TOWARDS SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS FOR ALL IN EUROPE: AN INTERVIEW WITH THE REGIONAL DIRECTOR OF THE UNITED NATIONS POPULATION FUND EASTERN EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIAN REGIONAL OFFICE

The 20-year review of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Programme of Action culminated in 2014. What were the key recommendations in the area of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRH&R) and has there been any progress in their implementation?

What came out strongly throughout the review process and in the review document of the ICPD Beyond 2014 Regional Conference in Geneva (see Figure 1) is the call for a human rights-based approach to sexual and reproductive health. This means that women and girls need to be able to make informed decisions, that their choices be respected and that they must have access to services and information, without discrimination, coercion or violence. We organized a follow-up conference in Sofia last year to develop in more detail what this means in practice for our Region. We have used both the Geneva outcome document and the Sofia Declaration of Commitment (http://ecca.unfpa.org/news/sofia-declaration-commitment) as a guide for our work in promoting universal access to sexual and reproductive health in the Region. We are seeing real progress. At the normative level, a new Action plan for sexual and reproductive health: towards achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Europe - leaving no one behind is being developed by WHO Member States with strong UNFPA involvement (http://ecca.unfpa.org/news/taking-action-better-sexual-and-reproductive-health-policies) (see Image 1). This reflects stronger government ownership and support. At the technical level, we are advancing the quality of sexual and reproductive health care by developing new alliances, supporting institutional capacity building and advancing sexual and reproductive health standards, guidelines and protocols. There is a sharper focus on innovative approaches for improving maternal health and access to contraception and investing in cervical cancer prevention, youth sexual and reproductive health and HIV/AIDS. I believe the notion is gaining traction that realizing the reproductive rights of people is key to unleashing the potential of women and youth and therefore is crucial for development—and for addressing the population dynamics we are facing in this Region.

As we are entering a new era with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development now having been kicked off, where do you see the main challenges that need to be addressed in our Region when it comes to SRH&R?

We have made a lot of progress over the past two decades. For example, maternal mortality more than halved since the early 1990s in our Region. But as the ICPD review has clearly shown, we are still facing a lot of challenges. Disparities remain significant, between countries, but also within them. For example, the risk of dying from maternal causes is still almost twice as high in our Region compared to the most developed regions. But if we look at individual countries, we see an enormous spread: from a very high risk of 1 in 390 in Kyrgyzstan to an extremely low risk of 1 in 45 200 in Belarus. We see a similar situation when it comes to the use of modern contraception. Rates are near the world average of 57% in some eastern European and central Asian countries, but extremely low—even below the average of the least developed countries—in several others, mostly in southeastern Europe and the Caucasus. Adolescents and youth still face obstacles in accessing sexual and reproductive health services and information due to a lack of youth-friendly facilities, poor institutional capacities and restrictive policies. Although comprehensive sexual-
private partnerships. Most importantly, we need an even stronger human rights focus. Applying a human rights-based approach to public health is a powerful way to improve health outcomes. For this we need to translate the powerful normative human rights discourse into operational guidance and concrete tools for health planners and service providers, as well as users of health systems. Applying human rights to sexual and reproductive health not only helps governments comply with their binding obligations, but also contributes to improving health outcomes. This is the only way we can build the human capital we need to tackle the challenges we face in this Region.

What is your vision for this Region for the next 15 years? Where will the Region be in 2030 in terms of sexual and reproductive health?

There is a tremendous amount of potential in this Region and many lessons to share with the rest of the world. I am convinced that we can achieve breakthroughs in reducing inequalities and making universal access to sexual and reproductive health a reality by ensuring that all individuals can exercise their basic human rights, including those that relate to the most intimate and fundamental aspects of life. Applying the principles enshrined in the 2030 Agenda and the ICPD will help us deliver a Region where every pregnancy is wanted, every child birth is safe and every young person’s potential is fulfilled. It is a tall order, but I believe we are on the right track.