

## HEALTH - GENERAL

### II. GENERAL COMMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- CERD General Recommendation XXX (Sixty-fifth session, 2004): Discrimination Against Non-Citizens, A/59/18 (2004) 93 at paras. 29 and 36.

...

[The Committee recommends]...that the States parties to the Convention, as appropriate to their specific circumstances, adopt the following measures:

...

29. Remove obstacles that prevent the enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights by non-citizens, notably in the areas of education, housing, employment and health;

...

36. Ensure that States parties respect the right of non-citizens to an adequate standard of physical and mental health by, *inter alia*, refraining from denying or limiting their access to preventive, curative and palliative health services;

...

- ICESCR General Comment 14 (Twenty-second session, 2000): Article 12: The Right to the Highest Attainable Standard of Health, E/2001/22 (2000) 128 at paras. 1-65.

#### The right to the highest attainable standard of health (art. 12 of the Covenant)

1. Health is a fundamental human right indispensable for the exercise of other human rights. Every human being is entitled to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health conducive to living a life in dignity. The realization of the right to health may be pursued through numerous, complementary approaches, such as the formulation of health policies, or the implementation of health programmes developed by the World Health Organization (WHO), or the adoption of specific legal instruments. Moreover, the right to health includes certain components which are legally enforceable. a/

2. The human right to health is recognized in numerous international instruments. Article 25, paragraph 1, of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirms: "Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services." In international human rights law, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights provides the most comprehensive article on the right to health. In accordance with article 12, paragraph 1, of the Covenant, States parties recognize "the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health", while article 12, paragraph 2, enumerates, by way of illustration, a number of "steps to be taken by the States

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parties ... to achieve the full realization of this right". Additionally, the right to health is recognized, *inter alia*, in article 5, paragraph (e) (iv), of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (1965), in article 11, paragraph 1 (f), and article 12 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979) and in article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Several regional human rights instruments also recognize the right to health, such as the European Social Charter (revised) (1996) (art. 11), the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (1981) (art. 16) and the Additional Protocol to the American Convention on Human Rights in the Area of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (Protocol of San Salvador) (1988) (art. 10). Similarly, the right to health has been proclaimed by the Commission on Human Rights in its resolution 1989/11, as well as in the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action b/ and other international instruments. c/

3. The right to health is closely related to and dependent upon the realization of other human rights, as contained in the International Bill of Rights, including the rights to food, housing, work, education, human dignity, life, non-discrimination, equality, the prohibition against torture, privacy, access to information, and the freedoms of association, assembly and movement. These and other rights and freedoms address integral components of the right to health.

4. In drafting article 12 of the Covenant, the Third Committee of the General Assembly did not adopt the definition of health contained in the preamble to the Constitution of WHO, which conceptualizes health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity". However, the reference in article 12, paragraph 1, of the Covenant to "the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health" is not confined to the right to health care. On the contrary, the drafting history and the express wording of article 12, paragraph 2, acknowledge that the right to health embraces a wide range of socio-economic factors that promote conditions in which people can lead a healthy life, and extends to the underlying determinants of health, such as food and nutrition, housing, access to safe and potable water and adequate sanitation, safe and healthy working conditions, and a healthy environment.

5. The Committee is aware that, for millions of people throughout the world, the full enjoyment of the right to health still remains a distant goal. Moreover, in many cases, especially for those living in poverty, this goal is becoming increasingly remote. The Committee recognizes the formidable structural and other obstacles resulting from international and other factors beyond the control of States that impede the full realization of article 12 of the Covenant in many States parties.

6. With a view to assisting States parties' implementation of the Covenant and the fulfilment of their reporting obligations, this General Comment focuses on the normative content of

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article 12 (Part I), States parties' obligations (Part II), violations (Part III) and implementation at the national level (Part IV), while the obligations of actors other than States parties are addressed elsewhere (Part V). The General Comment is based on the Committee's experience in examining States parties' reports over many years.

### I. NORMATIVE CONTENT OF ARTICLE 12 OF THE COVENANT

7. Article 12, paragraph 1, of the Covenant provides a definition of the right to health, while article 12, paragraph 2, enumerates illustrative, non-exhaustive examples of States parties' obligations.

8. The right to health is not to be understood as a right to be healthy. The right to health contains both freedoms and entitlements. The freedoms include the right to control one's health and body, including sexual and reproductive freedom, and the right to be free from interference, such as the right to be free from torture, non-consensual medical treatment and experimentation. By contrast, the entitlements include the right to a system of health protection which provides equality of opportunity for people to enjoy the highest attainable level of health.

9. The notion of the highest attainable standard of health in article 12, paragraph 1, takes into account both the individual's biological and socio-economic preconditions and a State's available resources. There are a number of aspects which cannot be addressed solely within the relationship between States and individuals; in particular, good health cannot be ensured by a State, nor can States provide protection against every possible cause of human ill health. Thus, genetic factors, individual susceptibility to ill health and the adoption of unhealthy or risky lifestyles may play an important role with respect to an individual's health. Consequently, the right to health must be understood as a right to the enjoyment of a variety of facilities, goods, services and conditions necessary for the realization of the highest attainable standard of health.

10. Since the adoption in 1966 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the world health situation has changed dramatically and the notion of health has undergone substantial changes and has also widened in scope. More determinants of health are being taken into consideration, such as resource distribution and gender differences. A wider definition of health also takes into account such socially-related concerns as violence and armed conflict. d/ Moreover, formerly unknown diseases, such as human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) and others that have become more widespread, such as cancer, as well as the rapid growth of the world population, have created new obstacles for the realization of the right to health which need to be taken into account when interpreting article 12.

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11. The Committee interprets the right to health, as defined in article 12, paragraph 1, of the Covenant, as an inclusive right extending not only to timely and appropriate health care but also to the underlying determinants of health, such as access to safe and potable water and adequate sanitation, an adequate supply of safe food, nutrition and housing, healthy occupational and environmental conditions, and access to health-related education and information, including on sexual and reproductive health. A further important aspect is the participation of the population in all health-related decision-making at the community, national and international levels.

12. The right to health in all its forms and at all levels contains the following interrelated and essential elements, the precise application of which will depend on the conditions prevailing in a particular State party:

(a) *Availability*. Functioning public health and health-care facilities, goods and services, as well as programmes, have to be available in sufficient quantity within the State party. The precise nature of the facilities, goods and services will vary depending on numerous factors, including the State party's developmental level. They will include, however, the underlying determinants of health, such as safe drinking water and adequate sanitation facilities, hospitals, clinics and other health-related buildings, trained medical and professional personnel receiving domestically competitive salaries, and essential drugs, as defined by the WHO Action Programme on Essential Drugs; e/

(b) *Accessibility*. Health facilities, goods and services f/ have to be accessible to everyone without discrimination, within the jurisdiction of the State party. Accessibility has four overlapping dimensions:

(i) *Non-discrimination*: health facilities, goods and services must be accessible to all, especially the most vulnerable or marginalized sections of the population, in law and in fact, without discrimination on any of the prohibited grounds (see paras.18 and 19 below);

(ii) *Physical accessibility*: health facilities, goods and services must be within safe physical reach for all sections of the population, especially vulnerable or marginalized groups, such as ethnic minorities and indigenous populations, women, children, adolescents, older persons, persons with disabilities and persons with HIV/AIDS. Accessibility also implies that medical services and underlying determinants of health, such as safe and potable water and adequate sanitation facilities, are within safe physical reach, including in rural areas. Accessibility further includes adequate access to buildings for persons with disabilities;

(iii) *Economic accessibility (affordability)*: health facilities, goods and services must be affordable for all. Payment for health-care services, as well as services related to the underlying determinants of health, has to be based on the principle of equity, ensuring that

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these services, whether privately or publicly provided, are affordable for all, including socially disadvantaged groups. Equity demands that poorer households should not be disproportionately burdened with health expenses as compared to richer households;

(iv) Information accessibility: accessibility includes the right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas g/ concerning health issues. However, accessibility of information should not impair the right to have personal health data treated with confidentiality;

(c) *Acceptability*. All health facilities, goods and services must be respectful of medical ethics and culturally appropriate, i.e. respectful of the culture of individuals, minorities, peoples and communities, sensitive to gender and life-cycle requirements, as well as being designed to respect confidentiality and improve the health status of those concerned;

(d) *Quality*. As well as being culturally acceptable, health facilities, goods and services must also be scientifically and medically appropriate and of good quality. This requires, *inter alia*, skilled medical personnel, scientifically approved and unexpired drugs and hospital equipment, safe and potable water, and adequate sanitation;

13. The non-exhaustive catalogue of examples in article 12, paragraph 2, of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights provides guidance in defining the action to be taken by States. It gives specific generic examples of measures arising from the broad definition of the right to health contained in article 12, paragraph 1, thereby illustrating the content of that right, as exemplified in the following paragraphs. h/

### Article 12, paragraph 2 (a) of the Covenant: The right to maternal, child and reproductive health

14. "The provision for the reduction of the stillbirth rate and of infant mortality and for the healthy development of the child" i/ may be understood as requiring measures to improve child and maternal health, sexual and reproductive health services, including access to family planning, pre- and post-natal care, j/ emergency obstetric services and access to information, as well as to resources necessary to act on that information. k/

### Article 12, paragraph 2 (b) of the Covenant: The right to healthy natural and workplace environments

15. "The improvement of all aspects of environmental and industrial hygiene" comprises, *inter alia*, preventive measures in respect of occupational accidents and diseases; the requirement to ensure an adequate supply of safe and potable water and basic sanitation; the prevention and reduction of the population's exposure to harmful substances such as radiation and harmful chemicals or other detrimental environmental conditions that directly or

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indirectly impact upon human health. l/ Furthermore, industrial hygiene refers to the minimization, so far as is reasonably practicable, of the causes of health hazards inherent in the working environment. m/ Article 12, paragraph 2 (b), of the Covenant also embraces adequate housing and safe and hygienic working conditions, an adequate supply of food and proper nutrition, and discourages the abuse of alcohol, and the use of tobacco, drugs and other harmful substances.

### Article 12, paragraph 2 (c) of the Covenant: The right to prevention, treatment and control of diseases

16. "The prevention, treatment and control of epidemic, endemic, occupational and other diseases" requires the establishment of prevention and education programmes for behaviour-related health concerns such as sexually transmitted diseases, in particular HIV/AIDS, and those adversely affecting sexual and reproductive health, and the promotion of social determinants of good health, such as environmental safety, education, economic development and gender equity. The right to treatment includes the creation of a system of urgent medical care in cases of accidents, epidemics and similar health hazards, and the provision of disaster relief and humanitarian assistance in emergency situations. The control of diseases refers to States' individual and joint efforts to, *inter alia*, make available relevant technologies, using and improving epidemiological surveillance and data collection on a disaggregated basis, the implementation or enhancement of immunization programmes and other strategies of infectious disease control.

### Article 12, paragraph 2 (d) of the Covenant: The right to health facilities, goods and services (see para. 12 (b) above) g/

17. "The creation of conditions which would assure to all medical service and medical attention in the event of sickness", both physical and mental, includes the provision of equal and timely access to basic preventive, curative, rehabilitative health services and health education; regular screening programmes; appropriate treatment of prevalent diseases, illnesses, injuries and disabilities, preferably at community level; the provision of essential drugs; and appropriate mental health treatment and care. A further important aspect is the improvement and furtherance of participation of the population in the provision of preventive and curative health services, such as the organization of the health sector, the insurance system and, in particular, participation in political decisions relating to the right to health taken at both the community and national levels.

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### ARTICLE 12 OF THE COVENANT: SPECIAL TOPICS OF BROAD APPLICATION

#### Non-discrimination and equal treatment

18. By virtue of paragraph 2 of its article 2 and of its article 3, the Covenant proscribes any discrimination in access to health care and underlying determinants of health, as well as to means and entitlements for their procurement, on the grounds of race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth, physical or mental disability, health status (including HIV/AIDS), sexual orientation and civil, political, social or other status, which has the intention or effect of nullifying or impairing the equal enjoyment or exercise of the right to health. The Committee stresses that many measures, such as most strategies and programmes designed to eliminate health-related discrimination, can be pursued with minimum resource implications through the adoption, modification or abrogation of legislation or the dissemination of information. The Committee recalls General Comment No. 3 (1990) on the nature of States' parties obligations (art. 2, para. 1, of the Covenant), paragraph 12, which states that even in times of severe resource constraints, the vulnerable members of society must be protected by the adoption of relatively low-cost targeted programmes.

19. With respect to the right to health, equality of access to health care and health services has to be emphasized. States have a special obligation to provide those who do not have sufficient means with the necessary health insurance and health-care facilities, and to prevent any discrimination on internationally prohibited grounds in the provision of health care and health services, especially with respect to the core obligations of the right to health (see paras. 43 and 44 below). Inappropriate health resource allocation can lead to discrimination that may not be overt. For example, investments should not disproportionately favour expensive curative health services which are often accessible only to a small, privileged fraction of the population, rather than primary and preventive health care benefiting a far larger part of the population.

#### Gender perspective

20. The Committee recommends that States integrate a gender perspective in their health-related policies, planning, programmes and research in order to promote better health for both women and men. A gender-based approach recognizes that biological and sociocultural factors play a significant role in influencing the health of men and women. The disaggregation of health and socio-economic data according to sex is essential for identifying and remedying inequalities in health.

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### Women and the right to health

21. To eliminate discrimination against women, there is a need to develop and implement a comprehensive national strategy for promoting women's right to health throughout their life span. Such a strategy should include interventions aimed at the prevention and treatment of diseases affecting women, as well as policies to provide access to a full range of high quality and affordable health care, including sexual and reproductive services. A major goal should be reducing women's health risks, particularly lowering rates of maternal mortality and protecting women from domestic violence. The realization of women's right to health requires the removal of all barriers interfering with access to health services, education and information, including in the area of sexual and reproductive health. It is also important to undertake preventive, promotive and remedial action to shield women from the impact of harmful traditional cultural practices and norms that deny them their full reproductive rights.

### Children and adolescents

22. Article 12, paragraph 2 (*a*), of the Covenant outlines the need to take measures to reduce infant mortality and promote the healthy development of infants and children. Subsequent international human rights instruments recognize that children and adolescents have the right to the enjoyment of the highest standard of health and access to facilities for the treatment of illness, as does the Convention on the Rights of the Child (art. 24, para. 1), which directs States to ensure access to essential health services for the child and his or her family, including pre- and post-natal care for mothers. The Convention links these goals with ensuring access to child-friendly information about preventive and health-promoting behaviour and support to families and communities in implementing these practices. Implementation of the principle of non-discrimination requires that girls, as well as boys, have equal access to adequate nutrition, safe environments, and physical as well as mental health services. There is a need to adopt effective and appropriate measures to abolish harmful traditional practices affecting the health of children, particularly girls, including early marriage, female genital mutilation, preferential feeding and care of male children. n/ Children with disabilities should be given the opportunity to enjoy a fulfilling and decent life and to participate within their community.

23. States parties should provide a safe and supportive environment for adolescents, that ensures the opportunity to participate in decisions affecting their health, to build life-skills, to acquire appropriate information, to receive counselling and to negotiate the health-behaviour choices they make. The realization of the right to health of adolescents is dependent on the development of youth-friendly health care, which respects confidentiality and privacy and includes appropriate sexual and reproductive health services.

24. In all policies and programmes aimed at guaranteeing the right to health of children and

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adolescents their best interests shall be a primary consideration.

### Older persons

25. With regard to the realization of the right to health of older persons, the Committee, in accordance with paragraphs 34 and 35 of General Comment No. 6 (1995) on the economic, social and cultural rights of older persons, reaffirms the importance of an integrated approach, combining elements of preventive, curative and rehabilitative health treatment. Such measures should be based on periodic check-ups for both sexes; physical as well as psychological rehabilitative measures aimed at maintaining the functionality and autonomy of older persons; and attention and care for chronically and terminally ill persons, sparing them avoidable pain and enabling them to die with dignity.

### Persons with disabilities

26. The Committee reaffirms paragraph 34 of its General Comment No. 5 (1994) on persons with disabilities, in particular the issue of persons with disabilities and the right to physical and mental health. Moreover, the Committee stresses the need to ensure that not only the public health sector but also private providers of health services and facilities comply with the principle of non-discrimination in relation to persons with disabilities.

### Indigenous peoples

27. In the light of emerging international law and practice and the recent measures taken by States in relation to indigenous peoples, o/ the Committee deems it useful to identify elements that would help to define indigenous peoples' right to health in order better to enable States with indigenous peoples to implement the provisions contained in article 12 of the Covenant. The Committee considers that indigenous peoples have the right to specific measures to improve their access to health services and care. These health services should be culturally appropriate, taking into account traditional preventive care, healing practices and medicines. States should provide resources for indigenous peoples to design, deliver and control such services so that they may enjoy the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health. The vital medicinal plants, animals and minerals necessary to the full enjoyment of health of indigenous peoples should also be protected. The Committee notes that, in indigenous communities, the health of the individual is often linked to the health of the society as a whole and has a collective dimension. In this respect, the Committee considers that development-related activities that lead to the displacement of indigenous peoples against their will from their traditional territories and environment, denying them their sources of nutrition and breaking their symbiotic relationship with their lands, has a deleterious effect on their health.

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### Limitations

28. Issues of public health are sometimes used by States as grounds for limiting the exercise of other fundamental rights. The Committee wishes to emphasize that the Covenant's limitation clause, article 4, is primarily intended to protect the rights of individuals rather than to permit the imposition of limitations by States. Consequently, a State party which, for example, restricts the movement of, or incarcerates, persons with transmissible diseases such as HIV/AIDS, refuses to allow doctors to treat persons believed to be opposed to a government, or fails to provide immunization against the community's major infectious diseases, on grounds such as national security or the preservation of public order, has the burden of justifying such serious measures in relation to each of the elements identified in article 4. Such restrictions must be in accordance with the law, including international human rights standards, compatible with the nature of the rights protected by the Covenant, in the interest of legitimate aims pursued, and strictly necessary for the promotion of the general welfare in a democratic society.

29. In line with article 5, paragraph 1, of the Covenant, such limitations must be proportional, i.e. the least restrictive alternative must be adopted where several types of limitations are available. Even where such limitations on grounds of protecting public health are basically permitted, they should be of limited duration and subject to review.

## II. STATES PARTIES' OBLIGATIONS

### General legal obligations

30. While the Covenant provides for progressive realization and acknowledges the constraints due to the limits of available resources, it also imposes on States parties various obligations which are of immediate effect. States parties have immediate obligations in relation to the right to health, such as the guarantee that the right will be exercised without discrimination of any kind (art. 2, para. 2) and the obligation to take steps (art. 2, para. 1) towards the full realization of article 12. Such steps must be deliberate, concrete and targeted towards the full realization of the right to health. p/

31. The progressive realization of the right to health over a period of time should not be interpreted as depriving States parties' obligations of all meaningful content. Rather, progressive realization means that States parties have a specific and continuing obligation to move as expeditiously and effectively as possible towards the full realization of article 12 of the Covenant. q/

32. As with all other rights in the Covenant, there is a strong presumption that retrogressive measures taken in relation to the right to health are not permissible. If any deliberately

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retrogressive measures are taken, the State party has the burden of proving that they have been introduced after the most careful consideration of all alternatives and that they are duly justified by reference to the totality of the rights provided for in the Covenant in the context of the full use of the State party's maximum available resources. r/

33. The right to health, like all human rights, imposes three types or levels of obligations on States parties: the obligations to respect, protect and fulfil. In turn, the obligation to fulfil contains obligations to facilitate, provide and promote. s/ The obligation to respect requires States to refrain from interfering directly or indirectly with the enjoyment of the right to health. The obligation to protect requires States to take measures that prevent third parties from interfering with the Covenant's article 12 guarantees. Finally, the obligation to fulfil requires States to adopt appropriate legislative, administrative, budgetary, judicial, promotional and other measures towards the full realization of the right to health.

### Specific legal obligations

34. In particular, States are under the obligation to *respect* the right to health by, *inter alia*, refraining from denying or limiting equal access for all persons, including prisoners or detainees, minorities, asylum seekers and illegal immigrants, to preventive, curative and palliative health services; abstaining from enforcing discriminatory practices as a State policy; and abstaining from imposing discriminatory practices relating to women's health status and needs. Furthermore, obligations to respect include a State's obligation to refrain from prohibiting or impeding traditional preventive care, healing practices and medicines, from marketing unsafe drugs and from applying coercive medical treatments, unless on an exceptional basis for the treatment of mental illness or the prevention and control of communicable diseases. Such exceptional cases should be subject to specific and restrictive conditions, respecting best practices and applicable international standards, including the Principles for the Protection of Persons with Mental Illness and the Improvement of Mental Health Care. c/ In addition, States should refrain from limiting access to contraceptives and other means of maintaining sexual and reproductive health, from censoring, withholding or intentionally misrepresenting health-related information, including sexual education and information, as well as from preventing people's participation in health-related matters. States should also refrain from unlawfully polluting air, water and soil, e.g. through industrial waste from State-owned facilities, from using or testing nuclear, biological or chemical weapons if such testing results in the release of substances harmful to human health, and from limiting access to health services as a punitive measure, e.g. during armed conflicts in violation of international humanitarian law.

35. Obligations to protect include, *inter alia*, the duties of States to adopt legislation or to take other measures ensuring equal access to health care and health-related services provided by third parties; to ensure that privatization of the health sector does not constitute a threat

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to the availability, accessibility, acceptability and quality of health facilities, goods and services; to control the marketing of medical equipment and medicines by third parties; and to ensure that medical practitioners and other health professionals meet appropriate standards of education, skill and ethical codes of conduct. States are also obliged to ensure that harmful social or traditional practices do not interfere with access to pre- and post-natal care and family-planning; to prevent third parties from coercing women to undergo traditional practices, e.g. female genital mutilation; and to take measures to protect all vulnerable or marginalized groups of society, in particular women, children, adolescents and older persons, in the light of gender-based expressions of violence. States should also ensure that third parties do not limit people's access to health-related information and services.

36. The obligation to fulfil requires States parties, *inter alia*, to give sufficient recognition to the right to health in the national political and legal systems, preferably by way of legislative implementation, and to adopt a national health policy with a detailed plan for realizing the right to health. States must ensure provision of health care, including immunization programmes against the major infectious diseases, and ensure equal access for all to the underlying determinants of health, such as nutritiously safe food and potable drinking water, basic sanitation and adequate housing and living conditions. Public health infrastructures should provide for sexual and reproductive health services, including safe motherhood, particularly in rural areas. States have to ensure the appropriate training of doctors and other medical personnel, the provision of a sufficient number of hospitals, clinics and other health-related facilities, and the promotion and support of the establishment of institutions providing counselling and mental health services, with due regard to equitable distribution throughout the country. Further obligations include the provision of a public, private or mixed health insurance system which is affordable for all, the promotion of medical research and health education, as well as information campaigns, in particular with respect to HIV/AIDS, sexual and reproductive health, traditional practices, domestic violence, the abuse of alcohol and the use of cigarettes, drugs and other harmful substances. States are also required to adopt measures against environmental and occupational health hazards and against any other threat as demonstrated by epidemiological data. For this purpose they should formulate and implement national policies aimed at reducing and eliminating pollution of air, water and soil, including pollution by heavy metals such as lead from gasoline. Furthermore, States parties are required to formulate, implement and periodically review a coherent national policy to minimize the risk of occupational accidents and diseases, as well as to provide a coherent national policy on occupational safety and health services. t/

37. The obligation to fulfil (facilitate) requires States, *inter alia*, to take positive measures that enable and assist individuals and communities to enjoy the right to health. States parties are also obliged to fulfil (provide) a specific right contained in the Covenant when individuals or a group are unable, for reasons beyond their control, to realize that right

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themselves by the means at their disposal. The obligation to fulfil (promote) the right to health requires States to undertake actions that create, maintain and restore the health of the population. Such obligations include: (a) fostering recognition of factors favouring positive health results, e.g. research and provision of information; (b) ensuring that health services are culturally appropriate and that health care staff are trained to recognize and respond to the specific needs of vulnerable or marginalized groups; (c) ensuring that the State meets its obligations in the dissemination of appropriate information relating to healthy lifestyles and nutrition, harmful traditional practices and the availability of services; (d) supporting people in making informed choices about their health.

### International obligations

38. In its General Comment No. 3 (1990) on the nature of States' parties obligations (art. 2, para. 1, of the Covenant), the Committee drew attention to the obligation of all States parties to take steps, individually and through international assistance and cooperation, especially economic and technical, towards the full realization of the rights recognized in the Covenant, such as the right to health. In the spirit of Article 56 of the Charter of the United Nations, the specific provisions of the Covenant (arts. 12, 2, para. 1, 22 and 23) and the Alma-Ata Declaration, u/ States parties should recognize the essential role of international cooperation and comply with their commitment to take joint and separate action to achieve the full realization of the right to health. In this regard, States parties are referred to the Alma-Ata Declaration which proclaims that "the existing gross inequality in the health status of the people, particularly between developed and developing countries, as well as within countries, is politically, socially and economically unacceptable and is, therefore, of common concern to all countries".

39. To comply with their international obligations in relation to article 12 of the Covenant, States parties have to respect the enjoyment of the right to health in other countries, and to prevent third parties from violating the right in other countries, if they are able to influence these third parties by way of legal or political means, in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations and applicable international law. Depending on the availability of resources, States should facilitate access to essential health facilities, goods and services in other countries, wherever possible and provide the necessary aid when required (see para. 45 below). States parties should ensure that the right to health is given due attention in international agreements and, to that end, should consider the development of further legal instruments. In relation to the conclusion of other international agreements, States parties should take steps to ensure that these instruments do not adversely impact upon the right to health. Similarly, States parties have an obligation to ensure that their actions as members of international organizations take due account of the right to health. Accordingly, States parties which are members of international financial institutions, notably the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and regional development banks, should pay greater

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attention to the protection of the right to health in influencing the lending policies, credit agreements and international measures of these institutions.

40. States parties have a joint and individual responsibility, in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations and relevant resolutions of the General Assembly and of the World Health Assembly, to cooperate in providing disaster relief and humanitarian assistance in times of emergency, including assistance to refugees and internally displaced persons. Each State should contribute to this task to the maximum of its capacities. Priority in the provision of international medical aid, distribution and management of resources, such as safe and potable water, food and medical supplies, and financial aid should be given to the most vulnerable or marginalized groups of the population. Moreover, given that some diseases are easily transmissible beyond the frontiers of a State, the international community has a collective responsibility to address this problem. The economically developed States parties have a special responsibility and interest to assist the poorer developing States in this regard.

41. States parties should refrain at all times from imposing embargoes or similar measures restricting the supply of another State with adequate medicines and medical equipment. Restrictions on such goods should never be used as an instrument of political and economic pressure. In this regard, the Committee recalls its position, stated in General Comment No. 8 (1997), on the relationship between economic sanctions and respect for economic, social and cultural rights.

42. While only States are parties to the Covenant and thus ultimately accountable for compliance with it, all members of society - individuals, including health professionals, families, local communities, intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations, civil society organizations, as well as the private business sector - have responsibilities regarding the realization of the right to health. State parties should therefore provide an environment which facilitates the discharge of these responsibilities.

### Core obligations

43. In General Comment No. 3 (1990) on the nature of States' parties obligations (art. 2, para. 1, of the Covenant), the Committee confirms that States parties have a core obligation to ensure the satisfaction of, at the very least, minimum essential levels of each of the rights enunciated in the Covenant, including essential primary health care. Read in conjunction with more contemporary instruments, such as the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development, v/ the Alma-Ata Declaration provides compelling guidance on the core obligations arising from article 12 of the Covenant. Accordingly, in the Committee's view, these core obligations include at least the following obligations:

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- (a) To ensure the right of access to health facilities, goods and services on a non-discriminatory basis, especially for vulnerable or marginalized groups;
- (b) To ensure access to the minimum essential food which is nutritionally adequate and safe, to ensure freedom from hunger to everyone;
- (c) To ensure access to basic shelter, housing and sanitation, and an adequate supply of safe and potable water;
- (d) To provide essential drugs, as from time to time defined under the WHO Action Programme on Essential Drugs;
- (e) To ensure equitable distribution of all health facilities, goods and services;
- (f) To adopt and implement a national public health strategy and plan of action, on the basis of epidemiological evidence, addressing the health concerns of the whole population; the strategy and plan of action shall be devised, and periodically reviewed, on the basis of a participatory and transparent process; they shall include methods, such as right to health indicators and benchmarks, by which progress can be closely monitored; the process by which the strategy and plan of action are devised, as well as their content, shall give particular attention to all vulnerable or marginalized groups.

44. The Committee also confirms that the following are obligations of comparable priority:

- (a) To ensure reproductive, maternal (pre-natal as well as post-natal) and child health care;
- (b) To provide immunization against the major infectious diseases occurring in the community;
- (c) To take measures to prevent, treat and control epidemic and endemic diseases;
- (d) To provide education and access to information concerning the main health problems in the community, including methods of preventing and controlling them;
- (e) To provide appropriate training for health personnel, including education on health and human rights.

45. For the avoidance of any doubt, the Committee wishes to emphasize that it is particularly incumbent on States parties and other actors in a position to assist, to provide "international assistance and cooperation, especially economic and technical" (art. 2, para. 1, of the Covenant) which enable developing countries to fulfil their core and other obligations

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indicated in paragraphs 43 and 44 above.

### III. VIOLATIONS

46. When the normative content of article 12 of the Covenant (Part I above) is applied to the obligations of States parties (Part II above), a dynamic process is set in motion which facilitates identification of violations of the right to health. The following paragraphs provide illustrations of violations of article 12.

47. In determining which actions or omissions amount to a violation of the right to health, it is important to distinguish the inability from the unwillingness of a State party to comply with its obligations under article 12 of the Covenant. This follows from article 12, paragraph 1, which speaks of the highest attainable standard of health, as well as from article 2, paragraph 1, of the Covenant, which obliges each State party to take the necessary steps to the maximum of its available resources. A State which is unwilling to use the maximum of its available resources for the realization of the right to health is in violation of its obligations under article 12. If resource constraints render it impossible for a State to comply fully with its Covenant obligations, it has the burden of justifying that every effort has nevertheless been made to use all available resources at its disposal in order to satisfy, as a matter of priority, the obligations outlined above. It should be stressed, however, that a State party cannot, under any circumstances whatsoever, justify its non-compliance with the core obligations set out in paragraph 43 above, which are non-derogable.

48. Violations of the right to health can occur through the direct action of States or other entities insufficiently regulated by States. The adoption of any retrogressive measures incompatible with the core obligations under the right to health, outlined in paragraph 43 above, constitutes a violation of the right to health. Violations through acts of commission include the formal repeal or suspension of legislation necessary for the continued enjoyment of the right to health or the adoption of legislation or policies which are manifestly incompatible with pre-existing domestic or international legal obligations in relation to the right to health.

49. Violations of the right to health can also occur through the omission or failure of States to take necessary measures arising from legal obligations. Violations through acts of omission include the failure to take appropriate steps towards the full realization of everyone's right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, the failure to have a national policy on occupational safety and health as well as occupational health services, and the failure to enforce relevant laws.

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### Violations of the obligation to respect

50. Violations of the obligation to respect are those State party actions, policies or laws that contravene the standards set out in article 12 of the Covenant and are likely to result in bodily harm, unnecessary morbidity and preventable mortality. Examples include the denial of access to health facilities, goods and services to particular individuals or groups as a result of de jure or de facto discrimination; the deliberate withholding or misrepresentation of information vital to health protection or treatment; the suspension of legislation or the adoption of laws or policies that interfere with the enjoyment of any of the components of the right to health; and the failure of the State to take into account its legal obligations regarding the right to health when entering into bilateral or multilateral agreements with other States, international organizations and other entities, such as multinational corporations.

### Violations of the obligation to protect

51. Violations of the obligation to protect follow from the failure of a State party to take all necessary measures to safeguard persons within their jurisdiction from infringements of the right to health by third parties. This category includes such omissions as the failure to regulate the activities of individuals, groups or corporations so as to prevent them from violating the right to health of others; the failure to protect consumers and workers from practices detrimental to health, for example, by employers and manufacturers of medicines or food; the failure to discourage production, marketing and consumption of tobacco, narcotics and other harmful substances; the failure to protect women against violence or to prosecute perpetrators; the failure to discourage the continued observance of harmful traditional medical or cultural practices; and the failure to enact or enforce laws to prevent the pollution of water, air and soil by extractive and manufacturing industries.

### Violations of the obligation to fulfil

52. Violations of the obligation to fulfil occur through the failure of States parties to take all necessary steps to ensure the realization of the right to health. Examples include the failure to adopt or implement a national health policy designed to ensure the right to health for everyone; insufficient expenditure or misallocation of public resources which results in the non-enjoyment of the right to health by individuals or groups, particularly the vulnerable or marginalized; the failure to monitor the realization of the right to health at the national level, for example by identifying right-to-health indicators and benchmarks; the failure to take measures to reduce the inequitable distribution of health facilities, goods and services; the failure to adopt a gender-sensitive approach to health; and the failure to reduce infant and maternal mortality rates.

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### IV. IMPLEMENTATION AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL

#### Framework legislation

53. The most appropriate feasible measures to implement the right to health will vary significantly from one State to another. Every State has a margin of discretion in assessing which measures are most suitable to meet its specific circumstances. The Covenant, however, clearly imposes a duty on each State to take whatever steps are necessary to ensure that everyone has access to health facilities, goods and services so that they can enjoy, as soon as possible, the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health. This requires the adoption of a national strategy to ensure to all the enjoyment of the right to health, based on human rights principles which define the objectives of that strategy, and the formulation of policies and corresponding right-to-health indicators and benchmarks. The national health strategy should also identify the resources available to attain defined objectives, as well as the most cost-effective way of using those resources.

54. The formulation and implementation of national health strategies and plans of action should respect, *inter alia*, the principles of non-discrimination and people's participation. In particular, the right of individuals and groups to participate in decision-making processes, which may affect their development, must be an integral component of any policy, programme or strategy developed to discharge governmental obligations under article 12 of the Covenant. Promoting health must involve effective community action in setting priorities, making decisions, planning, implementing and evaluating strategies to achieve better health. Effective provision of health services can only be assured if people's participation is secured by States.

55. The national health strategy and plan of action should also be based on the principles of accountability, transparency and independence of the judiciary, since good governance is essential to the effective implementation of all human rights, including the realization of the right to health. In order to create a favourable climate for the realization of the right, States parties should take appropriate steps to ensure that the private business sector and civil society are aware of, and consider the importance of, the right to health in pursuing their activities.

56. States should consider adopting a framework law to put into effect their right-to-health national strategy. The framework law should establish national mechanisms for monitoring the implementation of national health strategies and plans of action. It should include provisions on the targets to be achieved and the time-frame for their achievement; the means by which right-to-health benchmarks could be achieved; the intended collaboration with civil society, including health experts, the private sector and international organizations; institutional responsibility for the implementation of the right to health national strategy and

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plan of action; and possible recourse procedures. In monitoring progress towards the realization of the right to health, States parties should identify the factors and difficulties affecting implementation of their obligations.

### Right-to-health indicators and benchmarks

57. National health strategies should identify appropriate right-to-health indicators and benchmarks. The indicators should be designed to monitor, at the national and international levels, the State party's obligations under article 12 of the Covenant. States may obtain guidance on appropriate right-to-health indicators, which should address different aspects of the right to health, from the ongoing work of WHO and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in this field. Right to health indicators require disaggregation on the prohibited grounds of discrimination.

58. Having identified appropriate right-to-health indicators, States parties are invited to set appropriate national benchmarks in relation to each indicator. During the periodic reporting procedure the Committee will engage in a process of "scoping" with the State party. Scoping involves the joint consideration by the State party and the Committee of the indicators and national benchmarks which will then provide the targets to be achieved during the next reporting period. In the following five years, the State party will use these national benchmarks to help monitor its implementation of article 12 of the Covenant. Thereafter, in the subsequent reporting process, the State party and the Committee will consider whether or not the benchmarks have been achieved, and the reasons for any difficulties that may have been encountered.

### Remedies and accountability

59. Any person or group victim of a violation of the right to health should have access to effective judicial or other appropriate remedies at both national and international levels. w/ All victims of such violations should be entitled to adequate reparation, which may take the form of restitution, compensation, satisfaction or guarantees of non-repetition. National ombudsmen, human rights commissions, consumer forums, patients' rights associations or similar institutions should address violations of the right to health.

60. The incorporation in the domestic legal order of international instruments recognizing the right to health can significantly enhance the scope and effectiveness of remedial measures and should be encouraged in all cases. x/ Incorporation enables courts to adjudicate violations of the right to health, or at least its core obligations, by direct reference to the Covenant.

61. Judges and members of the legal profession should be encouraged by States parties to

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pay greater attention to violations of the right to health in the exercise of their functions.

62. States parties should respect, protect, facilitate and promote the work of human rights advocates and other members of civil society with a view to assisting vulnerable or marginalized groups in the realization of their right to health.

### V. OBLIGATIONS OF ACTORS OTHER THAN STATES PARTIES

63. The role of the United Nations agencies and programmes, and in particular the key function assigned to WHO in realizing the right to health at the international, regional and country levels, is of particular importance, as is the function of UNICEF in relation to the right to health of children. When formulating and implementing their right to health national strategies, States parties should avail themselves of technical assistance and cooperation of WHO. Further, when preparing their reports, States parties should utilize the extensive information and advisory services of WHO with regard to data collection, disaggregation, and the development of right-to-health indicators and benchmarks.

64. Moreover, coordinated efforts for the realization of the right to health should be maintained to enhance the interaction among all the actors concerned, including the various components of civil society. In conformity with articles 22 and 23 of the Covenant, WHO, the International Labour Organization (ILO), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UNICEF, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the World Bank, regional development banks, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Trade Organization (WTO) and other relevant bodies within the United Nations system, should cooperate effectively with States parties, building on their respective expertise, in relation to the implementation of the right to health at the national level, with due respect to their individual mandates. In particular, the international financial institutions, notably the World Bank and IMF, should pay greater attention to the protection of the right to health in their lending policies, credit agreements and structural adjustment programmes. When examining the reports of States parties and their ability to meet the obligations under article 12 of the Covenant, the Committee will consider the effects of the assistance provided by all other actors. The adoption of a human rights-based approach by United Nations specialized agencies, programmes and bodies will greatly facilitate implementation of the right to health. In the course of its examination of States parties' reports, the Committee will also consider the role of health professional associations and other non-governmental organizations in relation to the States' obligations under article 12.

65. The role of WHO, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and UNICEF, as well as non-governmental organizations and national medical associations, is of particular importance in relation to disaster relief and humanitarian assistance in times of emergencies,

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including assistance to refugees and internally displaced persons. Priority in the provision of international medical aid, distribution and management of resources, such as safe and potable water, food and medical supplies, and financial aid should be given to the most vulnerable or marginalized groups of the population.

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### Notes

a/ For example, the principle of non-discrimination in relation to health facilities, goods and services is legally enforceable in numerous national jurisdictions.

b/ Adopted by the World Conference on Human Rights, held at Vienna from 14 to 25 June 1993 (A/CONF.157/24 (Part One, chap. III)).

c/ The Principles for the Protection of Persons with Mental Illness and for the Improvement of Mental Health Care (General Assembly resolution 46/119, annex) and the Committee's General Comment No. 5 (1994) on persons with disabilities, apply to persons with mental illness; the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (*Report of the International Conference on Population and Development, Cairo, 5-13 September 1994* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.95.XIII.18), chap. I, resolution 1, annex), as well as the Beijing Declaration and Programme for Action adopted by the Fourth World Conference on Women (*Report of the Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, 4-15 September 1995* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.96.IV.13), chap. I, resolution 1, annex I), contain definitions of reproductive health and women's health, respectively.

d/ Common article 3 of the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949 for the protection of war victims (1949); article 75, paragraph 2 (a), of Additional Protocol I (1977) to these Conventions relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts; and article 4 (a) of the Additional Protocol II (1977) relating to the Protection of Victims of Non-International Armed Conflicts.

e/ See WHO Model List of Essential Drugs (revised December 1999, *WHO Drug Information*, vol. 13, No. 4, 1999).

f/ Unless expressly provided otherwise, any reference in this General Comment to health facilities, goods and services includes the underlying determinants of health outlined in paras. 11 and 12 (a) of this general comment.

g/ See article 19, paragraph 2, of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. This General Comment gives particular emphasis to access to information because of the special importance of this issue in relation to health.

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h/ In the literature and practice concerning the right to health, three levels of health care are frequently referred to: primary health care typically deals with common and relatively minor illnesses and is provided by health professionals and/or generally trained doctors working within the community at relatively low cost; secondary health care is provided in centres, usually hospitals, and typically deals with relatively common minor or serious illnesses that cannot be managed at community level, using specialty-trained health professionals and doctors, special equipment and sometimes in-patient care at comparatively higher cost; tertiary health care is provided in relatively few centres, typically deals with small numbers of minor or serious illnesses requiring specialty-trained health professionals and doctors and special equipment, and is often relatively expensive. Since forms of primary, secondary and tertiary health care frequently overlap and often interact, the use of this typology does not always provide sufficient distinguishing criteria to be helpful for assessing which levels of health care States parties must provide, and is therefore of limited assistance in relation to the normative understanding of article 12 of the Covenant.

i/ According to WHO, the stillbirth rate is no longer commonly used, infant and under-five mortality rates being measured instead.

j/ Prenatal denotes existing or occurring before birth; perinatal refers to the period shortly before and after birth (in medical statistics the period begins with the completion of 28 weeks of gestation and is variously defined as ending one to four weeks after birth); neonatal, by contrast, covers the period pertaining to the first four weeks after birth; while *post-natal* denotes occurrence after birth. In this General Comment, the more generic terms pre- and post-natal are exclusively employed.

k/ Reproductive health means that women and men have the freedom to decide if and when to reproduce and the right to be informed and to have access to safe, effective, affordable and acceptable methods of family planning of their choice as well as the right of access to appropriate health-care services that will, for example, enable women to go safely through pregnancy and childbirth.

l/ The Committee recalls, in this regard, Principle 1 of the Stockholm Declaration (*Report of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, Stockholm, 5-16 June 1972* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.73.II.A.14), Part 1, chap. I) which states: "Man has the fundamental right to freedom, equality and adequate conditions of life, in an environment of a quality that permits a life of dignity and well-being", as well as of recent developments in international law, including General Assembly resolution 45/94 on the need to ensure a healthy environment for the well-being of individuals; Principle 1 of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (*Report on the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, 3-14 June 1992* (A/CONF.151/26/Rev.1 (Vol. I, Vol.I/Corr.1, Vol. II, Vol. III and Vol.III/Corr.1) (United Nations publication, Sales No.

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E.93.I.8 and corrigenda), vol. I: *Resolutions adopted by the Conference*, resolution 1, annex I); and regional human rights instruments such as article 10 of the American Convention on Human Rights in the Area of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (Protocol of San Salvador).

m/ ILO Convention No. 155 (1981) concerning occupational safety and health and the working environment, article 4, paragraph 2.

n/ See World Health Assembly resolution WHA47.10, of 10 May 1994, entitled "Maternal and child health and family planning: Traditional practices harmful to the health of women and children".

o/ Recent emerging international norms relevant to indigenous peoples include ILO Convention No. 169 (1989) concerning indigenous and tribal peoples in independent countries; the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), article 29, paras. (c) and (d) and article 30; the Convention on Biological Diversity (1992), article 8 (j), recommending that States respect, preserve and maintain knowledge, innovation and practices of indigenous communities; Agenda 21 (*Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, 3-14 June 1992*, (A/CONF.151/26/Rev.1 (Vol. I, Vol. I/Corr.1, Vol. II, Vol. III and Vol. III/Corr.1)) (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.93.I.8 and corrigenda), vol. I: *Resolutions adopted by the Conference*, resolution 1, annex II), in particular chapter 26 and the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, adopted by the World Conference on Human Rights held in 1993 (sect. I, para. 20) (A/CONF.157/24 (Part I), chap. III), stating that States should take concerted positive steps to ensure respect for all human rights of indigenous peoples, on the basis of non-discrimination. See also the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (1992), preamble and article 3 and the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, particularly in Africa (1994) (art. 10, para. 2 (e)). During recent years an increasing number of States have changed their constitutions and introduced legislation recognizing specific rights of indigenous peoples.

p/ See the Committee's General Comment No. 13 (1999) on the right to education (art. 13 of the Covenant), para. 43.

q/ *Ibid.*, para. 44. See also General Comment No. 3 (1990) on the nature of States parties' obligations (art. 2, para. 1, of the Covenant), para. 9.

r/ See the Committee's General Comments No. 3 (1990), para. 9 and No. 13 (1999), para. 45.

s/ According to the Committee's General Comments No. 12 (1999) on the right to adequate

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food (art. 11 of the Covenant) and No. 13 (1999), the obligation to fulfil incorporates an obligation to *facilitate* and an obligation to *provide*. In the present general comment, the obligation to fulfil also incorporates an obligation to promote because of the critical importance of health promotion in the work of WHO and elsewhere.

t/ Elements of such a policy are the identification, determination, authorization and control of dangerous materials, equipment, substances, agents and work processes; the provision of health information to workers and the provision, if needed, of adequate protective clothing and equipment; the enforcement of laws and regulations through adequate inspection; the requirement of notification of occupational accidents and diseases, the conduct of inquiries into serious accidents and diseases, and the production of annual statistics; the protection of workers and their representatives from disciplinary measures for actions properly taken by them in conformity with such a policy; and the provision of occupational health services with essentially preventive functions. See ILO Convention No. 155 (1981) concerning occupational safety and health and the working environment and Convention No. 161 (1985) concerning occupational health services.

u/ *Report of the International Conference on Primary Health Care, Alma-Ata, USSR, 6-2 September 1978*, WHO, "Health for All" Series, No. 1, Geneva, pp. 2-6.

v/ See *Report of the International Conference on Population and Development, Cairo, 5-13 September 1994*, op. cit. (footnote *c* above), chaps. VII and VIII.

w/ Regardless of whether groups as such can seek remedies as distinct holders of rights, States parties are bound by both the collective and individual dimensions of article 12. Collective rights are critical in the field of health; modern public health policy relies heavily on prevention and promotion which are approaches directed primarily to groups.

x/ See the Committee's General Comment No. 2 (1990) on technical assistance measures (art. 22 of the Covenant), para. 9.

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- CEDAW General Recommendation 24 (Twentieth session, 1999): Article 12: Women and Health, A/54/38 Rev.1 part I (1999) 3 at paras. 2, 5-7 and 9-31.

...

2. States parties' compliance with article 12 of the Convention is central to the health and well-being of women. It requires States to eliminate discrimination against women in their access to health care services, throughout the life cycle, particularly in the areas of family planning, pregnancy, confinement and during the post-natal period. The examination of

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reports submitted by States parties pursuant to article 18 of the Convention demonstrates that women's health is an issue that is recognized as a central concern in promoting the health and well-being of women. For the benefit of States parties and those who have a particular interest in and concern with the issues surrounding women's health, the present general recommendation seeks to elaborate the Committee's understanding of article 12 and to address measures to eliminate discrimination in order to realize the right of women to the highest attainable standard of health.

...

5. The Committee refers also to its earlier general recommendations on female circumcision, human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS), disabled women, violence against women and equality in family relations, all of which refer to issues which are integral to full compliance with article 12 of the Convention.

6. While biological differences between women and men may lead to differences in health status, there are societal factors which are determinative of the health status of women and men and which can vary among women themselves. For that reason, special attention should be given to the health needs and rights of women belonging to vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, such as migrant women, refugee and internally displaced women, the girl child and older women, women in prostitution, indigenous women and women with physical or mental disabilities.

7. The Committee notes that the full realization of women's right to health can be achieved only when States parties fulfil their obligation to respect, protect and promote women's fundamental human right to nutritional well-being throughout their life span by means of a food supply that is safe, nutritious and adapted to local conditions. Towards this end, States parties should take steps to facilitate physical and economic access to productive resources especially for rural women, and to otherwise ensure that the special nutritional needs of all women within their jurisdiction are met.

...

### Key elements

#### Article 12 (1)

9. States parties are in the best position to report on the most critical health issues affecting women in that country. Therefore, in order to enable the Committee to evaluate whether measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the field of health care are appropriate, States parties must report on their health legislation, plans and policies for women with reliable data disaggregated by sex on the incidence and severity of diseases and conditions hazardous to women's health and nutrition and on the availability and cost-effectiveness of preventive and curative measures. Reports to the Committee must demonstrate that health legislation, plans and policies are based on scientific and ethical

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research and assessment of the health status and needs of women in that country and take into account any ethnic, regional or community variations or practices based on religion, tradition or culture.

10. States parties are encouraged to include in their reports information on diseases, health conditions and conditions hazardous to health that affect women or certain groups of women differently from men, as well as information on possible intervention in this regard.

11. Measures to eliminate discrimination against women are considered to be inappropriate if a health care system lacks services to prevent, detect and treat illnesses specific to women. It is discriminatory for a State party to refuse to legally provide for the performance of certain reproductive health services for women. For instance, if health service providers refuse to perform such services based on conscientious objection, measures should be introduced to ensure that women are referred to alternative health providers.

12. States parties should report on their understanding of how policies and measures on health care address the health rights of women from the perspective of women's needs and interests and how it addresses distinctive features and factors which differ for women in comparison to men, such as:

(a) Biological factors which differ for women in comparison with men, such as their menstrual cycle and their reproductive function and menopause. Another example is the higher risk of exposure to sexually transmitted diseases which women face;

(b) Socio-economic factors that vary for women in general and some groups of women in particular. For example, unequal power relationships between women and men in the home and workplace may negatively affect women's nutrition and health. They may also be exposed to different forms of violence which can affect their health. Girl children and adolescent girls are often vulnerable to sexual abuse by older men and family members, placing them at risk of physical and psychological harm and unwanted and early pregnancy. Some cultural or traditional practices such as female genital mutilation also carry a high risk of death and disability;

(c) Psychosocial factors which vary between women and men include depression in general and post-partum depression in particular as well as other psychological conditions, such as those that lead to eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia;

(d) While lack of respect for the confidentiality of patients will affect both men and women, it may deter women from seeking advice and treatment and thereby adversely affect their health and well-being. Women will be less willing, for that reason, to seek medical care for diseases of the genital tract, for contraception or for incomplete abortion and in cases where

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they have suffered sexual or physical violence.

13. The duty of States parties to ensure, on a basis of equality between men and women, access to health care services, information and education implies an obligation to respect, protect and fulfil women's rights to health care. States parties have the responsibility to ensure that legislation and executive action and policy comply with these three obligations. They must also put in place a system which ensures effective judicial action. Failure to do so will constitute a violation of article 12.

14. The obligation to respect rights requires States parties to refrain from obstructing action taken by women in pursuit of their health goals. States parties should report on how public and private health care providers meet their duties to respect women's rights to have access to health care. For example, States parties should not restrict women's access to health services or to the clinics that provide those services on the ground that women do not have the authorization of husbands, partners, parents or health authorities, because they are unmarried 1/ or because they are women. Other barriers to women's access to appropriate health care include laws that criminalize medical procedures only needed by women and that punish women who undergo those procedures.

15. The obligation to protect rights relating to women's health requires States parties, their agents and officials to take action to prevent and impose sanctions for violations of rights by private persons and organizations. Since gender-based violence is a critical health issue for women, States parties should ensure:

(a) The enactment and effective enforcement of laws and the formulation of policies, including health care protocols and hospital procedures to address violence against women and abuse of girl children and the provision of appropriate health services;

(b) Gender-sensitive training to enable health care workers to detect and manage the health consequences of gender-based violence;

(c) Fair and protective procedures for hearing complaints and imposing appropriate sanctions on health care professionals guilty of sexual abuse of women patients;

(d) The enactment and effective enforcement of laws that prohibit female genital mutilation and marriage of girl children.

16. States parties should ensure that adequate protection and health services, including trauma treatment and counselling, are provided for women in especially difficult circumstances, such as those trapped in situations of armed conflict and women refugees.

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17. The duty to fulfil rights places an obligation on States parties to take appropriate legislative, judicial, administrative, budgetary, economic and other measures to the maximum extent of their available resources to ensure that women realize their rights to health care. Studies such as those which emphasize the high maternal mortality and morbidity rates worldwide and the large numbers of couples who would like to limit their family size but lack access to or do not use any form of contraception provide an important indication for States parties of possible breaches of their duties to ensure women's access to health care. The Committee asks States parties to report on what they have done to address the magnitude of women's ill-health, in particular when it arises from preventable conditions, such as tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS. The Committee is concerned at the growing evidence that States are relinquishing these obligations as they transfer State health functions to private agencies. States parties cannot absolve themselves of responsibility in these areas by delegating or transferring these powers to private sector agencies. States parties should therefore report on what they have done to organize governmental processes and all structures through which public power is exercised to promote and protect women's health. They should include information on positive measures taken to curb violations of women's rights by third parties, to protect their health and the measures they have taken to ensure the provision of such services.

18. The issues of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted disease are central to the rights of women and adolescent girls to sexual health. Adolescent girls and women in many countries lack adequate access to information and services necessary to ensure sexual health. As a consequence of unequal power relations based on gender, women and adolescent girls are often unable to refuse sex or insist on safe and responsible sex practices. Harmful traditional practices, such as female genital mutilation, polygamy, as well as marital rape, may also expose girls and women to the risk of contracting HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. Women in prostitution are also particularly vulnerable to these diseases. States parties should ensure, without prejudice and discrimination, the right to sexual health information, education and services for all women and girls, including those who have been trafficked, including those who have been trafficked, even if they are not legally resident in the country. In particular, States parties should ensure the rights of female and male adolescents to sexual and reproductive health education by properly trained personnel in specially designed programmes that respect their rights to privacy and confidentiality.

19. In their reports States parties should identify the test by which they assess whether women have access to health care on a basis of equality of men and women in order to demonstrate compliance with article 12. In applying these tests, States parties should bear in mind the provisions of article 1 of the Convention. Reports should therefore include comments on the impact that health policies, procedures, laws and protocols have on women when compared with men.

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20. Women have the right to be fully informed, by properly trained personnel, of their options in agreeing to treatment or research, including likely benefits and potential adverse effects of proposed procedures and available alternatives.

21. States parties should report on measures taken to eliminate barriers that women face in gaining access to health care services and what measures they have taken to ensure women timely and affordable access to such services. Barriers include requirements or conditions that prejudice women's access such as high fees for health care services, the requirement for preliminary authorization by spouse, parent or hospital authorities, distance from health facilities and absence of convenient and affordable public transport.

22. States parties should also report on measures taken to ensure access to quality health care services, for example, by making them acceptable to women. Acceptable services are those which are delivered in a way that ensures that a woman gives her fully informed consent, respects her dignity, guarantees her confidentiality and is sensitive to her needs and perspectives. States parties should not permit forms of coercion, such as non-consensual sterilization, mandatory testing for sexually transmitted diseases or mandatory pregnancy testing as a condition of employment that violate women's rights to informed consent and dignity.

23. In their reports, States parties should state what measures they have taken to ensure timely access to the range of services which are related to family planning, in particular, and to sexual and reproductive health in general. Particular attention should be paid to the health education of adolescents, including information and counselling on all methods of family planning. 2/

24. The Committee is concerned about the conditions of health care services for older women, not only because women often live longer than men and are more likely than men to suffer from disabling and degenerative chronic diseases, such as osteoporosis and dementia, but because they often have the responsibility for their ageing spouses. Therefore, States parties should take appropriate measures to ensure the access of older women to health services that address the handicaps and disabilities associated with ageing.

25. Women with disabilities, of all ages, often have difficulty with physical access to health services. Women with mental disabilities are particularly vulnerable, while there is limited understanding, in general, of the broad range of risks to mental health to which women are disproportionately susceptible as a result of gender discrimination, violence, poverty, armed conflict, dislocation and other forms of social deprivation. States parties should take appropriate measures to ensure that health services are sensitive to the needs of women with disabilities and are respectful of their human rights and dignity.

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### Article 12 (2)

26. Reports should also include what measures States parties have taken to ensure women appropriate services in connection with pregnancy, confinement and the post-natal period. Information on the rates at which these measures have reduced maternal mortality and morbidity in their countries, in general, and in vulnerable groups, regions and communities, in particular, should also be included.

27. States parties should include in their reports how they supply free services where necessary to ensure safe pregnancies, childbirth and post-partum periods for women. Many women are at risk of death or disability from pregnancy-related causes because they lack the funds to obtain or access the necessary services, which include ante-natal, maternity and post-natal services. The Committee notes that it is the duty of States parties to ensure women's right to safe motherhood and emergency obstetric services and they should allocate to these services the maximum extent of available resources.

### Other relevant articles in the Convention

28. When reporting on measures taken to comply with article 12, States parties are urged to recognize its interconnection with other articles in the Convention that have a bearing on women's health. Those articles include article 5 (b), which requires States parties to ensure that family education includes a proper understanding of maternity as a social function; article 10, which requires States parties to ensure equal access to education, thus enabling women to access health care more readily and reducing female students' drop-out rates, which are often due to premature pregnancy; article 10(h) which provides that States parties provide to women and girls specific educational information to help ensure the well-being of families, including information and advice on family planning; article 11, which is concerned, in part, with the protection of women's health and safety in working conditions, including the safeguarding of the reproductive function, special protection from harmful types of work during pregnancy and with the provision of paid maternity leave; article 14 (2) (b), which requires States parties to ensure access for rural women to adequate health care facilities, including information, counselling and services in family planning, and (h), which obliges States parties to take all appropriate measures to ensure adequate living conditions, particularly housing, sanitation, electricity and water supply, transport and communications, all of which are critical for the prevention of disease and the promotion of good health care; and article 16 (1) (e), which requires States parties to ensure that women have the same rights as men to decide freely and responsibly on the number and spacing of their children and to have access to information, education and means to enable them to exercise these rights. Article 16 (2) also proscribes the betrothal and marriage of children, an important factor in preventing the physical and emotional harm which arise from early childbirth.

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### Recommendations for government action

29. States parties should implement a comprehensive national strategy to promote women's health throughout their lifespan. This will include interventions aimed at both the prevention and treatment of diseases and conditions affecting women, as well as responding to violence against women, and will ensure universal access for all women to a full range of high-quality and affordable health care, including sexual and reproductive health services.

30. States parties should allocate adequate budgetary, human and administrative resources to ensure that women's health receives a share of the overall health budget comparable with that for men's health, taking into account their different health needs.

31. States parties should also, in particular:

(a) Place a gender perspective at the centre of all policies and programmes affecting women's health and should involve women in the planning, implementation and monitoring of such policies and programmes and in the provision of health services to women;

(b) Ensure the removal of all barriers to women's access to health services, education and information, including in the area of sexual and reproductive health, and, in particular, allocate resources for programmes directed at adolescents for the prevention and treatment of sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS;

(c) Prioritize the prevention of unwanted pregnancy through family planning and sex education and reduce maternal mortality rates through safe motherhood services and prenatal assistance. When possible, legislation criminalizing abortion could be amended to remove punitive provisions imposed on women who undergo abortion;

(d) Monitor the provision of health services to women by public, non-governmental and private organizations, to ensure equal access and quality of care;

(e) Require all health services to be consistent with the human rights of women, including the rights to autonomy, privacy, confidentiality, informed consent and choice;

(f) Ensure that the training curricula of health workers includes comprehensive, mandatory, gender-sensitive courses on women's health and human rights, in particular gender-based violence.

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### Notes

1/ See *Official Records of the General Assembly, Forty-ninth Session, Supplement No. 38*

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(A/49/38), chap. I, sect. A, General recommendation 21, para. 29.

2/ Health education for adolescents should further address, *inter alia*, gender equality, violence, prevention of sexually transmitted diseases and reproductive and sexual health rights.

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- CEDAW General Recommendation 25 (Thirtieth session, 2004): Article 4, Paragraph 1: Temporary Special Measures, A/59/38 part I (2004) 78 at para. 37.

...

37. The Committee reiterates its general recommendations 5, 8 and 23, wherein it recommended the application of temporary special measures in the fields of education, the economy, politics and employment, in the area of women representing their Governments at the international level and participating in the work of international organizations, and in the area of political and public life. States parties should intensify, within their national contexts, such efforts especially with regard to all facets of education at all levels as well as all facets and levels of training, employment and representation in public and political life. The Committee recalls that in all instances, but particularly in the area of health, States parties should carefully distinguish in each field between measures of an ongoing and permanent nature and those of a temporary nature.

...

- CRC General Comment 4 (Thirty-third session, 2003): Adolescent Health and Development in the Context of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, A/59/41 (2004) 102 at paras. 1-43.

### Introduction

1. The Convention on the Rights of the Child defines a child as “every human being below the age of 18 years unless, under the law applicable, majority is attained earlier” (art. 1). Consequently, adolescents up to 18 years old are holders of all the rights enshrined in the Convention; they are entitled to special protection measures and, according to their evolving capacities, they can progressively exercise their rights (art. 5).

2. Adolescence is a period characterized by rapid physical, cognitive and social changes, including sexual and reproductive maturation; the gradual building up of the capacity to assume adult behaviours and roles involving new responsibilities requiring new knowledge and skills. While adolescents are in general a healthy population group, adolescence also

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poses new challenges to health and development owing to their relative vulnerability and pressure from society, including peers, to adopt risky health behaviour. These challenges include developing an individual identity and dealing with one's sexuality. The dynamic transition period to adulthood is also generally a period of positive changes, prompted by the significant capacity of adolescents to learn rapidly, to experience new and diverse situations, to develop and use critical thinking, to familiarize themselves with freedom, to be creative and to socialize.

3. The Committee on the Rights of the Child notes with concern that in implementing their obligations under the Convention, States parties have not given sufficient attention to the specific concerns of adolescents as rights holders and to promoting their health and development. This has motivated the Committee to adopt the present general comment in order to raise awareness and provide States parties with guidance and support in their efforts to guarantee the respect for, protection and fulfilment of the rights of adolescents, including through the formulation of specific strategies and policies.

4. The Committee understands the concepts of "health and development" more broadly than being strictly limited to the provisions defined in articles 6 (right to life, survival and development) and 24 (right to health) of the Convention. One of the aims of this general comment is precisely to identify the main human rights that need to be promoted and protected in order to ensure that adolescents do enjoy the highest attainable standard of health, develop in a well-balanced manner, and are adequately prepared to enter adulthood and assume a constructive role in their communities and in society at large. This general comment should be read in conjunction with the Convention and its two Optional Protocols on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography, and on the involvement of children in armed conflict, as well as other relevant international human rights norms and standards.<sup>1/</sup>

### I. Fundamental Principles and Other Obligations of States Parties

5. As recognized by the World Conference on Human Rights (1993) and repeatedly stated by the Committee, children's rights too are indivisible and interrelated. In addition to articles 6 and 24, other provisions and principles of the Convention are crucial in guaranteeing that adolescents fully enjoy their right to health and development.

#### The right to non-discrimination

6. States parties have the obligation to ensure that all human beings below 18 enjoy all the rights set forth in the Convention without discrimination (art. 2), including with regard to "race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status". These grounds also cover adolescents'

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sexual orientation and health status (including HIV/AIDS and mental health). Adolescents who are subject to discrimination are more vulnerable to abuse, other types of violence and exploitation, and their health and development are put at greater risk. They are therefore entitled to special attention and protection from all segments of society.

### Appropriate guidance in the exercise of rights

7. The Convention acknowledges the responsibilities, rights and duties of parents (or other persons legally responsible for the child) “to provide, in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child, appropriate direction and guidance in the exercise by the child of the rights recognized in the Convention” (art. 5). The Committee believes that parents or other persons legally responsible for the child need to fulfil with care their right and responsibility to provide direction and guidance to their adolescent children in the exercise by the latter of their rights. They have an obligation to take into account the adolescents’ views, in accordance with their age and maturity, and to provide a safe and supportive environment in which the adolescent can develop. Adolescents need to be recognized by the members of their family environment as active rights holders who have the capacity to become full and responsible citizens, given the proper guidance and direction.

### Respect for the views of the child

8. The right to express views freely and have them duly taken into account (art. 12) is also fundamental in realizing adolescents’ right to health and development. States parties need to ensure that adolescents are given a genuine chance to express their views freely on all matters affecting them, especially within the family, in school, and in their communities. In order for adolescents to be able safely and properly to exercise this right, public authorities, parents and other adults working with or for children need to create an environment based on trust, information-sharing, the capacity to listen and sound guidance that is conducive for adolescents’ participating equally including in decision-making processes.

### Legal and judicial measures and processes

9. Under article 4 of the Convention, “States parties shall undertake all appropriate legislative, administrative and other measures for the implementation of the rights recognized” therein. In the context of the rights of adolescents to health and development, States parties need to ensure that specific legal provisions are guaranteed under domestic law, including with regard to setting a minimum age for sexual consent, marriage and the possibility of medical treatment without parental consent. These minimum ages should be the same for boys and girls (article 2 of the Convention) and closely reflect the recognition of the status of human beings under 18 years of age as rights holders, in accordance with their evolving capacity, age and maturity (arts. 5 and 12 to 17). Further, adolescents need

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to have easy access to individual complaint systems as well as judicial and appropriate non-judicial redress mechanisms that guarantee fair and due process, with special attention to the right to privacy (art. 16).

### Civil rights and freedoms

10. The Convention defines the civil rights and freedoms of children and adolescents in its articles 13 to 17. These are fundamental in guaranteeing the right to health and development of adolescents. Article 17 states that the child has the right to “access information and material from a diversity of national and international sources, especially those aimed at the promotion of his or her social, spiritual and moral well-being and physical and mental health”. The right of adolescents to access appropriate information is crucial if States parties are to promote cost-effective measures, including through laws, policies and programmes, with regard to numerous health-related situations, including those covered in articles 24 and 33 such as family planning, prevention of accidents, protection from harmful traditional practices, including early marriages and female genital mutilation, and the abuse of alcohol, tobacco and other harmful substances.

11. In order to promote the health and development of adolescents, States parties are also encouraged to respect strictly their right to privacy and confidentiality, including with respect to advice and counselling on health matters (art. 16). Health-care providers have an obligation to keep confidential medical information concerning adolescents, bearing in mind the basic principles of the Convention. Such information may only be disclosed with the consent of the adolescent, or in the same situations applying to the violation of an adult’s confidentiality. Adolescents deemed mature enough to receive counselling without the presence of a parent or other person are entitled to privacy and may request confidential services, including treatment.

### Protection from all forms of abuse, neglect, violence and exploitation 2/

12. States parties must take effective measures to ensure that adolescents are protected from all forms of violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation (arts. 19, 32-36 and 38), paying increased attention to the specific forms of abuse, neglect, violence and exploitation that affects this age group. In particular, they should adopt special measures to ensure the physical, sexual and mental integrity of adolescents with disabilities, who are particularly vulnerable to abuse and neglect. States parties should also ensure that adolescents affected by poverty who are socially marginalized are not criminalized. In this regard, financial and human resources need to be allocated to promote research that would inform the adoption of effective local and national laws, policies and programmes. Policies and strategies should be reviewed regularly and revised accordingly. In taking these measures, States parties have to take into account the evolving capacities of adolescents and involve them in an appropriate

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manner in developing measures, including programmes, designed to protect them. In this context, the Committee emphasizes the positive impact that peer education can have, and the positive influence of proper role models, especially those in the worlds of arts, entertainment and sports.

### Data collection

13. Systematic data collection is necessary for States parties to be able to monitor the health and development of adolescents. States parties should adopt data-collection mechanisms that allow desegregation by sex, age, origin and socio-economic status so that the situation of different groups can be followed. Data should also be collected to study the situation of specific groups such as ethnic and/or indigenous minorities, migrant or refugee adolescents, adolescents with disabilities, working adolescents, etc. Where appropriate, adolescents should participate in the analysis to ensure that the information is understood and utilized in an adolescent-sensitive way.

### II. Creating a Safe and Supportive Environment

14. The health and development of adolescents are strongly determined by the environments in which they live. Creating a safe and supportive environment entails addressing attitudes and actions of both the immediate environment of the adolescent - family, peers, schools and services - as well as the wider environment created by, inter alia, community and religious leaders, the media, national and local policies and legislation. The promotion and enforcement of the provisions and principles of the Convention, especially articles 2-6, 12-17, 24, 28, 29 and 31, are key to guaranteeing adolescents' right to health and development. States parties should take measures to raise awareness and stimulate and/or regulate action through the formulation of policy or the adoption of legislation and the implementation of programmes specifically for adolescents.

15. The Committee stresses the importance of the family environment, including the members of the extended family and community or other persons legally responsible for the child or adolescent (arts. 5 and 18). While most adolescents grow up in well-functioning family environments, for some the family does not constitute a safe and supportive milieu.

16. The Committee calls upon States parties to develop and implement, in a manner consistent with adolescents' evolving capacities, legislation, policies and programmes to promote the health and development of adolescents by (a) providing parents (or legal guardians) with appropriate assistance through the development of institutions, facilities and services that adequately support the well-being of adolescents, including, when needed, the provision of material assistance and support with regard to nutrition, clothing and housing (art. 27 (3)); (b) providing adequate information and parental support to facilitate the

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development of a relationship of trust and confidence in which issues regarding, for example, sexuality and sexual behaviour and risky lifestyles can be openly discussed and acceptable solutions found that respect the adolescent's rights (art. 27 (3)); (c) providing adolescent mothers and fathers with support and guidance for both their own and their children's well-being (art. 24 (f), 27 (2-3)); (d) giving, while respecting the values and norms of ethnic and other minorities, special attention, guidance and support to adolescents and parents (or legal guardians), whose traditions and norms may differ from those in the society where they live; and (e) ensuring that interventions in the family to protect the adolescent and, when necessary, separate her/him from the family, e.g. in case of abuse or neglect, are in accordance with applicable laws and procedures. Such laws and procedures should be reviewed to ensure that they conform to the principles of the Convention.

17. The school plays an important role in the life of many adolescents, as the venue for learning, development and socialization. Article 29 (1) states that education must be directed to "the development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential". In addition, general comment No. 1 on the aims of education states that "Education must also be aimed at ensuring that ... no child leaves school without being equipped to face the challenges that he or she can expect to be confronted with in life. Basic skills should include...the ability to make well-balanced decisions; to resolve conflicts in a non-violent manner; and to develop a healthy lifestyle [and] good social relationships...". Considering the importance of appropriate education for the current and future health and development of adolescents, as well as for their children, the Committee urges States parties, in line with articles 28 and 29 of the Convention to (a) ensure that quality primary education is compulsory and available, accessible and free to all and that secondary and higher education are available and accessible to all adolescents; (b) provide well-functioning school and recreational facilities which do not pose health risks to students, including water and sanitation and safe journeys to school; (c) take the necessary actions to prevent and prohibit all forms of violence and abuse, including sexual abuse, corporal punishment and other inhuman, degrading or humiliating treatment or punishment in school, by school personnel as well as among students; (d) initiate and support measures, attitudes and activities that promote healthy behaviour by including relevant topics in school curricula.

18. During adolescence, an increasing number of young people are leaving school to start working to help support their families or for wages in the formal or informal sector. Participation in work activities in accordance with international standards, as long as it does not jeopardize the enjoyment of any of the other rights of adolescents, including health and education, may be beneficial for the development of the adolescent. The Committee urges States parties to take all necessary measures to abolish all forms of child labour, starting with the worst forms, to continuously review national regulations on minimum ages for employment with a view to making them compatible with international standards, and to regulate the working environment and conditions for adolescents who are working (in

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accordance with article 32 of the Convention, as well as ILO Conventions Nos. 138 and 182), so as to ensure that they are fully protected and have access to legal redress mechanisms.

19. The Committee also stresses that in accordance with article 23 (3) of the Convention, the special rights of adolescents with disabilities should be taken into account and assistance provided to ensure that the disabled child/adolescent has effective access to and receives good quality education. States should recognize the principle of equal primary, secondary and tertiary educational opportunities for disabled children/adolescents, where possible in regular schools.

20. The Committee is concerned that early marriage and pregnancy are significant factors in health problems related to sexual and reproductive health, including HIV/AIDS. Both the legal minimum age and actual age of marriage, particularly for girls, are still very low in several States parties. There are also non-health-related concerns: children who marry, especially girls, are often obliged to leave the education system and are marginalized from social activities. Further, in some States parties married children are legally considered adults, even if they are under 18, depriving them of all the special protection measures they are entitled under the Convention. The Committee strongly recommends that States parties review and, where necessary, reform their legislation and practice to increase the minimum age for marriage with and without parental consent to 18 years, for both girls and boys. The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women has made a similar recommendation (general comment No. 21 of 1994).

21. In most countries accidental injuries or injuries due to violence are a leading cause of death or permanent disability among adolescents. In that respect, the Committee is concerned about the injuries and death resulting from road traffic accidents, which affect adolescents disproportionately. States parties should adopt and enforce legislation and programmes to improve road safety, including driving education for and examination of adolescents and the adoption or strengthening of legislation known to be highly effective such as the obligations to have a valid driver's licence, wear seat belts and crash helmets, and the designation of pedestrian areas.

22. The Committee is also very concerned about the high rate of suicide among this age group. Mental disorders and psychosocial illness are relatively common among adolescents. In many countries symptoms such as depression, eating disorders and self-destructive behaviours, sometimes leading to self-inflicted injuries and suicide, are increasing. They may be related to, *inter alia*, violence, ill-treatment, abuse and neglect, including sexual abuse, unrealistically high expectations, and/or bullying or hazing in and outside school. States parties should provide these adolescents with all the necessary services.

23. Violence results from a complex interplay of individual, family, community and societal

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factors. Vulnerable adolescents such as those who are homeless or who are living in institutions, who belong to gangs or who have been recruited as child soldiers are especially exposed to both institutional and interpersonal violence. Under article 19 of the Convention, States parties must take all appropriate measures<sup>3/</sup> to prevent and eliminate: (a) institutional violence against adolescents, including through legislation and administrative measures in relation to public and private institutions for adolescents (schools, institutions for disabled adolescents, juvenile reformatories, etc.), and training and monitoring of personnel in charge of institutionalized children or who otherwise have contact with children through their work, including the police; and (b) interpersonal violence among adolescents, including by supporting adequate parenting and opportunities for social and educational development in early childhood, fostering non-violent cultural norms and values (as foreseen in article 29 of the Convention), strictly controlling firearms and restricting access to alcohol and drugs.

24. In light of articles 3, 6, 12, 19 and 24 (3) of the Convention, States parties should take all effective measures to eliminate all acts and activities which threaten the right to life of adolescents, including honour killings. The Committee strongly urges States parties to develop and implement awareness-raising campaigns, education programmes and legislation aimed at changing prevailing attitudes, and address gender roles and stereotypes that contribute to harmful traditional practices. Further, States parties should facilitate the establishment of multidisciplinary information and advice centres regarding the harmful aspects of some traditional practices, including early marriage and female genital mutilation.

25. The Committee is concerned about the influence exerted on adolescent health behaviours by the marketing of unhealthy products and lifestyles. In line with article 17 of the Convention, States parties are urged to protect adolescents from information that is harmful to their health and development, while underscoring their right to information and material from diverse national and international sources. States parties are therefore urged to regulate or prohibit information on and marketing of substances such as alcohol and tobacco, particularly when it targets children and adolescents.<sup>4/</sup>

### III. Information, Skills Development, Counselling, and Health Services

26. Adolescents have the right to access adequate information essential for their health and development and for their ability to participate meaningfully in society. It is the obligation of States parties to ensure that all adolescent girls and boys, both in and out of school, are provided with, and not denied, accurate and appropriate information on how to protect their health and development and practise healthy behaviours. This should include information on the use and abuse, of tobacco, alcohol and other substances, safe and respectful social and sexual behaviours, diet and physical activity.

27. In order to act adequately on the information, adolescents need to develop the skills

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necessary, including self-care skills, such as how to plan and prepare nutritionally balanced meals and proper personal hygiene habits, and skills for dealing with particular social situations such as interpersonal communication, decision-making, and coping with stress and conflict. States parties should stimulate and support opportunities to build such skills through, *inter alia*, formal and informal education and training programmes, youth organizations and the media.

28. In light of articles 3, 17 and 24 of the Convention, States parties should provide adolescents with access to sexual and reproductive information, including on family planning and contraceptives, the dangers of early pregnancy, the prevention of HIV/AIDS and the prevention and treatment of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). In addition, States parties should ensure that they have access to appropriate information, regardless of their marital status and whether their parents or guardians consent. It is essential to find proper means and methods of providing information that is adequate and sensitive to the particularities and specific rights of adolescent girls and boys. To this end, States parties are encouraged to ensure that adolescents are actively involved in the design and dissemination of information through a variety of channels beyond the school, including youth organizations, religious, community and other groups and the media.

29. Under article 24 of the Convention, States parties are urged to provide adequate treatment and rehabilitation for adolescents with mental disorders, to make the community aware of the early signs and symptoms and the seriousness of these conditions, and to protect adolescents from undue pressures, including psychosocial stress. States parties are also urged to combat discrimination and stigma surrounding mental disorders, in line with their obligations under article 2. Every adolescent with a mental disorder has the right to be treated and cared for, as far as possible, in the community in which he or she lives. Where hospitalization or placement in a psychiatric institution is necessary, this decision should be made in accordance with the principle of the best interests of the child. In the event of hospitalization or institutionalization, the patient should be given the maximum possible opportunity to enjoy all his or her rights as recognized under the Convention, including the rights to education and to have access to recreational activities.<sup>5/</sup> Where appropriate, adolescents should be separated from adults. States parties must ensure that adolescents have access to a personal representative other than a family member to represent their interests, when necessary and appropriate.<sup>6/</sup> In accordance with article 25 of the Convention, States parties should undertake periodic review of the placement of adolescents in hospitals or psychiatric institutions.

30. Adolescents, both girls and boys, are at risk of being infected with and affected by STDs, including HIV/AIDS.<sup>7/</sup> States should ensure that appropriate goods, services and information for the prevention and treatment of STDs, including HIV/AIDS, are available and accessible. To this end, States parties are urged (a) to develop effective prevention

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programmes, including measures aimed at changing cultural views about adolescents' need for contraception and STD prevention and addressing cultural and other taboos surrounding adolescent sexuality; (b) to adopt legislation to combat practices that either increase adolescents' risk of infection or contribute to the marginalization of adolescents who are already infected with STDs, including HIV; (c) to take measures to remove all barriers hindering the access of adolescents to information, preventive measures such as condoms, and care.

31. Adolescent girls should have access to information on the harm that early marriage and early pregnancy can cause, and those who become pregnant should have access to health services that are sensitive to their rights and particular needs. States parties should take measures to reduce maternal morbidity and mortality in adolescent girls, particularly caused by early pregnancy and unsafe abortion practices, and to support adolescent parents. Young mothers, especially where support is lacking, may be prone to depression and anxiety, compromising their ability to care for their child. The Committee urges States parties (a) to develop and implement programmes that provide access to sexual and reproductive health services, including family planning, contraception and safe abortion services where abortion is not against the law, adequate and comprehensive obstetric care and counselling; (b) to foster positive and supportive attitudes towards adolescent parenthood for their mothers and fathers; and (c) to develop policies that will allow adolescent mothers to continue their education.

32. Before parents give their consent, adolescents need to have a chance to express their views freely and their views should be given due weight, in accordance with article 12 of the Convention. However, if the adolescent is of sufficient maturity, informed consent shall be obtained from the adolescent her/himself, while informing the parents if that is in the "best interest of the child" (art. 3).

33. With regard to privacy and confidentiality, and the related issue of informed consent to treatment, States parties should (a) enact laws or regulations to ensure that confidential advice concerning treatment is provided to adolescents so that they can give their informed consent. Such laws or regulations should stipulate an age for this process, or refer to the evolving capacity of the child; and (b) provide training for health personnel on the rights of adolescents to privacy and confidentiality, to be informed about planned treatment and to give their informed consent to treatment.

### IV. Vulnerability and Risk

34. In ensuring respect for the right of adolescents to health and development, both individual behaviours and environmental factors which increase their vulnerability and risk should be taken into consideration. Environmental factors, such as armed conflict or social

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exclusion, increase the vulnerability of adolescents to abuse, other forms of violence and exploitation, thereby severely limiting adolescents' abilities to make individual, healthy behaviour choices. For example, the decision to engage in unsafe sex increases adolescents' risk of ill-health.

35. In accordance with article 23 of the Convention, adolescents with mental and/or physical disabilities have an equal right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health. States parties have an obligation to provide adolescents with disabilities with the means necessary to realize their rights.<sup>8/</sup> States parties should (a) ensure that health facilities, goods and services are available and accessible to all adolescents with disabilities and that these facilities and services promote their self-reliance and their active participation in the community; (b) ensure that the necessary equipment and personal support are available to enable them to move around, participate and communicate; (c) pay specific attention to the special needs relating to the sexuality of adolescents with disabilities; and (d) remove barriers that hinder adolescents with disabilities in realizing their rights.

36. States parties have to provide special protection to homeless adolescents, including those working in the informal sector. Homeless adolescents are particularly vulnerable to violence, abuse and sexual exploitation from others, self-destructive behaviour, substance abuse and mental disorders. In this regard, States parties are required to (a) develop policies and enact and enforce legislation that protect such adolescents from violence, e.g. by law enforcement officials; (b) develop strategies for the provision of appropriate education and access to health care, and of opportunities for the development of livelihood skills.

37. Adolescents who are sexually exploited, including in prostitution and pornography, are exposed to significant health risks, including STDs, HIV/AIDS, unwanted pregnancies, unsafe abortions, violence and psychological distress. They have the right to physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration in an environment that fosters health, self-respect and dignity (art. 39). It is the obligation of States parties to enact and enforce laws to prohibit all forms of sexual exploitation and related trafficking; to collaborate with other States parties to eliminate intercountry trafficking; and to provide appropriate health and counselling services to adolescents who have been sexually exploited, making sure that they are treated as victims and not as offenders.

38. Additionally, adolescents experiencing poverty, armed conflicts, all forms of injustice, family breakdown, political, social and economic instability and all types of migration may be particularly vulnerable. These situations might seriously hamper their health and development. By investing heavily in preventive policies and measures States parties can drastically reduce levels of vulnerability and risk factors; they will also provide cost-effective ways for society to help adolescents develop harmoniously in a free society.

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### V. Nature of States' Obligations

39. In exercising their obligations in relation to the health and development of adolescents, States parties shall always take fully into account the four general principles of the Convention. It is the view of the Committee that States parties must take all appropriate legislative, administrative and other measures for the realization and monitoring of the rights of adolescents to health and development as recognized in the Convention. To this end, States parties must notably fulfil the following obligations:

- (a) To create a safe and supportive environment for adolescents, including within their family, in schools, in all types of institutions in which they may live, within their workplace and/or in the society at large;
- (b) To ensure that adolescents have access to the information that is essential for their health and development and that they have opportunities to participate in decisions affecting their health (notably through informed consent and the right of confidentiality), to acquire life skills, to obtain adequate and age-appropriate information, and to make appropriate health behaviour choices;
- (c) To ensure that health facilities, goods and services, including counselling and health services for mental and sexual and reproductive health, of appropriate quality and sensitive to adolescents' concerns are available to all adolescents;
- (d) To ensure that adolescent girls and boys have the opportunity to participate actively in planning and programming for their own health and development;
- (e) To protect adolescents from all forms of labour which may jeopardize the enjoyment of their rights, notably by abolishing all forms of child labour and by regulating the working environment and conditions in accordance with international standards;
- (f) To protect adolescents from all forms of intentional and unintentional injuries, including those resulting from violence and road traffic accidents;
- (g) To protect adolescents from all harmful traditional practices, such as early marriages, honour killings and female genital mutilation;
- (h) To ensure that adolescents belonging to especially vulnerable groups are fully taken into account in the fulfilment of all aforementioned obligations;
- (i) To implement measures for the prevention of mental disorders and the promotion of mental health of adolescents.

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40. The Committee draws the attention of States parties to the general comment No. 14 on the right to the highest attainable standard of health of the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights which states that, “States parties should provide a safe and supportive environment for adolescents that ensures the opportunity to participate in decisions affecting their health, to build life skills, to acquire appropriate information, to receive counselling and to negotiate the health-behaviour choices they make. The realization of the right to health of adolescents is dependent on the development of youth-sensitive health care, which respects confidentiality and privacy and includes appropriate sexual and reproductive health services.”

41. In accordance with articles 24, 39 and other related provisions of the Convention, States parties should provide health services that are sensitive to the particular needs and human rights of all adolescents, paying attention to the following characteristics:

(a) *Availability.* Primary health care should include services sensitive to the needs of adolescents, with special attention given to sexual and reproductive health and mental health;

(b) *Accessibility.* Health facilities, goods and services should be known and easily accessible (economically, physically and socially) to all adolescents, without discrimination. Confidentiality should be guaranteed, when necessary;

(c) *Acceptability.* While fully respecting the provisions and principles of the Convention, all health facilities, goods and services should respect cultural values, be gender sensitive, be respectful of medical ethics and be acceptable to both adolescents and the communities in which they live;

(d) *Quality.* Health services and goods should be scientifically and medically appropriate, which requires personnel trained to care for adolescents, adequate facilities and scientifically accepted methods.

42. States parties should, where feasible, adopt a multisectoral approach to the promotion and protection of adolescent health and development by facilitating effective and sustainable linkages and partnerships among all relevant actors. At the national level, such an approach calls for close and systematic collaboration and coordination within Government, so as to ensure the necessary involvement of all relevant government entities. Public health and other services utilized by adolescents should also be encouraged and assisted in seeking collaboration with, *inter alia*, private and/or traditional practitioners, professional associations, pharmacies and organizations that provide services to vulnerable groups of adolescents.

43. A multisectoral approach to the promotion and protection of adolescent health and

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development will not be effective without international cooperation. Therefore, States parties should, when appropriate, seek such cooperation with United Nations specialized agencies, programmes and bodies, international NGOs and bilateral aid agencies, international professional associations and other non-State actors.

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### Notes

1/ These include the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

2/ See also the reports of the Committee's days of general discussion on "Violence against children" held in 2000 and 2001 and the Recommendations adopted in this regard (see CRC/C/100, chap. V and CRC/C/111, chap. V).

3/ *Ibid.*

4/ As proposed in the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (2003) of the World Health Organization.

5/ For further guidance on this subject, refer to the Principles for the Protection of Persons with Mental Illness and for the Improvement of Mental Health Care, (General Assembly resolution 46/119 of 17 December 1991, annex).

6/ *Ibid.*, in particular principles 2, 3 and 7.

7/ For further guidance on this issue, see general comment No. 3 (2003) on HIV/AIDS and the rights of children.

8/ United Nations Standard Rules on Equal Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities.

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- CRC General Comment 5 (Thirty-fourth session, 2003): General measures of implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (arts. 4, 42 and 44, para. 6), A/59/41 (2004) 114 at para. 56.  
  
...  
56. Implementation is an obligation for States parties, but needs to engage all sectors of society, including children themselves. The Committee recognizes that responsibilities to respect and ensure the rights of children extend in practice beyond the State and State-controlled services and institutions to include children, parents and wider families, other adults, and non-State services and organizations. The Committee concurs, for example, with general comment No. 14 (2000) of the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights on the right to the highest attainable standard of health, paragraph 42, of which states: “While only States are parties to the Covenant and thus ultimately accountable for compliance with it, all members of society - individuals, including health professionals, families, local communities, intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations, civil society organizations, as well as the private business sector - have responsibilities regarding the realization of the right to health. States parties should therefore provide an environment which facilitates the discharge of these responsibilities.”
- CERD General Recommendation XXVII (Fifty-seventh session, 2000): Discrimination Against Roma, A/55/18 (2000) 154 at para. 34. For text of General Recommendation, see **EQUALITY AND DISCRIMINATION - RACIAL DISCRIMINATION**.
- ICESCR General Comment 4 (Sixth session, 1991): Article 11(1): The Right to Adequate Housing, E/1992/23 (1991) 114 at paras. 8(b) and 8(d)-(f). For text of General Comment, see **ADEQUATE OR DECENT STANDARD OF LIVING - FOOD, CLOTHING, SHELTER**.
- ICESCR General Comment 5 (Eleventh session, 1994): Persons with Disabilities, E/1995/22 (1994) 99 at para. 34. For text of General Comment, see **DISABILITY**.
- ICESCR General Comment 6 (Thirteenth session, 1995): The Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of Older Persons, E/1996/22 (1995) 97 at paras. 34 and 35. For text of General Comment, see **EQUALITY AND DISCRIMINATION - OLD AGE**.
- ICESCR General Comment 15 (Twenty-ninth session, 2002): The Right to Water (arts. 11

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and 12 of the Covenant), E/2003/22 (2002) 120 at paras. 1-3, 6, 8, 11, 12(a), 12(b), 13, 15, 17, 29, 37(a), 37(i), 38, 40-42, 44(a), 52 and 53. For text of General Comment, see **ADEQUATE OR DECENT STANDARD OF LIVING - FOOD, CLOTHING, SHELTER.**

- ICESCR General Comment 16 (Thirty-fourth session, 2005): Article 3: The Equal Right of Men and Women to the Enjoyment of all Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, E/2006/22 (2005) 116 at paras. 4 and 29. For text of General Comment, see **EQUALITY AND DISCRIMINATION - GENDER DISCRIMINATION - General.**
- CEDAW General Recommendation No. 14 (Ninth session, 1990): Female Circumcision, A/45/38 (1990) 80. For text of General Recommendation, See **EQUALITY AND DISCRIMINATION - GENDER DISCRIMINATION - Genital Mutilation.**
- CEDAW General Recommendation No. 19 (Eleventh session, 1992): Violence Against Women, A/47/38 (1992) 5 at paras. 7 (g), 19, 20, 22, 23 and 24 (k)-(n). For text of General Recommendation, see **EQUALITY AND DISCRIMINATION - GENDER DISCRIMINATION - Violence Against Women.**
- CRC General Comment 3 (Thirty-second session, 2003): HIV/AIDS and the Rights of the Child, A/59/41 (2004) 89 at paras. 1-6, 29 and 39. For text of General Comment, see **CHILDREN'S RIGHTS - GENERAL.**