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INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON POPULATION AND DEVELOPMENT

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Statement by

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On behalf of the Independent Commission on Population and the Quality of Life over which I have the honour to preside, I would like to express my sincere appreciation to you Mr Chairman, and to all present, for the opportunity to address this final Prepcom before the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development.

I will first briefly introduce the Commission. We are 20 in number - 10 women and 10 men - half from the South and half from the North. We are all politicians, activists, scientists, practitioners, with a shared background in efforts to advance the broad cause of peoples' welfare. We are not population specialists in the way that many here are. Our goal is to promote a "fresh vision" of population matters which will inspire, engage and commit actions worldwide.

The Commission was founded in 1992, at the inspiration of, and with support from, a number of governments, international agencies, and foundations. We will pursue our efforts up mid-1995, when we aim to publish our final report. We are undertaking a range of activities, including currently a series of regional public consultations. Three such hearings have so far been held - in Eastern and Southern Africa, Western Africa, and just last week in North America. Five further consultations will be held in other regions of the world.



The Rio conference has seen "nature" re-enter history through the renewed consciousness of the international community. The Cairo conference is likewise the right moment for a heightened awareness, so that "population" may emerge as the subject of all social transformation processes.

We are in a finite world, with finite resources and finite capacity. Paradoxically such an awareness is not a new limitation. Rather, it becomes - in the new paradigm of history - an imperative to widen the way we see population and its quality of life, within the context of social, economical, environmental, political constraints and possibilities.

The population question when focussed with the lens of quality of life points to the urgency of what must be done for people to feel free and secure, to have their destiny in their own hands. Again and again, in the three regional public hearings the commission has conducted so far, we have listened to the same conviction - population is people, people who live, suffer, die, love, struggle, hope, participate, decide. At the first of our consultations in Harare the representatives of more than 40 NGOs said it eloquently: "we deserve a better quality of life".

The objectives, the actions and the means of implementation so comprehensively spelled out in the draft of the Cairo document show clearly the path ahead and the urgency to follow it. It is imperative to find the conditions for harmonizing population dynamics with the capacity of each society to integrate, without rupture, the consequences of such dynamics. What is at stake is the physical and organizational carrying capacity of creating resources for people and of absorbing the wastes of an increasingly urban-centered life-style, of encompassing the widespread rationale behind massive production in delocalized units and the degrees of want that the world never saw before on such scale. What is also at stake is at the same time the wilful, intellectual and compassionate caring capacity to attend to the needs of today's and tomorrow's population.

It is our conviction that it is futile to make of population an "education" question, a "health" question, an "environmental" question, even a "development" question alone - while, in fact, it is all of these together in their multiple interactions and on the thin layers of their interfaces. To reach the exact juncture of the interfaces we need an all-encompassing approach. The commission thinks and is gathering evidence that quality of life provides such an approach. Coherent and integrated public policies and new rules and instruments of governance are needed in order to tackle realistically all population issues in their interfaces with other societal problematiques. Otherwise, we may wonder what is the outcome of a generalized concern with population dynamics among leaders of the world when the cultural and economic conditions for education and for adequate reproductive health services are absent from the political priorities and programs of governments. What is the outcome over a long-term of health services that are not accompanied by education capable of leading to informed consent and responsible choice? What is the outcome of an educational and health care program at the very moment that economy-centered policies - not people-centered ones - cut blindly and irresponsibly the funds for education and health in national budgets?

The first recommendation of the Commission flows directly from these remarks. Reproductive rights and reproductive health care in all its dimensions and services are a powerful way through which women can become effectively the ultimate decision-makers in the process of giving birth. We understand that the primacy of the individual and specifically of women is, at this stage, acknowledged by all member-states.

The Commission would like to probe into this question. To say that women are decision makers in what concerns their reproductive rights - what does it entail? Is it compatible with the absence of women in all other processes of decision-making? Is it compatible with a practical, if not legal, marginalisation of women in society? Is it compatible with industries based upon women's exploitation in their sexuality, the very realm where their reproductive rights are at stake? Is it compatible with the rampant sexual abuse of children in so many diversified situations?

Let us not fool ourselves. This entails the possibility for women in every society to acquire full dignity as human beings. It entails everywhere a fundamental change in mentality and in cultural and social patterns of representations and behaviour. It may entail a radical change in legislation, going beyond traditional norms or ideological battles. Are member-states, and indeed the diverse societies around the world, ready to undertake such fundamental changes?

These questions acquire a particular poignancy when we focus on the growing rate of teenagers' pregnancies. This is a worldwide issue asking for concerted, innovative and urgent action. Speaking last week at the North American consultation of the Commission, Jocelyn Elders, the US Surgeon General, stated that in the USA more than 50% of pregnancies are unplanned or unwanted - while in other countries, both industrialized and developing, the proportion is roughly one third. As many of 80 to 90% of teenage pregnancies in USA are unplanned - this in a country with one of the higher teenage pregnancy rates in the world. These data tellingly demonstrate and justify the Commission's central perspective of looking at the world as a whole, and not focussing on the artificial division of industrialised and developing countries. More importantly it raises vital questions of the nature of role models in the increasingly interdependent world and the common responsibility of all countries in this regard.

Women The Commission gives a high priority to the development of innovative ways to face the causes of teenage pregnancies. The "conspiracy of silence" that has surrounded sexuality as a fundamental dimension of the human person has left young people at the mercy of uncontrolled distortion of sexuality. This conspiracy must be broken. In the search for values with which all political and religious leaders are concerned the realm of sexuality constitutes an undisputable field for the deepening of concepts and programs of action.

The linkages between education, primary health care, accessible services of information and counselling, must be thought of in new forms so as to meet the young people where they are. Young people have to be stimulated, and given the space, to organize themselves so as to educate each other in a massive mobilization of youth towards their own fulfillment. The Commission intends to pursue its hearings with a substantive participation of young people in order to contribute to the urgent process of self-knowledge and self-empowerment, and to devise adequate methods and services that adapt the family-planning rationale to the youth culture at the end of this century

The second recommendation of the Commission concerns the interlinkages the draft document refers to, namely the interdependence between "growth in numbers/ poverty/ social and economic inequalities/ wasteful consumption/ threats to the environment".

Already a few years ago the Brundtland report stated that "population/ food security/ loss of species and generic resources/ energy/ industry/ human settlements are all connected and cannot be treated in isolation one from another".

This same idea was verbalised at the recent public hearings in Washington. Two words came up persistently: "holistic" and "interconnectedness". Population cannot be singled out, converted into simplistic cause or effect factor. Rather it has to be addressed always in terms of a more complex system. The factors that affect population are not one but many. Conversely, population imbalance is not the single cause of any other factor.

In this context the Commission underlines the importance to consider and the urgency to address the interlinkages between population, persistent poverty and unsustainable production and consumption patterns.

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Either directly or indirectly poverty and population growth reinforce each other, thus affecting the quality of life of millions of human beings. The actions undertaken to reach population balance and stability cease to be cost-effective and relevant if poverty is not fought against at the same time.

There is a growing evidence of the human and social need, and the scientific and technical possibilities to draw up specific strategies against poverty within the overall development efforts of each country. It is true that we have for decades worked at integrating all social and economic factors in the concept of development and in its policy lines. Today the pressing concerns with population demand of all of us to refocus on poverty as such and to invent actions geared to its eradication. In doing so we cannot fail to address anew long standing issues such as the redistribution of the land and agrarian reform, rebuilding a healthy rural tissue, the creation of new types of local subsistence economies taking into account and supporting the initiatives of each community, the fostering of small and medium size enterprises, the development of intermediary sized towns.

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The Commission is committed to elaborate on the feasibility of such strategies in order to propose to national leaders and to the international community operative guidelines that can effectively be used in a structural combat against poverty thus providing a secure ground for population balance and quality of life of all.

Finally, our third recommendation at this stage concerns the question of the resources required, if the actions mapped out above are to be implemented, as they should.

The Commission sees a dual need involving both re-allocation, and the mobilisation of additional resources. These are necessary not only to ensure the availability of finance, but also to demonstrate transparently and unequivocally the shared commitment which all are required to make at this juncture, internationally, on the part of governments, and across societies.

What should be the balance between re-allocation, and the mobilisation of additional resources? The urgency of the situation looms large here. Given the experience of the recent past, the scope and feasibility for extensive re-allocation through the next two decades may be more limited than hitherto thought. And, as we know, it is over the next two decades that actions have to be put in train and completed.

Conversely, what opportunities exist for raising additional resources? Although at first sight, this might appear the more difficult option, the Commission believes that there are alternative forms of international taxation which should now be seriously considered. Our initial thinking - for reasons of simplicity and practical effectiveness - is to explore the possibility of instituting a tax on international financial transactions. Given the present levels of international financial flows, even a transaction tax as little as 0.1%, or less, could realise sums which would contribute significantly towards meeting the resource needs specified in the Cairo document.

Clearly there are many questions to be addressed in determining the feasibility of such a proposal. But the Commission believes that the gravity of the situation demands that it be taken seriously. Past efforts to raise the necessary funding by more conventional approaches have not proved adequate; the time now has come to try something new.

To conclude, we cannot anymore limit ourselves to the short-term; indeed, the long-term may be more urgent than the short-term. What we do in the next decade will shape not only the latter part of our own lives, but also the opportunities and risks our children will face. And many of us will be here three decades hence when the results of our decisions will be manifest for all to see. We cannot anymore express all-encompassing goals and remain within the scope of discreet actions. The time is ripe for new and daring steps. The deadline for positive action is not in a distant future - it is tomorrow.

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