

# Sexual and reproductive health and rights in the sustainable development goals and the post-2015 development agenda: less than a year to go

Marianne Haslegrave

Director, Commonwealth Medical Trust (Commat), Deal, Kent, UK. *Correspondence:* [mh@commat.org](mailto:mh@commat.org)

**Abstract:** *Since the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo in 1994 there have been significant achievements in moving towards the goal of sexual and reproductive health and rights. Yet there have also been disappointments, as demonstrated in the Millennium Development Goals, even though in 2007 a target on reproductive health was added. Most recently, the 20-year review of the implementation of the ICPD Programme of Action, ICPD Beyond 2014, has taken place, which has moved forward the sexual and reproductive health and rights agenda. But, the main arena for future negotiations has changed and the UN is in the process of negotiating the post-2015 development agenda and the sustainable development goals (SDGs). This paper assesses what has been taking place since 2013 and provides information as to how the process for the post-2015 development agenda and the SDGs are likely to move forward. An understanding of what has been achieved, the processes as they are now proceeding and their future development are important for moving towards the ultimate goal of achieving sexual and reproductive health and rights in the next 15 years. © 2014 Reproductive Health Matters*

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Since the adoption of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD)<sup>1</sup> in Cairo in 1994, Governments and civil society advocates can claim many achievements in working towards the ultimate goal of sexual and reproductive health and rights, even though progress might have been uneven. More remains to be done in the context of the post-2015 development agenda and the sustainable development goals (SDGs), that have been set in place to replace the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which expire at the end of 2015. This paper is a follow-up to the assessment I published a year ago in *RHM* as regards the state of the negotiations on both the post-2015 development agenda and the sustainable development goals (SDGs), as they could underpin future action on sexual and reproductive health and rights for the next 15 years.<sup>2</sup>

## *Building on the past*

First, it is important to step back and look at what has already been achieved. Twenty years ago, at the end of the ICPD, 179 governments had adopted a far-reaching Programme of Action that represented a paradigm shift from the traditional macro-demographic perspective to one that placed human rights at the centre of population and development, recognized women's empowerment, and set out a comprehensive range of issues including sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights. This agenda has underpinned our work to the present.

At the same time, not everything was perfect – Governments did not agree sexual rights and the language on access of young people to sexual and reproductive health information, education and services gave too much emphasis to the role of parents and guardians, as opposed to the best interests of adolescents.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, progress

was made with the Beijing Platform for Action, which recognized the human rights of women to control over their own bodies and also the rights of adolescents to acquire knowledge, especially information on sexuality and reproduction taking into account their best interests as a primary consideration.<sup>3</sup> Further progress was also made with the adoption at the 21st UN General Assembly Special Session in 1999 of the Key Actions for the Further Implementation of the ICPD Programme of Action.<sup>4</sup>

The year 2000, however, saw a major setback with the introduction of the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), without a goal on sexual and reproductive health and rights. This was only partially rectified in 2007 with the introduction of MDG Target 5B on universal access to reproductive health by 2015, although it has to be said that some Governments did not fully include this target in their policies and programmes even then.<sup>5</sup> While progress might have seemed too slow at times, other gains were made along the way in the outcome documents of some of the sessions of the Commission on Population and Development and the Commission on the Status of Women.

### ***ICPD Beyond 2014: strengthening the case for sexual and reproductive health and rights***

The review of the implementation of the ICPD Programme of Action, ICPD Beyond 2014, which has been taking place alongside the discussions on the post-2015 development agenda and the SDGs, has been of key importance in advancing the ICPD agenda. Sexual and reproductive health and rights have been included in the outcome documents of nearly all the regional conferences, as well as in other documents, such as the reports of the International Conference on Human Rights and the ICPD Beyond 2014 Technical Expert Group Meeting on Women's Health: Rights, Empowerment and Social Determinants.

These achievements were brought together at the Special Session of the General Assembly on ICPD Beyond 2014 in September 2014, at the end of which the President of the General Assembly introduced an oral decision, by which Member States formally acknowledged the framework for actions for the follow up to the Programme of Action Beyond 2014 and the steps for further

implementation, taking into account their respective statements in the Special Session.<sup>6\*</sup>

### ***What comes next?***

Now, however, the main focus for moving forward will be through the post-2015 development agenda and the SDGs, as they will be the main drivers for policies and programmes more than the agreements of past major UN conferences, although these will still have an important role in supplementing them.

The process for the post-2015 development agenda and the SDGs, leading to the World Summit in New York in September 2015, is extremely complex insofar as it is working towards a truly integrated agenda that is negotiated across the UN key pillars of work, namely economic, environmental and social. The challenge will be to ensure that sexual and reproductive health and rights are included under these pillars. Because it is a new concept, this process is not based on any particular former precedents but it is critically important to understand it as fully as possible in order to be able to use it, not only in the negotiations in the coming months but also in the years ahead to ensure the achievement of the ultimate goal of sexual and reproductive health and rights.

### ***A sometimes glossed over document: the Special Event outcome document***

While sharing the common ideals and aspirations, two processes evolved for the follow up to the

\*At this meeting, the President said: "May I take it that the General Assembly, recalling the reports of the Secretary-General circulated in documents A/S-29/3 and A/S-29/4 and the report of the Commission on Population and Development on its forty-seventh session circulated in document A/S-29/5, wishes to take note of the deliberations of the Special Session on the findings and recommendations contained therein?"

It should be noted that the "Framework of Actions for the follow-up to the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development beyond 2014" (A/S-29/3), the "Recurrent themes and key elements identified during the sessions of the Commission on Population and Development" (A/S-29/4) and the "Report of the Commission on Population and Development on its forty-seventh session" (A/S-29/5) define the road map for moving forward and include specific references to sexual and reproductive health and rights in both the regional outcomes and the findings and recommendations of ICPD Beyond 2014.

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