

India's Opening Remarks in the Senior Officials Segment
Asia Pacific Population Conference, Bangkok, UNESCAP
16 -20 Sept 2013

Distinguished Chairperson, fellow delegates and participants, friends from civil society organizations, ladies and gentlemen:

As we gather here today, nearly 20 years after the landmark ICPD at Cairo to assess how far we in the Asia-Pacific region have reached, and to set our agenda for the next decade, India takes this opportunity to reaffirm strongly its commitment to the ICPD Programme of Action, the Key Actions agreed upon at its Five Year Review, and at various recent sessions of the Commission on Population and Development.

Shortly after the ICPD, the Government of India launched a series of interactive discussions with civil society and other partners that resulted in the National Population Policy of 2000 (NPP 2000) emphasizing the need for a rights-based approach that we continue to affirm as our goal for population policies including family planning.

Mr Chairperson, we are aware that our programmes have still a way to go before we are able to fully meet the needs of our people, but we are committed to achieving the goals of NPP 2000 through a renewed emphasis on quality and equity. Of high priority are maternal deaths and morbidity in a country that still accounts for too large a number of the world's maternal deaths. Accordingly, we have made massive and strategic investments in the National Rural Health Mission. Launched in 2005, this mission is the largest public health program in the world with an investment of over 15 Billion USDs by the Central Government, and strong participation of the state governments. We are pleased, though not satisfied, that our U5MR has declined 59 points between 1990 and 2011, while our MMR declined at a compounded annual rate of 5.6%, both higher than the respective global rates.

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Gender biased cultural practices that result in adverse sex ratio remain a matter of continuing concern. India is committed to the effective implementation of laws and policy measures to reverse the adverse sex ratio and we have noted, with some satisfaction, progress in some areas where the problem was most acute.

Family planning is a central part of our efforts to ensure Universal Health Coverage. We have already brought about a paradigm shift in our approach to family planning with emphasis now being laid on promotion and provision of spacing methods. We are working to make contraceptives including IUCD services available in close vicinity to the community by leveraging our strong workforce of 200,000 Auxiliary Nurse Midwives and 9,00,000 community health workers. Our strategy focuses on enabling access, especially women's access, to a range of reproductive health services including safe abortion. Women's rights to exercise their bodily autonomy and integrity has been recognized in India through the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act. We recognize that we need to do more to ensure access to safe abortion, and this will be a priority for us in the coming years.

We have made an important beginning through the Adolescent Reproductive and Sexual Health (ARSH) Programme to address the needs of our 240 million adolescents, recognizing that they are our country's greatest wealth and future. Their ability to grow into empowered and responsible citizens lies in no small measure in our ability to support them to affirm and claim their own rights, to recognize their responsibility for their own wellbeing and that of others, for boys to learn to treat girls with respect and to abjure sexual and other forms of gendered violence. Comprehensive and integrated sexuality education has been proven in many countries to be an

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important requirement in this regard, and we plan to make this our aim.

Gender based violence remains a major global public health, gender equality and human rights challenge, touching every country and every part of society. Stringent measures are being taken to combat crimes against women. The Criminal Law (Amendment) Act 2013 broadens the definition of rape and criminalizes a greater set of violations including stalking, voyeurism, acid attacks and human trafficking.

Finally, we are happy to inform you that the draconian colonial era Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code that criminalized homosexual acts has been read down by the Delhi High Court for consenting adults. As the largest democracy in the world, India views this as a mark of the robustness of our institutions of governance, and reiterates the guarantees of our Constitution that all our citizens will be equal before the law, and have fundamental rights to freedom of speech and expression, non-discrimination, and protection of life and liberty.

Fellow delegates, we in India are encouraged by the good work being done by our colleagues in other regions, and especially applaud the benchmark set recently through the forward-looking Montevideo Consensus on Population and Development. We look forward to a really meaningful outcome document in Bangkok, with clear articulation of our consensus - that equality, empowerment, and the human rights of women and young people is and will remain our utmost priority.

Thank you.