



AUSTRALIA



AUSTRALIAN MISSION TO THE UNITED NATIONS

E-mail australia@un.int

150 East 42nd Street, New York NY 10017-5612 Ph 212 - 351 6600 Fax 212 - 351 6610 www.AustraliaUN.org

UNDP/UNFPA/UNOPS Executive Board
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Item 14 – Statement by the Executive Director

**Statement by Ambassador Gillian Bird,
Permanent Representative of the Australian Mission to the
United Nations**

(Check against delivery)

Thank you Mr President,

The original version of my remarks today centred on thanking our dear colleague Dr Babatunde for his leadership of UNFPA.

In light of his loss, I can only re-state these thanks, although it does not seem an adequate response to the level of debt and gratitude that we all owe him.

We would like to take this opportunity to reflect on his legacy and his stewardship, as we carry his work forward.

First, I would like to start where Dr Babatunde often started, which is to reflect on our shared respect for one another, and our shared commitment to human rights.

Both the UN Charter and the mandate of UNFPA, are articulations of the importance of human rights as a building block of our shared international community.

The preamble of the UN Charter outlines the criticality of our shared work *'to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small'*.

The truth and power of these concepts underlie the transformational work of UNFPA.

UNFPA's commitment to developing quality health systems, and supporting sexual and reproductive rights and services for all are fundamental to saving lives of women and their children, and shifting trends of structural poverty in all communities.

It must remain the touchstone of our work.

Second, I would like to reflect on Dr Babatunde's commitment to bringing together his humanity with his commitment to the importance of data driven, evidence-based decision making.

It is this commitment to data which has allowed us to reflect on how far we have come as an international community.

Since the Millennium Development Goals, maternal mortality has been reduced by 44 per cent, due to gains in sexual and

reproductive rights of women and girls, access to family planning, and improved health systems.

These statistics give us solace on days like today, allowing us to remember that change is possible.

Yet evidence also outlines how far we have to go.

Each and every day 830 pregnant women die from preventable causes, often in humanitarian crises.

These preventable deaths are shocking to all of us, and remind us of the pain and suffering of women and children for whom we all must do better.

Finally, I would like to reflect on Dr Babatunde's commitment to leadership in leaving no one behind. Dr Babatunde was the perfect embodiment of the 'He for She' campaign.

Every day he brought his brilliance, his drive and his eloquence to champion the causes of those who are not yet empowered to speak for themselves.

Because they are children, because they are poor, because they are persons with disabilities.

Strong role models from all countries, political backgrounds and religious affiliations are powerful advocates for UNFPA's mandate

and recognition of its role in saving lives, transforming futures and creating the conditions for economic growth.

Dr Babatunde's passing has created a vacuum, but one that can be filled by current and future leaders who step up in his memory to empower the futures of women and girls.

Australia is a proud long-time supporter of UNFPA. We feel so fortunate that Dr Babatunde was able to spend time with us in March this year in Canberra, and together with regional partners in Suva.

Together we discussed a range of issues, including new collaborative efforts of UN partners. One example is the Joint UN program in the Pacific for maternal, child and adolescent health – a collaboration between UNFPA, WHO and UNICEF – which has reaped many benefits and has been warmly welcomed by local governments.

We see this programming as reflecting the spirit of UNFPA, and a legacy of Babatunde's many strengths.

We extend our deepest sympathies and profound thanks to the staff of UNFPA and the broader UN family and will strive to work together to live up to the hopes and expectations that Dr Babatunde had for us all.

Thank you.