

State of the Coalition 2017

John Skibiak, Director of the Reproductive Health Supplies Coalition

Good morning friends, colleagues and Coalition members.

It really is a pleasure to welcome you here today to Brussels; capital of Europe; headquarters of the Reproductive Health Supplies Coalition; and until just over a year ago, the place I called home.

It's also, as we look outside to the frigid temperatures and grey skies, a far cry from where, just a few months ago, we thought we would be hosting our 18th General Membership Meeting. For me, October 20th, 2017 will forever remain indelibly marked in my mind. I still look back at that bizarre juxtaposition of events where in the morning I was planning for a plenary session on the Global Gap Analysis, and then less than four hours later, announcing to the world that our meeting plans would be put on hold. It was not the kind of announcement anyone would want to make, but ultimately it was the right one.

And so, on behalf of the Executive Committee and the Secretariat, I would like to thank all of you who sent words of sympathy and support for our decision. But I would also like to extend a very special thanks to those who worked so tirelessly to lay the groundwork in Dakar – and particularly to the Senegal Ministry of Health, represented here today by Secrétaire Général, Mr Alassane Mbengue, Dr Omar Sarr - Directeur de la Santé de la Mère et de l'Enfant; Dr Annette Seck Ndiaye - Directrice de la Pharmacie Nationale d'Approvisionnement; and Dr Oumy Kalsoum Ndao - Directrice du projet Informed Push Model

I am convinced that the good spirit and warmth of Dakar will infuse the proceedings here over the coming days

I would like to begin my remarks this morning, however, by drawing your attention to another meeting that took place just over 9 months ago in London. At that meeting, representatives from across the RH community assembled to celebrate and reinvigorate the dramatic success we have seen in broadening access to FP since 2012. Representatives from more than 60 governments, private companies and foundations pledged at least \$2.5 billion to expand access to family planning worldwide

But within that framework, what certainly gave me the greatest personal pride were the advances in the commodity security space. Yes, it is true we have huge challenges before us. There remain 220 million women who do not want to become pregnant, but are not using a family planning method. And each year, we still confront hundreds of thousands of unnecessary unsafe abortions.

But the fact is, we have made huge strides in breaking down the supplies barriers that contribute to these challenges. Continuing a trend that began in 2011 with our own Implanon Access Initiative, prices for contraceptive commodities are lower today than they have ever been before. From implants to injectables, the rationing that once characterized much of donor procurement has come to an end. Just as importantly, we have more WHO prequalified

products than ever before, the result of manufacturers who see the market advantages of holding this status, but also of agencies who have supported the manufacturers to successfully manage the WHO prequalification process.

Regrettably, not all Coalition countries in need find themselves in a position to benefit from these advances. And it is this reality that has shaped much of our work over the past year. In 2017, our regional forum for Latin America, ForoLAC and UNFPA, launched a new initiative designed to open the eyes of national procurers to the supply opportunities around them. Through a series of face to face meetings called *encuentros*, we are demonstrating to our regional partners that they are, compared to most LMICs, at a distinct disadvantage with respect to commodity security. They pay more for commodities than any other LMIC region; they procure products whose quality cannot be assured; and they remain unaware of many benefits that accrue to countries elsewhere in the world. In a nutshell, we want to motivate regional players to take advantage of those opportunities for which they are eligible; and to apply the lessons of the last decade to benefit themselves and the region. They can support national industries to broaden market bases by securing WHO Prequal; they can negotiate with manufacturers, individually or collectively, to secure favorable procurement terms; etc.

Already, we are seeing results, we emerged from last month's *encuentro* in Lima with consensus around the need to establish a regional price observatory; to push for local registration of critical commodities; to secure more affordable pricing through UNFPA Procurement and COMISCA; and to explore opportunities to leverage the region's purchasing power to secure favorable procurement terms.

When we last met, about 16 months ago in Seattle, I spoke of plans to put in place a global platform that would bring together people, processes, policy and technology to transform the way our community makes supply chain decisions. From the people side, it would link procurers, manufacturers, shippers and countries. In terms of technology, it would capture and harmonize data from multiple sources. And new processes would transform how members interact, analyze data, and make decisions.

Now if all this sounds familiar, it should because these core elements lie at the heart of what we now call the Global FP VAN (VAN being short for Visibility Analytics Network). The Global FP VAN will offer a platform to collectively estimate and prioritize supply needs, take action when supply imbalances loom, and advocate for funding when necessary. Eventually, it will lead to more timely and cost effective delivery of commodities; more women reached with the right product at the right time; and a better allocation of limited health resource.

Last July at the London FP Summit, I announced the launch of the VAN, while highlighting at the same time, the critical contributions of key financial and human resources such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, DFID, USAID and UNFPA.

Seven months on, the results of this joint effort have been nothing less than astonishing. We now have a formal governing structure, represented by a Steering Committee. We have key technical task forces on data sharing and technology selection. We've identified the manufacturers that we will be providing us with critical supply data during the pilot phase. We

have chosen the commodities for which data will be collected. We have chosen the countries where the pilot will be rolled out. And just last week, after a participative tendering process, members of the Steering Committee reached consensus on the technology vendor whose software will power the flow of data under the VAN. There is no question that all these accomplishments speak to the dedication and commitment of a wide cast of characters. But they also reflect the dedication of one individual who has tirelessly, even unofficially, steered the VAN from its earliest, formative days to the recent bidding process. With the unanimous backing of the Global VAN Steering Committee, it is my pleasure to announce this morning the appointment of my colleague, Julia White, as the new Director of the VAN. Congratulations Julia and thank you for all you have done to bring us, so swiftly, to where we are now.

There is saying we often used when building the case for the Global VAN, and that saying was “you cannot control what you cannot see”. The spirit behind that phrase lies at the heart of much of what we do and nowhere is that more evident than in the Costed Commodity Gap analysis, which we released in Seattle, and will do again here in Brussels for 2018. Over the course of the past year, the Seattle report found itself at the center of both planning and advocacy efforts across our community. Its findings have been presented at numerous high level fora, including the London Family Planning Summit; and the data have prompted enquiries from across the reproductive health spectrum including UNFPA, bilateral agencies, and country partners, all requesting tailored data to suit their own needs.

But in my opinion, the best outcomes to come from the report were the thought-provoking questions and suggestions from across our community. In the dynamic environment of the Coalition, questions lead to answers, and those answers lead to more questions. The new CGA report, which we publish today, explores in greater depth a number of critical themes highlighted in the last report. We have new information about private sector commodity prices, made possible by the purchase of data from IQVIA, including OC cycle prices for up to 60 countries. While we took a conservative approach to using this data to cost supplies sold in the private sector, we nevertheless identified **\$1.33 billion** in supply cost and spending that had previously been hidden from our view. The data also allow us to compare aspects of the public and private sectors that yield important insights for our ongoing discussions of how to guarantee supply security in the context of declining donor support.

Another major achievement of 2017 was the successful replenishment of the funding base required to sustain both our core workplan and targeted initiatives. Over the course of the 12 months, our staff has worked tirelessly to full the obligation placed upon us under the TOR to ensure the financial sustainability of the RHSC. That effort saw the development of no fewer than ten separate funding proposals, yielding us in excess of \$20M over the next four years. While the total amount doesn't completely cover our core needs, it has allowed to embark on a whole range of exciting new initiatives in the areas of youth, safe abortion, data digitization and marginalized populations – especially in Latin America. It has allowed us to recruit the staff needed to undertake these activities; and it has allowed us to resume the Innovation Fund, which for over a decade, has made it possible to inspire and finance over \$5M worth of new activities that further both our strategic goals and those of our Working Groups.

Last week, we concluded our first round under the current funding cycle and I am happy to announce the five winners, namely :

- Village Reach: Enabling innovative reproductive health supply chains through streamlined costing.
- Marie Stopes Uganda: Establishing Social Marketing of Menstrual Cups in Uganda.
- MSH: Integrating oxytocin into the EPI cold chain
- Gynuity: Oral Antihypertensive Therapy: A Pathway to Efficiently Reducing Maternal Complications from Severe Hypertension in Low Resource Environments.
- William Davidson Institute. Private Sector Distributor Landscape Analysis.

Again, let me congratulate the winners – and indeed all the applicants under this round of the fund. The new policies put into place for vetting and developing concepts are yielding top quality proposals that every working group and caucus should be proud of.

I'd like to turn my attention to one area of our work I have not yet addressed and that is addressing the RH needs of young people through a supplies lens. As many of you know, this year the Executive Committee approved the creation of a new Youth Caucus, which places it on an equal footing with the other critical themes – NURHT, MHS, etc. - that shape our work.

But as I look around the room, I can't help but think of those who, like me, are as far from young as one could possibly be. When we began our careers, we found ourselves in an environment very different from today. In fact, it was a Republican President, Ronald Reagan, who presided over the largest increase in family planning spending to date. In many ways, it was more hospitable. It offered a wealth of opportunities. And those of us, now in our 50s and 60s, benefitted enormously from this unique period.

There are many who argue that the well-being of young people today hinges on their having access to sexual and RH rights and services. And that is certainly true. But I would also argue that the future of SRHRS hinges on young people filling the positions and roles all of us over 50 occupy today: the supply chain managers, the advocates, the program managers and service providers. But how do we do that in an environment so very different from where began. Giving young people a seat at the table and registering their perspectives make for a promising start. But how do we really press the mantle into the hands of these young leaders?

This year, the Coalition has committed itself to a unique initiative: The Supply Fellows Scheme. We invited 13 seasoned supplies professionals to partner with a meeting participant under the age of 30. We're calling the partners "Supply Fellows". They are not "mentors" and "mentees" because we don't expect the learning to take place in just one direction. Both partners approach the table on an equal footing and have much to gain from one another. They will shadow one another all week, navigating the landscape of the RHSC General membership meeting together. In this way, our hope is that seasoned fellows are inspired by the passion of young leaders, who in turn get ringside seats, as it were, to introductions and conversations which stand to help shape their future in reproductive health.

John Townsend, my friend and colleague on whose wisdom and insight I have called for many years, recently said to me, “Sometimes it is important to guide, sometimes to listen, and sometimes to just get out of the way”. I am confident that our inaugural Supply Fellows Scheme checks at least two of these boxes!

The guiding principle behind Supply Fellows is a commitment to ensuring that all our members across the board enjoy equitable access to the Coalition’s resources. It is our way of seeking to redress power imbalances; it takes on special meaning in the current fevered social climate, where deep-seated power differentials, having long simmered, have finally exploded into the startling spread and ferocity of the #MeToo movement.

The RHSC is not a monolithic organization; we are a loose affiliation of some 450 multisectoral agencies, each playing out its own distinct level of power and authority in this shared arena. It behooves us to be extra vigilant in times like these, and I want to take this opportunity to reassure everyone here that we take the integrity and dignity of all our members very seriously and will not brook abuse of any kind under our auspices.

I’d like to round out my review of 2017 by looking back on our growing body of work that explores the linkages between supplies and safe abortion. Last year, we saw the completion of four Innovation Fund grants in Asia, sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America. In Kazakhstan, our member Gynuity heightened provider awareness of a multi-level urine pregnancy test to monitor the successful completion of early medical abortion. In Nigeria, Ipas field-tested a mobile health app to help healthcare providers better track medical abortion and manual vacuum aspiration supplies on their premises, thereby reducing the frequency of stockouts. And in six Latin American countries, our partner CLACAI analyzed factors that have either favored or hindered the registration of misoprostol and mifepristone for safe abortion.

This body of impressive work has set the stage for more strategic engagement around the subject of Safe Abortion supplies, which now constitutes a separate workstream within the Caucus for New and Underused Reproductive Health Technology. As proud as we are of this work, we remain fully aware of the sensitivities surrounding it and are firmly committed to steering clear of the ideological rifts that can only undermine the power of partnership on which our success depends. The Coalition was born in a period of ideological discord and the fact we have survived both that period and the honeymoon that followed is a testament to the success of creating safe spaces, of leaving institutional hats at the door, and of focusing on what binds us, not tears us apart.

So, we leave 2017 with our eyes firmly fixed on the future – on the run up to 2020, but also with our eyes fixed firmly on 2030 and the need to ensure the security of commodities required to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. We have always been a Coalition of the willing and of partnerships based on trust, mutual respect and a shared vision. Over the next two days, as we teach, learn, strategize and plan, let us also recommit to saving the future together.