



51st session of the Commission on Population and Development

Opening remarks

Dr. Natalia Kanem

Executive Director

United Nations Population Fund

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Mr. Chairperson,
Deputy Secretary-General
Distinguished members of the Commission,
Distinguished delegates,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honour to address the 51st session of the Commission on Population and Development. This is my first such opportunity as Executive Director of UNFPA, and it is a privilege to be here with the champions of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development, known as the ICPD Programme of Action

The Commission chose for this year's theme the intersection of several issues at the core of population dynamics and the human condition – our mobility and migration, and how we come together in cities.

These are very important, and very complex issues. And they are, at their heart, about people. About their lives, their health, their rights, their safety and their opportunities. As Shakespeare wrote, “What is the city but the people?”

UNFPA recently interviewed young migrants in the gateway cities of Cairo, Beirut and Tunis about their experiences, as part of a multi-city research project. They told us of the desperation in the places they left. They were drawn to those cities because of insecurity and unrest where they grew up. And these young people were very honest with us: They face serious risks and abuses during and after their moves, and things are much harder than they had expected. Even so, they almost universally say – they would do it all over again.

Brave young people seeking a better life, and they are joined in this quest by people of all ages, from everywhere. An estimated one billion people alive today are migrants, and as of last year, 2017, more than 65 million people were forcibly displaced – a record high.

The majority on the move cluster in cities and towns. They move with the expectation of a better life. How do we deliver on the better life they seek in a way that equally supports both the people on the move and those who host them upon arrival?

Addressing the Drivers of Mobility and Migration

At the core of the ICPD Programme of Action and the 2030 Agenda is the commitment to address the drivers of migration – by creating a world where all persons are free from poverty, illness, discrimination, violence and the consequences of conflict or climate change. Climate change demands our shared, and deepening commitment, being a key driver of food insecurity and migration.

A word about young people. Governments do recognize the importance of increased and sustained investments in young people to respond to a rapidly changing world, and to achieve these ends. This is one reason that the pursuit of the demographic dividend, a social and

economic boon that comes from providing educational and economic opportunities for young people, has become such a widespread priority and rallying cry.

We aim to build and sustain peace, to reduce the record displacements caused by conflict, and to speed the pace and possibility of return. A powerful study just released, builds upon Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth Peace and Security. The study was commissioned by the United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office and supported by UNFPA. It shows that at least one in four young people around the world is affected by violence or armed conflict.

The study debunks the myth that “bulging youth populations” present an increased risk of violence. It showcases, in fact, how every day young people work in their communities to generate peace, improve governance, and advocate for their rights.

Let us invest in young people – in their empowerment, health, rights, education and employment – and let us put our trust in them to help solve the challenges we face together. The demographic dividend then leads to a peace dividend.

Development expands people’s horizons and aspirations, and it provides the means for mobility. This is why, despite what many think, people from the least developed countries are significantly less likely to be found outside their countries of origin.

Protection in Transit and at Destination

Let me now focus on protection in transit and at destination. As people move, they face hazards along their journey. When migrants are separated from family and support networks, their chances of exploitation, violence, and victimization from human trafficking become much higher.

Women and girls are particularly vulnerable to violence and discrimination. Gender-based violence, already the most common human rights violation, only increases with disruption and displacement. And far too much evidence shows that child, early and forced marriage increases as well.

So I would ask you to bear in mind that the lack of access to sexual and reproductive health services is a major contributing factor to death, disease and disability among displaced women and girls of reproductive age.

At UNFPA, we have declared “safe birth, even here” because migration while pregnant can increase risk of complications. Therefore, pregnant women may be left behind, while others seek safer locations. And those left behind may face continued threats, often exacerbated by a collapsing health system.

That is why ensuring universal access to sexual and reproductive health and rights for all people is so critical. This must include migrant and mobile populations, refugees and crisis-affected people. And let us effect changes that remove the barriers that keep them from accessing services and realizing their rights. Barriers like cost, overcrowded health centres, language differences, lack of transportation options, pollution, insecure housing and more.

If cities are the people, then let's equip cities to deliver for the people. All people, including migrants on the move.

Strong evidence shows that greater integration produces less discrimination and offers new possibilities for social inclusion and equality, especially in the highly diverse gateway cities where migrants often land. Services and interventions that target everyone in need – whether mobile or local host community – can also help bridge divides between groups, and generate the greatest good and provide a path to combatting the discrimination, xenophobia, racism and indeed violence that has emerged in some places around the world.

Population Data on Cities, Mobility and Migration

In closing I will now turn to the importance of high-quality population data to address challenges and seize opportunities related to cities, migration and mobility. To know more, and in detail, about the situation of urban populations, we will need better data and analysis. This Commission plays an indispensable, singular role in supporting such efforts.

The particular constellation of issues we address this year places massive new demands on data systems...and the truth is, many countries simply are not yet ready.

The more mobile a person, the less likely she is to appear in a data system – with the exception of formal registration for refugees. And we have inadequate information for internally displaced populations.

Let me underscore the need for qualitative data that helps us understand the motivations, and life circumstances, of migrants. UNFPA advocates for better data systems that can give us the information necessary to understand and locate those in need, so that investments can be better directed to truly reach the furthest behind first.

With adequate resources and shared action we can fulfill the promise of the ICPD Programme of Action to everyone who is still waiting nearly 25 years since Cairo.

At UNFPA, on the eve of our 50th anniversary next year, as well as ICPD at 25, we are focusing on achieving three strategic results:

- zero unmet need for family planning,
- zero preventable maternal deaths, and
- zero violence and harmful practices against women and girls.

All predicated on a platform of quality population data that will help us ensure that everyone is accounted for and reached.

These are ambitious aims. Yet, in total dollars and as a proportion of official development assistance – the funding to the sector that works on sexual and reproductive health has plateaued since 2011. And funding for population data and policy analysis plateaued back in 2005. Let our deliberations over the coming week mobilize us to realize the vision of Cairo for all.

Final Thoughts

Let me close with a memory. Last year, Dr. Babatunde Osotimehin, our late Executive Director, addressed you from this chair. He spoke to me about the confidence he and his predecessors placed in this Commission, and his belief that the statements you make, and the outcomes you negotiate, are essential to place the health and rights of women and girls at the centre of population and sustainable development, where they belong.

I know that this week may bring challenges. Therefore, as you negotiate, allow me to encourage you, and all of us, first and foremost, to think about the vulnerable women and girls around the world who, every day, face the important issues that this Commission is addressing. Bearing them in mind, I urge you to spare no efforts to ensure a successful, consensual outcome, knowing that you will help deliver a better world for everyone. Everywhere.

I pledge the full support of UNFPA to Member States to achieve this goal.

Thank you.