private sector actors, communities and development partners.

6. Parliamentarians across the Region, with the support of WHO, must work together to identify and exchange information relevant for decision-making in public health at the national, regional and international levels, in order to translate global and regional commitments into local action, country by country, parliament by parliament, and law by law. They must also ensure that new laws and policies are established in order to achieve UHC and health security and confer population-wide protection against threats to health.

7. However, there is still a gap between governments' global and regional health policy commitments and parliamentarians' awareness of and political support for these commitments. Moreover, there is a need to strengthen collaboration between parliaments across the Region as well as between parliaments, WHO and other organizations acting on health. For this reason, it is proposed that a parliaments network of chairs and deputy chairs of health committees in the WHO European Region be established, with the support of WHO, with the aim of raising awareness about the global health agenda and the need for coordinated action at the national and international levels, through a collaborative approach, in order to mobilize the political will to better promote and protect health and well-being.

8. WHO proposes to work with chairs and deputy chairs of parliamentary health committees to:

- strengthen their capacity to effectively advocate for health in parliamentary debates so as to have a meaningful impact on decision-making with regard to health-related issues, including the allocation of resources;
- provide them with information and evidence that will allow them to address national health challenges within the framework of their mandates (such as oversight of implementation of public policies and participation in the law-making process) in a more informed manner; and
- bring those parliamentarians committed to promoting health and well-being together on one platform, where they can share experiences and information (such as evidence-based data and information, including technical information) and also support one another (for example with technical support and policy advice).

9. As a result, these parliamentarians will be in a stronger position to promote health during parliamentary discussions, and will have a stronger voice on health issues, especially in important national and intersectoral policy dialogues or parliamentary debates. They will be able to obtain assistance from WHO in further developing capacities in national parliaments, so that parliamentarians can systematically and effectively address health in the context of

parliamentary activity that includes law-making and oversight (particularly in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the SDGs). The network will foster regular dialogue among its members and promote the development of common positions on enhancing governance for health and expanding the role of lawmakers in the design, implementation and monitoring of health policy.

Objectives of the briefing

10. The technical briefing will provide a platform for discussion among the chairs and/or deputy chairs of parliamentary health committees and the delegations of Member States to the WHO Regional Committee for Europe on the establishment of a European parliaments network (taking into account the recommendations and conclusions of the consultative meeting that took place in July 2019), linking it to the global perspective to move the UHC agenda ahead – such as the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) resolution on UHC, and the ambitious global parliaments network project – and taking account of regional and subregional experiences. The objective of the briefing is to build on these discussions and recommendations to identify the way forward with regard to the establishment of a European parliaments network.

Format of the briefing

11. The briefing will start with a presentation of the objectives, the legal and governance issues, modality of working, and potential thematic areas for collaboration. A concept note clarifying these details as well as a report of the consultative meeting will be provided as background documentation for this briefing. The future activities to be led by WHO headquarters and the IPU will also be presented, particularly the draft IPU resolution on “Achieving universal health coverage by 2030: the role of parliaments in ensuring the right to health”, which is planned to be adopted at the 141st IPU Assembly in October 2019.

12. The presentation will be followed by a moderated discussion involving parliamentarians from the European Region and Member States.

13. The technical briefing will conclude with a summary of the steps that will be taken to establish a network of parliamentarians in the Region.

Expected outcomes

14. The expected outcomes of this session are:

- participants will have an increased awareness of key trends and the current status of collaboration between WHO, the IPU and various networks of parliaments;
- participants will have been updated on the upcoming draft IPU resolution on “Achieving universal health coverage by 2030: the role of parliaments in ensuring the right to health”, which is planned to be adopted at the 141st IPU Assembly;

- there will have been a structured discussion on the way to move towards the official launch of the regional network of parliamentarians and how this network can link with the future global parliaments network being set up under the leadership of the Director-General of WHO.

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