

**Challenges in the South Asian Region and the Work of ICOMP**  
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The International Council on Management of Population Programmes (ICOMP), based in Kuala Lumpur, was set up in 1973 upon the realization that people managing population programmes in most countries did not have adequate management training. In response, a group of people looked for a way to build management capacity so that population programmes could be more effective and efficient. ICOMP is an international NGO with considerable inter-governmental support from countries of Asia and the Pacific, Africa and Latin America. Substantively, ICOMP covers issues of Reproductive Health and the broader context of population and development, including population and environment. The primary focus is on improving management of programmes and enhancing efficiency of organizations involved in these focus areas.

Over the years ICOMP has been supported by various governments, the World Bank, UN Agencies such as UNFPA, UNAIDS, WHO, and private foundations such as Hewlett, Packard and Ford. ICOMP does not have an endowment and must raise money every year to fund its work.

**The art of leadership**

Leadership is not a vague term – it is a particular skill and quality that ICOMP focuses on in our training and other activities. For example, from 2002 to 2006 we led a Visionary Leadership Programme in Population and Development (VLP), with support from the David and Lucile Packard Foundation. In India – by a consortium of partners, the initiative built the capacity of 187 individuals from more than 150 organizations, including state and federal-level government bodies, the United Nations, donor and international development agencies, national NGOs, welfare organizations, academic institutions and the media. In addition to the 187 leaders. VLP led leaders through a programme of self-learning, an advanced leadership course, mentoring, on-the-job support, peer exchange and networking. Their leadership capacity was further strengthened over time by opportunities to participate in task forces, drafting committees, advocacy networks, and so on.

In addition to initiatives like VLP, ICOMP has also produced a number of tools for promoting universal access to reproductive and NGO sustainability.

ICOMP is now looking forward, beyond the Cairo agenda, to determine the best way to build capacity and ensure universal access to reproductive health. For this, I welcome your wisdom and feedback.

**Case Study: Family planning, SRHR and development in South Asia**

While ICOMP works all over the world, we are based in Asia and have worked extensively in South Asia. This area is of particular interest to me, personally and professionally, and so I would like to outline some of the progress and the challenges of the region with regard to family planning and SRHR.

### **Linkages between RH and HIV and Aids programmes**

In four countries of Sub Saharan Africa – Uganda, Tanzania, Ethiopia and Zambia -- ICOMP has worked with more than 30 NGOs for capacity building for linked response to Reproductive Health and HIV/Aids. These projects focused on the needs of young people and thus worked both for counselling and referral to services for young people.

### **Progress and successes**

South Asia comprises eight countries, with vastly different histories and stories. There have been great successes in the region, tremendous investments and achievements in social entrepreneurship. Three Nobel Laureates – one a poet and philosopher, the others focusing on gender, equality and injustice.

Family planning has also been a great success story in South Asia. Formal government family planning programmes started in the region 50 years ago, and fertility rates have come down dramatically in many places. For example, in Sri Lanka fertility rates are below replacement level. It is important to ask ourselves what the population of the region, and the world, would be if we did not have family planning programmes in South Asia. Gender has been placed squarely at the centre of family planning programmes in the region, and young people's needs have become a focus. In addition, the responsibilities of men are prominent, with SRHR programmes for male partners.

South Asia is at the cutting edge of innovation in many other ways as well. For instance, Bangladesh alone provides endless numbers of examples of what you can do despite poverty, illiteracy and other social challenges. Of course, one of the greatest success stories is the Grameen Bank and its founder, Muhammad Yunus, which received the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize. And Sri Lanka has seen unbelievable progress, despite its civil war, which hopefully is now coming to an end. Finally, Bhutan thrives by the notion that 'Gross Happiness Indicator', with a vision that it is important to look at more than income and wealth. Bhutan is serious about quality of life

### **Challenges remain**

Despite the status of many South Asian countries as models of development and progress, approximately 70% of maternal deaths in the world occur in 10 countries, four of which are in South Asia: Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan and India. This is indicative of other dramatic differences among regions, populations and people, and of reversals of progress in South Asia. For example, Pakistan, for years, had an impressively high rate of economic growth, but distribution and social progress have been slow. Pakistan, Afghanistan and Nepal are all troubled by a number of social, economic and security challenges.

While gender, including men's involvement, has become an important focus for many programmes in South Asia. There is still a monumental challenge with regard to establishing rights – rights to good health, not to die in pregnancy, and to access good quality health facilities, funding and services. There has been some progress in these areas, but it is not enough. India spends only 1% of its GDP on public health, in contrast, for example, to Iran, which spends 4.8%, and Bhutan, which spends 2.7%. Another area of unfinished business in India is illiteracy: it is estimated that, in 2010, almost half the children of India will remain illiterate.

There is a lot yet to be done on issues of poverty and injustice, and in terms of conflict. Former President Bill Clinton had said once that South Asia was the most dangerous

part of world, and in Afghanistan and Pakistan this certainly is an issue, no matter which business you are in. This is further complicated because we have flawed democracy, and many corrupt people return to power over and over again.

**South Asia's unfinished Agenda**

I hear some donors say that it is time to exit South Asia and move on to Africa. This undermines South Asia's is catch-22 situation: despite great progress, there is still much to do. Without a proper exit strategy adequately funded and timed, the unfinished business of South Asia would remain unfinished.