



## **NGO Consultation on the future role and organization of the Commission on Population and Development**

The Center for Family and Human Rights (C-Fam) is an organization in consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council. C-Fam thanks the Bureau of the 54<sup>th</sup> session of the Commission on Population and Development for this opportunity to participate in a consultation on the future role and organization of the commission. Below are the answers of C-Fam to the prompts provided by DESA for the consultation.

*1. Given that the Commission is the only intergovernmental forum focused on the implementation of the Programme of Action of the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in the United Nations, how can we improve its work to better assist Member States and the international community at large in advancing the ICPD agenda while contributing to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)?*

- While the Commission on Population and Development is the only intergovernmental forum focused on the ICPD as a whole, some aspects of the ICPD receive a lot of coverage in multiple intergovernmental processes each year, above all “sexual and reproductive health.”
- Reproductive health is debated in multiple inter-governmental processes every year, including the General Assembly, the Commission on the Status of Women, the ECOSOC Humanitarian segment, the High-Level Forum for Sustainable Development. It has even become a topic of debate in the Security Council.
- Sadly, many important aspects of the ICPD outcome, including education, infrastructure, health care, the “rights of families” (UN document A/CONF.171/13, paragraph 5.4), and many other aspects of the ICPD remain neglected in intergovernmental processes.
- The lack of attention of the commission to overall health policies and health system infrastructure, and in a particular way maternal health, is especially lamentable.
- As a result of the imbalanced focus of the commission, and the UN system as a result, groups that promote fertility reduction through contraception and abortion are lavishly funded while maternal health and overall health systems continue to be woefully under-resourced.

- Essentially the message the Commission and the UN system are giving to women around the world is that they must contracept or abort their children, or risk losing their lives in pregnancy and childbirth. This is not an empowering message. And it is certainly not providing women with options to choose.

*2. Population and development issues and trends, including drivers and impacts, have important implications for the further implementation of the Programme of Action and the achievement of the SDGs. What role can the Commission play in guiding Member States and the international community in responding to these issues and trends?*

- The role of the Commission should not be to guide Member States, but to create normative guidance for the United Nations system. Member States do not take guidance from the Commission.
- The normative guidance of the Commission should be focused on consensual normative and programmatic aspects of ICPD, including in relation to the Sustainable Development Goals.
- The Commission should avoid straying into controversial policy debates that are essentially the province of domestic lawmaking, including issues like abortion, marriage, parental guidance in education, access to sexual and reproductive health services for minors.
- Unless the normative guidance of the Commission for the UN system is based on the consensus reached in ICPD, the work of the UN system will lose political legitimacy, weaken international cooperation and further contribute to the crisis of multilateralism.

*3. In order to address the above questions and issues, would it be desirable or feasible for the Commission to adjust its methods of work (organizational aspects, substantive elements, outcome)? If so, could the practices and experiences of other subsidiary bodies of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) provide any guidance?*

*i. Organizational Aspects*

- Organizational aspects should change as little as possible in order for all member states to be able to contribute on a level playing field. Delegations with more resources and personnel are at an advantage when many changes are made.
- One practice of other ECOSOC functional commissions that may help contribute a more rounded focus to the Commission's deliberations is to allow more civil society written statements. The Commission on Population and Development is the only functional commission to restrict the number of statements published on its website to 20. Other commissions do not have this restriction, which unnecessarily limits the perspectives included in the deliberations of the Commission.

## *ii. Substantive Elements*

- As noted above, there are many neglected aspects of the ICPD outcome that do not receive balanced or adequate coverage in the Commission's work or in other intergovernmental negotiations.
- To help create a more balanced coverage of the entire ICPD agenda, the commission should focus on neglected areas including the family's essential role in the development nexus, emerging focus areas such as aging, and lagging international goals related to maternal health and health infrastructure overall.
- The Commission should avoid controversial subjects that do not enjoy consensus. For this to happen delegations who promote controversial social norms that are not consensual, including abortion, homosexual marriage, children's sexuality, etc. need to show greater flexibility and recognize that their policy preferences cannot be imposed on all member states.

## *iii. Outcome*

- The outcome of the commission should continue to be agreed by all members of the commission on the basis of consensus.
- Without consensus the outcome of the commission will lose legitimacy and become a source of acrimony, coercion, and possibly ridicule.
- Adopting the outcome of the commission on the basis of consensus also buttresses the principle of one country one vote. Consensus ensures that the normative guidance of the commission is in step with the wider consensus of the wider membership of the General Assembly.
- The Commission should resist the proliferation of UN conferences and reviews of UN outcomes outside UN Charter bodies. Such reviews and conferences ultimately dilute the consensus reached by UN member states and weaken the legitimacy of UN consensus by mischaracterizing it. One such example was the Nairobi Summit outcome, which attempted to expand the ICPF consensus to include abortion as a humanitarian right, and to include transexual issues, homosexual issues, and other non-consensual items as part of sexual and reproductive health.