Commission on Population and Development

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Assessing the status of implementation of the Programme of   
Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and its contribution to the follow-up and review   
of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development during the   
decade of action and delivery for sustainable development

Statement submitted by C-Fam, Inc., a non-governmental organization in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council[[1]](#footnote-1)

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

As we approach the thirty-year review of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development, we often hear about the “unfinished business” that remains to be completed. It is true that critical gaps remain between the vision agreed in Cairo in 1994 and the world today. The international community committed itself to reducing maternal mortality, and reiterated this commitment in both the Millennium Development Goals and the Sustainable Development Goals. While significant progress has been made, we have seen this progress slow—and even regress in some areas—in recent years. Tragically, many of these deaths result from preventable complications of pregnancy and birth, and the solutions are known and widely used, but have not yet been made accessible to all women who need them, especially in regions that are poor, remote, or rendered unstable due to conflict or the effects of natural disasters.

Earlier this year, the World Health Organization reported that progress on improving maternal health had stagnated since 2015, and cited decreased investment in this crucial area as a reason. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, it was evident that the issue of maternal health, which was a central piece of the Millennium Development Goals, risked being obscured by the much larger patchwork of targets in the Sustainable Development Goals. At the same time, its association with the more controversial area of “reproductive health” made it politically more difficult to focus on preventing maternal deaths without being distracted by the controversial issue of abortion. Over thirty countries proposed a path forward in the Geneva Consensus Declaration, which draws entirely from areas of global consensus in affirming the importance of maternal health and the family while also protecting human life from conception and respect for national sovereignty.

Other UN data reveals that 130 million girls are not receiving an education, that over 2 billion people—a quarter of the world’s population—do not have reliable access to safe drinking water and sanitation, and that some regions, particularly sub-Saharan Africa, continue to have far fewer physicians than are needed to provide adequate health care to their populations, especially in rural areas.

At the same time, there is increasing acknowledgment that access to family planning has become near-universal, along with awareness of methods. Despite frequent and incorrect conflation of “unmet need” with lack of access, and of access to family planning with its use, it is increasingly true that those who desire to use it are able to do so, and those who choose not to do so are making decisions based on their own fertility and health priorities. When over ninety percent of reported “unmet need” for family planning is due to reasons like concern over health risks and side effects, personal objections, a perceived low likeliness of becoming pregnant, or the lack of a strong motivation to avoid it, this indicator has arguably outlived its usefulness. Efforts to achieve zero “unmet need” would require overriding women’s own priorities and decision-making, which is at best paternalistic and at worst coercive. Global commitments on family planning should not shift their focus from satisfying demand to generating it in order to align with an outdated and widely-misunderstood indicator.

As we consider how the implementation of the International Conference on Population and Development contributes to the implement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, it is important to remember that both are the result of painstaking negotiations by member States, and are important to consider both in terms of what they contain and what they omit. During both lengthy negotiations, some of the most controversial and difficult topics involved issues like abortion and sexuality, and ended in compromises between widely divergent viewpoints. At Cairo, language on “sexual and reproductive health” and “reproductive rights” was accepted only with important caveats: abortion is not an international human right and its legal status is for the governments of member States to determine; women must be provided with alternatives to abortion, and women who have suffered injuries due to abortion must be supplied with health care. Similarly, language on “sexual rights” was rejected, and the term “sexual and reproductive health and rights,” which implies the existence of “sexual rights” has been repeatedly rejected in negotiations in the decades that followed. Indeed, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals include direct references to the Cairo language and the crucial caveats it contains, which remain equally relevant today as these same debates continue in United Nations deliberations.

At no point in the last thirty years have member States agreed to an international human right to abortion or the existence of “sexual rights.” Nevertheless, it is common to hear the “unfinished agenda” of Cairo characterized not in terms of the commitments that were made and remain incomplete, but rather, in terms of the things that were rejected from the Cairo agenda in the first place, and continue to be rejected to this day when member States engage in negotiations.

This reality is particularly visible in the context of the Commission on Population and Development, which has in recent years failed to produce a negotiated outcome on several occasions due to these same contentious issues of abortion, “sexual rights,” and “comprehensive sexuality education.” These issues may be a high priority of a subset of member States, but they clearly do not enjoy international consensus, and decades of attempts have only resulted in repeated stalemate. Meanwhile, those agencies and funds tasked with implementing the agendas of the International Conference on Population and Development and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development have increasingly exceeded their negotiated mandates by promoting “sexual and reproductive health and rights” and “comprehensive sexuality education” and erroneously treating abortion as a human right rather than a national concern.

This disconnection between the agendas and programmes agreed by member States and the ways that implementing organizations are choosing to interpret their mandates threatens the success and legitimacy of both the Programme of Action of Cairo and the 2030 Agenda. There is much that the community of member States can agree to and have agreed to in recent decades. These agreed programmes are ambitious and aspirational, and will require considerable effort and cooperation by member States and a wide variety of other partners to achieve. In order to realize the world we want, it is essential that focus be directed toward those things that have global agreement and buy-in from the whole community, and avoid being distracted and paralyzed by those issues that inevitably produce gridlock and breakdown of consensus.

In order to deliver the full implementation of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and the 2030 Development Agenda, we must first focus on the things they actually contain, particularly those that have been repeatedly affirmed, yet lag behind agreed targets, such as ending preventable maternal and child deaths and ensuring access to good quality education for all children. The fact that these things are not controversial does not mean they are easy to achieve, but it does mean that this is where focused attention and resources should be directed.

1. The present statement is issued without formal editing. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)