



## UN Population Award Ceremony

June 26, 2015

### Acceptance Speech: UN Population Award

1. *Your Excellency Ambassador Edita Hrda, Permanent Representative of the Czech Republic and Chair of the United Nations Population Award,  
Deputy Secretary-General,  
Dr. Babatunde Osotimehin, Under Secretary-General and Executive Director of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA),  
Distinguished Members of the Committee for the United Nations Population Award,  
Ms. Thoraya Ahmed Obaid, fellow nominee,  
Your Excellencies,  
Friends,  
Distinguished ladies and gentlemen,*

On behalf of the Board of Directors, Management and Staff of the African Population & Health Research Center (APHRC), I am humbled to see the Center recognized in this way by the United Nations. I want to thank the Committee for the United Nations Populations Award for counting us worthy of such an honor.

2. Allow me to begin by telling you the story of Imani...
3. Imani is the first-born daughter, of parents Felake and Kofi, a young African couple. The walls of the hospital where Imani has just been born cannot contain her parents' joy. Both mother and daughter are doing well and her parents can now take their baby home. As the doctors discharge Imani from the hospital, they register Imani's birth into the government records and the proud parents leave clutching her birth certificate.
4. In anticipation of Imani's arrival, Felake and Kofi bought a spacious two-bedroom house in the nearby town a few weeks earlier. It has flowing water, good lighting, a flushing toilet and a garden. The house is in a nice secure neighborhood.



5. Soon, Imani's grandparents will come to visit. They may be old but they are healthy and strong and nothing will stop them from seeing their 20<sup>th</sup> grandchild! As Imani grows, her grandparents will visit often and take long walks with her around her home town as they narrate stories from days gone by.
6. Imani is an active child.
7. At the age of 6, Imani will proudly don her school uniform – on her first day at the primary school near her parents' house. She loves school; gets good grades and is a well-rounded girl with many friends. She enjoys sports, dance, music and is an avid reader.
8. Now 15 years old, Imani is in secondary school. She is her parents' pride and joy. She scores high grades, and is the sports captain of her secondary school. When she is home for holidays, she loves to play soccer with her 7-year-old brother. She has great hopes; she loves to tell anyone who will listen about her dream of winning a scholarship to university, becoming an astronaut, (or a maybe population researcher), getting married and having some kids of her own someday. We do not know yet whether she will achieve all her dreams.....just because Imani is still only 15.
9. But what if Imani was no so lucky to be born to Felake and Koffi, but instead was born in one of the slum communities where we work or other marginalized or conflict-ridden communities in Africa? What would her life story be? In the year 2015, many children are still being born in unsafe circumstances and growing up with no record of their existence.
10. Many children are going to school every day, yet still finish school barely able to read or write, let alone master the critical thinking skills needed to advance the continent's economic development.
11. Too many adolescent girls in Africa experience unplanned pregnancies, drop out of school and are left with little chance to succeed in life.
12. Many parents are not living to see their children's children because they die of non-communicable diseases like diabetes and hypertension at an early age.
13. While this may be Africa's reality today, it doesn't have to be that way 15 years from now. Today, African governments have the opportunity to turn things around. After 2015, we shift our focus away from the Millennium Development Goals to the Sustainable Development Goals. African leaders have the opportunity to, in just 15 years; help write a different narrative for every boy and girl born in Africa today.
14. The number 15 is significant to us at APHRC. About two decades ago, some visionaries at the Rockefeller Foundation were deeply concerned by Africa's limited contribution to



global knowledge and the continued absence of African voices in global development discourses, even those that focus primarily on African issues. They set out to prove a point: that Africans can do world-class research and that our voices—*vital to catapulting the global development discourse forward* – can be heard.

APHRC as an independent entity is now 15 years old. From its origin as a fellowship program, APHRC became an independent and autonomous research institution in 2001 and has since become a leading pan-African research center headquartered in Nairobi, Kenya, with active research and programs in more than 20 countries across sub-Saharan Africa.

15. In just 15 years, APHRC has conducted hundreds of research studies, published nearly 450 articles in peer reviewed journals and more than 100 technical reports and policy briefing papers, trained nearly 300 PhD fellows and over 40 post-doctoral fellows, and shaped policy discourse around developmental issues affecting Africa.

I trust that today's event, without a doubt, responds positively to that point: given the right environment, Africans in Africa can and do produce work deserving of such an honor as APHRC is receiving today.

16. APHRC was established as a fellowship program with a primary focus on understanding the fertility decline in sub-Saharan Africa and the high levels of unmet need for family planning. The goal was to produce evidence to inform policy options and program design for African governments and their development partners. This simple goal represented a significant departure from development paradigms that existed (and, regrettably, still exist) in Africa.
17. Too often development efforts are focused on short-term quick fixes or emergency-like responses (even when there are no real emergencies). When an individual, a household, community, district, nation or sub-region are faced with emergencies, decisions tend to favor short-term responses with little thought given to preventing future emergencies.

No country has escaped the vagaries of poverty without a long-term vision and plan. APHRC therefore decided early on to focus on issues that will be priority challenges for Africa into the future, and identify homegrown sustainable solutions to the problems of population and reproductive health, urbanization, health systems, education, and aging, all while developing some of the top researchers on the continent.



18. At the heart of our research is the drive to go beyond current challenges facing sub-Saharan Africa and the siloed approach to development. We know we must take a hard look at the region's development trajectory and how the confluence of various factors will influence development outcomes over the coming decades. Our extensive work on urbanization and health, non-communicable diseases, strengthening data systems, ageing and development, and strengthening doctoral training and higher education in sub-Saharan Africa are examples of such effort to go beyond current crisis and emergency-driven approaches to development issues in sub-Saharan Africa.
19. APHRC remains committed to generating the evidence base needed to put such issues on the agendas of governments and development partners before they become a crisis—and keep them there until they are addressed. We keenly understand that our job as researchers does not end with publishing in peer-reviewed journals, or even when policies and programs are changed or improved based on robust scientific evidence. It ends when the people of Africa enjoy the highest possible quality of life
20. Our journey from Nairobi to the UN Headquarters here in New York to receive this award symbolizes the institutional journey APHRC has made since the start of independent operations in 2001.

We would not be here without our partners and supporters. The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, Swedish International Development Agency (Sida), The Rockefeller Foundation and an Anonymous Funder have been key partners whose unrestricted funding to APHRC has enabled the Center to dream and to act. Other partners such as The Carnegie Corporation of New York, International Development Research Centre, The David and Lucile Packard Foundation, The Ford Foundation, The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and Wellcome Trust, many of whom are represented in the audience, have through the years supported our various programs. We are especially grateful to Guttmacher Institute with whom we have enjoyed a mutually beneficial partnership since the start of our independent operations in 2001; and to the Population Council, which incubated the Center for over five years, supported its transition to an independent entity and continues to be one of our trusted partners.

We have had a lot of people whose commitment and service to APHRC has helped us get here. The list is long; we thank you all very much for believing that it is possible to change Africa's story through research. Let me just recognize one anonymous supporter who has traveled from Washington, DC to share this moment with us. Wherever you are seated in the audience, we thank you.



21. We congratulate you, Madam Thoraya Ahmed Obaid, former Executive Director of UNFPA, on winning the individual category award. We are thrilled that Thoraya is being recognized for her exceptional and relentless work in championing women and young people's health and empowerment.

Our sincere gratitude goes to Ann Starrs, President of Guttmacher Institute, and staff for nominating APHRC for this award.

We also thank the Awards Committee chaired by the Czech Ambassador to the United Nations, Edita Hrdá and members that include Bangladesh, Cote d'Ivoire, Denmark, Grenada, Jamaica, Qatar, Tanzania, Nigeria and Pakistan. Thank you too to the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, Deputy Secretary-General Jan Eliasson, and UNFPA Executive Director Dr. Babatunde Osotimehin.

22. We look onward to the next 15 years with great anticipation. With your continued support, we are certain that APHRC will continue to make its mark in shaping policy decisions with credible research evidence and influencing decisions that will improve health, education, urbanization, and population outcomes in Africa. Our vision is that in 2030, the thousands of Imanis born today across Africa will have a different, happier story to tell.
23. Once again, on behalf of the entire APHRC family I thank you all for this great honor and recognition. And I thank all our partners and board members who are present here to share this moment with us. Thank you.