



**Statement by Dr. Babatunde Osotimehin,
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Senior Officials Segment of the Sixth Asia Pacific Population Conference**

Bangkok, Thailand

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Honorable Minister of Public Health of Thailand,
Mr. Shun-ichi Murata, Deputy Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Asia and the Pacific,
Excellencies,
Distinguished delegates and participants,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to be with you today at the opening of the Sixth Asia Pacific Population Conference. We are grateful that this once in a decade event was rescheduled to coincide with the global review of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD). This underscores the importance that your governments attach to ensuring a people-centred approach to development that adequately addresses emerging challenges facing the region and the world. This is particularly important at this critical time when the global community is also discussing the shape of the development agenda beyond 2015.

I would like to thank [Minister of Public Health of Thailand] for hosting this important conference. Thailand's success in reducing fertility, in improving maternal and child health and in responding to the HIV epidemic is proof that investments in people, in health and in social services can accelerate socio-economic progress.

I would also like to thank Ms. Noeleen Heyzer, Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Asia and the Pacific, and her team for their collaboration in undertaking the regional review process and in organizing this conference.

The Asia-Pacific region has been a leader in the field of population. In fact, the first Asia Pacific Population Conference, held in New Delhi in 1963, was one of the first inter-governmental discussions on population issues.

UNFPA is committed to working with Governments, civil society, particularly youth groups, and communities in this region to ensure that the remarkable economic transformation taking place here is sustainable. And it will only be sustainable if it is built on the sound foundations of equity, individual well-being, respect for the rights of all and harmonious existence with the environment.

This was precisely the message that came out of the ICPD in Cairo 19 years ago, and it remains true today.

As the lead agency for the ICPD review, we look forward to working with all of you to ensure that your governments have the best possible analyses and information to provide the conditions of life worthy of the expectations of your people, today and in the future.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Rapid economic development has enabled this region to make significant strides towards meeting the internationally agreed development goals, and I commend your Governments for these achievements.

As a result, fewer people in the region are living in extreme poverty today than were in 1990. The growing Asian middle class is expected to more than triple by 2020 and they will play an important role in implementing the ICPD agenda.

Not all countries in the region have benefitted from this economic growth, however, nor has economic growth led to commensurate progress in social development in many countries. The increasing inequities and inequalities, both within and between countries, pose a challenge to further achievement of development goals and to the sustainability of the gains made.

Women and girls often face multiple and inter-connected vulnerabilities and have the least access to services. It is no surprise that the MDGs related to gender equality, such as reducing maternal mortality and ensuring the rights of women to sexual and reproductive health, are the ones most off-track.

Equitable access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights is still beyond reach for the poorest women and girls, those living in rural or remote geographic areas, indigenous or minority groups, people with disabilities and migrants. Barriers to access may be financial, physical, socio-cultural, or the result of restrictive policies.

These barriers further exacerbate socio-economic inequalities. So addressing this unfinished agenda is not only the right thing to do; it's smart economics.

While progress has been made towards improving maternal health, South Asia still ranks second highest in the world in terms of maternal mortality. Just ten countries contribute to 60% of maternal deaths worldwide, and five of them are in Asia.

These deaths represent the biggest health inequity in the world. The majority of maternal deaths are preventable – we know what works and must commit the necessary resources to ensure that all women and girls have access to skilled attendance at birth and emergency obstetric care.

Access to contraception to avoid unintended pregnancies is also key; approximately 13% of all maternal deaths are the result of unsafe abortion.

There are still 140 million women in Asia and the Pacific – both married and unmarried – who have an unmet need for modern contraception. And unintended pregnancies account for more than one third of pregnancies in the region. Once again, it is the most disadvantaged and socially excluded groups that have the least access to contraception. This can stem from women’s lack of power to make decisions related to contraception, poor quality of services, lack of information, young people’s lack of access to sexual and reproductive health services, myths and misconceptions about various methods, lack of choice in terms of methods, as well as failure of systems to maintain a continuous supply of contraceptives.

In some countries in the region, early commitment to and investments in family planning have resulted in a decline in fertility. Responses must also address fundamental issues of the rights of individuals and couples to make choices, to enjoy gender equality, and to have universal access to quality family planning and reproductive health services.

The region’s HIV epidemic is generally stabilizing, but this masks varying epidemic patterns across and within countries. New HIV infections continue to be concentrated among key affected populations at higher risk of HIV: sex workers, men having sex with men, transgender people and people who inject drugs. Stigmatization, discrimination and punitive laws prevent these populations from accessing sexual and reproductive health services, including life-saving HIV services. I call upon you to take your courage in your hands and state clearly in the outcome of this conference the critical importance of recognizing the different forms of sexuality, gender and lifestyles that exist in the region and the need for inclusion and respect for the rights of all.

Gender-based violence is a major violation of women’s and girls’ rights in the region, and there is an urgent need to work with men and boys to put an end to it.

By prioritizing gender equality, we can empower women and girls to exercise their rights, including their right to sexual and reproductive health.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Asia and the Pacific is home to more than half of the world’s young people aged 10-24 – 998 million. But the level of commitment to issues affecting young people remains very low,

with few comprehensive, multi-sectoral approaches addressing their rights and needs. Moreover, young people rarely have a voice in the policy decisions affecting them.

A number of countries in the region are in a position to benefit from the demographic dividend – but only if they invest in programmes to improve young people’s access to quality education, including age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education; decent work; social participation; and health services, especially sexual and reproductive health services. Protecting and promoting the rights of young people to make choices related to their sexual and reproductive health enables them to make other critical life choices and realize life-changing opportunities.

Marriage and early childbirth mark the end of education and other opportunities for too many of the region’s girls. Half of the world’s child brides live in South Asia. Pregnancy before their bodies are ready for childbearing means married adolescents face a higher risk of maternal death and morbidity.

Every year, 6 million adolescent girls become mothers; maternal mortality is the leading cause of death in girls between the ages of 15 and 19 in South Asia. It is unacceptable that in the 21st century girls are still subjected to child marriage and that so many of their lives are cut short by this practice. We must put an end to this once and for all.

In some parts of the region, the age at marriage is actually rising, and those who are not married are being left with little or no access to information and services as a result of restrictive policies and socio-cultural norms. The result is high levels of unintended pregnancies and unsafe abortions in some countries, as well as increased risk of HIV and sexually transmitted infections. In fact, since Cairo there has been a 40 percent increase in STI’s the world over, and we need to focus our efforts on reversing this trend.

Many of us have been faced with the challenge of guiding the sexual evolution of our daughters and sons. The evidence shows that what works best is age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education that combines the teaching of responsible decision-making and life skills with access to adequate information, counseling and youth-friendly services, including contraception, while honouring young people’s privacy and confidentiality. Fortunately, the majority of your countries have policies related to life skills education or comprehensive sexuality education, but the quality and reach of programmes must be improved so that all young people have access to the necessary information and skills to make healthy decisions.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Asia’s population is ageing at a scale and pace unmatched by any other region in the world. We must ensure that older persons have access to social protection systems and allowances, including pensions and health, that enable them to make full use of their skills

and abilities so that they not only enjoy independence and dignity, but remain active and productive members of society.

Asia's urban population is also expected to almost double from 1.8 billion in 2010 to 3.3 billion in 2050, and the region will soon be home to the four biggest urban agglomerations in the world. This presents an opportunity for sustainable development. Urban planners, equipped with data and projections, can leverage the advantages of agglomeration to manage urban growth and accommodate increased demands for livelihoods and services, including for the urban poor.

Migration is another important issue that the region will continue to face. We must work to ensure the development benefits of migration by promoting and protecting the rights of migrants and their access to health care and other public services, with special attention to the most vulnerable, including women, children, adolescents and youth.

Finally, climate change is one of the major challenges to this region and to our entire world. The increasing frequency and intensity of natural disasters attests to this fact. The Asia Pacific region is the most disaster-prone region in the world, with around 63 million people affected by flooding alone.

The small island states of the Pacific rank among the most vulnerable and are already experiencing sea level rise, sea temperature increases and more frequent cyclones.

Projections show that by 2070, almost half of the total population threatened by coastal flooding will reside in just ten megacities – nine of which are located in Asia.

Building resilience to climate change is essential for the region and the world.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is clear that this region will continue to be at the forefront of the population challenges and opportunities of the 21st century. Asia – already the most populous region in the world – is projected to add a billion people over the next 40 years. Therefore, the course you set for responding to population dynamics and the challenges and opportunities of our modern populations will have a global impact.

This conference is our opportunity to determine how best to respond to existing and emerging challenges, and also your opportunity to provide ground-breaking leadership.

And while the challenges are many and complex, we can draw from and build on the rich experiences and resources in the region – the dynamism of your economies, opportunities for South-South and triangular cooperation, and the findings and conclusions of the global ICPD beyond 2014 review.

Strengthening partnerships at every level, especially with civil society and the private sector, and empowering individuals enhances the effectiveness that we can bring to changing and shaping our world.

Nineteen years ago in Cairo the global community laid out a ground-breaking vision for the well-being and dignity of all people. That vision provided the basis for the right of individuals to make choices to live in dignity and enjoy well-being, and for the world to achieve sustainable development.

This week you have the power to decide on the steps necessary to make this vision a reality for current and future generations. With more than half of the world's young people, the future is quite literally in your hands.

Thank you.