

Inter-Parliamentary Union  
114<sup>th</sup> Assembly: Nairobi, Kenya  
9<sup>th</sup> May 2006

Keynote Address by David Nabarro, UN System Influenza Coordinator

Mr President of the Assembly; Mme Vice President; Hon Minister of Foreign Affairs, Government of Kenya; Professor Wangari Maathai; Delegates; Ladies and Gentlemen;

When I asked my parliamentarian uncle what he did, some 45 years ago, he said that parliamentarians tackle complex issues on behalf of their constituents and are typically Fearless, Frank and Fair.

It is both an honour and pleasure to be addressing you about influenza issues today: issues on which courage, honesty and equity are keys to an effective response.

At the start I want to be sure that you do know the difference between **seasonal influenza** – the type that comes each year, and usually affects older people, **avian influenza** – that affects birds and is currently causing a damaging epidemic among poultry in parts of Asia – spreading to Europe, and **pandemic influenza** – thankfully not with us now, but liable to come at any time, through a viral mutation. Currently we face two challenges. First - the current epidemic of avian influenza. Second - the potential of a human influenza pandemic.

Today I present you with five messages and one proposition:

First Message: **The H5N1 virus – the most unpleasant avian influenza virus ever known - is spreading** at an extremely rapid rate across the world – more than 30 countries newly infected since January 1<sup>st</sup> 2006; 45 countries infected in total since 2003. H5N1 is currently a disease of birds. Human infection is sporadic, and really very rare. An influenza pandemic will occur at some time. H5N1 could be the virus that undergoes genetic change, becomes transmissible from human to human, and is the cause of the next influenza pandemic. If it is not H5N1, it will be another virus – we will not know till it happens.

Second Message: **Strategies exist for responding to avian influenza and preparing for a potential pandemic.** These have been developed by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Health Organization (WHO), together with the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE). The principal route for preventing H5N1 from being the cause of the next influenza pandemic is to control avian influenza – by stamping it out when domestic bird populations are infected, through culling of birds and movement restrictions and (in some cases) vaccinating them. At the same time, stringent efforts must be adopted to reduce the risk of H5N1 avian influenza being transmitted

from one poultry flock to another, and of humans (particularly children) being infected with the virus. Strong veterinary and human health systems are essential to carry out these tasks. All communities and countries should get ready to respond to human-to-human transmission of an influenza virus, by containing it rapidly: they should also be prepared to sustain social, economic and governance systems if a pandemic becomes established. The emphasis will be on protecting people's health while sustaining their livelihoods.

Third Message: **Broad and inclusive partnerships are essential for a successful response.** A variety of groups should be engaged in delivering these strategies – working together, as a movement, united by common purpose and a commitment to synergy. Government must show the way, led from the highest level possible (with a focus on legal instruments, controls and services; also fast and fair compensation for those who lose their birds, and readiness to contain a human-to-human virus should it appear.) The private sector will wish to be engaged – not least because the continuity of business will be influenced both by avian influenza and a possible pandemic (so travel and tourism, agriculture and livestock, financial and logistics services will all have an interest). Civil society groups have a key role – through mosque, temple or church; through the Red Cross and Red Crescent movement; through community organizations. The media are important partners too. How else do people know what is going on and have a chance to decide for themselves how they wish to respond? And given that diseases do not respect national boundaries, the international organizations (UN, other intergovernmental bodies, scientific networks and the IPU) have a key role to play in encouraging international good practice, technical assistance and solidarity (and thus ensuring that poorer nations receive the funds they need to respond effectively).

Fourth Message: **There are some tough issues to be tackled:** parliamentarians in many countries are engaged with them:

1. How to square the two imperatives of protecting animal and public health (through containing avian influenza at source) with protecting livelihoods (limiting the number of birds that are culled, and ensuring prompt compensation for any birds that are killed)? With compensation payments seen as unreliable in many poor countries, culling programmes are seen to be increasing the poverty of poor people.
2. How do national governments combine the protection of public health with the need to nurture national economies? Is it a surprise that Governments seek to play down the possibility of their birds being affected by H5N1 avian influenza when they are worried that their travel and tourism industries might be damaged by a public campaign against the disease?
3. How do those responsible for animal health and human well-being pursue best practice, and inform people of the risks that are believed to be associated with avian influenza and the threat of a pandemic, while, at the same time, doing what they can

to avoid irrational actions taken by business, civic organizations or the public (all evidence suggests that hiding crucial information adds to potential for irrationality)?

4. How to ensure that there is adequate time, effort and finance invested in preparing health systems, economies and societies for continuity in the event of a pandemic when professionals and officials are worried that this is a distraction from their efforts to tackle other causes of suffering and disease?
5. How to establish the amount of funds to be invested in medical responses to a potential pandemic versus investment in non-medical interventions (social distancing, the use of masks and basic hygiene)

Fifth Message: **Governments must invest in sound defences against the threats posed by disease outbreaks and epidemics.** There is no other option. Governments invest the equivalent of billions of dollars annually to protect societies from acts of violence – whether committed by individuals or organized groups. Millions of dollars are invested annually in disaster preparedness and environmental catastrophe (though as Professor Maathai says, we must do much more). But are we doing enough to respond to the 70% of new infections that we expect to come from the animal kingdom? We are seriously under-protected against these zoonotic infections. And we see how lack of preparedness against other epidemic and pandemic diseases – including HIV – has caused untold suffering and economic loss. We need to focus on healthy animal husbandry and on protecting human health, with massive public information campaigns enabling people to understand what all the fuss is about. Bio-security is – literally – a key to the future of humankind.

The Proposition: **Parliamentarians should maintain a regular watch over preparedness for epidemics and pandemics, and share experiences between countries – perhaps through the IPU.** I propose that each year the parliamentarians in every nation make a point of questioning national officials responsible for human and animal health, asking them to report on the state of national preparedness against epidemic and pandemic disease (particularly disease coming from the animal kingdom), checking whether response plans have been properly tested through exercises, and then reviewed. They should make sure that the government invests sufficient finance, time, and political backing in international epidemic and pandemic response capacity. Such investments, and the actions that flow from them, could make the difference between a human race that is vulnerable to the effects of epidemics and pandemics, and one that is well able to put up a strong and sustained fight against them. Preparedness reduces the cost of a response, and makes it so much more effective. Future generations will not forgive us if national governments, with support from the United Nations, cannot get this right. It is the kind of challenge for which the United Nations was invented.