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ADDRESS

BY

THE MINISTER FOR DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

OF THE KINGDOM OF THE NETHERLANDS

JAN PRONK

TO THE

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON POPULATION AND DEVELOPMENT

CAIRO, 8 SEPTEMBER 1994

All couples and individuals have the basic right to decide freely and responsibly the number and spacing of their children and to have the information, education and means to do so".

This is a quote. It is the basic principle underpinning the World Population Plan of Action we agreed upon in Bucharest, twenty years ago. Ten years later, in Mexico, we reaffirmed this right of individuals to decide freely, without any form of coercion, when and how many children they would have as a basic human right. In Mexico we strongly related this to the advancement of women. We also regarded family planning not in isolation, but in relation to social programmes, health care and education. In both Bucharest and Mexico we committed ourselves to take action.

So why do we need a new Conference? The principles we agreed upon were sound. They are still valid. We need a third Conference because we are, in the words of Paul Kennedy, "Preparing for the twenty-first Century". Despite the principles agreed upon, despite the action taken, despite the progress made, it is still a race against time. We now know, better than ten or twenty years ago, that the projected growth in the world's population cannot be sustained with our current patterns and levels of material consumption, especially not with the level of consumption of the rich. We now also know better than before that high and unbalanced population growth can have social effects to the extent that economic and cultural conflicts swiftly escalate into violence. We now also know

more about the necessary conditions for human development. We have learned much during the last ten years, much which could help us improve our policies, practices and behavior. This is why we have come to Cairo: to express a sense of urgency, to strengthen our commitment, to improve our practices, to pledge our solidarity with future generations, and to act upon all that.

That means that the outcome of this third Conference should be a step forward compared to the previous two. Forward, not backward. Otherwise, we could simply have decided to speed up the implementation of the still valid agreements of Bucharest and Mexico, instead of starting a new discussion. Indeed, such a new discussion is useful, not only to take into account the lessons of the past but also to reflect the urgency of today.

Unsustainable population growth is an emergency. However, there is no reason to panic. There is no reason to renounce the freedom of individuals to choose. History does not provide any indication that coercion, implying social sacrifice and a loss of individual happiness, would bring about more sustainable population growth rates than the freedom of individuals would - in particular the freedom of women to take their own decisions. Development leading to a greater quality of life for all people is still the best contraceptive, in particular if resources are shared equitably and if priority is being given to the autonomy of women. Educating girls, providing labour opportunities to women, securing their economic self-reliance, in short: empowering women in society, is the right way to sustainable human development. Coercion is not humane. It is also counter-productive.

One lesson therefore is that we need a comprehensive approach. That is why I agree with the 20/20 proposal to increase the current level of

public spending, as well as that of development aid, on basic social services to 20% each. I hope that the Conference can support this target.

Investing more in basic social services, either by increasing overall resources or by re- allocation, will prove more rewarding than funding reproductive health and family planning itself. Policies in the Netherlands will be geared toward the realization of the 20/20 initiative.

In order to render development sustainable we need more than this. Our ultimate objective is the enhancement of the quality of life of present and future generations. This requires that we should not limit the options of future generations by consuming too much today. ICPD in Cairo and UNCED in Rio are twins. A decrease in world population growth rates and reshaping world production and consumption patterns are two sides of the same coin, the coin of a sustainable economic future. That is a tall order for all of us, not only for developing countries, but even more so for industrialized countries where present economic policies are a principal cause for the degradation of the global environment. It is curious that structural adjustment programmes are forced upon developing countries, while at the same time a matter of such vital importance to the future of the world, such as the adjustment of Western economies and lifestyles, is postponed again and again. This Conference should call for structural adjustment in the North to give yet unborn generations a real chance on this earth.

Mr. President,

This Conference on Population and Development is important not only

because of the urgency of the issue, not only because of the need for a comprehensive approach, but also because it enables us to discuss the underlying values. The 1990's are the decade of disputed values. In all our societies they are being challenged and reviewed. Not seldom this dispute lies at the basis of new conflicts. The United Nations, as a family of peoples, provide the outstanding forum to discuss them constructively, in mutual respect and tolerance, as we were reminded by Mr. Boutros Boutros Ghali in his opening address. That requires a willingness to listen to each other, as countries with different cultures and traditions. The Netherlands' government commits itself to do so, to listen carefully to other governments and to the people themselves. To the latter in particular - adult, young, female, male. Their choices, their needs and aspirations are the core of our discussions.

We are very much interested in a constructive dialogue on values. We can support the draft document "unbracketed", but we are also sincerely willing to engage ourselves in the ongoing discussions. After all, that is what a conference is all about. We understand the fears concerning loss of family values, too much emphasis on individualism and a proliferation of Western consumption life styles. As a matter of fact in our view the draft document does address these concerns. It is quite well balanced, defending values such as solidarity, also with the yet unborn, protection of life and sustainability of society. We appreciate the underlying philosophy. In discussing these values we would like to emphasize the right to life, to live as a human being, not only to survive, but to enjoy a life with quality, not misery, not a life in pain or fear. Such a life requires at least that "children should have the right to be wanted and to enter a family and community that values them" (Robert Cassen). The counterpart of such a children's right is that women only have the children they want, in a community that will

support and cherish them. If not, human development and human values are at risk.

We find the draft document well in accordance with such principles and values. In our view the text does indeed add value to what we agreed in Bucharest and Mexico:

- It introduces the new broad concept of sexual and reproductive health and rights;
- It focuses on gender and highlights the crucial role of women in population and development issues, while at the same time it points at the responsibility of men;
- It addresses the immense tragedy of unsafe abortion which is the cause of so many unnecessary maternal deaths;
- It acknowledges the problems which adolescents still have to face in relation to their needs regarding sexual behavior and reproductive health.

I see the new concept of sexual and reproductive health and rights as an important contribution of this Conference to the design of policies enhancing the quality of life. It includes family planning but it is broader and of an integrated nature. It takes the needs of people more seriously by not solely focusing on them as contributors to population growth but as persons seeking a healthy and dignified life. The Bucharest principle that all couples and individuals have the right to decide freely and responsibly the number and spacing of their children and to have the information and means to do so, remains the cornerstone of this concept. Population policies and programmes should always respect universally declared and recognized human rights and never ever be coercive.

Reproductive rights, when understood as individual choices, are meaningless without the conditions that facilitate their exertion. Policies in support of reproductive rights must change adverse social conditions. Gender still is one of the most pervasive sources of inequality. So, women's autonomy is a key condition for the attainment of reproductive health and rights. The exposure of women to unwanted pregnancy, maternal mortality and sexually transmitted diseases depends on multiple social, economic and cultural conditions which affect their ability to make free and voluntary decisions. Women's decisions about childbearing are often made under pressure by others - husbands or male partners, mothers, in-laws, sisters, neighbors, etc. Women are too often patronized or limited in their possibilities to visit clinics and consider the use of contraceptives. The result is that their health and even their lives are at risk. At the same time they end up with the full responsibility for avoiding unwanted pregnancies. The promotion of reproductive health and rights of women has the best chances for success if it aims at reducing existing inequality by empowering women and encouraging male responsibility and partnership. Again, this requires full access of women to education, employment, credit and productive assets. It also requires an end to discrimination of women in decision making, to begin with decisions concerning their own health, body and life.

We consider it of the utmost importance that unsafe abortion is addressed as a grave health problem. It is an indictment of indifference and neglect. Unsafe abortion is not necessary. It can be avoided, by providing women with full access to all means of sexual and reproductive health: information as well as safe contraceptives. And if, by chance, that access failed, there should be access to safe abortion as an "ultimatum remedium", as part of an overall reproductive health package

on the basis of a commitment to women's well-being. In my country termination of pregnancy is not promoted as a method of fertility regulation. In the Netherlands, safe abortion, as an emergency solution, is legal within certain specific restrictions. These are spelled out in the law in order to guarantee a process of responsible decision making, a safe practice, proper implementation of the legal requirements, whereby the woman concerned is never punishable. The result of all this is one of the lowest abortion rates in the world. My government focuses on providing individuals and couples, women and men, adults and adolescents, married as well as single or unmarried, with a wide variety of fertility regulation methods and information on sexuality and reproduction enabling them to make free, informed and responsible choices.

This includes young people. Again, not without result. The number of teenage pregnancies is about the lowest in the world.

Mr. President,

I have elaborated on sexual and reproductive health policies in the Netherlands in order to make clear that good education, freedom of choice, access to a full range of services without discrimination of women or young people can lead to responsible decisions and a healthy society. After all, people are human beings: committed to life, concerned about the future, knowledgeable about society, respecting values. The more people are treated with respect and given the opportunity to make their own free choice, the more responsible our society will be.

Values are basic, in particular when we are discussing, as is the case here in Cairo, matters of life and death. Laws can be imposed. Values

cannot. They should be owned by the people themselves. If so, the result will be a more sustainable society, greater quality of life and responsible behavior in respect of our fellow men and women, taking care also of the yet unborn.

It is in this spirit that we participate in the discussions in Cairo. We want to listen, discuss and compromise. We commit ourselves to action. We want this Conference to be a success, so that we are prepared to enter the twenty-first century.

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