

Keynote Address
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By Forest Whitaker

Mr. Secretary-General of the United Nations,
Your Excellency President Kutesa,
Your Excellency President Chowdhury,
Your Excellencies Speakers of Parliament,
Secretary-General Chungong,
Ladies, and Gentlemen:

It is a tremendous honor to stand before this distinguished group of legislators and leaders and to be able to connect with all of you this morning. I know the importance of the work that awaits you over these next three days, and I am humbled to have been included in this conference. Thank you to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, to President Chowdhury

and Secretary-General Chungong, for this invitation.

As speakers of parliament, you are playing a critical role in democracies across the planet at a time when extraordinary action is required of the global community. I have devoted the last ten years of my life to working with young people around the world, to developing their skills as peace leaders and community builders. These youth are our present and our future. And our laws may reflect this thought. In my capacity as UNESCO Special Envoy for Peace and Reconciliation, I've had the opportunity to hear the voices and listen to the stories of young women and men from all sorts of backgrounds, cultures, communities, and countries. What they share is a deep and widespread discontentment with the political status quo. Around the world, youths are struggling to define their identities and discover their purposes. Many of them feel marginalized, like they don't have a place in society or that their voices aren't being heard. Some are angry; they

feel that violence and extremism are their only recourse.

I see this in my own country, where too many times in recent years, this anger has been channeled into shootings and even bombings. I see this anger in the Middle East, where ISIS is committing acts of terror and attempting to radicalize an entire generation. Of course, all violence and terrorism must be condemned in the strictest of terms and eliminated without exception. But these are a sign of a broader problem. They are a symptom of a society where people are giving up hope.

You—the most powerful lawmakers and leaders in your nations—you have the ability to change this. The word parliament comes from the French verb *parler*, “to speak.” You need to speak for people all around the world who are not being heard—for former child soldiers in Uganda, South Sudan, and Myanmar; for gang members in Mexico and the United States; for orphans in Syria and many other countries

around the world. You have to help these people find their way so they can stand strong in their identities. You have to demonstrate that everyone matters, and that every person in your democracy has power and efficacy. You have to convince them to hope again.

You know, when I was a kid, I used to spend a lot of time on my grandfather's farm. Sometimes he would make me plow the field. This was an actual push plow; there was no horse, just my own two hands. And once the field was plowed, my grandfather would tell me where to plant the seeds. "Here you plant watermelon, here turnips, here tomatoes." And then I would have to care for the seeds. If it was cold, I'd need to make sure the ground was covered. I had to chase away birds. I watered the soil. And if I did all these things, then by the end of the season, I would have a field full of these beautiful crops. But if I neglected the seeds, if I forgot to water them or I didn't use the right fertilizer or planted them at the wrong depth, then the field would be covered with

weeds. And I'd have to get down on my hands and knees and choke out the weeds by their roots, and start the whole process all over again.

Inside every young person, there exists a single, precious seed. It carries a unique energy and identity. If we nourish those seeds—if we ensure that young people have enough to eat, that they receive proper educations, that there are jobs available in their communities where they can make an honest living so they can fulfill their basic human needs, if we can help them find their purpose and make sure their voices are heard—then the true identity of those seeds will blossom, and beautiful flowers and crops will reveal themselves in fields and gardens all over the world.

But if we fail to do this, if we neglect to care for these young women and men, then we allow the weeds to take root. These weeds are stubborn; they can grow anywhere. Violence, extremism, racism, and intolerance are weeds

that can sprout through cracks in any sidewalk. They can penetrate the walls of any seed and corrupt its very identity.

There were some years on my grandfather's farm when the weeds would take over. They would grow too thick, and I'd have no choice but to wait till the next season to replant.

But we can't wait. We can't give up on the current generation and simply try again on the next one. We have to nurture these young women and men now. We must all be farmers and gardeners. Every single man and woman can play a role in shaping a world where our children grow up knowing that they are cared about and that there is a place for them. It is so much easier to devote our days to caring for and educating the next generation of leaders, rather than getting down on our hands and knees and spending an eternity pulling up weeds.

And you, as speakers of parliament—as our

most experienced leaders—you have to lead these efforts.

You have some of the most beautiful jobs on the planet. With the laws you pass, you are shaping the very movement, the ebb and flow, of your countries and your cultures. The smallest laws and policymaking decisions—even those that local leaders make—can have powerful impacts. A simple traffic sign that says you can't turn right, or a fence you construct around a parking lot, can cause ripples that make a difference in people's lives. These things create boundaries and structure. Local leaders are in effect saying to people, "Yes, this place is for you; no, this place is off limits." A single drop of water cannot sustain a plant. But many drops, over time, are the difference between life and death.

And you legislate on a much larger scale, at the national level. Every law you pass affects tens of thousands, or even millions of people. Think about the power that gives you to care for and

nurture the seeds of identity that exist inside of the youth of the world. Your laws cause ripples and waves that can nourish an entire generation. You have the ability to plow and to fertilize, to clip and to prune. You can make those seeds blossom in every field on the planet.

I have witnessed the extraordinary transformations that occur when you nurture young men and women's potential and help them find their identity. My foundation works with a school in Northern Uganda called Hope North. This place is a sanctuary, a home for former child soldiers, refugees, and orphans whose worlds have been shattered by war and violence. Hope North is a place where these children can seek refuge, somewhere they can be made whole again. It is a place where from the scorched earth of war, life can spring anew.

There's one boy in particular we've worked with there whose story has stayed with me. When he arrived years ago at Hope North, you could see

this emptiness in his eyes. For so many years, this boy had been forced to be a soldier. And even though he had spent sleepless nights haunted by the memories of what he had done, the very act of being a soldier had given his life purpose. Now he was safe, but he was also lost. The emptiness in his eyes revealed his lack of purpose. Without care and attention, this boy's life easily could have devolved into further violence and isolation. But in this community, where he was being supported and nurtured, the light started to come back to his eyes. I watched him one day singing with his fellow classmates, and I could see that as these many voices came together as one, the harmony created waves that washed over the boy that gave him purpose and nourished his soul. And this newfound identity has transformed his life. Last year he opened his own electrical shop. The last time we spoke, he expressed his plans to franchise three more shops in the surrounding villages. He has become a leader and a role model in this community.

With a little love and nurturing, a seed will fulfill its potential and express its true self. There are so many initiatives and sustainable goals that parliaments around the world should pursue to promote social welfare and to give youths the tools that allow them to find their identities.

Parliaments must help ensure that every boy and girl receives a quality education. A human being has the same need for education that a plant has for water. You cannot thrive if you are not allowed to learn. In South Sudan, where many young people around the country have been taking up arms and fighting in a civil war, my foundation jointly with UNESCO and partners works with youth to educate and train them as conflict mediators and community builders. We are already seeing how this is shaping these young men and women's lives. There's one young man in our program whose parents were killed when he was only seven, and he spent his childhood living in displaced persons camps. Now, he's finding his purpose working to build peace in his community, and

he's about to transform his life further when he starts university this year.

Two other young men from our program in South Sudan, through this training and education, have heard this same call to service, and now their identities as community leaders are continuing to blossom; they have just been elected to parliament from Eastern Equatoria State. They will be engaging in the same type of work that all of you perform—shaping the ebb and flow of their cultures with the laws they pass. Over the coming months, the parliament in South Sudan must ratify the peace agreement signed last week by leaders in Juba. Legislators must work together to make this peace a reality, to create programs that support and reintegrate the 10,000 children who have been forced to serve as soldiers in this conflict. They must craft laws that stamp out harmful cultural practices and promote tolerance and reconciliation.

Parliaments around the world must leverage the

power of technology to allow people to express themselves and to bring people together. The Internet gives voice to the voiceless. It allows every person on the planet to proclaim, “Here I am. I matter.” I have seen the wonder on a young person’s face when she accesses the Internet for the first time and discovers a whole world of possibilities waiting for her. But as of 2014, only 32 percent of individuals in developing countries had access to the Internet. Increasing this technology’s prevalence around the world would be a tremendous tool in allowing young men and women to learn, to seek out communities, and to find their identities.

And, parliaments must empower women and other groups whose voices are being silenced. Especially in fragile countries impacted by war and conflict, too many women are the victims of violence and sexual exploitation. There’s a young woman we work with and trained in Uganda. She’s endured some of the most horrific things imaginable: She was captured by

soldiers and forced to kill her sister. She was raped as a weapon of war. And then she had to learn to love the child—a daughter—that was born to her through this terrible ordeal. I'm sure you've all heard too many stories like hers.

But from this death and destruction has sprung new life. Because when she was offered fertile ground—when she was given a safe place to live, when she received an education and was trained as a peacebuilder—this woman found her identity. She's started her own business selling purses to people all around the globe. Now, she's raising her daughter—born from the chaos and fury of war—and, like mothers around the planet, she's nurturing a new generation of men and women to believe that they can shape their own futures.

These are the people parliaments must serve. These are the seeds you must care for. No one should be left behind.

You assembled here today come from over 150

nations. You represent a diverse and beautiful mix of nationalities, ethnicities, cultures, and peoples. I understand that the political states of your nations—the ways you govern and the exact policies that you pursue—are unique to each of you. But just as every plant requires water, sunshine, and soil to grow, every person requires basic human rights that must be universally provided across all nations. Securing these rights and promoting development are instruments of survival.

When the United Nations formally adopts 17 new Sustainable Development Goals in just a few days—at this very place—it will announce to the world the intention to ensure universal education, promote widespread Internet access, achieve gender equality, eradicate poverty, end hunger, reduce inequality, combat climate change, and more. These challenges illustrate the deep interdependence between the developed and the underdeveloped world. Whatever impacts one impacts all. We can no longer believe that our neighbor's problems are

not our own—that wars won't spread, that refugees won't cross borders, that poverty and extremism will stay where they are. Weeds can grow anywhere.

And that means that implementing the Sustainable Development Goals will require collective action. Addressing these massive challenges will take all of us—every country and every person—working together. You must be the men and women who lead us in these efforts, who make sure that we are fulfilling our sacred obligations to each other and coming together to build peace and sustainable development that all citizens of the world can share in. You must make sure that we care for the seeds inside of those who will inherit this world.

Imagine traveling to the banks of a mighty river. If you reach your hand into the water, you can hold, in your palm, a single drop, distinct and perfect. But then you turn over your hand, and that drop falls back into the current, where it

joins with trillions of other drops that, together, make up a single entity, flowing as one toward the same end. And along its journey, that river will create life everywhere it flows—from the highest mountains to the harshest deserts.

We humans are those drops. Together, we are that river. Inseparable. A single entity, united in purpose.

Together, we can create the life we want. Our voices and our message can percolate to every corner of the world. Our good deeds can create waves that irrigate every field, and provide the love and nourishment and support that every single young woman and man needs to become the truest—the most beautiful—versions of themselves imaginable. Together, it is possible.

I want to thank you again for this opportunity to connect with you today. Thank you for working to ensure that every person's voice is heard and for all that you do in support of peace and development around the globe.