

Highlights from the discussions at the Regional Conference on ICPD30 "Population and Development: Ensuring Rights and Choices" organized by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe and the United Nations Population Fund Regional Office for Eastern Europe and Central Asia in Geneva on 19-20 October 2023.

Presented by the co-Chairs of the Conference, H.E. Mr. Alexei Buzu, Minister of Labour and Social Protection, Republic of Moldova, and H.E. Ms. Aurora Diaz-Rato Revuelta, Permanent Representative of Spain to United Nations Office and other International Organizations in Geneva

Excellencies,
Dear delegates,

As the ICPD30 conference for the UNECE region is coming to an end, we're pleased to present some highlights of our discussions over the past two days.

We'd like to stress that this is not a comprehensive account; a report of the conference deliberations will be made available later.

This is also not an official Chair's Summary. The 2013 Chair's Summary remains the reference document for the implementation of the ICPD Beyond 2014 agenda.

In the **opening session**, many member States reaffirmed their commitments to the principles agreed at the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) and to implementing the ICPD Programme of Action, as well as related international frameworks such as the Beijing Platform for Action.

Delegations welcomed the regional report on the implementation of the ICPD Programme of Action and the priorities identified in the 2013 Chair's Summary. Many speakers echoed the conclusions of the report, welcoming the progress made and voicing concern about remaining gaps in implementation and persisting inequalities both within and between countries.

A number of delegations expressed concern about the effects of overlapping crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic and an increasing number of armed conflicts, and about pushbacks against some elements of the ICPD agenda, warning also that progress in some areas has slowed down or is being reversed, and that there was a risk of hard-won gains being lost.

In light of these challenges, several delegations called for a renewed commitment and global political consensus around the ICPD and its Programme of Action. They also stressed the need to link the ICPD Programme of Action to the High-Impact Initiatives of the UN, as well as the Summit of the Future.

The plenary heard keynote presentations highlighting the importance of building bridges between different stakeholders, and addressing population issues in a comprehensive

manner with a focus on both population numbers, on the one hand, and evidence- and rights-based approaches, on the other.

In light of increasing demographic concerns, the principles and goals of the ICPD Programme of Action and the outcome documents of its review conferences remain as relevant as ever.

It was emphasized that there are no quick, top-down fixes for the demographic challenges the region is facing, and that it is imperative to ask – sometimes difficult – questions about the root causes of the symptoms that are often seen as a demographic crisis. However, there is ample ground to unite around a common vision of fulfilling and realizing the potential of all people, including women and the most marginalized, and developing solutions based on sound evidence.

Many delegations reported progress towards achieving the ICPD Programme of Action. They cited new laws, policies, strategies and programmes in areas such as gender equality and women's empowerment, involving men and responsible parenting, countering gender-based violence and harmful practices, including child marriage, promoting the rights of youth and older persons, and healthy ageing, ensuring universal access to sexual and reproductive health, including maternal health, safe abortion services, strengthening comprehensive sexuality education and youth-friendly and disability-inclusive services, ending the HIV epidemic, as well as dealing more broadly with social determinants including measures to end discrimination, and address harmful gender and social norms that perpetuate inequalities.

Several speakers emphasized how investing in people and enabling them to fulfil their potential benefits not only individuals, but societies as a whole. As such, the ICPD agenda provides a relevant framework and guide for countries to address the demographic and socio-economic challenges they are facing and build demographically resilient, prosperous societies.

Some delegations drew attention to the importance of supporting and addressing the needs and expectations of all families in the context of the socioeconomic and demographic challenges the region is facing.

Several delegations emphasized the centrality of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls and sexual and reproductive health and rights. It was stressed in this context by some speakers that, in order to ensure that no one is left behind, an intersectional approach is needed to understand and address multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination and structural drivers of inequalities.

A number of delegations spoke about the importance of ensuring bodily autonomy and the right of women and girls to make decisions about their bodies and lives free from discrimination, violence or coercion.

Participants emphasized that understanding the link between population dynamics and climate change helps design sustainable policies for a greener planet.

Parliamentarians participating in the Conference recalled the key role they can play in human-centered and human rights-based policy development and stressed how stronger political will is fundamental to addressing the challenges the region is facing.

Civil society organizations present at the Conference called on governments to refrain from action undermining gender equality and sexual and reproductive health and rights, counter the shrinking of the space for civil society in many countries, reform laws and policies in line with international standards, strengthen non-discrimination legislation, and adopt an intersectional approach to developing and implementing policies, to take into account the rights and needs of the most vulnerable.

Youth representatives made a passionate plea for inclusion of young people in decision-making processes at all levels, and called for the voices of youth to be heard and taken into account when decisions are made, stressing that youth inclusion benefits society as a whole. They emphasized the need to take into account all vulnerable groups and highlighted the particular challenges faced by young people with disabilities.

During the **first thematic session on population dynamics and sustainable development**, several delegations voiced concern about the socioeconomic effects of demographic changes such as low fertility rates and population decline, rapid population ageing and pressure on public budgets, shrinking working age population and labour and skills shortages, as well as complex migration movements.

A number of delegations also stressed that demographic change can present opportunities, if the right measures are taken to prepare for and adapt to changing demographic realities.

Speakers emphasized that population policies must be rooted in human rights and gender equality, and the right of individuals and couples to choose if and when to have children, and how many, must be respected.

Several speakers expressed the need to invest in human capital and create an enabling environment for people, including women, young people, older persons, migrants and other marginalized people, to fulfil their potential as a precondition for addressing demographic change successfully.

It was pointed out that people generally want two or more children in the region, but end up having fewer due to a variety of barriers, including difficulties for women, in particular, in combining career and family duties and the unequal distribution of unpaid work at home.

It was noted that men are more likely to be employed than women in all countries of the region, and women spend fewer hours of paid work and more hours of unpaid care work than men, a gap that widens considerably when women have children.

Closing the employment gap between men and women would have significant economic benefits. It requires a redistribution of unpaid care work, including through expanding

paternity leave benefits, and measures to enable men and women to balance work and family responsibilities, including through family-friendly workplaces and the provision of accessible, affordable and quality daycare for small children.

It was also noted that the demographic challenge is a true democratic challenge which requires fighting for social justice and against inequalities among territories and people. Public policies for socio-territorial cohesion have to ensure gender equality and women's empowerment to lead the processes of change required and through a cross-cutting vision that fosters the integrated development of territories.

It was pointed out that the spread of internet and mobile technologies can affect a variety of demographic outcomes, but benefits may be more pronounced for higher skilled workers.

A number of delegations shared experiences with strengthening demographic resilience at the national level. This included the development of comprehensive, inclusive youth policies, embracing immigration as a driver of economic growth and innovation, and strategies to support healthy and active ageing in line with the life course approach.

Some delegations reported on their efforts to stimulate higher fertility rates by providing financial benefits and incentives and other forms of support to families.

There was wide recognition that financial incentives alone do not work, and a set of comprehensive policy responses is needed to enable people to realize their fertility intentions.

It was also pointed out that promoting immigration must not lead to brain drain in sending countries, but should lead to benefits for sending countries, for example through circular migration and cross fertilization.

The need for more and better quality disaggregated data came up in several interventions. It is needed to strengthen the evidence base for policy formulation and to explain interrelationships between different factors that affect demographic outcomes.

During the **second thematic session, on families and sexual and reproductive health over the life course**, speakers presented the progress that has been made in this field, both at national and regional level, including the development and implementation of the national SRH policies and strategies, taking into account and responding to evolving needs across different life stages.

Several delegations restated that the access to sexual and reproductive health is a human right. They emphasized the importance of sexual and reproductive health and rights for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women and young people in particular, as well as for sustainable development more broadly.

It was stated that large disparities exist especially with regard to access to SRH services for vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, including young people, people of colour, migrants, refugees, persons with disabilities, people living with HIV, and LGBTQI+ community. There were strong calls for removing the barriers marginalized people are facing in accessing SRH services and information.

It was noted that for young people the barriers for accessing modern contraception include lack of knowledge, high cost, and judgemental attitudes of healthcare workers.

Some delegations reported on measures, or plans, to introduce free contraceptives for young people.

There was strong support from many delegations for ensuring that age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education is available to all young people, from an early age on and as part of mandatory school curricula, and for challenges such as lack of quality and insufficient teacher training to be addressed. A number of speakers stressed the importance of ensuring the mental health and well-being of young people.

A number of delegations reported measures to expand access to safe abortion care, including through reducing barriers such as mandatory waiting periods. Some delegations informed about efforts to reduce recourse to abortion.

In light of slowing progress on eliminating preventable maternal mortality, the vital importance of robust health information systems was underscored for formulating effective interventions.

A number of delegations recognized the diversity of families in the region. A range of policies and programmes were presented that are designed to support families. Addressing the growing incidence of infertility, some countries have invested in making fertility treatments available as part of national insurance schemes.

The need to address stigma, harmful social norms and misinformation was raised by a number of speakers, and it was stressed that men and boys need to be engaged in conversations around sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Improved access and utilization of digital technologies and AI was reported by participants, including telemedicine as an effective method for providing SRH services and information.

In the **third thematic session on inequalities, social inclusion and rights**, speakers stressed that gender equality and women's empowerment create strong communities, stable economies, and resilient societies and cause lasting positive change.

As such it was highlighted that advancing gender equality and the rights of vulnerable groups must be the priority for governments, at the national level and as part of international cooperation strategies.

Speakers noted that despite progress, challenges to gender equality still persist. They discussed the need for multi-dimensional transformational approaches that address multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination and combat stereotypes.

Delegations highlighted the importance of anti-discrimination laws and policies, and their corresponding monitoring mechanisms, and the importance of comprehensive gender equality policies that also involve men and boys.

Several speakers raised concerns about anti-gender narratives and their negative effects on human rights and people's access to services, as well as the shrinking of civic space, for women, human rights defenders, youth and marginalized communities.

Delegations highlighted the importance of increasing efforts to promote women's participation in decision-making positions, including in parliaments and governments, and peace processes.

It was pointed out that recent crises have had a devastating impact on children and their families, in particular children with disabilities, children on the move and children from Roma communities, and that inclusive social protection systems must be in place to guarantee equitable access to support and benefits.

Speakers noted the importance of institutions to protect and promote human rights, including rights for LGBTIQ+ persons.

Delegations reported on advances at the national level in legal frameworks and strategies to address and prevent all forms of gender-based violence. It was stressed that the elimination of gender-based violence requires a whole-of-society effort, addressing root causes and eliminating all gender inequalities.

In light of evidence showing that women are more likely than men to be affected by poverty, speakers called for stronger social protection and social services to promote social inclusion.

Several speakers highlighted the vulnerability of older persons, and of older women in particular, due to the intersection between ageing and gender, as a result of disadvantages accumulated over the life course.

It was noted that policies and strategies are needed to address discrimination against older people and improve their access to services and benefits and address poverty. There were calls for a paradigm shift towards seeing older people and older women as rights holders and active agents of sustainable development.

Many speakers drew attention to the needs of people with disabilities, and their right to live their lives and access services free from discrimination and stigma, coercion and violence, and to be included in decision-making.

It was stressed that fighting stigma and discrimination is key for efforts to end the HIV epidemic in the region.

It was recommended that the outcome of the ICPD30 review be fed into the 2024 Commission on Population and Development, the 2024 Summit of the Future, as well as national and regional consultations related to Beijing+30 and the voluntary national review of 2030 Agenda.