

March 2004

Ten Years after the International Conference on Population and Development - the Roles of Business and Philanthropy

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Summary: Half way through the efforts to achieve universal population and development goals, there are still countless individuals in developing countries who - due to gender inequality, lacking quality education and inadequate health services - are unable to enjoy the healthy and productive life to which they are entitled. Governments continue to have the primary responsibility for further advancing population and development issues and for closing the remaining gap; but there are good reasons why business, foundations and private citizens should assist and there are many ways to do so.

Ten Years Later and another Ten to Go

In September 1994, representatives from more than 180 governments assembled in Cairo to agree on a programme of action in the field of population and development for the next 20 years. They were joined by numerous participants from international organizations, non-governmental organizations and the media. The outcome was a breakthrough in terms of the international community agreeing on a strategy that emphasized the numerous interrelationships between population, poverty and sustainable development, and that focused on meeting the needs and respecting the rights of all couples and individuals, and particularly women, rather than on setting quantitative demographic goals (population control). The 20-year Programme of Action adopted at the conclusion of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) includes goals with regard to education, especially for girls, women's empowerment, infant, child and maternal mortality reduction (meanwhile reconfirmed by the set of eight Millennium Development Goals which form the prime frame of reference for international development assistance), and the provision of universal access to reproductive and sexual health services. It also addresses important issues relating to the environment, migration, HIV/AIDS, and elderly people.

Five years later, *in June 1999*, a special session of the United Nations General Assembly adopted in New York the so-called Key Actions for the Further Implementation of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development. While there was welcome progress across some fronts, the review exposed the need for much greater action in areas such as maternal mortality, adolescent sexual and reproductive health, the prevention of HIV/AIDS, and the provision of reproductive health care in emergencies.

In March 2004, ten years after Cairo, the United Nations¹ is scheduled to undertake a renewed periodic review and appraisal of the progress made in achieving the goals and objectives of the Programme of Action of ICPD. Overall, substantial progress can be reported: “The world is beginning to see the end of rapid population growth, couples are closer to achieving their desired family size and spacing, mortality is declining in most countries and there is evidence that many countries are taking the necessary steps to confront HIV/AIDS and other mortality crisis”². However, half way through the efforts to achieve universal population and development goals, there are still countless individuals in developing countries who are unable to enjoy the healthy and productive life to which they are entitled.

The Roles of Business and Philanthropy

Governments continue to have the primary responsibility for further advancing population and development issues and for closing the remaining gap; but there are good reasons why private companies and private households should assist. For one, on the economic side of the coin, by investing in reproductive and sexual health information and services, including HIV/AIDS, smaller families and slower population growth, developing countries have achieved higher productivity, more savings and more productive investment.³ And the fact that we are currently faced with the largest number of young people alive ever (nearly half of all people are under the age of 25) presents a unique opportunity for effective social investment. On the philanthropic side of the coin,

¹ United Nations Commission on Population and Development.

² Report of the United Nations Secretary-General on the review and appraisal of the progress made in achieving the goals and objectives of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (E/CN.9/2004/3).

³ UNFPA Annual Report 2002.

investments in population issues matter because they are crucial in order to fight poverty more broadly and to strengthen individual basic human rights.

Reproductive and Sexual Health

Reproductive and sexual health are sensitive and controversial topics in all societies – even the most liberal ones – as well as intimate ones for the individual persons and couples in question. And there is no doubt that much remains to be done to ensure that each individual and couple has access to objective information, services, and commodities they personally require. According to UNFPA⁴, for instance, nearly 350 million women worldwide are still in need of a full range of effective family planning methods to be able to space their children or limit the size of their families. And more than 500'000 women die every year from pregnancy-related complications; according to WHO⁵, 99 per cent of these deaths occur in developing countries, and 98 per cent could have been easily prevented.

In general, business can effectively engage in reproductive health issues by working with governments or taking its own initiatives to help staff members access reproductive health information and services, and which allow their employees, women and men, to better address and combine work and family concerns. Foundations and individual philanthropists' help is required for advocacy work and projects such as for discouraging female genital mutilation, for addressing special adolescent sexual and reproductive health needs, for the UNFPA campaign to end obstetric fistula (an injury caused by prolonged labour), for ending gender-based violence against women, or for providing reproductive health services and commodities in times of emergencies.

HIV/AIDS

In 2003, according to UNAIDS⁶, the HIV/AIDS pandemic took the highest number of lives and produced the highest number of new infections since surveillance of the disease started, mostly due to HIV transmission through unsafe sex. Also, according to UNICEF⁷, the epidemic has so far left behind around 11 million orphans in Sub-Saharan Africa,

⁴ United Nations Population Fund; the lead UN organization for the follow-up and implementation of the ICPD Programme of Action.

⁵ World Health Organization.

⁶ Joint United Nations Programme on AIDS.

⁷ United Nations Children's Fund.

exceeding the capacity of local communities to care for them. Effective HIV-prevention and treatment programmes need to be scaled up, for instance in Southern Africa, Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

On the whole, business can constructively engage in the fight against HIV/AIDS for instance by establishing their own workplace programmes covering non-discriminatory policies, prevention education, access to voluntary counselling and testing, as well as care, support and treatment. Foundations and individual donors' money is well-invested in projects such as for tackling Africa's AIDS orphans crisis, for making HIV treatment available, for educating young people, for empowering women and adolescent girls, for reducing stigma and discrimination, or for reducing mother-to-child HIV-transmission.

The qualitative and quantitative state of the world's population has far-reaching impact on the environment, the economy, and on human security. As we reach the tenth anniversary of the International Conference on Population and Development, the mid-point of its 20-year Programme of Action, the ultimate success of the endeavour will depend on increased contributions bringing together each party's core complementary competencies (financial and non-financial such as know-how, technologies, infrastructure, and communication channels and platforms).

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