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REPORTS ON RECENT IPU SPECIALIZED MEETINGS

(d) MULTI-COUNTRY SEMINAR ON PARLIAMENTS AND ACCOUNTABILITY FOR WOMEN'S AND CHILDREN'S HEALTH

(Dhaka, Bangladesh, 30-31 July 2013)

The IPU, the Parliament of Bangladesh and the World Health Organization (WHO) organized a multi-country seminar to promote the contribution of parliamentarians to strengthening national accountability mechanisms for women's and children's health. The Seminar was attended by close to 30 representatives from Bangladesh, India, Kenya, Malawi, Uganda and Zimbabwe. Participants shared the experiences of their respective countries in meeting challenges relating to women's and children's health. They observed that their parliaments could contribute to addressing these challenges through innovative approaches, effective laws and legislation, efficient resource allocation and oversight of execution. In particular, the participants recognized the budget appropriation role of parliamentarians as central to accountability and stressed the need for parliamentarians to play a proactive role in ensuring adequate resource mobilization for women's and children's health. They also recognized leadership and accountability as the overarching and most important means of addressing the gaps and challenges observed in women's and children's health. Subsequently, they identified and committed themselves to certain key actions and requested that the IPU and United Nations agencies support the efforts of parliamentarians on an ongoing basis.

MULTI-COUNTRY PARLIAMENTARY SEMINAR

PARLIAMENTS AND ACCOUNTABILITY FOR WOMEN'S AND CHILDREN'S HEALTH

(Dhaka, Bangladesh, 30-31 July, 2013)

Context

Recent global efforts to improve women's and children's health have placed parliaments at the centre of the accountability discourse. For instance, the report of the Commission on Information and Accountability for Women's and Children's Health identified the national level as the most effective locus of accountability. The Commission also highlighted the active engagement of governments, including parliaments, communities and civil society, as well as the importance of strong links between country-level and global mechanisms. In view of the provisions in international human rights law related to women's and children's health, the 2012 IPU resolution on the role of parliaments in addressing key challenges to securing women's and children's health identified health as a right.

The resolution also established synergies between the generic roles of parliaments, actions required to improve health outcomes for women and children, and accountability for them. Parliaments have valuable insights into the functioning of national accountability mechanisms, such as national commissions, processes of "review and redress", reporting on the implementation of international commitments and conventions and the periodic examination of reports and testimonies of members of the Executive. Parliaments are therefore well-positioned to support emerging accountability mechanisms for women's and children's health as they committed to doing in the IPU resolution and as proposed by the Commission.

The IPU, the Parliament of Bangladesh and WHO organized a multi-country seminar to promote the contribution of parliamentarians to strengthening national accountability mechanisms for women's and children's health. The Seminar, which was inaugurated by the Speaker of the Bangladesh Parliament, Hon. Shirin Chaudhury, was attended by close to 30 representatives from Bangladesh, India, Kenya, Malawi, Uganda and Zimbabwe.

Overview of deliberations

While participating countries had made various degrees of progress in improving health outcomes for women and children, the participants agreed that, on the whole, more needs to be done. Women and children continue to die from preventable causes for which affordable interventions are available. Participants highlighted that, as the representatives of citizens, parliamentarians have a moral and ethical obligation to voice the health concerns of their constituents. They also noted that parliamentarians have a critical role to play in ensuring that all parties are held accountable for allocating the required resources and achieving the intended results for women and children.

The Seminar provided parliaments with the opportunity to share the experiences of their respective countries in meeting existing challenges. They observed that innovative approaches, effective laws and legislation, efficient resource allocation and oversight of execution by their Parliaments would play a pivotal role in addressing most of these challenges.

The participants recognized the budget appropriation role of parliamentarians as central to accountability. The point was made repeatedly that legislation and programmes with immense prospects can fail in the absence of adequate and appropriate budget allocations. In addition, they identified good governance as an outcome of effective parliamentary oversight. The participants therefore voiced concern over the continued low prioritization of health budgets in relation to other sectors. In this regard, they stressed the need for parliamentarians to play a proactive role in ensuring adequate resource mobilization for women's and children's health.

A key concern was that parliamentarians in some countries are not adequately involved in the budget review process. Factors identified as limiting deeper engagement in budget discussions by parliamentarians included insufficient information, preparation time and debate on budget proposals and inadequate assistance in understanding technical jargon and making evidence-based recommendations.

The participants also observed that the actions identified to heighten accountability are aligned to the generic roles of parliamentarians. These actions include voicing women's and children's concerns in parliament; creating an enabling environment through legislation and policies; ensuring the effective implementation of strategies and adequate budget allocations; monitoring progress and results by auditing and overseeing executing agencies; and ensuring that any geographical and socioeconomic inequities are addressed.

Moreover, they singled out leadership and accountability as the overarching and most important means of addressing the gaps and challenges observed in women's and children's health. Considerable attention was paid to the Global Strategy for Women's and Children's Health and its Commission on Information and Accountability, which have provided countries with useful guidance in their efforts to improve women's and children's access to health services as well as country-led roadmaps for improving accountability. The Seminar noted that these roadmaps require the contribution of parliaments. In this regard, participants identified the following opportunities for parliaments to support country roadmaps:

- Review and improve laws to strengthen the framework that supports women's and children's health aimed at improving individual access to health services and advancing the introduction of universal health coverage;
- Establish parliamentary committees that focus on reproductive, maternal, newborn and child health and ensuring their sustainability, especially after elections and the consequent change of representatives;
- Promote civil registration as an important means of obtaining accurate and updated information on vital statistics such as births, deaths and causes of death.

Commitments made

In view of the discussions held, the participants undertook to:

- Urge the executive branches of their respective governments to extend the role of parliaments in the budget process, including by enacting flexible rules of procedure to allow for greater budgetary scrutiny, adopting more favourable whip systems and consolidating the role of the estimates committee; in this respect, we undertake to participate more fully in the budget cycle, from budget appropriation, which is informed by analysis, to tracking expenditure, through to ensuring accountability for achieving anticipated results;

- Urge their parliaments to establish or improve the resourcing of a specialized budget office to support and enhance the effectiveness of the contribution of parliaments to the budget process;
- Urge the appropriate authorities at national and local levels of government to increase their budget allocations to the levels required for spending on women's and children's health;
- Urge national and international agencies to be inclusive in developing and implementing health initiatives and programmes; on our part, we undertake to adopt an increasingly proactive approach in order to contribute to national dialogues on women's and children's health;
- Advocate for special consideration of socioeconomic and geographical groups facing higher burdens of maternal, newborn and child diseases.