

Joint Statement by Action by Churches Together – ACT Alliance (ACT) and World Council of Churches to the 52nd Commission on Population and Development "Review and appraisal of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and its contribution to the follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development"

ACT Alliance (ACT) and the World Council of Churches (WCC) welcome the opportunity to submit this statement to the 52nd Session of the Commission on Population and Development. As networks of churches and Christian faith-based organisations working for decades for human rights, development and humanitarian purposes around the world, we are engaged in all pillars of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development. We affirm that all people are created in the image of God, with equal dignity and rights, and equally entitled to the benefits of sustainable economic and holistic development. We believe that reducing inequalities across economic, food, and education systems, as well as gender equality and access to sexual and reproductive health and rights, is a prerequisite for ensuring human rights and achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. Thus, we affirm the integrated, holistic mandate of the International Conference on Population and Development agenda.

In this review and appraisal of the Programme of Action 25 years on, we call on member states to uphold previous commitments and agreements in relation to this agenda at the global, regional and national levels. The regional reviews of this year--Latin America, Europe and Africa--have reaffirmed the Programme of Action and the regional reports from 2014.

We also recall the prior commitments made by many faith actors. During the United Nations General Assembly in 2014, 40 religious leaders from around the world from six major faiths - Baha'i, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish and Muslim - committed to "A call to action: Faith for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Reproductive Rights," which stated: "Not in our name should any mother die while giving birth. Not in our name should anyone be denied access to basic health care, nor should a child or adolescent be denied knowledge of and care for his/her body. Not in our name should any young person be denied their full human rights."

Churches and faith-based organisations are integral to the implementation of the Programme of Action and contribute significantly to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. While we acknowledge that there are social, religious and cultural controversies surrounding issues important to this agenda and that subsequent inaction in addressing them has a detrimental impact on social equity and sustainable development, we also affirm our basic responsibility as churches and faith-based organisations to promote each person's inherent dignity as part of the divine creation.

For example, we recognize that sexual and gender-based violence is evident in many different and often hidden contexts, including spousal abuse and 'child marriage', and that its risks and impacts are compounded by stigma, racial discrimination, socioeconomic divisions, poverty, abuse, armed conflict, and lack of access to quality reproductive healthcare. Issues related to human sexual behaviour and gender relations within the family are taboo in many churches and church communities, preventing the church from being a safe and protective place for women who are victims of or threatened by sexual and gender-based violence. Churches and faith communities must actively contribute to the elimination of such violence and abuse, as an essential step to meet this agenda and Sustainable Development Goal 5--empowerment of women and girls.

Lack of access to sexual and reproductive health services, including family planning, maternal health and access to services for youth, means that women and girls are dying. Everyone should have the ability to decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality and sexual and reproductive health, free from discrimination, coercion and violence. This also entails not leaving behind men and boys, as they are key in promoting and protecting human rights and gender equality, both as decision makers and as people with power, but also because they are subjected to harmful imposed masculinities. Churches and faith communities in our wide networks deliver family planning, youth services and other sexual and reproductive health services and also help to challenge patriarchal attitudes and practices by promoting gender equality at all levels of society, engaging men and boys in their activities, and promoting transformative masculinities. As such, faith-based organisations are crucial partners in attaining Sustainable Development Goal 5 on gender equality as well as Goal 3 on health.

The significance of churches and faith-based organisations in ensuring healthy lives and promoting wellbeing for all cannot be overemphasized. Faith-based organizations provide critical education and health care services at the community level, in some places comprising up to 50% of health-care provision. Faith institutions and networks have access to marginalized communities where even governments have difficulty in ensuring an institutional presence.

One example is the World Council of Churches Ecumenical HIV and AIDS Initiatives and Advocacy (EHAIA) which helped principals, education secretaries and church leaders from across Kenya examine the concerns of youth and link these concerns with accessible information on sexual and reproductive health and human rights. Launched in 2002, this initiative has demonstrated the need of linking grassroots, national and regional actors with international decision and policy-makers. By accompanying member churches in the schools they own or operate, safe spaces are provided for students to receive adequate information about HIV and AIDS prevention and treatment. In doing this, the students are also able to discuss the difficult issues of sex and sexuality, and decision-makers are engaging directly with those most affected by their policies.

We also reaffirm the importance placed on addressing issues of migration and displacement, including internal displacement, in the Programme of Action. Migration has been a defining feature of human history, and migrants contribute to societies worldwide economically, socially and spiritually. We emphasise that migration is not a “problem” or a “threat”, but rather, that the rights of those who migrate remain inadequately protected and must be addressed through policy frameworks including the Programme of Action.

Faith-based organisations are often the first port of call for services for migrants and displaced people, but equally we work with communities to ensure that migrants and displaced people have access to the protection and rights to which they are entitled. For example, ACT Alliance members have been active in delivering life-saving assistance to refugees and internally displaced persons as well as supporting livelihood opportunities and longer-term prospects for both displaced populations and their host communities, in settings like Jordan, Ethiopia, and Uganda. Similarly, member churches support the inclusion and integration of newcomers into host societies, help them access crucial services, and support legal aid for those seeking asylum. Particular emphasis has been placed on community-based support for unaccompanied minors.

We recognize that two important Global Compacts - on Refugees, and for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration - were negotiated over the past year, reinforcing the need for international

cooperation to address these challenges. As with Agenda 2030, these new frameworks emphasise the importance of developing national plans for effective implementation, and of ensuring that migration- and displacement-related measures are well integrated into existing efforts to promote sustainable development, achieve gender justice, reduce disaster risk, address climate change, and protect the rights of internally displaced people. As networks with extensive grassroots presence, churches and faith-based organizations are equipped to support implementation and facilitate effective involvement of local communities.

A particular challenge in the protection of migrants and displaced people has been the rise of xenophobia, racism, and populist nationalism. We are committed to working to counter this dangerous trend, which threatens all aspects of development. ACT Alliance and the World Council of Churches have both actively worked to address this question at the international level. For example, the World Council of Churches and the Vatican recently convened a joint conference on Xenophobia, Racism and Populist Nationalism in the Context of Global Migration (Rome, 18-20 September 2018), followed by a Global Forum for Faith Action for Children on the Move (Rome, 16-19 October 2018) to address migration and the role of all actors, including faith actors.

In sum, to better ensure the implementation of the Programme of Action and its contribution to achieving the 2030 Agenda, faith actors should be consulted in their own national context, as well as at high-level policy dialogues like the Commission. Some 84% of the world's population adheres to diverse religious traditions and faith communities, professing religious and cultural practices which are influenced and motivated by their social, economic and political contexts. The World Council of Churches already in 1994 in Cairo stated – as was reaffirmed by ACT Alliance at its 2018 General Assembly - “we all commit to continually encourage and maintain an open, constructive dialogue both among ourselves, with other churches, and with people of other faiths.” In committing to build on our diversity, we must work in partnerships that are holistic and interdependent to achieve the global shared agenda.

Based on our experiences as some of the largest Christian faith-based networks of churches and agencies in the world working on policy advocacy, development and humanitarian issues, and as we commit to examining our own organisations and structures, we strongly call upon member states to:

1. Fully implement the Programme of the International Conference on Population and Development and its subsequent reviews with no regression or exception.
2. Develop and implement national plans to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, with particular reference to Goal 3 and Goal 5 and all targets related to gender, Goal 10 on reducing inequalities, and Goal 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions, particularly in relation to their significance for protecting the rights of migrants and displaced people.
3. Protect the rights of all people on the move, regardless of their status, develop and implement national plans to address the commitments under the Global Compact for safe, orderly and regular migration, and develop pledges to effectively contribute to the implementation of the Global Compact on Refugees, through transparent and participatory processes which involve migrants and refugees themselves, as well as other stakeholders including churches and faith-based organisations.
4. Develop and implement targeted national plans to support the realisation of the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, as outlined in the GP20 Initiative.

5. Fulfill previous commitments to the Programme of Action and subsequent declarations, and urge other states to do likewise. This encompasses non-regression on previously agreed language, including reference to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights.
6. Stand up for the integrity of the United Nations and the importance of multilateralism, rejecting extreme polarisation and fragmentation and embracing cooperation.
7. Engage in partnership, in line with Goal 17 of the 2030 agenda, with faith-based organisations and churches to transform social norms and promote social equality, and learn from their experiences and expertise in enhancing the role of faith as a positive force to promote change in society.
8. Engage churches and faith-based organisations as transformative actors in this agenda, recognising faith as holding important ethical values that promote abundant life and dignity of all human beings which encompass justice, compassion and love at its core.
9. Protect and fulfill the human rights of all persons, regardless of nationality, migration status, age, gender, sexual orientation, disability, religion, ethnicity or any other intersecting identity.
10. Acknowledge our shared interest and common moral responsibility to include all of humanity, especially those living in the margins, in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to ensure that no one is 'left behind' and all have safety and security.