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INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON POPULATION AND DEVELOPMENT

Third Session of the Conference Preparatory Committee

Statement by

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On behalf of the Independent Commission on Population and the Quality of Life, I would like to express my sincere appreciation to you Mr Chairman, and to you Dr Nafis Sadik, for the opportunity to address this last stage of the preparation for the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development.

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 Independent 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.

Coherent and integrated public policies and new rules and instruments of governance at all levels are needed in order to tackle realistically all population issues in their interfaces with other societal issues. Indeed, we may wonder what is the coherence of a generalized concern with population dynamics among many 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. We may ask 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 as they should - cut blindly and irresponsibly the funds for education and health in national budgets?

The first recommendation of the Independent Commission on Population and Quality of Life 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 there is an emerging consensus about the primacy of the individual and specifically of women in this personal sphere of their lives.

The Independent Commission would like to probe into this question. What does it entail - to say that women are decision makers in what concerns their reproductive rights? 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?

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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. The question then becomes clear : are member-states, and indeed the diverse societies around the world, ready to undertake such fundamental changes so that the human person, in this case women, may be the subject of their own lives?

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. 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 and must therefore be broken. The Independent Commission gives a high priority to the development of innovative ways to face the causes of teenage pregnancies. In the search for values with which all political and religious leaders are concerned the realm of sexuality constitutes an indisputable field for further conceptualisation.

Young people have to be met where they are, 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 growing 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 reproductive health rationale to the youth culture at the end of this century. This can in our mind be a decisive contribution to the population issue.

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 Independent Commission underlines the importance to consider and the urgency to address the interlinkages between population, persistent poverty and unsustainable production and consumption patterns. 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, and if production and consumption patterns go on unchecked in the economic assumptions that continue to support them.

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There is a growing evidence that it is necessary to draw up specific strategies against poverty within the overall development efforts of each country. Next year's World Summit on Social Development will be the time to bring to completion the work already underway at the international level on the ingredients of such strategies. The Independent Commission considers however that it is indispensable to elaborate on the feasibility of specific strategies against poverty in the context of the Cairo conference so as to provide a secure ground for population balance and quality of life for all human beings.

Likewise the Independent Commission will be undertaking a broad consultation on how the logic of current modes of production and consumption can be re-directed and re-orientated so as to use at all levels and in all societies the tools of free markets for the ultimate goal of making people free.

Finally, our third recommendation flows directly from this concern and addresses the question of the resources required.

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.

The Independent Commission believes that there are alternative forms of international taxation which should now be seriously considered. Without excluding other possibilities, we intend to explore the feasibility of a tax on international financial transactions. Given the present levels of international financial flows - some trillions of dollars everyday - even a transaction tax as little as 0.1%, or less, could realize sums which would meet the resource needs of which we are all aware.

There are certainly many questions to be addressed here. But it is the conviction of the Independent Commission that the gravity of the situation demands that such a quantum leap in putting the economy at the service of people may be taken with courage and determination.

To conclude, we cannot anymore limit ourselves to the short-term - the long-term may be more urgent than the short-term. We cannot limit ourselves to discreet actions and programs - all-encompassing goals are required if we want honestly to meet the challenges of a global nature. The time is ripe for new and daring steps. The deadline for positive action is not in a remote future - it is tomorrow.

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