

PRO-LIFE AND FAMILY MEMBER STATES REJECT OUTCOME DOCUMENT AT UN COMMISSION ON POPULATION AND DEVELOPMENT

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Last week, for the first time in history, the United Nations Commission on Population and Development concluded without the adoption of an outcome document. After nine days of arduous negotiations, pro-life and family Member States refused to accept the text, citing grave procedural concerns and the persistence of highly contentious language.

The essential purpose of the United Nations (UN) is to forge consensus among its 193 Member States for the achievement of the greater good. When States come together to negotiate a UN document the stated goal is to produce a text that, at the minimum, every State can accept. In UN terms, this means a document with no “red-lines,” or unacceptable references for any State. As a result of the agenda-driven nature of the UN, negotiations no longer represent this consensus building effort. Documents with serious red-lines are frequently adopted, leaving States to express their reservations. On rare occasions, however, when documents with red-lines are proposed for adoption, countries decide to walk away from the process entirely. In a historical move, the African Group, representing 54 countries, did just that at the most recent session of the Commission on Population and Development (CPD), which took place at UN Headquarters from April 13-17, 2015.



The events of last week are rooted in the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD). Over twenty years later, the document produced at this conference is still the definitive point of reference on every issue from nutrition to abortion at the UN. Although the ICPD marked the formal introduction of abortion into the UN discourse, pro-life Member States ensured that the document was crafted carefully to respect the sovereign authority of countries that defend life. Ever since, abortion activists have attempted to expand and redefine abortion as understood in the ICPD.

The CPD takes place annually at UN Headquarters in April to review progress made toward achieving the original ICPD. In 2014, the UN celebrated the 20th anniversary of ICPD. Pro-abortion Member States co-opted the session, threatened the inclusion of “sexual rights,” and forced the adoption of a highly disputed document. It was in the shadow of these contentious proceedings that the 48th session of the CPD took place this year.

This CPD was of particular significance due to the fact that the document was geared toward the post-2015 development agenda. The UN is currently in the midst of creating development goals that will guide the overarching approach to development for all UN agencies, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the World Health Organization and other international entities through 2030. In terms of financing for development and high-level political interest, this is one of the most important and far-reaching processes that the UN has ever undertaken.

In the wake of last year’s catastrophic negotiations and the profound implications of the post-2015 agenda, it was clear that the stakes were higher for pro-life and family Member States this year. Negotiations commenced on April 7 – one week before the Commission officially started. From the onset, the positions of the African and Arab Groups, and many other individual states including Caribbean countries, Belarus, Indonesia, Malta, Nauru and Nicaragua, were exceptionally strong in defence of life and family, calling for the complete deletion of abortion, “comprehensive sexuality education,” and population control language. This was a departure from previous years when countries have been forced to adopt compromise language early in the process.

Member States were unwavering in calling for the removal of all controversial language. As draft after draft of the text was released, it became clear that the States driving the process (El Salvador and Belgium) were disinclined to incorporate this feedback – a glaring omission considering that the African and Arab Groups together with other likeminded States represent almost 100 countries.

Instead of favoring the time-honoured consensus model of UN negotiations, the Chair (Belgium) took matters out of the hands of Member States and produced a last minute “Chair’s text.” This text was meant to represent a compromise position, and while some concessions were made, the text ultimately was rejected in its entirety. Nigeria took the floor to state that the document was not acceptable to the African Group, which led to the Chair’s withdrawal of the text and the first CPD in history to have no outcome.

It was not only pro-life and family forces that took issue with the text, but also the United States, which had problems with anti-Israel references to foreign occupation. This stalled the process for several hours, and gave Belgium and other similarly minded countries time to “démarche” – a diplomatic term for calling and pressuring countries at the ambassadorial level or even higher to get in line.

The lack of an outcome document reveals the state of affairs at the UN, and sends a clear political message that pro-life and pro-family Member States are united in resisting the bullying tactics and infringements on their national sovereignty that are all too common. In an unprecedented move, the island state of Nauru spoke from the floor to report that the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) had inappropriately pressured its government to change its stance on life and family and requested that this be put on record.

The inability to achieve an outcome throws into relief the egregious problems with attempting to force an outcome, and the fundamental importance of returning to the authentic consensus building approach from which the UN has so radically deviated. The UN is a battleground for the protection of life and family, and this past week represented a significant victory for pro-life and family forces. UNFPA and likeminded States have strategically blamed the African Group for undermining the negotiation process – a carefully framed narrative that they will capitalize on when furthering their agenda in future processes. The lines are now drawn more clearly than ever, and we can expect the Chair’s summary of the proceedings and next year’s reassessment of the working methods of the Commission to be quite heated as a result.

In his closing statement, the facilitator of the proceedings from El Salvador noted that “progress,” meaning the adoption of “sexual rights,” is slow but inevitable, and that we must allow countries time to “catch up” on these issues. Herein lies the fundamental problem with negotiations at the UN. The prevailing mindset is that the developed countries of the world are leading the charge on social progress, while traditionally minded countries lag behind. ADF International is committed to empowering these Member States to defend their sovereign right to live and to legislate in accordance with their religious, cultural, and ethical values.

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