Behind the scenes with Hilde Kroes

A groundbreaking resolution on sexual and reproductive health rights for adolescents and youth was adopted in New York at the 45th UN Commission on Population and Development (CPD) in April 2012.

The International Sexual and Reproductive Rights Coalition (ISRRC), consisting of more than one hundred organisations worldwide, took part in the formulation of the resolution and preparations to the CPD, working into the early hours for months, without funding, but with passion. Hilde Kroes at Rutgers WPF in the Netherlands held a coordinating role in the joint effort. Kroes tells FOKUS how it all went down.

What is the ISRRC?
The International Sexual and Reproductive Rights Coalition (ISRRC) is a global coalition of organisations that are pro sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). The coalition offers a secure space where intelligence on SRHR is shared.

A network of more than 100 SRHR-organisations was established during the CPD 2011. We decided to continue the momentum and work towards CPD 2012. Already in June we divided responsibilities into working groups. A core group of 20 people oversaw it all. It proved to be a successful strategy. No funding, extra time nor capacity was allocated to this joint effort. The success is due to participants’ genuine interest in the topic.

How does the ISRRC do international lobbying?
The CPD is a high level UN platform for discussing SRHR, thus international lobbying prior to such an event is crucial. The CPD attracts civil society from both sides of the fence, the pro SRHR-partners, but also the anti-choice groups that oppose everything related to SRHR. ISRRC’s presence is important in order to make sure that country delegations address and include the right issues in resolutions. Civil society groups from the global south are increasingly involved in the process. What the governments commit to at the UN can be used as advocacy tools at home.

How did the ISRRC approach the government delegations at the CPD?
Country delegations, consisting of either experts on the issues or diplomats who are not necessarily SRHR experts, make decisions at the CPD on behalf of their governments. The role of civil society in approaching delegations, giving advice and putting forward demands, is important. Some civil society representatives are included in the official delegations. I think this is where civil society can have the greatest influence, by taking part in the strategic discussions inside the negotiation room. About 16 countries had civil society on their delegations this year.

ISRRC partners engaged in information sharing, collaboration and strategizing prior to and during the CPD. How was the atmosphere amongst the ISRRC partners during the CPD?
The atmosphere was great! We have been working towards the CPD for the last ten months. We were prepared. On the Sunday before the CPD kicked off we met for a strategy meeting, and every morning during the CPD we would come together for two hours before the official meetings started.
It was great to meet so many partners in New York this year. High attendance is a reminder to the delegations that SRHR are important issues, and perhaps it keeps them extra sharp because they know that we keep an eye on them. Sometimes, due to lack of knowledge, delegations make statements that contradict with their country's national policies. If diplomats don’t know their government’s position, they often convey their own personal values, which can be rather conservative when SRHR is on the agenda. It is civil society’s job to inform delegations about SRHR and country policies.

Who are the most vocal objectors to SRHR, and what was your experience with these actors during this year’s CPD?

We face a lot of opposition from the Vatican. They have observer status in the UN, they take the floor a lot, and they don’t recognize sexual and reproductive health rights at all. Secondly, Egypt speaks on behalf of 24 Arab countries. These countries tend not to prioritise the CPD, hence Egypt gets to set conservative standards without facing any objections.

But there are a great number of supporters too. South-Africa, Zambia, Brazil, to mention a few, tends to send big, vocal and well informed delegations. They recognise SRHR challenges in their countries.

From your point of view, what was the most important outcome of the CPD 2012? Did you see concrete results of the joint mobilization and networking?

First of all, the resolution is groundbreaking. It is the first time that reproductive rights for adolescent and youths are being recognized at this level. Now it is up to us to make sure it is implemented at country level.

We succeeded in reaching out to governments. For example in Indonesia, civil society mobilised and put SRHR on the government’s agenda. This was important considering that the Indonesian government was the chair of the CPD 2012. A shift has come about also in Pakistan who was less difficult in negotiations this year, perhaps as a result of constructive working relations with civil society. Governments cannot neglect information and suggestions received from hundreds of organisations. Organisations working closely together like we did, disseminating the same messages and materials, symbolise a strong front. Perhaps we can reap the benefits of such a well-established network after 2014 when the International Conference on Population and Development Programme of Action (ICOD) will be renewed and also when a new development framework replaces the Millennium Development Goals in 2015. Whatever new development framework is in the loop, SRHR need a lot of investment and attention. It is our ambition to put SRHR high on the agenda of any new development framework.

What are the main issues ahead, and how can efforts be coordinated?

The Cairo Program of Action has not been fully implemented. We will push for a system that can hold governments accountable. There are always nice words on paper, and nice country policies, but implementation is lacking.

Funding is another challenge. It is difficult to raise funds for SRHR and gender equality. SRHR needs to get back on the agenda, and we need to find ways to explain that SRHR have positive economic implications.

We are evaluating our coordination strategies and systems right now. The trust is there, but we hope to raise funds that can finance a coordination secretariat.