



**United Nations**

Department of  
Economic and  
Social Affairs

EXPERT GROUP MEETING ON  
ASSESSING THE STATUS OF IMPLEMENTATION  
OF THE ICPD PROGRAMME OF ACTION AND ITS  
CONTRIBUTION TO THE FOLLOW-UP AND REVIEW  
OF THE 2030 AGENDA

(Virtual meeting)  
New York, 19-20 July 2023

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## PRESENTATION NOTES

### Karen Hardee presentation notes: The ICPD Cairo Consensus - Thirty Years On

UN DESA Expert Group Meeting on Assessing the Status of Implementation of the ICPD Programme of Action and its Contribution to the Follow-up and Review of the 2030 Agenda During the Decade of Action and Delivery for Sustainable Development

#### Slide 1.

I am pleased to be participating in this meeting.

I remember the energy around ICPD in 1994 well – and the reframing of programming – and narratives about what ICPD was and is – that has taken place as a result.

I am a social demographer so have always been interested in the intersections between population, culture, gender and societies, and health programming, and more recently climate change.

#### Slide 2.

Given our topic of reflecting on ICPD approaching 30, I want to revisit the Cairo Consensus that was forged at ICPD, to follow it through the past 30 years, and to ask if it is still relevant today, and looking forward to 2030.

#### Slide 3.

It is helpful to remind ourselves of the hard-fought consensus that emerged from Cairo –

The ICPD POA told us that “demographic goals, while legitimately the subject of government development strategies, should not be imposed on FP providers in the form of targets or quotas for the recruitment of clients” (ICPD POA 7.12)

But the Cairo Consensus also reinforced that facilitating the demographic transition is important – and is linked with the paradigm shift in programming from a more narrow focus on FP to a broader focus on SRHR and women’s empowerment that is also part of the Cairo consensus.

This important link gets dropped in prevailing common narrative that ICPD was all about SRHR and empowering women and nothing about population.



Population Division

**Slide 4.**

Curious how ICPD has influenced population policies, I conducted a content analysis of post-ICPD policies from 15 African and Asian countries since 1994 (available online) and found that the policies reflect the Cairo Consensus.

- The policies do reflect the paradigm shift to SRHR and women's empowerment
- *with* continued focus on population and sustainable development
- *and* a policy rationale of bringing demographic dynamics into alignment with development, wellbeing, and resources
- *Furthermore*, post-ICPD policy development reflected wider participation – a tenant of the Cairo consensus

Countries included in the analysis of post-ICPD population policies:

Africa (6)

Botswana (1997), Ghana (1994), Kenya (2012 and 2021), Malawi (2012 and 2022), Mauritania (2005), Nigeria (2021), Rwanda (2012), South Africa (1998), Tanzania (2006), Uganda (2020), and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC),

Asia (4)

Bangladesh (2012), India (2000), Pakistan (2018), and Vietnam (2020)

**Slide 5.**

ICPD reinforced the importance of human rights – much work over the past 30 years has gone into operationalizing human rights in programming

- Maternal Health - respectful care to counter disrespect and abuse
- HIV/AIDS - a leader in promoting human rights; calling out reproductive rights violations
- FP - voluntary, human rights-based FP framework and tools

Accountability is stronger

- ICPD has provided a strong grounding for civil society organizing to hold governments accountable for commitments
- Human rights mechanisms; Universal Periodic Reviews of country adherence to human rights; Budget Accountability

With this has also come troubling efforts to roll back reproductive rights – and to control women – and a narrowing of attention on abortion and contraception rather than the full continuum of SRH

- US Supreme Court decision and threats of going after contraception
- Coercive pronatalism in countries with low- and high - fertility

**Slide 6.**

The more recent pivot, outlined in the 2022 report of the High Level Commission on the Nairobi Summit on ICPD25 Follow Up, to widening the lens of human rights to focus more broadly on reproductive justice is reinforcing the need to shift the frame of reference from programs to people and from global to local, and to consider intergenerational communities and sustainable environments as an integral part of reproductive justice.

What is a sustainable environment?

- In addition to opportunities for women, education, jobs, housing and safety, does it include ensuring that the natural environment is sustainable?
- What about pressure on water and food security from prevailing demographic dynamics?

**Slide 7.**

Population is still the elephant in the room in too many discussions – particularly at the global level. Say the word and the next word that comes to mind, unfortunately even 30 years beyond Cairo – is “control.”

- We are told by UNFPA that with 8 billion people on the planet, there are infinite possibilities
- We are cautioned against having “population anxiety” and told not to worry about either over or underpopulation.

UN DESA in its 2022 World Population Prospects says there is little potential for immediate impact on population trends, which we understand as demographers – but the report adds that lowered fertility can have a substantial effect over the longer term. The first message sticks and the second part unfortunately gets lost.

And the toxicity of the term population has permeated even the global goals, which have shied away from incorporating population even though it is clear that demographic dynamics are critical to their success.

Musimbi Kanyoro, then Head of the Packard Foundation’s Population Program, made this point at an NGO forum on ICPD at 15.

*“No one doubts the value of empowering women through education, but when population grows this fast, countries are simply not able to sustain their development. And when education and health systems are overwhelmed or fail all together, I can assure you that it is women and girls who suffer first and most” (Kanyoro, 2009).*

She was booed by participants to daring to mention the population part of the Cairo consensus.

**Slide 8.**

A report by OASIS, a non-governmental organization working in the Sahel notes that the population of the G5 Sahel region is projected to grow from 85 million to nearly 200 million by 2050 (WPP 2019)

It makes the point that with investment in voluntary family planning and quality education are both good for women and girls

AND they will slow population growth, helping to stimulate the demographic dividend.

OASIS advocates for sufficient funding for these vital, rights-based programs – but funding has fallen short of needs.

**Slide 9.**

Yet UNFPA’s 2023 SWOP promotes demographic resilience by saying that with the right approach, resilient societies can thrive, whatever their fertility may be.

Going deeper into the meaning of demographic resilience and reading about its connection to the ICPD POA, helps see its potential -

From UNFPA ECA region (2023): Demographically resilient societies understand and anticipate the population dynamics they are experiencing [as continued population growth in some parts of the world, and population ageing and population decline in others, as well as accelerating migration and urbanization].

and They have the skills, tools, political will and public support to manage them so that they can mitigate potentially negative effects for individuals, societies, economies and the environment, and harness the opportunities that come with demographic change for people, prosperity and the planet.

– but in its simple form in the SWOP, is this really the right message for the Sahel? High fertility, environmental fragility and underfunded SRHR programs are not a great mix.

**Slide 10.**

While still too small-scale, there are successful examples of programming that incorporates SRHR and environment/conservation that is built on a foundation of caring about both the human and natural world.

One such approach, PHE, is programming in vulnerable and remote communities that improves access to health services (especially family planning and reproductive health), while also helping households improve livelihoods, manage natural resources, and conserve the critical ecosystems on which they depend.” From PRB

There are many examples of PHE programming, like this example from Conservation Through Public Health in Uganda – “I love it that Gladys Kalema- Zikussoak said she learned about birth spacing from her work with gorillas.” In a podcast, Nature Solutionaires, with [VeronkiaPerkova.com/podcast](https://www.veronkia.com/podcast)

On a broader scale, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) recently approved a resolution on the importance of removing barriers to voluntary rights-based family planning. A task force is engaged in operationalizing this resolution.

This type of rights-based programming to me links reproductive rights and justice and environmental justice – and exhibits care about population.

**Slide 11.**

I have shown in this presentation that all of the components of the Cairo Consensus are important – and still relevant nearly 30 years after the groundbreaking ICPD.

I have illustrated, however, that the components of the consensus have become delinked – with linking of population and SRHR unfortunately silenced – and dare I say even vilified – as though anyone who cares about population is branded a “controller.”

We know that ICPD-aligned programming is good for women, families, communities, countries and the planet. I contend that we should celebrate the link.

Supporting Reproductive rights and justice – including, importantly, fully funding programming to attain universal access to SRH – which we know policymakers and ministers of finance and planning may be more likely to do if they understand the ripple effects of doing so – along with environmental and intergenerational justice – falls within the Cairo Consensus and aligns with the SDG.

The ICPD and the Cairo Consensus forged 30 years ago, provides us with a wide tent to do so.