

# Focus UNFPA: Four Recommendations for Action

Katie Stein

CGD Brief

With a new executive director appointed in November 2010, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) is in a position to re-assert its role and lead the world's effort toward landmark achievements in improving women's health and well-being. The Fund's performance will literally be a matter of life or death for millions of women and children. The numbers speak for themselves: an estimated 215 million women lack access to modern contraceptives, and there are approximately 350,000 maternal deaths each year. As the lead agency for the United Nations' work on population and reproductive health, UNFPA can reduce this terrible and unnecessary toll of lost lives.

The Center for Global Development Working Group on UNFPA's Leadership Transition urges the Fund to sharpen its focus in pursuing the Programme of Action developed at the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development. Specifically, the Working Group recommends the following steps to Executive Director Babatunde Osotimehin:

- Establish and pursue a limited set of priorities closely related to UNFPA's unique mission.
- Improve UNFPA's performance measurement and reporting.
- Align UNFPA's human resources with its renewed agenda.
- Define and communicate UNFPA's role in population, sexual and reproductive health, and reproductive rights.

## A Moment to Reinvigorate UNFPA

Global attention is turning to the end-game for the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as its target year, 2015, approaches. Maternal and child health—the topics of MDGs 4 and 5—have received increased attention in recent years, opening the door for the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) to re-assert itself as the preeminent agency for population and development, sexual and reproductive health, and reproductive rights.

The diverse needs of countries and evolving global views of population have placed complex and controversial issues on UNFPA's doorstep since its inception in 1969. In a remarkable demonstration of leadership, UNFPA used the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), held in Cairo in 1994, to reframe population and development issues from an emphasis on population growth to a greater focus on sexual and reproductive health and women's empowerment. In the years since, UNFPA has been pulled in many directions and engaged in a broad range of activities that, while important, lacked a unifying vision and strategy. Meanwhile, there is much left to do to realize the goals of the ICPD Programme of Action. An estimated 75 million pregnancies each year are unplanned

and unwanted, and 215 million women lack access to the modern contraceptives needed to avoid unwanted pregnancies. Simultaneously, demographic trends, including large and growing numbers of young people in some regions and growing numbers of old in others, require country-specific and evidence-based guidance for country policymakers.

To have an effect on these issues, UNFPA needs to sharpen the focus of its mission and operations. Its financial resources have grown remarkably in the last decade, and increased resources have allowed it to expand programs. However, since UNFPA will likely face flat or reduced resources for at least the next few years, it is essential that it select and concentrate its activities to maintain momentum on the ICPD Programme of Action. It is more important than ever to leverage its resources and energies with those of the other organizations that are working on MDGs 4 and 5 within the UN and externally. Figure 1 provides an overview of international agencies working on issues related to UNFPA and its

Programme of Action. Perhaps UNFPA's most important asset is its ability to convene organizations and galvanize action on the ICPD goals. It should use this perch to work with other organizations to achieve a harmonized set of goals in a manner that respects specific strengths.

In spite of continued challenges on the most sensitive issues within its Programme of Action—challenges that cannot be expected to dissolve—UNFPA's core objectives are receiving greater attention and support than ever. This support is evident in many recent initiatives: the creation of UN Women, the 2006 Maputo Plan of Action on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, the new donor Alliance for Reproductive Health, and the UN secretary-general's leadership on the Global Strategy for Women's and Children's Health—to name a few. And in December 2010, the UN General Assembly extended the ICPD Programme of Action and requested a review of its progress in 2014—opening the door for UNFPA's new executive director, Dr. Babatunde

**Figure 1**  
International agencies working on population and development

Major UN institution	Population and health statistics, including censuses and surveys	Family planning and commodity security	Sexual and reproductive health	Gender equality and women's empowerment	Population dynamics, poverty, development, aging, and migration
UNFPA	Global and regional activities				
WHO	Global and regional activities		Country-level assistance		
World Bank	Global and regional activities		Both global and regional activities and country-level assistance		
UNAIDS		a			
UN Women				b	
UNICEF	Global and regional activities		Country-level assistance		
UNDP	Global and regional activities		c	Both global and regional activities and country-level assistance	Country-level assistance
UN Population Division	Global and regional activities				Country-level assistance
UN Statistics Division	Global and regional activities				
International Labour Organization	Global and regional activities				Country-level assistance
Food and Agriculture Organization	Global and regional activities				Country-level assistance
UN Habitat	Global and regional activities				Country-level assistance
UN Refugee Agency	Global and regional activities				Country-level assistance

■ Global and regional activities    ■ Country-level assistance    ■ Both global and regional activities and country-level assistance

a. UNFPA has a lead role in sexual health and HIV prevention; UNAIDS promotes treatment, care, and support more comprehensively.

b. Programs are under development.

c. UNDP plays a supportive role on sexual and reproductive health work through special initiatives and partnerships and as Resident Coordinator.

Osoimehin, to pursue a reinvigorated ICPD agenda and report on achievements in three years.

## Four Recommendations for Action

The time is right to reinvigorate UNFPA. The Center for Global Development Working Group on UNFPA's Leadership Transition recommends that Dr. Osoimehin and his governing bodies take four steps to make UNFPA one of the most important and visible vehicles for integrating population dynamics into development and promoting sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights. The recommendations that follow offer Dr. Osoimehin a roadmap for advancing the unfinished agenda, redefining priorities for the coming decade and transparently measuring goals, building capacity where needed, and communicating its message clearly.

### **Recommendation 1: "One Objective, One Agenda"**

UNFPA needs to review its mission to fit today's world and prepare for future needs. UNFPA's primary *objective* should be to achieve universal access to sexual and reproductive health and to promote reproductive rights—in the process significantly reducing the unmet need for family planning. UNFPA is uniquely charged with this objective globally and in countries. Looking forward, UNFPA should also embrace an *agenda* that helps countries integrate population dynamics into development. This new focus can be encapsulated as "one objective, one agenda."

### **Recommendation 2: Refine Goals and Transparently Measure Progress**

UNFPA's accountability—both for financial resources and program results—has been a major concern of its donors and recipient governments. UNFPA should select a limited set of goals with indicators that are widely accepted and visible. It should report progress on those goals publicly and frequently with a simpler and more streamlined system of reporting. The system must be able to track spending and progress, distinguish between the failure to achieve real impact and the difficulty of attribution, and clearly define methods of quantitatively and qualitatively assessing progress toward universal access to sexual and reproductive health and to the promotion of reproductive rights. Regardless of the outcomes, successes and failures must be transparently communicated to funders, partners, and recipient countries.

### **Recommendation 3: Align Human Resources with a Focused and Renewed Mission**

A more focused mission requires a review and realignment of UNFPA's human resource capabilities and structure. Effective engagement in the global health and development discourse requires attracting top-quality talent, working more closely with external experts, and reorienting existing staff to "one objective, one agenda." The Working Group recommends that Dr. Osoimehin commission an independent study of UNFPA's human resource needs and capabilities to provide a roadmap toward creating a culture of outstanding performance at UNFPA. The report should recommend steps to recruit, retain, and reward top-quality staff—and suggest how to identify and use reputable external advisors to enrich and review its technical work.

### **Recommendation 4: Rebrand UNFPA as the Lead Agency for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Reproductive Rights**

There is currently a visible global groundswell of support for actions to support maternal and child health. UNFPA must use this attention to reframe and renew relationships with key partners within and outside of the UN system and communicate more effectively its relevance to those partners and the global community.

### **Focus UNFPA: A Clear Mission and Leading Role**

UNFPA has a unique opportunity to redefine itself for the next generation. Opportunities abound, and the arrival of a new executive director can motivate UNFPA to strongly assert an agenda that includes sexual and reproductive health, reproductive rights, and demographic dynamics. UNFPA must seize this moment and command a role as facilitator and leader. To that end, the first step in establishing UNFPA's continued relevance and role on the international stage is to focus on its unique capacities and clarify its mission and priorities.

More information on the Center for Global Development Working Group on UNFPA's Leadership Transition—including background papers and country case studies—can be found at [www.cgdev.org/unfpa](http://www.cgdev.org/unfpa).

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March 2011