

Countries in Transition: Pitfalls and Potential I am grateful for the opportunity to briefly address my fellow participants as well as our distinguished speakers and dignitaries. I have been asked to discuss the challenges faced by non-governmental organizations in Eastern Europe and Central Asia as they promote reproductive health and rights, and to make suggestions for meeting those challenges. Over the past 11 years I have worked with NGOs from a group of 21 of these "countries in transition." Prior to and since the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development, we have met annually, under the auspices of the Population Institute, to discuss how we can ensure universal access to reproductive health and family planning. We have emphasized elevating the commitments of donors to assist this region of the world in solving or alleviating myriad related problems. Our partner NGOs and others that work in Eastern Europe and Central Asia face many obstacles in meeting their goals. Most obvious is the lack of significant external financial support.

This is partially due to a diminished interest in the region on the part of private donors. Another major cause of these shrinking resources is the impact of the United States government's shortsighted foreign policy. Ideological machinations of the current administration have led to significant reductions in the funding of the two most prominent organizations in the field of family planning and reproductive health - the United Nations Population Fund and the International Planned Parenthood Foundation. These misguided decisions have exacerbated the difficulties in achieving progress towards the goals of the ICPD. In addition, the countries of Eastern Europe and Central Asia must combat pervasive problems endemic to their societies. Though conditions vary from country to country, virtually the entire region is beset with staggering economic problems and poor living standards. This has led to enormous health risks. HIV spreads fastest in societies struggling to overcome poverty and political and social instability. Infection rates in the region are rising. Economic uncertainty, stress, and high alcoholism rates have led to increased mortality levels. Many countries have poor infrastructures, ranging from interrupted electricity and unstable potable water supplies to damaged or incomplete road networks.

The lack of government commitment to reproductive health and family planning issues often means that NGOs are the most stable national institutions in this region. For many countries, these challenges paint a bleak picture of reproductive health and rights. The nations of Eastern Europe have a combined fertility rate of 1.2 children per woman, falling below the 1.5 fertility rate of the more developed world. But contraceptive prevalence for reproductive age women in the region stands at only 41 percent - a figure lower than that of Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as Asia. The contradiction of low use of contraception alongside low birth rates is attributable to an alarmingly high reliance on abortion. Dr. Charles Westoff of Princeton University has estimated that 80 to 90 percent of unintended pregnancies in these countries are aborted. In Armenia, for example, where modern contraceptive use stands at only 40 percent, women in the year 2000 averaged 2.6 abortions.

In recent years, however, abortion has declined significantly in countries of the region where modern contraception has become widely available. For example, in the Czech Republic the abortion rate has dropped by 5 to 7 percent annually over the last 10 years. Our partner NGOs in Eastern Europe and Central Asia have recently reported other encouraging developments. In Albania, infant mortality has decreased in the last five years from 30 to 17.2 per 100,000 live births. In the Slovak Republic, the number of women using hormonal contraception has increased from 2 to 18 percent in the past ten years. In the same time frame, the number of abortions in the Slovak Republic has decreased by 70 percent. These statistics provide hope for the future. But much more

remains to be done. Young people are the most significant and the most vulnerable segment of the population. It is critically important that adolescents receive comprehensive sex education, including information on sexually transmitted infections and modern contraceptive methods. Many local NGOs are providing such information, but increased assistance of local agencies and governments in these actions would provide tremendous support. Funding remains a critical issue. Additional donor funds directed towards the countries of Eastern Europe and Central Asia must be earmarked for the implementation of the ICPD Programme of Action. However, increased funding is not the only solution. Quality of life does not depend solely on economics. To this end women must receive a greater share of income and higher levels of political participation. Women must become active partners at all levels of society so that they may determine the size and spacing of their own families and provide their children and themselves with a caring, stable environment. It behooves this gathering to realize that although we have seen some successes, especially in the more industrialized countries, population issues and reproductive health in the area of the world we are examining today remain of paramount concern.