



THE HAGUE FORUM

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Distinguished Chairperson, Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I feel deeply honoured to be able to address this Forum and to share with this distinguished audience FAO's experience and emerging concerns in the population field. I have no doubts that this meeting organized by UNFPA will make a major contribution to global population and development initiatives in general, and to the further implementation of the ICPD Programme of Action in particular.

The International Conference on Population and Development held in Cairo in 1994 represented a significant watershed for the reaffirmation of the crucial role of population in global issues. It was also very innovative in certain areas, for example in acknowledging women's health, including sexual and reproductive health, as a human right. Free choice, gender equality and the empowerment of women were identified as the key to smaller families and declining population growth. The Conference thus opened new avenues for improving the wellbeing of entire populations. Indeed, the post-Cairo years have seen a profound transformation of the world: fertility levels have fallen faster than anticipated in a number of countries, while the momentum of global population growth has slowed and still is slowing. However, as the success in reproductive health is becoming more evident, other elements of the ICPD Plan of Action come to the fore, such as the population aspects of sustainable development, environment, spatial distribution, ageing, etc. These are all topics receiving increasing attention in many countries, but are still insufficiently reflected in long-term strategies for development.

FAO has long been doing work to highlight the linkages between population and broader developmental issues. The Cairo Conference and the World Food Summit held in 1996 have helped FAO to change its perspective from an emphasis on production to a more humanised concern for the welfare of people. Today, our aim is to view population issues in a holistic manner and to focus on the interrelations between population factors, the biophysical environment and socio-economic and cultural forces from a sustainable development perspective. In applying this approach, we seek not only to strengthen the existing reproductive health emphasis by providing background information, but also to build positive synergies between those concerned with population and to promote more general developmental programmes. Let me illustrate briefly the fruitfulness of adopting such a perspective:

The issue of *rural/urban distribution* remains of critical importance for understanding population problems. In many developing countries, especially in Africa and South Asia, the vast majority of the population is still rural and will continue to be so well into the twenty-first century. Available evidence indicates that rural people, particularly rural women and children, suffer various handicaps and

inequalities. In comparison to their urban counterparts, they have lower literacy rates, are more vulnerable to economic shocks, have less scope for free choice, and face more difficulties in accessing resources such as education, technology, credit, legal advice and health care, including reproductive health services. One consequence of this is that rates of unwanted conceptions as well as maternal and infant mortality are often much higher in rural areas than in urban settings of a given country. The socio-economic status and productive as well as reproductive roles of rural populations can thus have a decisive impact on national demographic indicators. And yet it is not always fully appreciated that improving the condition of rural populations is one of the key strategies for socio-economic advancement at the national level. All too often policies have an in-built urban bias and rural populations do not receive the attention they deserve.

The processes of *migration and urbanisation* are of concern to all members of the international community. Results of several FAO projects show that changes in the territorial distribution of people are closely linked to factors such as changing agricultural patterns, changing trade and market relations, environmental degradation and sustainability of food production. Poverty, malnutrition, lack of food security, declines in agricultural outputs and local environmental collapses are among the principal causes of migration from rural to urban areas. In a number of developing countries, rural depopulation and stagnation of smaller towns affect increasingly large segments of the national territory. Although migration from rural areas can bring also significant developmental benefits, under certain circumstances it can give rise to public health crises or social tensions, and sometimes it can even contribute to international conflicts. Much still needs to be done to design national development policies that balance rural and urban needs in order to stem the outflow of people from the rural areas. This task requires time and money, but above all a consistent and determined commitment to sustainable development.

The *ageing of human populations* has emerged as one of the most significant demographic processes of the late twentieth century. FAO studies highlight the fact that ageing will increasingly be a rural matter. In addition, ageing in rural areas is likely to manifest itself earlier and proceed much faster than in the urban sector. Migration of younger family members to the cities is a major factor of the ageing of rural populations. The exodus of the youthful cohorts may ultimately lead to the erosion of rural production and a deterioration in the welfare of the elderly village populations. Rural elderly could face serious problems of isolation and insufficient subsistence, and supplying an adequate infrastructure is likely to be financially as well as socially much more costly than in urban areas. One aspect of this issue is that rural elderly could lose out against urban elderly if they find themselves in competition for scarce resources. Decision-makers should be alerted to the relative vulnerability of the rural elderly. The time for action may be shorter than is suggested by indices of ageing for the national populations as a whole.

On the basis of such examples and other information, the overall conclusion emerging from FAO's work in the population area is that the linkages between population, biophysical environment and socio-economic factors are extremely complex and defy simplistic interpretations or simplified interventions. Population, natural resource and environmental issues interact in complicated ways, depending on local conditions. It seems that the time has come to start looking at issues that so far have received less attention but have serious long-term implications, just like for fertility, and thus need to be addressed as soon as possible. Policies and programmes to accelerate development can greatly benefit from taking the complexity of biophysical, social, economic and institutional dimensions of demographic behaviour into closer consideration. The ideas of Cairo can only be strengthened if isolated, single-sectoral approaches in development strategies are replaced by cross-sectoral ones.

Of course, the issue of improving the wellbeing of rural populations is such a daunting challenge that it necessitates close collaboration of many different actors: governments, NGOs, international and regional organizations, donors, private sector and civil-society representatives. Such an example of collaboration can be found in the multi-sectoral structure of the UNFPA TSS system which represents an effective

instrument for meeting the tasks that still remain in implementing the Cairo Programme. FAO looks forward to co-operate with UNFPA as well as with other bodies within the UN system and on the international scene. By working together, and listening to each other, considerable progress can be made in promoting sustainable development and achieving a higher quality of life for all people. The present stage of the post-Cairo process, and this Forum in particular, give a unique opportunity to consolidate the work already done, explore new issues and devise effective strategies for the future.

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