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General debate on national experience in population matters: assessment of the status of implementation of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development

Statement submitted by World Youth Alliance, 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.



Statement

Assessment of the status of implementation of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development

The World Youth Alliance is a global coalition of young people promoting the dignity of the human person in policy, education, and culture, and building solidarity between young people of developing and developed countries. On the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the International Conference on Population and Development, the World Youth Alliance welcomes the theme of the forty-seventh session of the Commission on Population and Development, “Assessment of the status of implementation of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development”, and looks forward to the general discussion and outcome documents of this session. The Programme of Action remains an essential document in discussions about health and development. While much progress in implementing the Programme of Action has been achieved, there remains much room for improvement in the areas of reproductive health, maternal health, sustainable development and the family.

Reproductive health

Access to reproductive health, a major goal of the Programme of Action, has not been universally achieved. Global discussions on reproductive health often centre on family planning, in particular contraceptives. There has been a major global push to increase funding for contraception. Countries where even basic health care (and funding thereof) is lacking have been targeted as needing to increase their spending on contraceptives. This push for contraceptive funding is misplaced and alarming, when it is clear that many challenges will remain even with a steady supply of free contraceptives.

Demographic and health surveys conducted in developing countries reveal that women are not able to identify when they are fertile, which is critical to avoiding unintended pregnancies and achieving desired pregnancies. These surveys also indicate that women who use contraceptives or have been sterilized are not informed about potential side effects, what to do if they experience side effects, or about other methods. Women cannot exercise the informed choice required in family planning if they do not have this information. Furthermore, the focus on the unmet need for family planning — that women lack access to contraceptives and thus more funding is needed in this area — ignores the reason many women do not want to use contraceptives, including health concerns, side effects and personal, religious or ethical beliefs. Therefore, increased provision of contraceptives does not guarantee increased uptake of contraceptives.

A particular distortion of reproductive health is used to promote bad policy. Several international non-governmental organizations use the Programme of Action’s provisions on reproductive health as tools to promote the legalization of abortion, even though the definition of reproductive health does not include abortion and paragraph 8.25 of the Programme of Action asserts that abortion laws and policies are the prerogative of individual Member States through their own legislative processes. The Programme of Action does not promote abortion; in fact,

it casts abortion in a negative light by emphasizing that it should not be promoted as a method of family planning and that Governments should help women avoid recourse to abortion.

To enjoy reproductive health and to realize their right to freely and responsibly determine the number and spacing of their children, women need education that equips them with the tools to know their bodies. By understanding her cycle and how to observe and understand her own biomarkers, a woman is able to achieve optimum health and to plan her family. She can become an active participant in her health care and can work with her provider to achieve long-term health outcomes. The World Youth Alliance has partnered with Fertility Education and Medical Management to ensure that women get the education and care that they need.

Maternal health

The world has seen a drop in maternal deaths, from 358,000 in 2008 to 287,000 in 2010. Still, the maternal mortality ratio in the developing regions is too high at 240 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births, compared with 16 in the developed regions.

There are success stories, from the reporting of zero maternal deaths in rural villages in the United Republic of Tanzania to Chile's achievement of the lowest maternal mortality ratio in Latin America, thanks to a combination of economic growth, compulsory education laws, free maternal and child health care and improvements in sanitation and nutrition.

The direct interventions needed to help every woman and baby go safely through pregnancy and childbirth are clear and are not out of reach for developing countries:

(a) At least four prenatal care visits, as recommended by the World Health Organization, which prepare a woman and her family for pregnancy and childbirth;

(b) Access to skilled birth attendants, who, in combination with backup emergency obstetric care, can reduce the maternal mortality ratio by 75 per cent, according to the United Nations Population Fund, because they are trained to monitor pregnancy and childbirth, recognize and manage problems and refer to higher levels of care when necessary;

(c) Minimally equipped birthing facilities containing the essential medicines and equipment to treat and deal with the major complications in pregnancy;

(d) Health-care delivery system infrastructure, including education, which empowers women to make appropriate health decisions, and transportation, which enables women to reach birthing facilities in time.

However, as the global health community increases its focus on avoiding pregnancy and ending pregnancy through the promotion of contraception and legal abortion as "necessary" measures in combating maternal mortality, the emphasis on these four achievable and effective interventions has declined. Funding and policy efforts have switched to contraception and abortion, which fail to address the situation of pregnant women who want to have safe and healthy pregnancies and deliveries.

Sustainable development and the centrality of the human person

Principle 2 of the Programme of Action asserts that human beings are at the centre of concerns for sustainable development and that people are the most important and valuable resource of any nation. Countries should ensure that all individuals are given the opportunity to make the most of their potential. The World Youth Alliance fully supports the notion that sustainable development efforts must place the human person at the centre. Yet increasingly population and development policies suggest that people are a burden rather than a boon. Often, environmental concerns take precedence over human ones, or a false idea that providing free contraceptives will decrease fertility and automatically result in development improvements pervades.

In the spirit of the Programme of Action, the world needs an attitude that people are assets and that it is poverty, not people, that is burdensome. People should be free to make their own decisions about how many children they have; they generally have the number of children that they want, and it is not the Government's place to promote a small family form or punish large families. Although there are still high fertility rates in some developing countries (where, coincidentally, desired fertility is close to actual fertility), in many countries longtime low birth rates have resulted in ageing populations whose pensions and health-care needs pose challenges to Governments and to working taxpayers. In many developed countries, youth unemployment is high, even over 50 per cent in some, because there is no growth.

Instead of lamenting the growing youth populations in many developing countries, we must recognize the incredible potential of the insights and capabilities of these young people, which can be realized if they are ensured access to basic health care, education, skills training and professional opportunities.

Role of the family

The World Youth Alliance reaffirms during the International Year of the Family that the fundamental group unit of society is the family, where women and men learn to live in genuine freedom and solidarity. Paragraph 5.1 of the Programme of Action recognizes this truth. Yet a challenge to implementing the Programme of Action, particularly in the areas of education and health, is the increasing focus on complete autonomy for children. Under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, States must respect parents' responsibilities, rights and duties to provide direction and guidance to their children in their exercise of their rights. Parents' concern for the good of their children is universal. Yet the emphasis has become bypassing parental involvement in reproductive health, family planning and sexual education, which means that children may face challenges alone, without the support of family. The political community at the local, national and international levels is obliged to protect parents' rights to be involved in their children's education and health-care decisions.