



As delivered

**Global Partners in Action:
NGO Forum on Sexual and Reproductive Health and
Development**

Invest in Health, Rights and the Future

Statement by Thoraya Ahmed Obaid

UNFPA Executive Director

2 September 2009

Berlin, Germany

Madame Minister,
My dear colleague, Helen Clark,
My friend, Gill Greer,
Imane Khachani, Youth Representative,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is wonderful to be here with all of you in Berlin. We are joined together by a common cause for health, rights and the future. We are united in our quest for human rights, justice, equality and equity.

We are united in our vision that every person, in every part of the world, of every nationality, every ethnic origin and religion, both believers and non-believers, of every race, sex and sexual orientation... that every person, whether living with HIV or living with disabilities, whether living in safety, displaced or refugee... that every person can enjoy the full range of human rights to which they are entitled, so they can reach their full potential. Human rights are inalienable and indivisible.

We are joined by a common cause—the greatest social cause of our time—to eliminate violence and discrimination against girls and women, to ensure that women can control their fertility, and to guarantee the right to sexual and reproductive health for all.

This right was first proclaimed 15 years ago in Cairo at the historic International Conference on Population and Development and I thank many of you who were in Cairo and made that possible. It is a cause that endures, our work goes on, and the hope of achieving universal access to sexual and reproductive health shall never die.

We kicked off this meeting yesterday with the Youth Forum that was organized by the Youth Coalition. I can think of no better way to start the global commemorations of ICPD at 15. It is wonderful that one in three participants at this NGO Forum is a young person under the age of 30.

Our work is guided by an agreement that was reached through intergovernmental consensus by 179 leaders, representing every corner of our dynamic world of diverse people in terms of identity, culture, and faith.

UNFPA is proud to support this NGO Forum with the Government of Germany.

I would like to thank the Minister of Development Cooperation, Heidemarie Wieczorek-Zeul, and the Government of Germany for their hospitality and commitment to sexual and reproductive health and the ICPD Programme of Action. The commitment of governments worldwide to this visionary agenda continues to take us further ahead.

I am also happy to be joined on the podium by the dynamic leader and I am happy to say now my colleague and friend, Helen Clark. She was committed to achieving ICPD when she was the Prime Minister of New Zealand and she articulated her support as soon as she took this position at the United Nations Development Programme, UNDP, and Chair of

the UN Development Group. I have never heard my male colleagues speak so eloquently about sexual and reproductive health. Thank you, Helen, because we at the UN have come a long way – now you see two heads of agencies sharing a podium of an ICPD specific event and believe me, we women in the UN are leaders in this change.

I am also pleased to be joined by Imane Khachani of Morocco from the Youth Coalition whose presence adds value to this podium and Forum. Our joint presence is a demonstration of the necessary intergenerational solidarity and support.

I would also like to pay tribute to the wonderful members of the Steering Group for all you have done these past months to organize this important meeting and bring all of us together. Please stand up so we can express our heartfelt appreciation to you.

Partnerships with NGOs

The ICPD Programme of Action is comprehensive and it is the product of partnership at its best. It is the result of inclusion, passion, compassion and knowledge.

The Cairo agreement and the key actions of the five-year review were made stronger and more relevant reflecting the diverse voices of women, thanks to the invaluable contribution of members of civil society and dedicated and dynamic people like you.

More than 1,000 non-governmental organizations were accredited to the Cairo Conference and 37 NGO representatives spoke at the plenary. The parallel NGO Forum attracted 4,200 participants, including representatives of more than 1,500 NGOs from 133 countries. For a UN global conference, this was unprecedented.

Civil society helped shape the forward-looking Cairo agenda and civil society continues to drive commitment beyond the parameters of the Programme of Action. Your efforts are admirable as you continue building evidence, conducting advocacy, sharpening policy, delivering services, and holding governments accountable.

In countries, regions and at the global level, UNFPA will continue to fully engage with NGOs. And we will continue to urge our government partners to do the same so that your voices are part of the dialogue when national development policies and plans are made.

I have listened carefully and with great interest to our morning session that was a reflection on ICPD. I would like to thank Dr. Fred Sai for ensuring that the history of ICPD gives credit to all partners in the process of consensus-building. As we recognize the important role that NGOs played at the conference, let us not forget that, without the commitment of 179 governments to make ICPD a visionary and comprehensive agenda and to adopt it by consensus in an intergovernmental process, we would not be here today to commemorate its existence.

The United Nations, and in particular UNFPA and the Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, were the vehicles that facilitated consensus-

building and the drafting of the Programme of Action. I would like to mention with great pride the leadership of Dr. Nafis Sadik, my predecessor as Executive Director of UNFPA and Secretary General of the Conference, for her courage and patience in dealing with the multiple pressures from NGOs, member-states and the UN system. Her perseverance during the Conference contributed to its success. After the Conference, her courage to speak loudly on all occasions about the relevance of ICPD has kept it alive in the corridors and meetings of the United Nations and globally.

Let us not forget that the Programme of Action is a reality because, for the first time, governments, the United Nations and civil society, foundations, parliamentarians and faith-based organizations, came together to articulate their support to women's right to determine their fertility.

I would also like to invite all of you to join in the ICPD@15 online "ConversationsforaBetterWorld.com". Here you will find some of today's hot topics up for debate—the financial crisis and women, climate change and population issues, maternal health and human rights. Some of you are already involved and we would love for all of you to join the Conversation.

Open and frank dialogue has always characterized our partnerships. And today I intend to speak to you frankly and from the heart, knowing some of your views on our efforts to move ICPD forward. I will deal with three specific issues.

The first is about our partnership with you, NGOs that are fully committed to ICPD and beyond. The ICPD agenda is a consensus to be carried forward by all segments of society. Each one of us, each group is unique with a distinct and important role to play. Yes, we have our own strengths and limitations, but, as Gill said, we complement each other and together form a powerful movement for change. And unlike us in the United Nations who are held accountable by intergovernmental mechanisms, you, as NGOs, have more freedom and space to push the agenda further ahead. And here I am pleased to demonstrate what I mean. I believe that the International Planned Parenthood Federation, IPPF, and UNFPA have reached a model of partnership built on mutual trust, dialogue and understanding. This clear and critical division of labour maximizes our strengths and optimizes our resources to reach clear results for the full empowerment of women.

We at UNFPA seek a similar relationship with all of you.

Faith-based Organizations

My friends, we are on a long journey and we have to build broad partnerships to maintain, sustain and implement the ICPD agenda. At UNFPA, we believe in partnerships that are based on the principle that each of us offers what we can so that together we form a whole.

The Programme of Action states that all types of non-governmental organizations, including local women's groups, trade unions, cooperatives, youth programmes and

religious groups, should be encouraged to become involved in the promotion of better reproductive health.

It is in this spirit that UNFPA has reached out to expand partnerships, including with faith-based organizations. And that is my second point.

Last year, as a culmination of regional processes and networks, we established a Global Interfaith Network on Population and Development—a network of the “willing” that will be inclusive of all faiths, ensuring ethnic and indigenous representation. Their importance lies in their work that touches the lives of millions of women and their families.

This year international faith-based organizations in their partnership with UNFPA said they could make a positive contribution in two areas: improving maternal health and ending violence against girls and women. By joining forces, we can expand our reach to address these violations of women’s rights.

Abortion

My friends, a contentious issue at ICPD and one that remains today is abortion and that is my third point. Those of you who were at Cairo in 1994 remember the long hours of negotiations, adding and removing brackets, and discussing specific language. To this day, abortion continues to be contentious in related UN intergovernmental meetings.

The issue of abortion can be divisive, and, as we all know, it crosses between the realms of the personal and the political. As a politician, usually a man, stands in a hall and debates abortion, girls and women face the consequences of unintended pregnancies and unsafe abortion.

It is clearly a testament to the wisdom of the drafters and endorsers of the ICPD Programme of Action that they produced an international agreement on abortion, in the now famous paragraph 8.25 of the Programme of Action.

ICPD delegations agreed that where abortion is not against the law, it should be safe. And only four countries do not allow abortion under any circumstances. In all cases, women should have access to services for the management of complications arising from abortion, and compassionate post-abortion counseling and care. Women should have access to the necessary information so that they can make informed choices. You, NGOs, play a critical role in providing this information.

This is the intergovernmental agreement by which UNFPA continues to be bound. Just as no woman should die giving life, no woman should die from abortion.

The best way to prevent abortion is to prevent unintended pregnancies and for this UNFPA is committed to working with partners to expand access to voluntary family planning. Together we must empower women and couples by increasing access to information and services that enhance their reproductive health and rights.

Successes

As I said, we are on a journey and we have faced our share of setbacks and successes. And let me tell you, one thing I have learned over the years is that setbacks are less sour and successes even sweeter when you can share them with trusted friends and partners, like you in this room.

Today let us celebrate the successes we have achieved together.

Fifteen years after Cairo, more girls attend school than ever before, improving their own prospects and those of their families and nations. Progress is being made to achieve gender parity in education in most countries... important steps forward in the march towards equality.

Today, more births are attended by skilled health personnel. In East Asia, nearly every birth is now assisted by skilled health workers and substantial gains have been registered in Latin America and North Africa.

Today more women and couples are choosing to plan their families, space their pregnancies and determine the number of their children. More women are using modern contraception and birth rates have declined in all regions.

Today there is rising awareness and action within countries, and within the United Nations with the Secretary-General's UNITE campaign, to end violence against women and girls.

Today more and more communities are taking a stand against female genital mutilation and cutting. There are reported prevalence declines in Egypt, Ethiopia, Cote d'Ivoire, Mali and Nigeria.

Today, a greater share of the population has access to safe water. And since 1990, 50 per cent more people have access to sanitation services.

We have registered much progress in the past 15 years. Universal access to reproductive health is now part of the Millennium Development Goals, as a target under MDG 5 to improve maternal health, which paves the way for greater progress. Stronger action is being taken to link policies and programmes for HIV and AIDS with sexual and reproductive health, which will magnify the impact of these interventions. And gender and reproductive health are now addressed more than ever before in humanitarian response benefiting displaced persons and refugees.

But as we all know, we have an unfinished agenda. We still have a long way to go and we need to go faster.

Priorities

At the current rate of progress, we will not reach our goal to achieve universal access to reproductive health by 2015.

We have to act with urgency to scale up information and services and for this we need increased funding at a time when the world is facing a global financial crisis and competing demands.

Of the 23 billion dollars needed in developing countries in 2009 for a comprehensive package of family planning and maternal and newborn health services, less than half the amount is being made available. So we need to move from speech lines to budget lines and make sure these life-saving services are fully funded.

This is especially important as countries respond to the financial crisis. At UNFPA we are bracing ourselves for a drop in funding; cutbacks will likely affect all of us. Together we need to do more and better with less with clear results for which we can be held accountable.

We also need to make full use of the upcoming events in the United Nations General Assembly, next year's Women Deliver II Conference in Washington D.C, the G8 meeting, the Beijing15 and MDG+10 reviews, and all other relevant gatherings and partnerships, to rally more attention and resources for women and sexual and reproductive health.

Today unmet need for family planning and other services is much higher among women who are younger, less educated, living in rural areas and who are poorer. There is rising unmet need in growing urban slums so we have to do more to tackle inequities and ensure equitable access to information and quality services.

In many poor countries, rapid population growth is outpacing economic growth and the ability of governments to meet growing needs, which is threatening the achievement of the MDGs.

As I see it, there are three areas that require priority attention.

The first is improving maternal health, within the broad framework of the right to sexual and reproductive health, expanding access to family planning, and strengthening health systems. Progress is underway in countries and we have to continue to build momentum to achieve MDG5; this is prerequisite to the empowerment of women.

The second priority is advancing the right to sexual and reproductive health of young people. We need to fully embrace and support youth leadership, and address continuing high teen birthrates and sexually transmitted infections, including HIV.

The third is ending discrimination and violence against girls and women and impunity. Since Cairo, an impressive legal and policy foundation has been laid. Now we need to

focus on enforcement, implementation and building public awareness, with men as partners for equality.

We also have to convince leaders and finance ministers that investing in population, women and reproductive health brings progress in reducing poverty, protecting the environment and addressing climate change, and fostering peace and security.

After 2015

We are on a journey and, as we look ahead, we need to make sure that population, women's empowerment and sexual and reproductive health remain central to international development.

Some are asking: will there be a new conference on population and development when the Programme of Action comes to an end?

In the coming months, I will be consulting with you and other partners on the implementation of the ICPD Programme of Action up to 2014 and beyond, taking into account the outcomes of the regional and global meetings being held during the fifteenth anniversary, such as this one. The result of these consultations will guide us in UNFPA in working with Member States of the United Nations General Assembly as they decide on an inter-governmental follow-up process that protects the achievements of Cairo, responds to new challenges and the changing development environment, and reinforces the integration of the ICPD agenda in global processes related to development.

We will work with partners to make every contribution necessary to ensure that the follow-up process benefits from the most up-to-date and highest-quality analysis and data, without sacrificing our capacity to continue to support scaled-up services for the benefit of women, young people and societies.

We are on a journey, bound together by our convictions, by our passion for this agenda and our compassion for the people we serve. And we take strength in the knowledge that human rights, diversity and partnership are the way forward to achieve the ICPD Programme of Action and the Key Actions of its 5-year review.

To energize the dialogue between UNFPA and NGOs, I am pleased to announce the establishment of a consultative group of NGOs for UNFPA to be inaugurated in January 2010. We look forward to strengthening our ongoing partnership, and this is a first step for ensuring follow-up to this meeting. We will work with you to determine "the what" and "the how" of this group. This partnership will surely add to the wealth of dialogue and work we do with our other networks and advisory groups.

I look forward to our collective efforts to attain greater progress and together we shall achieve the ICPD vision.

Thank you.