

Statement of

DR. NAFIS SADIK
Secretary-General of the
1994 International Conference
on Population and Development
and
Executive Director
United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)

at the
Youth Consultation on
Population and Development

Cairo

Wednesday, 31 August 1994



The Cairo Conference, the biggest and most inclusive conference ever held on population and development opens on Monday. The conference itself will last for nine days; but if you ask "How will we find answers to all these difficult questions in nine days," the answer is that luckily, we do not need to. You will find many of the answers in the draft Programme of Action, which has already been discussed intensively for over six months. Discussions and preparations for the Conference have been going on for three years. The result is that nearly nine-tenths of the Programme is already agreed.

As I look back over these very busy years, it is heartening to know that young people from all the regions of the world have made sure that their voice and concerns are taken into account at every stage of the process.

This is most encouraging, for young people make up most of the world. More than half of world population is below the age of 25. About a third are between the ages of 10 and 24, of whom some eighty per cent live in developing countries of the world. Your generation will be the largest ever to inherit the earth.

What happens during the time frame of the Cairo Programme of Action, the next 20 years, will affect your lives in many very important ways. Even more important, the success of the Programme will largely decide what sort of world your children will inherit. Will it be a world where choices can be freely made, a world of dignity and peace; or will it be a world starved of resources, where poverty is endemic and only the strongest have the luxury of choice? Your generation will decide that question. I hope that my generation will have done our part, and that we will end the Conference with a Programme of Action that will help today's young people in your quest for peace, dignity and freedom.

I would like to highlight some of the main issues to be discussed next week, especially as they will affect you, the generation most closely concerned.

The draft Programme of Action of the Conference states very clearly the central intention of the conference—to improve the wellbeing of all members of the human family.

The basis of the draft Programme of Action is an integrated approach to population and development. This approach recognizes that population programmes are an essential part of a range of actions and policies needed for sustainable development, including economic growth, poverty alleviation and environmental protection. In particular the Programme of Action gives greater attention to human investment through better health care and better education, especially for girls and women; and in general more attention to improving the role and the status of women and increasing their ability to make their own choices regarding their lives.

There is now an international consensus that increasing the choices available to women is the key to solving population and development problems: choices about if and when to get married; choices about education and job opportunities; where to live and about family size.

Central to this effort is promoting education for girls and young women. Most of the world's out-of-school children are girls. Girls are less likely to go to school and more likely to drop out if they do. This early disadvantage translates into fewer options in later life--fewer good jobs, less pay for the same work, lower income, less access to credit. In marriage it means that women feel less confident and less able to communicate with their husbands on an equal basis.

Better education for girls and young women holds the key to expanding their life options. For girls in particular, equal access to education is one of the most important routes to a full and satisfying life. Universal primary education for both boys and girls is a goal that we should reach in the next generation.

Widening choices for women means that men must be prepared to accept more responsibility, starting with their role as parents and extending to the whole of family life. Training to accept these responsibilities should start early, while boys are still in school. Boys need to learn first that their sisters are their equals, and have the same rights and privileges. There should be no additional status attached merely to being a boy. In this fathers must give a lead, but all members of the family and community are responsible.

Today's young people are under pressure from rapid social change. They are more likely to live in crowded cities than in traditional villages. Communication of new ideas is faster than ever before, but the flood of information is so great

that there is little time to consider their implications and absorb them into the way we live.

In particular, family life is changing. The traditional support of relatives in the extended family may not be there for today's young people. There are many more temptations, and fewer opportunities for wise counsel and restraint. Today's young people develop into adulthood earlier and marry later than their parents' generation. They are at greater risk of unwanted pregnancy and of contracting sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS.

Many young people have little understanding of sexual and reproductive health issues, or the responsibilities of parenthood. The information they acquire from their daily lives or from the mass media or from commercial advertising may be misleading or at best unhelpful.

The family is the basic unit of society and is of the highest importance in passing on positive values to young people. Young people should learn in a family setting about their world and their surroundings, so that they can make their own considered and responsible choices and decisions. They should learn the significance of marriage, of parental responsibility and of planning their families; they should know the dangers of pregnancy too early in life before the woman is mentally and physically ready.

Better communications between parents and children would help. But formal education is also of great value in these matters. A survey carried out by WHO indicated that family life education can help protect teenagers. It found no evidence that family life education in schools leads to earlier or increased sexual activity in young people. In fact the evidence is that if young people know what their options are, they are more likely to choose restraint over indulgence. They can and should be trusted with the facts of life.

One of the most important and unpleasant facts is that girls who are married too early run much higher risks. Complications in pregnancy and childbirth are much more common before the age of 18. They threaten both the young mother and her infant. Early marriage does nothing to help preserve the family, quite the opposite.

The draft Programme of Action is very clear on what is proposed. It proposes the promotion of responsible and healthy reproductive and sexual behavior,

including voluntary abstinence, and the provision of appropriate services and counselling specifically suitable for that age group. It proposes to substantially reduce all adolescent pregnancies. It is important to remember that in many countries the majority of young girls in the teens already married and under great pressure to have children before they are fully developed.

The problems facing us are both serious and widespread. They have reached crisis proportions in many countries. To mention only two examples, half a million women die each year as a result of pregnancy and related childbirth. This tragedy, repeated every minute of every day, is completely preventable: the industrialized countries have virtually eliminated the risk of death in childbirth. It is a tragedy the Programme of Action is designed to prevent. Properly implemented, the Programme will make childbirth just as safe in future for poor women in poor countries as it is for all women in richer countries today.

Proper implementation of the Programme will also prevent three million deaths among babies in the first week of life. These deaths are the result of mismanaged pregnancy and complications in childbirth.

The Programme of Action will be discussed and decided upon by member governments of the United Nations next week. Each country will ensure that action recommended are in conformity with their own laws and culture. The intention of the draft Programme of Action is to help create the conditions for strong, healthy and well-educated young people in future generations. National youth policies and programmes that can articulate the aspirations and needs of young people will play an important role.

Most importantly, young people themselves must be involved. Youth must be empowered to make informed decisions and choices concerning all aspects of their lives. Young people can and should become actively involved in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of programmes that they want and need.

In this regard, youth organizations have a critical role to play. You are effective advocates of under-represented groups, and in reaching out to young people. You are superb innovators, communicators and practical problem-solvers. Young women's organizations can advance the interests of girls and young women. Likewise, young men's groups can help promote male responsibility.



Youth organizations like those represented here have a special role to play in this regard.

Despite this potential, adolescents tend to be invisible to many bureaucracies and health systems. Governments should devote greater attention, and more human and financial resources, to the needs and aspirations of young people.

The United Nations system should forge a closer partnership with youth organizations, in close collaboration with governments. The strategy would be to assist youth organizations in mobilizing young people to set up networks, to articulate their needs, to create public awareness of their concerns, and to mobilize resources for sustaining their often innovative programme approaches.

You are meeting today to discuss how best we can create a better world together, a world where women and men are equal, where all of us can have a choice, and where all of us will exercise responsibility. I commend the draft Programme of Action to you. I ask you to read it carefully and note what it says and what it does not say. You will find in it no encouragement to immoral or deviant behaviour. You will find no advocacy for anything offensive to religious sensibilities or different systems of belief. You will find that the sovereign rights of nations are specifically protected. Accepting the Programme of Action will bind no country to acts in conflict with its law or culture. On the contrary, accepting the Programme will help each country and each culture to develop and flourish as never before.

Fundação Cuidar o Futuro

A careful reading of the draft Programme will show you that in the field of population and development individual needs and public policy are converging. Individual needs must form the basis of public policy. Ultimately, individuals and couples will make their own decisions about where to live and work, and about family size and the timing of births. The Programme of Action will help create the conditions in which they can make good choices, free from any suggestion of coercion, for themselves, for their families, and for the countries in which they live.

I wish you every success in your important discussions, and I look forward to hearing your suggestions as to how best we can go forward.

Thank you.