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International Conference

on

Population

and

Development

Statement by

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President of IFAD

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INTERNATIONAL FUND FOR AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

Mr. Chairman,

Excellencies,

Distinguished Delegates,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an occasion of great pleasure and honour for me to be back in this historic city after my visit earlier this year. During that visit, I had an opportunity to see both the problems of rural development as well as the determined efforts which the people and Government of Egypt are making to address them. IFAD is proud to be associated in these endeavours to eliminate hunger and poverty and to bring about a more productive and stable rural society and economy in the country.

This aim of placing economic growth and social stability on a sustainable basis is one that many countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America are pursuing with courage and resolution. Population changes are a central aspect of this process, but the interaction is a complex one.

It is therefore important that the International Conference on Population and Development should be seen in the context of a series of major initiatives by the international community to address a number of issues central to achieving sustainable economic and social progress. The Conference on Environment and Development at Rio de Janeiro two years ago was one of these seminal events. It helped to generate a new awareness of the risks of environmental degradation and the strong interlinkages between environmental changes on the one hand and poverty eradication and economic development on the other. The Cairo Conference, in turn, will be followed by the Beijing Women's Conference and the Social Summit in Copenhagen next year. Environment, population, the status of women in development and social cohesion, all form aspects of an interlinked process of social and economic evolution. Progress in

each of them requires movement in the other areas and none can be viewed in isolation, certainly not the question of population.

At the heart of the matter in all these areas is how best to utilize the resources of this Planet so that each human being, man and woman, can develop fully his or her capacities and talents and live productive and secure lives.

The Earth is large but finite, which raises the question of the sustainable use of resources. One aspect which is often ignored relates to income distribution. We must not forget that today a small proportion of the Earth's population living in advanced countries consumes more allergy and other scarce resources than do the much larger numbers living in the developing countries. Unbalanced consumption patterns can affect the use of resources in unexpected ways. The high consumption of meat per head in industrialized countries, for example, is inducing a shift in the use of land from growing grains to raising animals, not only in the advanced countries themselves, but in developing countries producing for export. A more extreme example is the impact that the consumption of illegal narcotic drugs has in driving land away from food production to growing narcotic crops.

While the consumption patterns of the rich place a heavy burden on environmental sustainability, so does extreme poverty. In their struggle to survive, poor farmers, rural women, forest dwellers and other impoverished rural groups, often have little alternative other than to overuse and even abuse vulnerable land and water resources, and to cut down! trees and vegetation. Such misuse of the natural resource base accelerates degradation which, in turn, intensifies poverty, giving another twist to the spiral.

The question of population and numbers is, of course, an intrinsic element in this struggle for survival. Poverty, particularly rural poverty, interacts with population dynamics in a variety of ways. Rapidly growing numbers intensify the stress on natural resources, reducing land holdings and driving the poor onto marginal and fragile areas prone to degradation. Under these conditions, insecurity is a permanent element of their lives. Given high infant and child mortality, it is natural for such groups to want as many children as possible, to provide labour in the present, and security for old age. Poverty thus is worsened by population growth, but at the same time, fuels it.

Just as the Rio Conference made clear the interaction between environment and poverty, this Conference, I hope, will lead to a deeper awareness about the equally strong, equally complex interaction between population growth, poverty and development. The number of human beings who can live productively and sustainably on Earth is not an absolute figure. It depends on the technologies and capital available, the social organization and the strength of civic institutions. I am glad to see, therefore, in the draft Plan of Action, that we have progressed beyond the simple Malthusian notion that rising populations inevitably lead to poverty and famine. We are now closer to an understanding that reducing population growth is itself dependent on improving the productivity, incomes and conditions of life of the poor groups who account for much of this growth. Thus, it is the access of the poor to productive resources as well as availability of family planning services which will be decisive. This will ultimately determine when populations will be stabilized and, indeed, whether the overall goal of sustainable development will be achieved. We need to realize that the real population problem is not that there are too many people, but that there are too many poor people, today over one billion, in absolute poverty.

The critical issue is one of choice and the ability for poor rural groups who have high fertility and high population growth rates to have a greater command over their lives. Only with a growing sense of security against the loss of livelihood, and indeed lives, due to the ravages of illness and hunger, will there be a growing desire to reduce births down towards replacement levels. What is important therefore is creating conditions in which men and women in Asia, Africa and Latin America have a meaningful possibility of choice over the size of their families as is already enjoyed by couples in Germany or Italy or Japan.

Achieving such conditions is a challenge for us all. Greater production and incomes and a fairer distribution of the fruits of such production on the one hand, and a greater access to education and health services on the other, are essential. The latter needs to include preventive and curative health as well as the availability of family planning advice and support. Recognizing the role of women in development, and taking steps to make this role more productive and fulfilling for the women themselves, is crucial. Moreover, physical and economic security has to be enhanced, underpinned by effective institutions. When one compares such requirements with the actual conditions in many parts of the world, one realizes the dimension of the challenge.

Yet, there is growing evidence to encourage the view that while this challenge is difficult, it is not impossible. But it cannot be met by regarding the poor merely as a problem of welfare. Instead, the underutilized capacities of the poor themselves have to be mobilized so that they become a source of development rather than be seen simply as an obstacle to growth. The key to this is eliciting the active participation of the intended beneficiaries themselves in the design and implementation of projects. Such participation gives the beneficiaries

control and ownership over the enterprise, and enhances their capacity to take further initiatives on their own in the future making the projects sustainable. That this can be done has been shown in more than 300 poverty alleviation projects IFAD has supported in over 100 countries across the world.

Take credit, for example. The poor rarely have access to credit. Yet, IFAD-supported projects like the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, the P4-K initiative in Indonesia and the Village Funds in Africa, among many others, have demonstrated that credit can be effectively targeted to the poorest who are fully able to use it productively to raise output and incomes and work their way out of poverty.

One especially interesting way of stimulating participation is based on the formation of small groups in which the beneficiaries act together for credit and savings, extension, small-scale water schemes, marketing and the like. These groups provide a means for their members to voice their needs and articulate their claims on official institutions and development services. They thus can serve as a link between the poor, marginalized individuals, and the social structures which for so long have paid little attention to their requirements. Moreover, once set up, the groups can serve as a platform for channelling other services.

A Fund-supported project in Tamil Nadu, India illustrates the possibilities. Here, groups of poor village women, who can be counted among the poorest of the poor, are being helped to organize themselves into self-help and savings groups. The savings are deposited with a commercial bank linked to the project. The group savings provide a pool of resources for borrowing by members and, furthermore, can also serve as collateral to access much larger loans from the bank. The project,

developed with the close involvement of the beneficiaries and local NGOs, offers a variety of logistic and technical support allowing the women to choose among a number of possible income-generating activities. As the women's incomes rise, they want to preserve the benefits of their hard work for themselves and their families. There is in particular a stronger desire to space and limit the number of children so that they can provide these children with greater education and other opportunities. Especially encouraging is the interest in sending female children to school which will carry on the benefits to the next generation.

Thus access to resources is not complete unless it is accompanied by access to the means for family planning and other services. The women's groups under the Tamil Nadu Project are serving as an effective delivery channel for such support. The early results of the project are so interesting that there is an intention of expanding it to cover a number of other states in the country. What is particularly noteworthy is that it shows how even the poorest of the poor can gain a measure of authority over what happens to them and what they can do with their lives.

Mr. Chairman,

Through most of history humankind has had little control or influence over their environment, over how they lived, or died, or over how many children they had. It is only in the last 200 years, that substantial numbers of people have progressively gained some ability to do this. Unfortunately, there are still today many hundreds of millions of people who continue to be the victims of their environment rather than be able to deal with their environment as partners. It is this billion or more

where fertility rates and population growth are the highest, and which is the main source of concern since this high population growth perpetuates a cycle of poverty and deprivation.

This Cairo Conference on Population is a unique opportunity to bring together the resources of the international community to break this vicious cycle. What is required is complementary action to allow people, especially the poor, the resources that create a greater power to choose, together with the means in terms of health and family planning services to do so.

I look forward to this Conference, together with the other major initiatives I mentioned earlier, creating the framework in which developed and developing countries, and the international institutions they have set-up, can work in a convergent way to move towards this goal. As regards IFAD, we are about to complete the Fourth Replenishment of our resources, which will allow us to step-up the level of our programmes and act as a catalyst to bring about a world free of hunger and poverty. In this effort, we will work increasingly closely with the entire development community, particularly the International Financial Institutions and the •r Regional Development Banks, and, of course, with our bilateral aid donors. We will also work with our UN partners in the t,, Joint Consultative Group on Policy, in particular the UNFPA. In this connection, let me say here a warm word of appreciation to Nafis Sadik who has contributed so much to this effort both through her inspiring leadership of the UNFPA and as Secretary-General of this Conference.

Mr. Chairman,

At the end of the twentieth century, we have, I believe, the means as well as the resources to remove the poverty that cripples the lives of hundreds of millions. There is now the capacity to provide education, health and family planning knowledge that would give the poorest of the poor the ability to make meaningful choices about themselves and their families. But this is not a task that can be accomplished in a single conference or in a year or two. We need to accept that our commitment on this must be an enduring one. Yet the goal is not out of reach. For I am convinced that societies which can conquer disease and halt unnecessary deaths, will also in time be able to influence how many children they wish to bring forth into the world. Populations will move towards stability and in balance with society and nature. The question is when this will be achieved, and how many more millions of lives will be blighted in the meantime. This Conference, I believe, could be a turning point to accelerate that transition.

Thank you

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