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STATEMENT OF FINLAND

BY

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MINISTER OF EQUALITY AFFAIRS

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Please check against delivery

Mr. President,

Let me first, through you, thank the Arab Republic of Egypt for hosting the ICPD and for all the excellent arrangements made for us. I am confident that under your able leadership our work will be successful.

Let me also take this opportunity to thank the secretary-general of the Conference, Dr. Nafis Sadik, for all the hard and dedicated work she and her colleagues have put into the preparations of the Conference. Our success will be her success.

Furthermore, I would like to thank Dr. Fred Sai, who so ably led the Preparatory Committee of ICPD.

Mr. President,

The Government of Finland attaches particular importance to this first-ever International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD). This gives us a unique opportunity and challenge to address population issues and global population growth in the context of sustainable development and thereby carry forward and expand an important part of Agenda 21. The fundamental aim must be to safeguard and improve the quality of life of present and future generations. Policies and actions that we will agree on should result in stabilizing population growth to levels that could be maintained in economic, social and environmental terms. They must be based on the full realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms for all individuals.

Mr. President,

The overall concept of sustainable development, which interlinks population issues, economic and social development and environmental concerns is the very core of the ICPD Programme of Action. It has been approved as the starting point for the Programme. Therefore my Government regrets and is concerned that the recent publicity surrounding the ICPD focuses on a few issues only. Such publicity tends to derail the basic aim of our work and overshadows the fact that most of the Programme of Action has already been agreed on.

For my Government the ICPD is a landmark in the series of international conferences that will guide economic, social and human development in the years to come. This process, which started with UNCED two years ago, was followed by the Conference on Human Rights last year and will run through ICPD, the Summit for Social Development and the Conference on Women to Habitat II in 1996. These conferences build on the realization that sustainable human development is possible only as a result of a global commitment and cooperation by all partners.

One encouraging aspect is the constructive participation of the civil society, particularly the NGOs, in the processes culminating in these conferences. Their inputs, I am sure, will greatly facilitate the implementation of the policies and actions, particularly at the grassroots level.

Mr. President,

Finnish views regarding population and development issues are based on the recognition of a number of important facts at the global level:

Firstly, the generations whose reproductive behaviour will determine the size, trends and distribution of population have already been born. Their needs and expectations will be decisive. Our responsibility is to provide them with the possibility of choices.

Secondly, sustainable human development is possible only in circumstances where people are able to realize their potential in society, thus making population a resource. However, population growth becomes a threat where poverty, inequity, illiteracy and lack of opportunity prevail. Population can also become a threat through wasteful production and consumption patterns and lifestyles.

Thirdly, there is convincing evidence that policies and activities in the field of population and development do bring about tangible improvements in the quality of life. Doomsday prophecies do not need to materialize if appropriate and timely action is taken.

Fourthly, the daily realities have to be acknowledged, whether we like it or not. Unsafe abortions are a major public health concern, half a million women die annually of pregnancy or birth-related causes, and adolescents are sexually active. These issues must be addressed.

Mr. President,

Finland views the ICPD Programme of Action against these facts. The ICPD preparatory process has already achieved a great deal by underlining that governments must combine the interrelationships between population and development with the centrality of the individual in their actions. This is the only viable approach in matters that require actions by the governments in providing an enabling environment at the same time as

these matters touch on the values, intimacy and integrity of each person. The ultimate choice and responsibility is that of individuals and couples without any kind of coercion or imposition. We share the view expressed in the draft Programme of Action that, given the choice, enabling environment and empowerment, people will freely make such decisions that have significant effects on population growth and quality of life. Thus there is no conflict between public policies and individual needs.

The messages of ICPD and its Programme of Action are clear as regards gender equality and equity and the empowerment of women as well as the importance of education and basic health services. Equally clear is the recognition of the importance of the family in its different forms as the basic unit of society. Equality inside the family is an important end in itself.

The comprehensive approach to sexual and reproductive health and rights is a crucial element in the Programme of Action. This approach will enable the realization of mental, physical and social well-being and the enhancement of life and personal relationships. Every person - regardless of age or marital status - should have access to information and quality services regarding sexual and reproductive health and rights. Especially men should take more responsibility in sexual and reproductive health. A basic right of all women, men and adolescents is to make free and informed choices regarding their own sexual and reproductive health and to have the means to exercise this right. The comprehensive approach to sexual and reproductive health and rights covers the approaches and programmes on family planning, maternal and child health, sexually transmitted diseases, HIV/AIDS, information, education and communication, which so far have often been dealt with in isolation. While extending sexual and reproductive health services for

all emphasis must clearly be on quality, acceptability, accessibility and free choice.

The present high levels of unsafe and illegal abortions must also be properly addressed. Every nation must decide how it deals with these problems. Women's health is of course a priority, which affects the well-being of their children and families as well. Unless we address these matters now we endanger the health and lives of millions of women. Abortion should not be a family-planning method. Our national experience suggests that given the availability of information and services on reproductive health the number of abortions continues to decrease even though abortion is allowed on medical and social grounds. Finland is also the only country in Europe where the number of abortions among those under 19 years of age has decreased.

Mr. President,

Finland's experience may also in some other respects provide an example of a holistic approach to population issues. Finland has been one of the leading countries in empowering women and realizing gender equity and equality in terms of educational opportunities, labour force participation, family welfare and social security. As an example I could mention that women under 45 years of age are more educated than men. Extensive welfare and social security programmes have enabled people to combine working life and family life. The total fertility rate, which fell under replacement level in the late 1960s, is now around 1.8. Presently we are seeking solutions to the issues relating to aging populations.

Mr. President,

The global commitment to population and development issues must turn into concrete actions after the Conference. The follow-up includes also decisions on resource allocations and reallocations at different levels. More resources are needed to the social sector in general. An important element in the follow-up is learning from others and sharing experiences in a coherent way.

In the United Nations system all partners must combine their efforts, agree on a division of labor and avoid overlapping activities. No new institutions are needed, since I trust that the present ones have the capacity for improvement and change.

The issue closest to my heart is the health and well-being of children. We have a very strong moral and ethical mission in this conference: our actions will determine the future of our children and grandchildren. They have the right to be born wanted and with a prospect of a better future.

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