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MALAWI

STATEMENT BY THE RIGHT HONOURABLE
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 OF THE REPUBLIC OF MALAWI

DELIVERED AT THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON POPULATION AND DEVELOPMENT,
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Mr. President, Your Excellencies, Distinguished Leaders of Delegations,
 Ladies and Gentlemen.

I feel greatly privileged to be among this distinguished gathering of
 the International Conference on Population and Development being held

here in this magnificent, historic and beautiful city of Cairo. Allow me, Mr. President, to extend Malawi's congratulations to you, Your Excellency, on your being elected to the high office of Conference President.

My delegation would also like to thank, through you Mr. President, DR Nafis Sadik, the Conference Secretary General, and the whole Secretariat for the timely finalisation of the Conference's Draft Programme of Action as approved by the Preparatory Committee for the ICPD at its Third Session held in New York in April, this year. Mr. President, Malawi's experiences in population and development were ably tabled during negotiations of PrepCom III.

Malawi's social indicators are among the worst in the world. For example, the infant mortality rate stands at 135 per 1000 live births, while the child mortality rate is 240 per 1000 live births. The risk of Malawian women dying due to pregnancy and related factors is 1 in 29 followed by a very high maternal mortality ratio of 620 per 100,000 live births. Similarly, Mr. President, Malawi's life expectancy at birth of 48 years, is among the lowest in the world.

Mr. President, among the major factors contributing to the poor health status are: poverty, high illiteracy rates, especially among women, too early, too many, too frequent and too late pregnancies. Additional reasons include a high annual population growth rate of 3.2 per cent, a high total fertility rate of 6.7 and a low contraceptive prevalence rate of 7 per cent.

Aware of these critical issues the new Government has placed poverty alleviation as its top developmental objective. Within this objective,

population and development issues, the implementation of a comprehensive reproductive health care programme including family planning and primary health care are a top priority for my Government. Our aim is to achieve sustainable population growth rates which are compatible with the attainment of the country's social and economic development objectives.

Mr. President, strategies for realizing these objectives are well articulated in several key policy documents. These are mainly in areas of population, nutrition, gender and development, child survival, family planning, the environment and poverty.

These policy documents, Mr. President, provide a solid framework within which to address Malawi's population and development issues holistically. Their principal aim, within Malawi's social, economic and cultural development, of which population goals and policies are integral parts, is to improve levels of living and the quality of life of Malawian's, especially those in rural and peri-urban areas.

My delegation therefore notes with satisfaction that the ICPD is taking place at a time when the need for international cooperation for global problem-solving has never been greater. Such cooperation for development should be based on the spirit of partnership, mutual trust, interest and benefits, and genuine interdependence.

Mr. president, Malawi believes that international cooperation cannot take place in the absence of national independence, sovereignty, and liberation. Therefore, the first multiparty Government in the history of Malawi, to which I am privileged to belong, recognizes the dignity of the individual, his/her self-determination as well as the elimination of all forms of discrimination in accordance with the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and the United Nations Charter.

In looking towards the future, Mr. President, the Government of Malawi realizes that the challenges of today are to ensure that the majority of Malawians have access to efficient and effective reproductive health services that take account of the interactions of population, the environment, resources and development.

Priority will therefore be given to the implementation of the National Population Policy focusing on improving the poor social indicators through, among other actions, the implementation of comprehensive reproductive and sexual health programmes including family planning, strengthening programme management and integrating gender and development issues in all population and development programmes.

Mr. President, these efforts will have little impact unless the underlying factors such as poverty, food insecurity and high illiteracy, especially among women/girls, are addressed concurrently. Malawi is therefore fully committed to addressing these problems by harnessing the efforts of all public, parastatal, non-governmental, private, inter-governmental and international Organizations. Equally important is the need to mobilize adequate financial, human and material resources at the local, national and international levels with which to implement our programs.

Therefore, the Programme of Action's thrust in emphasizing efforts to slow down population growth, to reduce poverty, to achieve economic progress, to improve environmental protection, and to reduce unsustainable consumption and production patterns are mutually reinforcing and therefore deserve my delegation's full support.

Mr. President and distinguished delegates, my delegation is more than aware that during negotiations at PrepCom III, there was no consensus on a number of critical issues. These include safe motherhood, sexual and reproductive health, sexual and reproductive rights, family planning, unsafe abortion and fertility regulation. It is my delegation's considered opinion that these terms should not be compromised because they are central to our population and development policies and programmes.

Mr President, abortion in Malawi is still illegal, but it is carried out if in the opinion of a medical doctor, the health of the mother is endangered. Notwithstanding this factor, available statistics in Malawi show that nearly 35 per cent of all maternal deaths are due to induced abortions. Thus, clandestine and back-door abortions are taking place at an increasing rate, hence the need for addressing the health consequences of abortion.

Noting that a significant proportion of the abortions - carried out are self-induced or otherwise unsafe, Malawi is one of the many countries in the world where safe motherhood has been accepted as a strategy to a reduce maternal morbidity and mortality. My delegation therefore believes that the Draft Programme of Action - does not in any way promote or attempt to legalize abortion. Such an interpretation, Mr. President, is not only incorrect, but also dangerous because we are talking about the lives of our women who, together with our children, are the core and fabric of our society.

Thus the provision of comprehensive reproductive health and family planning information and services is unquestionably the most effective means of preventing unsafe abortions. My delegation would like to urge, in this context, that all Governments, inter-governmental and non-

governmental organizations should deal openly and forthrightly with unsafe abortions as a major public concern. They should assess the health and social impact of unsafe abortions and seek ways in which to reduce the need for them.

The prevention of unwanted pregnancies must always be given the highest priority. It is my Government's resolve that all attempts should be made to reduce the need for abortion, although abortion should not be promoted as an alternative to contraception. In all cases, Mr. President, women should have access to quality- services for the management of complications arising from unsafe abortions, as well as to postabortion counseling, education and 'family planning services.

Related to these issues Mr. President, is the subject of adolescent sexual and reproductive health. Young people aged 10 - 24 years, constitute one-third of Malawi's total population. They are faced with diverse problems including changes in the traditional family structure and early marriages (with 27.3 per cent of girls aged 15 - 19 already being mothers of at least one child as of 1992).

There is also a significant rise in the number of wanted and unwanted pregnancies and the associated high risks of contracting and transmitting sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS. These, Mr. President, are realities of today and we must collectively and affirmatively address the sexual and reproductive health needs of our adolescents.

In light of the spread of STDs and HIV/AIDS, Malawi recognizes the right of every individual of childbearing age and couple to have healthy and satisfactory relationships, free of any sexual abuse or harassment;

that such relationships should promote the right to freedom of choice and responsible decision-making on the number and spacing of children; and that by implication, sexual and reproductive health programmes should neither be coercive nor discriminatory.

Mr. President, Malawi believes that a clear understanding and a recognition of the interrelationships between population, sustained economic growth and sustainable development are of central importance to the success of this Conference. This understanding will enable us to take appropriate action in integrating population issues into economic and development strategies at the national and international levels. In the context Malawi, a clear appreciation of these interrelationships will enhance our ability to address the root causes of poverty and create a firm basis for ensuring that our developmental initiatives and actions are sustainable in the long-term.

Mr. President, direct relationships between reducing population growth rates and reducing poverty levels are well documented. I would, however, like to add that since women are generally among the most neglected sections of our society, often resulting from misconceptions of their role in the family as well as from vestiges of past social and economic patterns, existing gender inequalities and barriers to their economic empowerment should be eliminated.

Mr. President, my delegation notes with satisfaction the inclusion of the goal of universal primary education in all countries before the year 2015, as well as increased access by girls and women to secondary and higher levels of education. Malawi has just introduced free education at the primary level. Our aim is to ensure universal access to primary school by both girls and boys as one of the ways of eradicating illiteracy, as well as a basis for the permanent empowerment of women,

beginning with the girl child.

Finally, Mr. President, I wish to emphasize that action at the national level is of paramount importance and should foster the active involvement of people at the local and community levels, including their elected representatives. An equally important area, Mr. President, is resource mobilization and its judicious allocation and utilization, without which the Programme of Action cannot be implemented.

Mr. President, Excellencies, distinguished delegates,
thank you; very much.

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