

**A written submission from Catholics for Choice to the  
2009 Annual Ministerial Review of the Economic and Social Council  
July 6 - 9, 2009**

**Background**

Catholics for Choice shapes and advances sexual and reproductive ethics that are based on justice, reflect a commitment to women's well-being and respect and affirm the capacity of women and men to make moral decisions about their lives. Through discourse, education and advocacy, CFC works with a global network of Catholics, including sister organizations throughout Latin America and other colleagues around the world, to promote this mission. Catholics for Choice brings the voices and concerns of millions of Catholics to international debates through its consultative status at the United Nations with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).

CFC supports policy making and governing structures that make a clear separation between church and state. At the same time, we recognize that religion can make a positive contribution to law and policy making, particularly in relation to social justice and the dignity of the human person. We strongly support the right of religious institutions to participate in the life of nations, to express their values and even to contribute to public-policy debates. However, CFC maintains that religious organizations should be allowed to contribute in a manner that clearly recognizes the distinction between the secular and religious realms.

**Introduction**

As people throughout the world suffer from vicious health inequities, issues pertaining to access and capacity building as well as the future challenges of disease and the economic crisis must be addressed. The focus of this year's Annual Ministerial Review on "implementing the internationally agreed goals and commitments in regard to global public health" is both timely and vital.

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Of the many facets which need to be examined in assessing the current state of global public health and progress toward achieving the Millennium Development Goals, few are more contentious than access to sexual and reproductive health services. As a result of the religious and cultural stigmas that often accompany these critical services, the question of sexual and reproductive health is often tabled, soft-pedaled or marginalized. This does a grave disservice to men, women and children whose health and well-being require a more holistic view that necessarily includes sexual and reproductive health and rights.

We know that women around the world suffer and die as a result of unsafe abortion. The transmission rate of HIV is unabated, despite immense expenditure on the problem, perhaps as a result of opposition to condom use from some quarters. Women and families are persistently denied the opportunity to plan when and if to expand their families. In situations of conflict and extreme poverty, these problems are amplified many times over. We believe that access to sexual and reproductive health services must not be stigmatized or deprioritized; rather, these services must be provided to all those who seek them out.

Fortunately, the United Nations and its agencies have gone to great lengths to secure access to services related to sexual and reproductive rights and health. However, at times these efforts have garnered strident opposition, especially from the institutional Catholic church. In fact, the Catholic hierarchy consistently acts as an obstacle to including sexual and reproductive health services in the global public health agenda.

Catholics for Choice represents the majority of Catholics who disagree with the Vatican on matters related to sexual and reproductive health. As such, CFC works both to provide a vocal counterpoint to the Vatican's minority view and to support the vital efforts of the UN in including sexual and reproductive health and rights in the global health agenda.

### **Development Aid and Sexual and Reproductive Health**

The data is clear. People living in poverty, especially but not exclusively those in the Global South, are disproportionately affected by the health problems associated with unsafe abortion and lack of access to crucial family planning services, which help prevent unintended pregnancies and the transmission of sexually transmitted infections.

Together with the UN and its agencies, CFC shares both a commitment to internationally agreed Millennium Development Goals and the Programme of Action from the International Conference of Population and Development. We also share the UN's desire to see that the scarce resources for development aid are directed to agencies best suited to meet the needs of the world's most vulnerable people.

Unfortunately, not all governments and agencies are committed to these same goals and ideals. For example, under the leadership of the last administration in the United States, funds for family planning were curtailed and

evidence-based methods that maintain sexual and reproductive health and rights were rejected. At the same time, ineffective policies such as abstinence-only education were adopted, promoted and enforced.

To promote a candid and useful conversation about development aid and sexual and reproductive health, Catholics for Choice convened key leaders in the field, including UNFPA executive director Thoraya Obaid and former World Health Organization director general Anders Nordström, to discuss the issues.

Faith-based organizations increasingly work with the UN and donor countries in delivering aid. Therefore there were several difficult questions that the forum examined. These included discussions about faith-based groups and proselytizing; concerns around the balance between respecting or trying to change local customs and cultures; and whether governments should fund either faith-based groups that impose restrictions on their activities or organizations that promote a progressive outlook in countries that do not pursue particularly liberal policies.

CFC shared the insights of these leaders widely through global distribution of *Conscience* magazine and at the 42<sup>nd</sup> session of the Commission on Population and Development. At CPD, CFC participated in the panel discussion “From Advocacy to Action: Advancing women’s reproductive health and rights in the MDG framework.” During the panel, CFC highlighted examples of our experience working with partners in Latin America. Significantly, those in need of aid in Latin America are calling for increased access to sexual and reproductive health services. However, their needs are often unmet due to the damaging influence that Catholic bishops have on health-care delivery, even though Catholic agencies may be receiving international development aid. This is but one example of situations in which donor agencies must pay careful attention to whether local aid agencies are delivering services in a manner consistent with the goals of the donor agencies.

### **Family Planning, Unsafe Abortion and UNFPA**

The UN, through its many agencies including the United Nations Population Fund, provides assistance directly to people in dire need. UNFPA seeks to meet internationally agreed goals by promoting equal access to sexual and reproductive health services for all people.

Though UNFPA’s efforts to prevent unintended pregnancy, reduce infant and maternal mortality and slow the spread of HIV are critical to global public health concerns, ideologues have been able to thwart US funding of UNFPA for the past eight years. During this time, Catholics for Choice worked tirelessly to refute false accusations and educate the public and policymakers in order to reinstate US funding to UNFPA and garner broader support for UNFPA’s work.

Our efforts included taking a delegation of interfaith leaders to China to investigate false accusations against UNFPA. Following that trip, CFC reported to US policymakers about the vital work of UNFPA in China and the

lack of evidence to support the claim that UNFPA was complicit in forced abortions. These efforts helped create a climate in which US President Barack Obama was able to reinstate US funding to UNFPA.

As an estimated 70,000 women die as a result of unsafe abortion each year, the services of UNFPA and likeminded agencies are critical to ending this global health crisis. Providing family planning methods proven to reduce the need for abortion and prevent unintended pregnancies are an essential step in reducing these deaths.

However, as crucial as family planning methods are, women still need safe and legal access to abortion. The persistent dismissal by some of the need to legalize safe abortion is insensitive to the realities women face and to the number of women who die from unsafe abortions every day.

### **Condom Use as a Means to Prevent the Transmission of HIV**

The United Nations has consistently been on the front lines supporting condom use—not as a panacea for HIV-prevention but as a necessary component of a comprehensive approach to preventing the transmission of HIV.

However, not all institutions support the inclusion of condom use in HIV prevention. In March 2009, on his way to Cameroon, Pope Benedict XVI denounced condom use as a means to prevent the transmission of HIV and went so far as to assert that condom use “increases the problem.”

Governments as well as health and development ministers from around the world have responded to Pope Benedict’s dangerous and false assertion. UNAIDS noted that “condoms are an essential part of combination prevention.”

Well before these recent headlines, the 17<sup>th</sup> International AIDS Conference held in Mexico City, co-sponsored by UNAIDS, brought together HIV/AIDS activists and advocates from around the world. This gathering provided a much-needed space in which leaders in the field could gather the support and resources needed to move forward in an organized and collaborative manner to overcome this global health crisis.

During the conference, Catholics for Choice provided strong faith- and values-based messages supporting condom use in preventing the spread of HIV/AIDS. Our efforts were highlighted by the, AIDS Ambassador for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, who called Catholics for Choice’s work as vital in developing more openness about HIV and AIDS. CFC also contributed to the conversation among young people, lifting up this community’s specific concerns and provided communications workshops in both Spanish and English to hundreds of advocates. These trainings, based on CFC’s Condoms4Life messages, gave participants the

messages they need to explain that condom use is both life saving and life affirming when it comes to HIV prevention.

### **Moving Forward**

This Annual Ministerial Review comes at a critical time. Progress on the ICPD Programme of Action and the MDGs is not moving as quickly or completely as many had hoped. The global economic situation is causing many to scale back or reconsider their investments in development aid, further imperiling the achievement of the internationally agreed upon goals for global public health in the coming years. It is possible, though, to strategically focus conversations around development aid, and therefore more adequately and fully deliver the education and services people need to improve their lives and those of their families. CFC offers the following recommendations for moving forward to achieve our common goals:

- Creating sound development aid policies that reflect the needs of people, not the ideologies of service providers, and support the advancement of the MDGs and the ICPD Programme of Action;
- Developing criteria for selecting recipients of development aid, applied equally to secular and faith-based organizations, that ensure delivery of sexual and reproductive health-care services as a part of comprehensive health-care program;
- Supporting family planning and the organizations that work to ensure access to family planning methods, such as UNFPA;
- Recognizing the health impact of unsafe abortion as a major public health issue; and
- Including condom use in a comprehensive approach to prevent the transmission of HIV.

**In conclusion, as the UN and its agencies work to secure sexual and reproductive health and rights as a key component of the global health agenda, Catholics for Choice commits to supporting these efforts through discourse, education, research and advocacy.**