

## Highlights from the conference discussions

Excellencies,

Dear delegates,

As the ICPD+25 conference for the UNECE region is coming to an end, I'm pleased to present some highlights of our rich and fascinating deliberations over the past two days.

I want to stress that this is not a comprehensive account; a comprehensive report of the conference proceedings will be made available later.

This is also not an official chair's summary; the 2013 Chair's Summary remains the reference document for the implementation of the ICPD Beyond 2014 agenda.

In the opening session, Member States reaffirmed their commitments to implementing the ICPD Programme of Action and the 2013 Chair's Summary.

They expressed support for the Regional Report and the Monitoring Framework to further the implementation of the ICPD Programme of Action and the SDGs.

Member States also reaffirmed the centrality of the ICPD Programme of Action in achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

They called for the ICPD+25 review to inform the upcoming progress review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and emphasized the need to synchronize the ICPD and SDG reviews.

Member States highlighted national progress in implementing the ICPD Programme of Action, evidenced by the wealth of strategic, policy and programmatic frameworks in place to advance the 2013 Chair's. They also stressed gaps in national implementation and plans to address these gaps.

Throughout the conference deliberations, concerns were raised over the emergence of regressive laws and policies threatening to undermine gender

equality and sexual and reproductive health and rights, and over the shrinking space for civil society.

Member States expressed appreciation for UNECE and UNFPA in their support of implementation and review of the ICPD Programme of Action.

During the first thematic session population dynamics and sustainable development, we looked at the demographic context in the region, and highlighted major trends such as below-replacement fertility in a majority of countries, gains in longevity, and population ageing.

We learned that the traditional view – that more development means lower fertility – is not valid any longer in all contexts: in high development countries, moving up on the human development index also means higher fertility levels – except in countries where gender norms don't shift or shift too slowly.

The traditional association between marriage and high fertility is also weakening, as in some countries a majority of childbirths already happen outside of marriage.

Several member states highlighted the complex inter-relationships between low fertility, ageing and migration. It was noted that out-migration flows of the working-age population accelerate population ageing, weaken economies, contribute to brain-drain and challenge the sustainability of pension, social security and health care systems. Supporting smooth education-to-employment transitions, creating enabling environments for young persons to remain in or return to the country, and upgrading the quality of infrastructure and services, were identified as key strategies to reverse such trends.

More broadly, participants stressed the need for long-term, holistic, and rights-based approaches to population dynamics and their linkages with sustainable development, and the need to invest in human capital across generations. With regard to young more specifically, the need to invest in quality education, including

comprehensive sexuality education, decent work opportunities, and young persons' participation in all decisions that affect their lives was emphasized.

It was noted that governments are increasing investments in family support, but that family policies are not always gender-sensitive, and haven't always been adapted to changing family formation patterns.

Participants stated that more must be done to allow women and men to reconcile family and work life which remains a challenge in the region, oftentimes impacting the education, careers and childbearing choices of working age generations.

In this context, importance of redistributing unpaid care and domestic work between women and men was highlighted, given that unpaid work at home is largely borne by women, driving them out of the labour market, perpetuating gender gaps and increasing the risk of old-age poverty.

A number of participants emphasized the need to promote healthy, active and independent living of older generations, including by strengthening measures to support the productivity of older persons and combating age-based stereotypes and social isolation. More effective active ageing strategies also require better disaggregation of data, including for the oldest-old age group.

The second thematic session, on families and sexual and reproductive health over the life course, started with an overview of major trends, including significant reductions in unmet need for family planning and adolescent pregnancy and a still high reliance on traditional methods of contraception in parts of the region.

It was pointed out that aggregate gains in the region mask significant inequalities, with many being left out and patterns of exclusion being different from country to country.

Several participants emphasized the need for upholding true commitment to sexual and reproductive health and rights, and the need to end stigma and discrimination affecting many of the most vulnerable people.

It was noted that we are witnessing an increased politicization of women and girls' right to make their own informed decisions about sex and childbearing.

Several participants highlighted the central importance of an integrated package of sexual and reproductive health information and services, integrated at primary health care level.

It was stated that expanding reproductive health and rights and gender equality does not negatively affect fertility; in fact, examples from the region show that it often goes hand-in-hand with higher fertility and economic growth.

Member States reported about progress in guaranteeing universal access to sexual and reproductive health care. This included the removal of access barriers, such lowering the age at which adolescents can access services without need for parental consent, the allocation of budgets for the procurement of contraceptives for the most vulnerable, and increased focus on the sexual and reproductive health of older persons.

Progress was noted in the reduction of maternal mortality and the expansion of antenatal care, but maternal mortality still remains high in some countries in the eastern part of the region. Surveillance systems for and investigations of maternal mortality are vital for further reductions. Some speakers stressed that safe abortion saves lives.

Many participants called for the provision of comprehensive sexuality education to all young people, and some member states committed to make progress in this regard.

The increased role played by sexual transmission in the region's HIV epidemic was noted, and it was stressed that stigma and discrimination of key populations particularly affected must be ended.

Several Member States addressed the importance of access to safe abortion.

Some Member states also highlighted the prevalence of harmful practices such as child marriage and gender-biased sex selection in some countries in the region, which are deeply rooted in gender inequalities and social attitudes.

In the third thematic session on inequalities, social inclusion and rights, the persistence of gender inequalities in the fields of economic, social and political participation was highlighted.

Key features mentioned include inequalities in workforce participation, earnings, access to leadership positions in public and private life, family-work balance, and gender-based violence.

Some of the challenges mentioned include the trend towards use of gender-neutral language in laws and policies, threatening to obscure the effects of gender inequalities; growing religious fundamentalism; and women's heightened vulnerability in face of crises.

Member States noted measures undertaken to make progress towards equal rights and opportunities for women and men. These include the development of legislation or action plans for the implementation of the Istanbul Convention and other international frameworks, and the establishment or strengthening of institutional mechanisms for multi-sectoral responses to GBV.

Measures also include addressing harmful stereotypes, and the elimination of early and child marriage through setting 18 as the minimum age of marriage in all forms of marital community and sensitizing communities.

Eliminating son-preference and gender-biased sex selection is a related priority, and is being addressed through local campaigns targeting parents, adolescents and religious leaders.

It was mentioned that poverty is at the centre of individual and household vulnerability, resulting in and perpetuating exclusion and inequality cycles. It was stressed that fighting poverty must be at the heart of all policies.

In many countries, minority groups, including ethnic minorities, such as the Roma, and persons with disabilities, LGBTI people, migrants, older people and other groups continue to face persistent exclusion, material deprivation and inferior educational and health outcomes.

It was stressed that to end HIV more must be done to address underlying factors of vulnerability, especially stigma and discrimination of key populations, ensuring that those furthest behind are reached first, and the important role of community-based organization in ending HIV was emphasized.

Other initiatives to address inequalities include the creation of youth-friendly communities, involvement of young people in decision-making, inclusive education without discrimination, the integration of persons with disabilities in all sectors of public life, and the integration of migrants.

Vital measures to achieve inclusive education include ensuring a comprehensive legal provision against discrimination in education, adopting a school desegregation strategy, raising awareness and ensuring quality of education in all schools in line with the European Convention on human rights.

It was recommended that the outcome of the ICPD+25 review be fed into national and regional consultations related to Beijing+25, the 2019 Commission on Population and Development, and the voluntary national reviews of Agenda 2030.