

International Sexual and Reproductive Rights Coalition (ISRRRC): Comments on the Methods of Work of the Commission on Population and Development

Discussion on the future of the Commission on Population and Development

The Commission, at its [fifty-third session](#), decided to include a new agenda item on the future role and organization of the Commission in the provisional agenda for the fifty-fourth session of the Commission. To inform the reflection on this item, the Secretariat prepared a note under the auspices of the Bureau of the fifty-third session inviting Member States to respond to three questions:

1. *Given, on one hand, the difficulties of achieving consensus in recent years and, on the other hand, the major demographic challenges faced by the world, how do you see the future of the Commission?*
2. *Can or should these challenges be addressed through adjusting the methods of work, possibly informed by the experiences from other functional commissions?*
3. *How can we, more broadly, adjust the Commission in view of the call for revitalization of the GA and ECOSOC?*

Following this request, 21 Member States have submitted [written responses](#) to the note. The Bureau of the [fifty-fourth session](#) held a virtual informal brainstorming meeting on the topic on Thursday 28 January 2021 and also invited ECOSOC-accredited NGOs to provide written responses.

On behalf of the **19** signatory organizations, the International Sexual and Reproductive Rights Coalition (ISRRRC) welcome the Chair's initiative to include civil society inputs on the Methods of Work for the CPD, and the upcoming discussions on this topic at the 54th Session of the CPD. ISRRRC stresses that subsequent consultations should not take place in isolation from the discussions on the ongoing methods of work of the HLPF and ECOSOC. For these reasons, we would recommend that a background paper is prepared by the Secretariat which presents a clear picture of the operation of other functional commissions and UN bodies, as well as options for how the Commission's work, or even that of all functional commissions of the ECOSOC or other UN bodies could be organised in view of the 2030 Agenda. This will allow Member States to have a more substantive discussion about the future of the Commission(s) and their methods of work. There could also be an opportunity in the future to hold an expert meeting with colleagues from across all functional commissions, which would lend itself to a more comprehensive discussion, broader in scope, also linked with the implementation of the Agenda 2030, eventually some specific goals, and the ongoing discussions of the High-Level Political Forum and the revitalization of the General Assembly and the ECOSOC.

In recent years, the lack of an outcome document at the Commission has occurred, in part, because consensus was always the only option considered. This scenario has led some to question whether it is worthwhile to have negotiations at the CPD, which is valid given the current political reality. However, we would strongly believe on the need to protect the multilateral infrastructure and to protect the current existent fora for discussing and agreeing normative standards on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR), which is essential to the implementation of the ICPD Programme of Action and the outcome of its review conferences. Accordingly, Member States should revisit the various options for the adoption of the outcome document, including voting.

Moreover, with a scaled-down CPD this year without attendance by delegations from capital and in person attendance of civil society organizations, we would consider it premature to move too fast in the discussions around the methods of work.

General background on the CPD:

- The Commission is responsible for reviewing the implementation of the Programme of Action of the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD PoA) in Cairo, Egypt at national, regional and international levels.

- The CPD is also responsible for tracking population changes and their effects on economic and social conditions globally.
- The CPD is responsible for reporting to the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development Goals 3 and 5 (in particular 5.6), which relates to health and gender equality, including sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights.

Why does the ICPD agenda matter?

- The ICPD PoA is the global agenda with one of the strongest mandate for advancing the sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), gender equality and population dynamics agendas.
- The ICPD PoA makes a strong link between the ‘rights’ and ‘development’ paradigms including health, education, gender equality, population dynamics, urbanization, migration and technology research and development agendas. These links are critical to ensuring that we reach the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and leave no one behind. It is a universal agenda that is essential to the development of *all*, and especially to the least developed countries.
- The ICPD agenda and its implementation have been key in ensuring that the poorest countries in all regions make progress in terms of the aforementioned issues, particularly on issues related to sexual and reproductive health and rights.
- The ICPD agenda also underscores governments’ responsibilities in ensuring strong infrastructure and resourcing to support the administration of censuses, data collection and analyses, which are essential for development planning and will play a key role in monitoring the achievement of the SDGs.

The value of debate and negotiations

The 2016 CPD resolution on the “Future Organization and Methods of Work of the CPD¹” states in OP 12 that the outcomes of the Commission will be negotiated. The idea that there is no need for negotiations at the CPD because Member States have not been able to reach consensus in recent years not only contradicts the agreed methods of work of the Commission, but also places value only on achieving an outcome, undermining the importance of the process itself. While having an outcome is an important objective, it should not be the only one. And, as mentioned above, different options of achieving an outcome besides consensus must be considered. The process of having substantive discussions is fundamental in moving both the human rights and development agendas forward. Open dialogue among Member States provides an opportunity to make strong linkages between rights, gender equality, SRHR, sustainable development and the ICPD PoA and to combat arguments that chip away from established and agreed human rights, also by presenting counter-arguments and evidence. A few examples of the recent evolution of Member States’ political and positions on important issues as a result of negotiations include the following achievements:

- Four years ago, at the Commission on Population and Development, Member States were able to reach consensus on language that supports collecting data on a historically neglected group, specifically 10-14-year olds. This agreement came after years of substantive discussions on the issue.²

¹ E/RES/2016/25

² Commission on Population and Development Report on the forty-ninth session (17 April 2015 and 11-15 April 2016) Paragraph 15. Encourages Governments to collect, analyze and disseminate data on women and girls between the ages of 10-14 and over age 49, with due consideration to the confidentiality principle and professional ethics, to fill critical data gaps, and inform effective policy development. E/2016/25-E/CN.9/2016/9

- At the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in 2018, the African group recently proposed language on “multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination” after years of actively opposing such language.

These changes can only happen if Member States are able to continue substantive and evidence-based discussions at yearly negotiations and hear each other’s reasonings, concerns and views on how best to implement the ICPD PoA.

In addition, it is also clear that when there are no negotiations, Member States are not motivated to participate in dialogue and face no political pressure to reach compromises; hence Member States’ positions on key issues do not evolve as demonstrated in the examples above. Without yearly negotiations, the CPD process and the ICPD PoA agenda would quickly lose their relevance, something we are currently witnessing with the Commission on Social Development (CSocD) and its agenda.

Losing CPD as a politically relevant space may also have consequences on the relevance of the population agenda at the 2030 Agenda. It may also impact the work of other commissions, such as CSW.

A final consideration is the need to avoid deepening and worsening global political dynamics between global South and North countries. This includes avoiding a narrative that is at risk of being perpetuated: that progressive “global north” countries do not want to have negotiations on CPD in an effort to avoid discussions on issues they themselves find politically challenging, such as migration.

What is the relevance of resolutions that are adopted at the CPD?

Negotiated outcomes carry significant political weight and value in terms of their impact on the ground and for agencies working to advance the SRHR agenda. Outcomes agreed at the CPD:

- Inform both UNFPA and Pop Division priorities of work including what data to collect, what analysis to run, and which reports to write.
- Inform on gaps on both implementation, data collection and resources.
- Identify emerging issues and key actions for governments, UN agencies and CSO’s to focus on.
- Set of global priorities to influence regional and national priorities.

Voting at the CPD

Throughout the years ISRRRC has been contributing to the discussions and agreements of the CPD, always working and assisting Member States towards a consensus outcome document. Regrettably, politicization and instrumentalization of this agenda, in particular with regard to SRHR, has not allowed for an agreement at the past four CPDs (2015, 2017, 2018 and 2020). We strongly believe that CPD outcomes cannot be held hostage by a few countries and that the political process of enabling dialogue on the ICPD agenda between Member States is important even if our key issues are called to a vote. We understand the complexities of the current political climate and its effects on negotiations that relate to SRHR and call for processes that enable the agenda to advance. We also recognize that there is a broad and steady base of cross-regional group of countries that adamantly support the ICPD agenda.

ISRRRC emphasizes on the need for an outcome. Moving towards the option of voting would show not only the willingness of cross regional countries to advocate for and advance the ICPD agenda, but also highlights the minority of countries unwilling to support an agenda that enjoys broad, diverse and cross-regional support. While voting on issues that have previously enjoyed consensus is not ideal, preparing for a voting scenario is advised, and could be a strategy to ensure outcomes and further advance the implementation of ICPD PoA and ultimately bring the change needed on the ground, so that gender equality, the rights, needs and dignity of women and girls, young people and the most marginalized are fulfilled.

Civil society engagement

Civil society, including women, youth, local and feminist organizations, are instrumental in supporting the implementation of the ICPD Programme of Action, playing a key role in advocacy, both partnering with governments and holding them accountable on international agreements; engaging with vulnerable and marginalized left behind communities delivering services; developing best practice and providing technical advice to strengthen health systems. In order to ensure a multi-sectoral approach and meaningful participation of civil society, the ISRRRC suggests the following:

- Adding a half-day session devoted specifically to have a dialogue between governments, civil society and other stakeholders on the progress of the ICPD PoA.
- An annual high-level, multi-stakeholder and interactive panel discussion with CSO, the private sector, academia etc.. to open the consideration of an agenda and present evidence-based information to the Commission which will inform Member States' discussions and share information, good practices, experiences and lessons learned including planning, policies and implementation in relation to PoA and the SDGs.
- Maintaining the practice of inviting civil society representatives to take the floor following Member States and observers during the consideration of relevant agenda items, time permitting.
- The covid-19 pandemic and subsequent scaled-down sessions of the CPD have led to a decrease in civic space. The ISRRRC would like to request the creation of a mechanism that would allow civil society access to delegations, negotiations and (virtual) speaking slots, while also ensuring that civic space is protected, including in the recovery from the pandemic.
- The development of stronger relations and renewed partnership between the Commission on Population and Development and civil society organizations in accordance with Chapter XV of the PoA for ICPD where the importance of partnership with the non-governmental sector; the experience and expertise of civil society organizations; and the important role that they can play in its implementation is recognized.
- Undertaking consultations instigated by the Population Division with concerned civil society organizations before the writing of background papers etc to provide an opportunity for such organizations to provide information on their work related to these specific areas.
- Conducting informal briefings by the Chair and/or Bureau in advance of the Commission sessions, with sufficient time to inform CSO written submissions, and during the session itself.
- Lastly, the processes for the development of the 2030 Agenda, High Level Meetings on HIV/AIDS, and Human Rights Council have demonstrated the interest and value of meaningful engagement with civil society. The SDG and 2030 Agenda negotiations and Human Rights Council processes have allowed civil society organizations to intervene during discussions alongside Member States and to work collaboratively in preparing statements inputs and ensuring that the voices from those most affected on the ground are heard in these fora. Additional mechanisms which complement existing opportunities for engagement could allow civil society representatives to provide information based on their expertise and experiences in expert meetings more broadly as has been seen in other UN fora.

1. ACT Alliance – Action by Churches Together
2. Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women (ARROW)
3. Catholics for Choice
4. CHANGE (Center for Health and Gender Equity)
5. CHOICE for Youth and Sexuality
6. Commonwealth Medical Trust
7. DSW (DEutsche Stiftung Weltbevölkerung)
8. Fundación Mexicana para la Planeación Familiar, A. C. MEXFAM
9. International Campaign for Women's Right to Safe Abortion
10. International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF)
11. International Planned Parenthood Federation Western Hemisphere Region (IPPFWHR)
12. Major Group for Children and Youth
13. RFSU - The Swedish Association for Sexuality Education
14. Rutgers
15. Soroptimist International
16. SRHR Africa Trust - SAT Regional
17. The African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET)
18. Women's Global Network for Reproductive Rights (WGNRR) Africa
19. Women's Global Network for Reproductive Rights (WGNRR)