

Statement by Anne-Birgitte Albrechtsen, Deputy Executive Director UNFPA at the UNECE Regional Conference for the ICPD Review: Enabling Choices: Population Priorities for the 21st Century

[Monday 1 July 2013](#)

Excellency Ambassador Urs Schmid, Permanent Representative of Switzerland to the United Nations in Geneva,

Excellencies,

Distinguished Participants,

Colleagues and Friends,

It is a great pleasure to address you at this opening session of the UNECE Regional Conference for the ICPD Review: Enabling Choices: Population Priorities for the 21st Century. Europe is in the midst of a situation without parallel in demographic history. It is also in the midst of an economic crisis that leads to questioning economic and social policies. This opportunity to discuss the results of the review of the implementation of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) and its follow up beyond 2014 for the UNECE region could not have been timelier.

On behalf of UNFPA, I would like to express our deep appreciation to the Government of Switzerland for hosting the conference and for its continuous commitment to the ICPD and its reviews. I would like to thank the Governments of this region for the country level reviews, and in particular for their participation in the Global Survey which provided a rich basis for a comprehensive and evidence-based discussion. A number of countries, particularly the Netherlands, played an important role in securing the decision for the UNECE region to join the global review of the ICPD and its follow up beyond 2014. We are grateful to them. We are also grateful to our main partner in this endeavor, the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) for close collaboration in the review process. Last but not least, I want to acknowledge the contribution of civil society and youth in the review process. Their dedication, as well as technical and programmatic contribution was valuable.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

The ICPD vision, its goals and objectives are even more relevant today, in every region of the world. The relevance of ICPD has become more evident as we engage at the United Nations on ways to extending and better protecting the rights of all; ensuring equity, gender equality, non-discrimination; combating gender based violence, and ensuring sustainable development, among others.

In Cairo, 179 countries elevated the development discourse to an entirely new level in Cairo, linking empowerment, equity, rights, and focus on quality of life on the one hand, to the achievement of sustained economic growth and sustainable development on the other

hand. Nineteen years later, the goals and objectives of Cairo have not been realized. At least not everywhere; and not for everyone.

In this region there is a lot to celebrate. Countries have adopted policies to address ICPD related issues: policies to promote rights, gender equality and women empowerment, to facilitate family and work balance, to increase access to and quality of sexual and reproductive health services - including for adolescent and young people, to promote healthy and productive aging, to enhance the impact of migration, to name a few.

Some of the results of these changes are visible and present in lives of people in this region. People generally live longer and healthier lives. They have more reproductive choices, as well as better knowledge and means to fulfill these choices. People can move more freely between countries. New forms of families have emerged. Adolescent fertility, abortion and maternal mortality have declined. Gender gaps have been narrowed in many areas. Gender based violence - a taboo in many countries - is being openly discussed and addressed by governments and civil society. More intergenerational solidarity is observed. The population issues are better integrated in policies and programmes, and in many countries are addressed in the context of human rights rather than numbers.

It is an overall positive picture. But this is only part of the reality. Exercising rights and choice is still not a reality for all, two decades after Cairo. In fact, I am concerned about reports of potential curtailing of rights in the region. Moving forward not backward should be our common goal.

We all appreciate the unprecedented challenge of low fertility, migration and aging in this region. But often the policies designed to address these issues are not effective because they fail to address fundamental issues of the rights of individuals and couples to make choices, to enjoy gender equality, and to have universal access to quality family planning and reproductive health services, as prerequisite for people to fulfill their reproductive choices. Strong body of evidence is available in some parts of this region proving that comprehensive family-friendly social policies, gender equality and access to RH services contribute to the increase in fertility. Meanwhile the poverty of choices explains why the actual fertility is sometimes lower than would have been, if there were a better balance of family and work for individuals and families. Life expectancy has not increased equally in the region, and male mortality is of concern in parts of the region. The prevalence of HIV in the UNECE region has shown a significant increase, especially in the last two decades and among young people. All youth does not have access to SRH information and services. Absence of comprehensive sexuality education in many countries in the region severely affects life options of young people, rendering them vulnerable to debilitating effects of sexually transmitted infections and HIV. The high economic impact of not maintaining a healthy and productive young population harms development targets of many countries. Youth unemployment is high in the region and above 30% in ten countries of the region - the youth of today is called the lost generation. What impact is this having on family formation, on migration, on health - including reproductive health. Negative stereotypes, discrimination, traditional harmful practices still exist. Migration sometimes mean brain drain for some parts of the region, drainage of essential human resources and capacities. These are but a few examples. In short, there remains many challenges in the region.

Your excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

At the time of Cairo, the UNECE region was highly diversified in political, socio-economic and demographic terms. In the two following decades, while the region saw profound changes and in many aspects has seen some convergence, it has also seen disparities broadened, between countries or sub-regions.

We have also observed deepening inequities and inequalities within countries, further exacerbated by the current crisis, and with direct impact on women, on youth, on the elderly and on other disadvantaged populations. Why is this important? We have learned that nations with more equality do better on nearly every measurable health and social indicator, and are more cohesive and inclusive than less equal societies. Addressing inequalities is therefore a high impact intervention. and this can be done by providing universal access to sexual and reproductive health services, respecting the rights of migrants, empowering women and combatting gender-based violence, promoting youth participation as well as inter-generational solidarity, for example.

In addition to giving high priority to reducing inequities and inequalities, one of the crucial conclusions of the review so far is that investment in human capital is a key – an essential - strategy for sustainable and equitable development. It is important that policy approaches include preventive interventions, respect of rights, health and education for all, including comprehensive sexuality and reproductive health education, as well as long-term and multi-sectoral planning, beyond the usual political cycles. Supporting individuals and families to take care of themselves is sustainable, especially in time of crisis. Supporting women, men and youth to have a healthy sexual and reproductive life is one of the most preventive and sustainable intervention a government can make.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

One of the noteworthy results of the review in this region is the effective partnerships with stakeholders at the national and regional levels, and the involvement of civil society and community organizations in the success of several of the achievements. On the other hand, we learn that youth groups are rarely included as partners of governments, as well as other vulnerable groups. Strengthening civil participation, in particular of vulnerable groups when relevant, in policy dialogue and programme development is key to accelerate future progress.

This region possesses strong institutional and technical capacity, and has greatly contributed to normative work on ICPD matters. It is also a region where most traditional donors are, as well as several emerging donors. This region's technical and financial support benefit not only the region but also the rest of the world. The policy and programmatic experience of this region can also provide useful insights and lessons learned to other regions. I am convinced that the ICPD Beyond 2014 results in this region will contribute significantly to the global process.

As we consider the ICPD issues in the region, we should be conscious of the direct interconnection with the discussions going on worldwide to frame the post 2015 development agenda. It is important to examine the findings of the ICPD review and assess how they can potentially inform priorities for a new development framework that fully integrates population dynamics, gender equality and sexual and reproductive health and rights issues.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to conclude on a positive note. Research indicates that current demographic trends in the region are not necessarily threats by themselves, and that societies can live secure and prosper with smaller populations. Narrow policies that seek to influence a specific demographic trend in a desirable direction are often not effective. Long term vision and planning, coherent sets of broad and complementary multi-sectoral policies combined with investment in human capital - the people - is the most effective strategy for sustainable positive impact. Such policies can and must be designed in broad partnerships between governments, civil society, academia, private sector, and media. ICPD remains an excellent blueprint to achieve this.