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INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON POPULATION AND DEVELOPMENT

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STATEMENT BY JACQUES DIOUF

DIRECTOR-GENERAL

FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANIZATION OF THE UNITED NATIONS

Mr. Chairman, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and  
Gentlemen,

Humanity can be proud of its achievement in obtaining a level of  
global food production sufficient to enhance per caput supplies despite  
the formidable increase in the size of the world's population. Hundred  
of million of men and women farmers and fisherfolk have indeed succeeded  
in increasing productivity and production to levels surpassing the  
growth in global population.

When given the right socio-economic conditions, these farmers and

fishermen have taken up the challenge of producing more food by combining their indigenous knowledge and skills with the products of science and technology. In relatively short periods of time, they have learned how to use modern agricultural techniques and to adapt their family life choices and responses accordingly. They have done this by changing marriage patterns, family composition, and their decisions regarding migration, whenever they felt such changes to be in their and their families' interests. They have, thus, shown a remarkable degree of adaptation to their environment and an ability to contribute to national needs by ensuring food security, while bringing about demographic changes that are socially beneficial. In particular, they have demonstrated that the social and economic development of rural areas could have a tremendous impact on population growth.

Unfortunately, however, in many countries, farmers and fisherfolk have neither received the attention they deserve nor been given access to a sufficient share of available resources, which would enable them to ensure long-term food security. There are still seventy-eight countries belonging to the category of "low-income food-deficit countries" representing a total population of 3.2 billion, and approximately 800 million people living in the developing countries have too little food to eat to lead a productive and healthy life. This year, additional millions are again living under the threat of famine. FAO projects that chronic malnutrition will increasingly affect Africans in the future. By the year 2010, nearly half of the projected 650 million malnourished in the world can be expected to be found in Africa.

It is thus understandable that when faced with such overwhelming odds in their daily struggle to provide their families with the minimum food required to exist, many farmers have had no choice but to

concentrate on day-to-day survival techniques, using the few resources at their disposal. The logic of this tenuous existence has thus taken precedence over the logic of balancing population growth and sustainable development and thereby ensuring food security and the protection of the environment.

FAO believes that to succeed, population policies must be an integral part of an overall development strategy which has food security as one of its main objectives. Studies have shown that one of the motives of villagers for having many children is to replace those who die, in order to ensure that a minimum number of children in each family will survive to assist them in their daily productive activities, and to provide support in their old age. It has often been concluded that health and education measures, particularly when aimed at women, could alone be sufficient to address this problem. To be considered alongside this is the fact that food is a major determinant of health, thus villagers must feel confident that food security is ensured in order to adjust their fertility.

Much more dramatically, in the future the stability and even the fate of Third World cities will be determined to a considerable extent by the status of food security. United Nations's projections expect the population size of these cities to increase by several billions over the next thirty years. Who will provide the food for these billions and under what conditions? The fishermen and farmers, of course. Furthermore, it should be noted that a considerable proportion of the projected increase in the cities is expected to derive from rural to urban migration. To paraphrase an expression in the French language: "The neglected farmer can also vote with his or her feet by leaving the land for the city".

Cooperation between those responsible for population, agriculture and economic policies is necessary to discourage such massive population movements with all their inherent dangers of social instability. To ensure food for all, the food producers must be able to earn a decent living for their families and guarantee them a minimum quality of life, or the front line against hunger will invariably be breached. This already seems to have happened in too many countries some of which, as far back as the 1970's, were identified as being at risk in studies undertaken by FAO on population supporting capacities of land. The studies projected that in the year 2000, these countries were likely to reach unsustainable limits should their high population growth rates continue to be accompanied by a failure to develop agricultural productivity at the levels required.

Sadly, recent events have confirmed the accuracy of these projections and the fact that policy and programming efforts in these countries were not able to meet the challenge nor to prevent the succession of disasters with which we are all too familiar. The lesson to be learned, therefore, is that population policies and programmes depend for their success on sound sustainable agriculture and rural development policies and programmes and vice versa.

For example, although fish is one of the major sources of animal protein for the growing population of the Third World, it is also clear that marine fisheries will not be able to maintain per capita supplies at present levels, in the face of population growth. Such a break in the food security chain, i.e. the jeopardizing of a basic source of nutrition, has far-reaching implications for the development of children and for the health of adults, particularly the poor in both urban and rural areas. This would result not only in increasing health costs, but

also in undermining the very basis for development. In order to avoid such possible effects, it is necessary to give priority to the rapid development of aquaculture, improved fisheries management practices and better utilization of existing fish catches which can compensate for the limits being reached in marine fisheries. This is only an example from fisheries, similar ones could be given in the areas of forestry and agriculture showing the interface between population and development considerations. They amply demonstrate that effective solutions can only be found through the integration of population and development policies and programmes and through cooperation between those responsible for formulating and implementing these policies and programmes. One cannot, on one hand, underline the inter-relations between agriculture and population, and on the other expect to succeed by acting alone or without collaboration.

Mr. Chairman, the linking of population and development by the present Conference is timely and appropriate. However, the challenge we must all face over the next decade, is to secure effective collaboration between the various actors and take the action required to free the world from scourge of famine and malnutrition thereby contributing to solving population problems. For the first time in history, humanity has the knowledge to succeed in this dream. It is our task and responsibility to transform an age-old dream into everyday reality.

This statement was delivered, on behalf of Dr. J. Diouf, FAO Director-General, by Dr. A. Y. Bukhari, ADG/Regional Representative for the Near East in Cairo, Egypt.

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