

Closing Statement at the European Population Forum 2004

by Thoraya Ahmed Obaid, Executive Director

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Dear colleagues,

Over the past three days, we have been privileged to be part of this important meeting, to listen, to share and to learn from an array of distinguished experts and practitioners. We have been impressed by the high quality of ideas expressed and the depth of commitment displayed by all.

Let me first give thanks to our hosts, the Swiss Government, and to our partners, the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe. I also thank the European Commission for its support. We especially appreciate Commissioner Nielsen's participation in the opening ceremony, and his strong and insightful remarks on the importance of supporting the International Conferences on Population and Development's Programme of Action as part of efforts to realize the Millennium Development Goals.

Throughout this Forum, we heard over and over again the resounding view that the Programme of Action is as relevant to Europe as it is to other regions and that its implementation is key to realizing the global development agenda. We also heard strong support for the role of UNFPA for which we are heartened and grateful.

As we enter the halfway point of implementing the Programme of Action, all partners need to build on this common affirmation to ensure faster and sustainable progress in our work to improve the quality of lives and health of all people, particularly women and young people. For the sake of all the peoples whose lives are touched by disease, violence and trafficking and for the generations of people who would live blighted lives if we were to fail, we must not let our differences impede our progress.

Our primary objective must be to protect and save lives, and to contribute to the conditions under which all people—men, women and children—can thrive and lead secure and healthy lives. I urge that we resolve to be guided in the next ten years by the principle, agreed to in Cairo, that implementation is the sovereign right of each country, consistent with national laws and development priorities, with full respect for the various religious and ethical values and cultural backgrounds of its people and in conformity with universally recognized international human rights.

This Forum has demonstrated that it is necessary to learn from the diversity of conditions at the regional and global levels. In identifying and addressing the critical concerns of each region, we must not ignore the broad difficulties facing less-endowed countries and communities. Many of the issues identified as obstacles affect most countries, the difference being only a matter of degree.

Several priority needs must be recognized to guide our efforts. Without doubt, the greatest obstacle is the shortfall of resources allocated or available for implementing the Cairo agenda. Annual assistance for population and reproductive health programmes is nearly \$3 billion short of the level agreed to at the ICPD. It is urgent that donor countries increase not just their official development aid but also the proportion that goes to reproductive health and rights in particular.

We also need to ensure better use of existing resources. This calls for a review of the impact of sector-wide approaches and special funds on funding for reproductive health, and greater attention to ensuring that existing frameworks for poverty reduction and health sector reform reinforce support for ICPD goals, which are inseparable from and critical to the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals.

An effective case has been made here for the need to highlight the linkage between HIV/AIDS and reproductive health, and to ensure better integration of the two. We also must ensure that additional resources are available for prevention as well as for treatment.

In a majority of countries, the commitment to ICPD has led to new policies and laws aimed at promoting women's rights and improving reproductive health. In all countries, however, there is a need to strengthen efforts to put these policies into effect.

Our ability to plan and deliver effective programmes and services depends critically on the quality of available data. Our discussions have highlighted the need for development plans to pay special attention to population dynamics in order to serve the needs of the various population groups more effectively. It is also important to identify the impact of demographic trends for better planning purposes. In other words, demographic data and analysis inform policies and programmes that improve people's lives, especially for poverty reduction and service delivery. UNFPA will continue to work with countries and institutions to improve data collection and analysis wherever feasible.

And critically, every review of post-ICPD progress reaffirms the importance of involving communities served—including underserved groups and youth—in the design, implementation and monitoring of programmes.

As this Forum has recognized, the ECE region is one of great diversity. Some countries face persistent low fertility, ageing populations and declining workforces. As many of you have stressed, approaches to address these concerns need to be based on a commitment to human rights and to reflect the ICPD principles of ensuring gender equality, choice and opportunity.

While this is a region known for great wealth and prosperity, it includes countries in transition facing severe social, economic and health crises that restrict opportunity, exacerbate inequality and threaten development prospects.

Special attention is also required to reproductive health and gender concerns in general and to transition countries in particular. A major priority is to improve access to quality reproductive health services.

Despite some significant progress, the reproductive health and rights of adolescents continue to be neglected, fuelling the alarming increase in HIV infections in parts of the region. Efforts to provide young people with information and services to protect their health need to be intensified.

This Forum has affirmed that Europe stands behind the ICPD Programme of Action's commitment to reproductive rights and is determined to preserve and solidify the gains that have been made in realizing its goals.

Such political commitment, backed by effective policies grounded in human rights and above all by adequate resources, is the key to realizing our common hopes for humanity.

Thank you.