For many years, I believed nursing was a values-based profession, with an interdependent relationship between professional practice, research and theory. However, following an amazing year working as interim chief executive at the International Council of Nurses in Geneva, I have come to realise nurses must see nursing as much more. And critically, so should policymakers at regional, national and international level.

A lot has been said about nurses and nursing having a seat at the decision-making table at clinical and policy level. Our absence from these positions of influence should be inconceivable. But we should also articulate a message that is accessible, relevant and makes a difference to all.

If our professional voice is to be heard for the benefit of individuals, families, communities and societies, then nursing must speak not just to other nurses but to other stakeholders.

Thinking politically
Nursing’s leadership should not only speak of the research, practice and theoretical impact of nursing and nurses; it should address the political, broader national and international health policy agendas, as well as the economics of healthcare.

The voice of nursing and our professional contribution, potential and capacity must be clearly aligned to the key international health policy agendas. Our contribution to reducing the burden of non-communicable diseases, enabling access to healthcare for all, meeting sustainable development goals, and achieving person-centred care is critical, if these ambitious political aims are to be met.

Regrettably, many national and international policies that promise so much fail to deliver because they are under-resourced. Nursing leaders must work together to ensure we are central to the delivery and implementation of policy. This means making maximum use of the competence, scope and capability of the nursing workforce.

And it means going much further than perceived self-interest. We must provide irrefutable evidence that we can play a major role in delivering policy and translating rhetoric into reality.

All too often, exceptional policy with great potential is not translated into reality. We must articulate and demonstrate that nurses are a key resource to ensure these policies are implemented in practice.

In doing this, we will show that healthcare services and healthcare professionals such as nurses are not an economic drain on society. Many politicians and political commentators view health as a negative on the budget and balance sheet. All governments want to reduce the cost per capita of healthcare, improve the patient experience of care and improve health outcomes.

Government departments such as education, infrastructure and communication win investment by arguing it will bring financial gain for the country.

Economic gains
The health discourse must reflect that an investment in health has not only social but also economic benefits. Nurses can articulate how an investment in healthcare is an investment in people and society that will reap economic rewards. The potential here is for a win-win – enhancing the status of nursing and achieving a better health service.

As a key resource for health, nurses can deliver high-quality patient care, improve patient outcomes and do so in an effective, efficient and economical way. But they can do this only if they are invested in and used wisely, like any other resource.

To achieve our professional and political ambition, nurses and nursing locally, regionally, nationally and internationally must strive to ensure we have something to say at the table that makes a significant contribution to the global political and economic agendas. This is a fantastic opportunity for us all.