1. The All-Party Parliamentary Group on AIDS, UK (APPGA) has, since 1986, been the means by which backbench parliamentarians in the UK Parliament with an interest in HIV/AIDS co-ordinate their efforts to inform the UK's approach to HIV/AIDS. It is made up of 160 Members of both the House of Commons and House of Lords. Since 1997, the Chair has been Neil Gerrard MP. The Group also employs a full-time Policy Adviser.

2. The Southern African Development Community Parliamentary Forum brings together the Speaker and three MPs from different parties from each of the 12 member countries. Its goal is to promote democracy, co-operation and the role of parliamentarians. The current Secretary General is Dr Kasuka Mutukwa. Administration of the SADC Parliamentary Forum is based in Windhoek. The Plenary Assembly is the Forum's sovereign meeting.

3. The SADC Parliamentary Forum requested UNAIDS support to hold a Plenary Assembly in March 2001 to facilitate discussion between the Members on the role of the Forum and parliamentarians in addressing HIV/AIDS.

In order to facilitate peer dialogue, UNAIDS invited the APPGA, UK to also participate in the Plenary discussions. To this end, UNAIDS financed the video-conference facilities between the APPGA, UK and the Plenary Forum. Neil Gerrard MP, Chairperson of the APPGA was able to participate through this video conference (See Annex 1). UNAIDS also provided funding for Simon Wright, Policy Adviser of the APPGA, UK, to attend the Plenary both to speak and to take part in background discussions.


The Handbook for Legislators on HIV/AIDS, Law and Human Rights was used as a tool for the Plenary discussions. The Handbook was introduced, its purpose and the way in which it is used by the UK Parliament Group to audit the UK
government actions highlighted. The subsequent discussion focussed on the role of parliamentarians in national responses to HIV/AIDS.

4. There were four distinct outcomes agreed by the Forum:

- In response to question from the Chair, each parliamentary delegation said that they intended to return to their parliaments to investigate setting up a backbench committee or group on HIV/AIDS with a cross-departmental remit to establish a stronger role for parliamentarians (except South Africa which already has an All-Party Parliamentary Group on AIDS).

- The SADC Parliamentary Forum resolved to set up a Standing Committee on HIV/AIDS and elected members and a Chair. There was some discussion about whether a separate Committee was required and whether it should be a standing or short-term committee but there was a consensus about the importance of the issue and the need for the Parliamentary Forum to focus on it.

- The SADC Parliamentary Forum resolved that space on its new website (www.sadcpf.org) should be devoted to HIV/AIDS and requested the help of UNAIDS and the All-Party Parliamentary Group on AIDS in providing content.

- The Forum further resolved that it wished to see a conference or seminar focussing on the role of backbench parliamentarians in tackling HIV/AIDS later this year and that it would actively participate in such an event.

5. The APPGA, UK’s perception was that the event was extremely useful and successful. The APPGA, UK was delighted to have taken part in the dialogue and grateful to UNAIDS for facilitating this. There was a very strong understanding on the part of Members that HIV/AIDS is one of their most important issues and the epidemiology of SADC countries as the highest prevalence area was referred to by Members many times. There was distinct keenness to discuss how backbench parliamentarians can play a role in addressing HIV/AIDS.
ANNEX 1:

The role of parliamentarians in national responses to HIV/AIDS

Speech delivered by NEIL GERRARD, MP
by videoconference from the House of Commons, London
to the Southern African Development Community Parliamentary Forum
Plenary Assembly on Monday 26 march 2001, Safar Conference Centre,
Windhoek, Namibia. ²

GREETINGS

• The Secretary-General of the SADC (Southern African Development Community) Parliamentary Forum Dr Kasuka Mutukwa

• Fellow parliamentarians.

• Personal introduction: Name, role and electoral history

• Thank for invitation to speak and for devoting time from your assembly to consider this very important matter.

• Apologies for not being physically there - general election - but Simon Wright, the Group's Policy Adviser is there and I am sure he will be very willing to answer questions and make contact with as many of you as possible.

INTRODUCTION

• Great honour to be invited to speak to you.

• We hear, from the United Nations, from the World Bank, from the international bodies concerned with HIV/AIDS, that political leadership is vital to addressing HIV/AIDS. That the personal commitment of leaders is essential if a country is to direct national efforts to slowing down the epidemic.

• Often this is discussed in terms of Presidents, Prime Ministers and Executive members.

• I believe that ordinary backbench parliamentarians also have a vital role to play in addressing HIV/AIDS.

² These are Neil Gerrard's speaking notes for the speech rather than a transcript.
We are:

- uniquely placed to have great influence on whether and how well a country responds to HIV/AIDS
- by working together within our parliaments, and internationally, we can ensure that governments are braver, more willing to give leadership, more certain that HIV will not be used against them politically if there is a cross-party consensus.

• I would like to tell you about our experience as the UK All-Party Parliamentary Group on AIDS in the Westminster Parliament in London.

• Hope it illustrates the benefits that this model offers.

• I do not need to waste our valuable time by telling you how important HIV/AIDS is. We in Northern countries are slowly waking up to the devastation that HIV is already causing and will cause in your countries.

UK ALL-PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP ON AIDS

• In the UK, the history of HIV/AIDS and politicians is often the reverse of what we hear about African countries.

• In 1985 and 1986, the government of the time became convinced that HIV/AIDS, the new disease we were hearing about, would be a major threat to the people of the United Kingdom.
  - There was a special cabinet Committee set up to co-ordinate policy.
  - Special budgets were given to local health managers.
  - National television advertising was seen by everyone.
  - A leaflet about avoiding AIDS was sent to every home in the country.
  - The All-Party Parliamentary Group on AIDS was set up in 1986.

• We do not know whether these actions helped to prevent a wide-scale epidemic. Some believe so; others believe that it was an over-reaction for a country that was not likely to have a widespread heterosexual epidemic. In Europe, as in North America, we have so far escaped epidemics on similar scales. We debate why this is but I believe, as I am sure many of you do, that HIV is inextricably bound up with poverty, social disruption and development. HIV/AIDS is exacerbated by poverty and exacerbates poverty.

• Since that time, HIV/AIDS has declined in political importance in the UK (as a domestic health issue but is rising as an international responsibility).
• I believe that the All-Party Parliamentary Group on AIDS has played a vital role in keeping HIV/AIDS on the national agenda in the UK. Our constant attention to the issue, our questioning of government ministers, the recognition that the Group is given for its objective, thoughtful and consensual approach have been a major factor in keeping HIV/AIDS high on our government's agenda.

• I believe that our experiences may offer a possible model which could work in other parliaments. I am very grateful to the Southern African Development Community Parliamentary Forum and to UNAIDS for recognising this possibility and enabling me to speak to you and Simon to be there with you.

ALL-PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUPS

• In the Westminster parliament, we have a long tradition of All-Party Parliamentary Groups on different subjects. These are distinct from the official committees which monitor the work of a government department.

  - They are more informal
  - They have membership from both the upper and the lower houses of our parliament
  - There is no limit on numbers or formal nomination of members.

• To be recognised as an All-Party Parliamentary Group, we must have at least 10 MPs or Peers from the government party, six from the main opposition party and four from the smaller parties. If we cannot show this membership, we are not allowed to exist or to use the facilities of parliament.

• Only members of parliament can be members of the Group.

• We have membership of 160 with a Committee of seven people, again balanced between political parties.

• Groups receive no funding from government or parliament. Most receive advice and administrative support from NGOs and charities which are concerned with the same area.

• A few are run by MPs themselves.

• And a few raise enough money to employ an Adviser directly, which the AIDS Group has always been able to do through raising money from HIV/AIDS funding charities and the private sector.
BENEFITS OF THE GROUP

Over the years, we have identified the benefits of having a Group on HIV/AIDS:

- a number of well-informed advocates for HIV/AIDS within parliament - people who are well-informed and personally committed to raise this issue whenever they can

- the maintenance of cross-party consensus - we have ensured that HIV has never become a controversial issue between political parties. Although there are differences, the Group's base in all major parties helps to keep a consensual approach.

- a forum for the voices of people with HIV, vulnerable communities and services to be heard in Parliament and government

- a direct and influential route to government ministers and officials

- the ability for backbenchers to help set the political agenda as well as to react to it

- former ministers contribute to the Group and former members may go on to ministerial careers

OUR ACTIVITIES

- regular meetings in Parliament with guest speakers from the HIV sector in the UK and abroad, we are always careful to get as many people who are openly living with the virus to speak to us

- we co-ordinate written and oral parliamentary questions and debates

- public and private meetings with ministers and officials

- provide briefings for Members of Parliament on the HIV/AIDS implications of legislation

- We provide information for HIV/AIDS organisations on parliamentary business

- joint meetings with other All-Party Groups when there are links, such as drugs or children.
SUCCESSES

- The All-Party Parliamentary Group on AIDS has been involved in most legislation and government policy since 1986, either through suggesting or initiating, through questions and pressure or through amending. Examples of measures in which the Group has been influential include:

  - the general establishment of the “liberal consensus” approach to HIV/AIDS
  - public education, needle exchange, condom distribution and voluntary testing rather than coercive public health measures\(^2\)

  - introduction of anonymous prevalence surveys - these were very controversial and the Group's support for them help get them started

- the AIDS Control Act 1987 which obliges local health managers to report their efforts to address AIDS was initiated by a member of the Group and supported in parliament by others

- including HIV infection in the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 so that people cannot be sacked or refused services because they have HIV

- persuading life insurance companies to remove questions about HIV testing

- holding Parliamentary Hearings\(^3\) in 1998 to help set the agenda for a National HIV/AIDS Strategy

- expanding focus towards HIV/AIDS as an international development responsibility.

INQUIRY INTO HIV/AIDS AND HUMAN RIGHTS

- Piece of work we are currently engaged in is an Inquiry to look at how well the UK is respecting and promoting the international guidelines on HIV/AIDS and human rights. This Inquiry, which operates like an official committee inquiry, is a very useful way to set an agenda and make recommendations to government.

- We helped to launch the *Handbook for Legislators on HIV/AIDS, Law and Human Rights* produced jointly by UNAIDS and the Inter-Parliamentary Union, in 1999 and decided that we should try to do an audit of UK policy both at home and as an international participant. Coincidentally, the UN High
Commission on Human Rights asked countries to report on this matter last year and we understand that the UK Government did not respond.

- We invited written evidence from anyone with an opinion about whether the UK was taking a human-rights based approach to HIV both in the UK, through criminal law, through anti-discrimination, through changing the social environments for vulnerable communities. We also asked whether the UK, in its participation in international agencies and as a donor country was making human rights central to its international work.

- We are timing our Inquiry so that a report will be issued soon after the general election with sets of recommendations for different government departments. We are then well-placed to keep pressure on the government to address outstanding matters.

- I understand that copies of the _Handbook for Legislators on HIV/AIDS, Law and Human Rights_ are there in Windhoek with you and I strongly recommend it as an excellent guide for parliamentarians and the Guidelines which are in it are a great framework for the human-rights based approach to HIV/AIDS.

CONCLUSION

- I believe that parliamentarians have an extremely important role to play in addressing HIV/AIDS, both in countries with lower level epidemics and in countries where very high prevalence epidemics are causing such devastation.

- I believe that parliamentarians can act as a national voice of conscience. We are very aware of what HIV/AIDS is doing in areas we represent, we have a lot of personal influence and in our parliamentary role we are there to monitor and scrutinise the work of governments and to press for better and more extensive action.

- This can be difficult if we are acting individually, particularly on an issue that we are trying not to make party political. There are of course different ways that we can operate together including through official health or other committees.

- We believe that the UK All-Party Parliamentary Group on AIDS has been a key element of the UK’s response to HIV/AIDS. Through its parliamentary activities, it has prompted, influenced and scrutinised the policies of successive governments. It has ensured that HIV/AIDS has not become a party political issue and has remained a political priority, both as a national threat and as an international responsibility.
• I think the more ways we as parliamentarians can work together internationally, to exchange information on what our governments are doing and share experiences of successes (and failures) the better we will be able to operate. The SADC Parliamentary Forum, the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association offer opportunities for us to do this. This includes us listening to the priorities of you, parliamentarians from the worst-affected countries and being guided by those.

• If you would like further information about the Group or how we operate, Simon Wright is there to meet you and to answer further questions. I really hope that we can build on this excellent opportunity.

THANKS

• Thanks again. Have a successful day and on behalf of the UK Parliament, I wish you all the best in the struggles against HIV/AIDS which are so important for your countries. HIV is something we will defeat, but it is going to be hard and needs all of us politicians to make sure it is a very high priority.