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**General debate on national experience in population
matters: adolescents and youth**

Statement submitted by Action Canada for Population and Development, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/CN.9/2012/2.



Statement

The present statement is submitted by Action Canada for Population and Development, a non-profit advocacy organization that seeks to enhance the quality of life of women, men and children by promoting progressive policies in the field of human rights and international development with a primary focus on reproductive and sexual rights and health.

The theme of the forty-fifth session of the Commission on Population and Development, “Adolescents and youth”, comes at an urgent time. We recognize that while there has been progress in delivering on the commitments of the Cairo Programme of Action and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, there is still an urgent need to scale up progress towards respecting, protecting and promoting young people’s sexual and reproductive health and rights in policies and programmes.

This forty-fifth session of the Commission is an incredible opportunity for the world’s Governments to recommit to young people’s human rights, health and well-being. The fulfilment of young people’s human rights has been hampered by the limited realization of their sexual and reproductive health needs and rights and so we urge Governments to deeply reflect and commit to young people’s sexual and reproductive health and rights in the outcomes of this session.

During this session, we urge Governments to pay special attention to the sexual and reproductive health and rights of adolescent girls and young women. Gender inequality has a profound impact on the health, lives and well-being of adolescent girls and young women, who remain one of the most marginalized groups in many aspects of the development agenda, including in employment, health and access to education and in being recognized as rights-holders. A lack of research and programmes that address the particular needs of adolescent girls and young women has further pushed them to the margins of society and denied them basic human rights. As Governments have already reaffirmed, gender equality cannot be achieved without promoting and protecting the rights of women, including young women. Gender equality is an essential component to enjoying the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, which cannot happen without expanding access to sexual and reproductive health information and services and protecting human rights.

We thus urge Governments to stand by their commitment to ensuring that young people, especially adolescent girls and young women, have universal access to sexual and reproductive health services. This includes access to information and comprehensive sexuality education that will empower young women and girls with the tools to make the best choices for themselves. It is about access to modern contraceptives and sexual and reproductive health services free from legal barriers, stigma, discrimination and coercion. It is about providing us with the resources to make informed and responsible choices about our health and lives. It is about access to safe abortion services that embrace and respect our bodily integrity, autonomy, freedom and dignity.

In many parts of the world, a combination of social taboos, unavailability of sound information and lack of resources and infrastructure make it difficult for children and young people to access sexuality education aimed at improving knowledge and reducing risk. This leaves many young people vulnerable to

coercion, abuse, exploitation, unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections, including HIV.

Youth-friendly comprehensive sexuality education must be part of all formal school curricula, ensuring that young people have adequate, science-based, comprehensive information about gender roles, gender equality, sexuality, relationships, negotiation skills, sexual diversity, sexually transmitted infection and HIV prevention and human anatomy, among other topics. Providing this information allows girls and young women to make informed decisions about their bodies and their lives. There is no need to reinvent the wheel: best practices already exist, including some that are gathered in the publication entitled “International technical guidance on sexuality education”, published by the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization in partnership with the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), the United Nations Population Fund, the United Nations Children’s Fund and the World Health Organization (WHO). Comprehensive sexuality education must be combined with access to sexual and reproductive health and rights services for youth, including modern and affordable contraception, in order to empower young people with the right to make autonomous and responsible decisions.

Alongside access to modern and affordable contraception, young women need safe and legal access to abortion services. The lack of access to abortion services is a concern, as indicated in the 2011 report of the Special Rapporteur on the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, and the impact on adolescent girls’ lives and health has been addressed in the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

According to the publication by WHO entitled *Unsafe Abortion: Global and Regional Estimates of the Incidence of Unsafe Abortion and Associated Mortality in 2008*, research has shown that legal restrictions on abortion do not lower the number of abortions but rather increase the risks of maternal mortality and morbidity owing to unsafe abortions carried out in clandestine and unhygienic environments by unskilled attendants. The consequences of such abortions are often more appalling for adolescent girls and young women given the legal, social and cultural barriers and the abortion-related stigma that limits their access to sexual and reproductive health services.

We urge Governments and other stakeholders to highlight the importance of including access to abortion services by removing legal restrictions on access to safe and affordable abortion services, facilitating an essential intervention towards achieving the goals indicated in the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development, as well as those reinforced in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the Millennium Development Goals.

Unless it addresses these critical issues, any policy outcome of the session will be an unsuccessful attempt at addressing the needs, realities and rights of adolescents and young people. Therefore, we urge Member States to take into account the gravity of this situation and urge the international community:

- To recognize girls, young women and young men as rights-holders and protect and uphold their human rights, including sexual and reproductive rights and health.

- To recognize the evolving capacity of young people, including women and girls, for making autonomous and responsible decisions about their bodies and lives.
 - To recognize that the provision of affordable, safe and legal abortion services along with comprehensive sexuality education, access to modern contraceptive methods and gender-sensitive youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health services will bring better health outcomes among adolescent girls and young women.
 - To establish rights-based policies that are evidence-based, address the realities of adolescent girls and young women in their countries and promote equitable, peaceful and just societies.
 - To ensure adequate financial resources for programmes and interventions that safeguard and advance young people's sexual and reproductive health and rights.
 - To ensure the meaningful participation of a diverse group of young people in all programmes, policies and interventions since that is essential to ensuring that sexual and reproductive health and rights programmes and policies address the realities, concerns and priorities of all young people.
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