

India's Global Commitments on Reproductive Health and Family Planning

India was the first country that officially adopted a national Family Planning Programme in 1952. The country has made significant progress since, realigning its focus from reducing the population growth rate to achieving population stabilisation and meeting maternal and child health, adolescent health and nutrition related goals.

As death rates declined sharply post 1952 and birth rates grew, policymakers showed immense concern over population growth and its potential impact on the country's economic growth and development. In 1976, the country came up with its first National Population Policy, underpinned by the primary assumption that population explosion was a result of poverty and it must be addressed for the country's development¹. In its attempt to control the population explosion, certain state-sponsored population control measures during emergency and subsequently a target-oriented approach left an undesired negative impression of family planning programme, particularly among poor and underprivileged men, the impact of which is seen even to this day.

Over the last two decades, the government has revisited and redrafted the National Health Policy and its Population Policy guided by emerging global evidence and learnings, and commitments. The current National Population Policy, 2000 affirms the commitment of the government towards ensuring that the reproductive health services, especially family planning, adhere to the principles of informed-choice and consent and are voluntary in nature. It also recommends a target-free approach in delivering family planning services².

International covenants and agreements like the International Conference on Population and Development-ICPD, Sustainable Development Goals-SDG and FP2020 were instrumental in bringing these crucial elements into our Family Planning Programme guided by the National Population Policy, 2000 and National Health Policy, 2017.

What is the ICPD?

The International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) was a global event held in Cairo in 1994 where 179 governments including India adopted a Programme of Action (PoA) that laid out a revolutionary population and development strategy. It moved the focus of policies on population dynamics to putting rights, needs and aspirations of individuals at the centre of national and global sustainable development efforts. It advocated that rights and choices have to be respected, and empowerment of women is interwoven with reproductive health, which is necessary to achieve progress. The ICPD is a key milestone and is often used as a reference when one talks about global level accord by the country that recognises reproductive health as human rights³.

Why is ICPD important to this day?

The ICPD was revisited 25 years later in Nairobi in 2019, where the need to accelerate the Programme of Action was recognised to meet the Sustainable Development 2030 Agenda. This was emphasised given the progress has been slower than envisaged and a lot remains to be achieved despite some remarkable achievements many countries have made.

In India, as high as 13% currently married women (15-49 years) reported an unmet need for FP in National Family Health Survey-4 (NFHS - 2015-16)⁴ with modern contraceptive use highly skewed towards female sterilisation. Though modern contraceptive use has increased, still nearly half (47.8 percent) of Indian women do not use any contraceptives⁵. The budget outlay and expenditure for family planning continues to fall short against the magnitude of unmet need in the country. To add to this, there has been an increase in the call for population control measures as the solution to address the perceived 'population explosion' problem in the country.

More than 25 years since India signed on the PoA of ICPD, these issues related to the need for universal access to the full range of sexual and reproductive health information, education and services still persist. Under these circumstances, reiterating India's commitment to the ICPD becomes relevant in order to emphasise strengthening supply chain, expanding the range and reach of contraceptives, improving counselling services and integrating Social Behaviour Change Communication campaigns.

What is FP2020/2030?

A Summit on Family Planning was held in London in 2012, which initiated a global movement called FP2020 partnership, where multiple governments made commitments to work together to address the most challenging barriers to expanding access to contraceptives. The barriers are mainly related to policy, financing, delivery and socio-cultural norms. In brief, the FP2020 partnership is a coordinated attempt to empower women and girls by investing in rights-based family planning⁶.

As a signatory to FP2020, in 2012, India committed to spend USD 2 billion for FP programs, to expand the scope and reach of contraceptive options through rolling out new contraceptives and delivering a full range of FP services in public health facilities at all levels. In 2017 London Summit of FP2020, India renewed its commitment to invest USD 3 billion for FP by 2020⁷. Vision FP2020 aims to build on the current policy of increasing focus on spacing services without disturbing sterilisation through voluntary adoption of family planning, based on the felt-need of the community and ensuring couples have children by choice, not by chance⁸.

Building on gains from last eight years of FP2020, the partnership with 69 focus countries is currently transitioning to a new structure and is in the process of framing the commitments for FP2030.

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Family Planning

The SDGs adopted in 2016 is a universal set of 17 goals, which serve as a blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all by 2030. 193 countries, including India have adopted the SDGs. Goal-3 on Health and Well-being and Goal-5 on Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women and Girls make specific references to family planning and emphasise on reducing maternal mortality, reducing premature, neo-natal and child deaths and ensuring universal access to sexual and reproductive health care services, including family planning, information and education⁹. As a signatory to the SDGs charter, India has committed to provide universal access to reproductive health services including FP services by 2030.

¹ National population policy. Yojana. 1983 Jan 26;27(1-2):55-6. PMID: 12312003.

² <https://www.prb.org/indiaproposesretooledpopulationpolicy/>

³ <https://www.unfpa.org/icpd>

⁴ International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) and ICF. 2017. National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4), India, 2015-16: Mumbai: IIPS. http://rchiips.org/nfhs/factsheet_NFHS-4.shtml

⁵ International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) and ICF. 2017. National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4), India, 2015-16: Mumbai: IIPS. http://rchiips.org/nfhs/factsheet_NFHS-4.shtml

⁶ <http://familyplanning2020.org/about-us>

⁷ <http://familyplanning2020.org/india>

⁸ <https://advancefamilyplanning.org/sites/default/files/resources/FP2020-Vision-Document%20India.pdf> Page 29.

⁹ <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>