

As written:

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Opening remarks

by Ms **Eveline Herkens**, Minister for development Co-operation
of the Kingdom of the Netherlands

at the International NGO and Youth Forum on the ICPD Review at
The Hague, Netherlands

on 6 February 1999, at 9.00 a.m. in the Congress Centre

Ladies and gentlemen,

you cannot regulate intimate and sensitive issues like sexuality, reproduction and health by government decree. To bring about changes in behaviour and attitude you need intermediaries who are close to the people concerned, know their needs and are familiar with local custom. This is why the Programme of Action produced in Cairo recognised civil society as a fully-fledged partner in the pursuit of its objectives.

In the summer of 1998 UNFPA held a meeting in Bangladesh to look at what has become of this partnership. It had carried out studies in around a hundred countries - not to produce figures but to find out how civil society has been involved and what problems have arisen.

The studies showed that civil society has become involved in a wide range of ways, many of them very inventive, using existing channels. Just a few examples. In Tanzania trade unions have been used in a campaign to get men more involved in reproductive health and birth control. The national trade unions association managed to reach men in the furthest

corners of the country, on plantations and in factories and workshops. The project succeeded in involving a number of companies who contributed money for training and contraceptives. In Chile a radio soap targeted at young girls taught them that it's OK to say no to sex, and that safe sex is not just for wimps.

At the meeting in Bangladesh last year, the state secretary for Health and Population of Egypt said that without the help of NGO's, female genital mutilation would never have been banned in that country.

You, the NGO community, can pocket these and other success stories. They are important to tell. They also help showing us the way for the next five years. Now, I would like to highlight a number of issues which I think should be on your agendas for the next five years and which I hope you may draw some inspiration from during your conference here.

On top of your list should be advocacy. Advocacy lies at the heart of what NGO's are all about. This holds especially true for ICPD. Sexual health and rights, HIV/AIDS, adolescent sexuality, abortion: many of these issues are only addressed in whispering conversations or in the doctors' office. Five years after Cairo we are still confronted with a great many taboos. In my time as ambassador to the UN in Geneva I once attended an official UN meeting in which Mary Robinson, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and Nafis Sadik, Executive Director of UNFPA agreed on the right for women to enjoy sex! In stating this, Mary Robinson and Nafis Sadik did not change the world. But their statements supporting public debate do matter. The fact that these issues are publicly debated however, is what counts. NGO's can mobilize opinion leaders, religious leaders and officials to show that public debate on these issues is possible and that talking about them does make a difference.

The second issue I would like to focus on is finance.

As you can read in reports from UNFPA and Population Action International, governments in donor countries as well as in recipient countries are not meeting the financial targets they agreed upon in Cairo. On the donor side, the Nordic countries, the Netherlands, UK and Germany are the only ones living up to their commitments. The rest is far behind. Clearly there is ample scope for action here from the NGO community, lobbying governments, parliamentarians and other decision makers. At the same time we should keep in mind that even if donor governments start paying their share, donor grant money is limited and always will be. The bulk of what is needed to finance the implementation of the Programme of Action will have to come from domestic budgets of developing countries. At present, 80% of all money spent by developing countries on reproductive health and related issues is spent by five countries: India, China, Indonesia, Mexico and Iran. That means the majority of developing countries are not doing enough. NGO's from developing countries have an important role in bringing home that message. Make sure your government gets its priorities right.

Another area where NGO's have a special role: reaching out to young people. Young people are becoming the biggest segment of the world's population. They have enormous development potential. All over the world youngsters are becoming sexually active at an earlier age, and marrying later. This means they have more casual sexual encounters, and are therefore at greater risk from sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancy, unsafe abortion and AIDS. Advice on how to avoid these risks should therefore be targeted mainly at young people. However, it is often difficult to reach them through the regular channels. A young girl is unlikely to ask for contraceptives at a clinic where she is likely to run into her aunt with her newborn baby. In many cultures there is a heavy taboo on contraceptives for unmarried people. So we need unconventional strategies. It is extremely important to involve young people themselves in these strategies and

programmes from the outset.

Although it comes as no news to you, I should just like to stress that this applies particularly to girls. Women's and girls' right to health is flagrantly disregarded from the cradle to the grave. It begins with prenatal selection of the sex of a child, and the murder of girl babies because parents prefer to have sons. Throughout their childhood girls are pushed to the back of the queue for food and medical care - boys always get priority. Once they have grown into young women it is hard for them to refuse sexual contact or to insist on safe sex. Sexually transmitted diseases, too many pregnancies in rapid succession and dangerous abortions are ever-present threats. Before she knows it, a woman's body is old, worn out and broken. Sexual health and rights for women and men should be on the top of your agenda when it comes to advocacy.

Finally a few words on the NGO sector as such.

The UNFPA study found that in ninety per cent of countries the government was working with NGOs to put the Programme of Action into practice. However, in many countries NGOs do not yet feel strong enough to draw attention to problems and call for alternative solutions. In developing countries they are often small, inexperienced and dependent on external funding. Some governments invite only **accomodating** organisations to talks. In other countries, NGOs have the idea that they are only allowed to attend for the sake of appearances. And sometimes they risk losing their credibility as watchdogs if they are too closely associated with government policy. There is no universal recipe for strengthening the NGO sector. But if we take a critical look at current practice we could learn some lessons.

NGOs are often in competition with each other, if only for funding. This produces an array of programmes for birth control, reproductive health care, AIDS prevention or improvement of the status of women. Some countries have

thousands of NGOs, varying widely in quality and organisational capacity. This makes it incredibly difficult to know who they actually represent and to coordinate them. Another obstacle is the financial dependence on external donors. As a result NGOs sometimes suddenly have to divert their attention to another area at the donor's insistence. This benefits neither the sustainability, nor the expertise of the organisation. Forming effective partnerships and assuring a more stable financial base is essential for NGOs to be reliable and effective partners in implementation of programmes.

Reproductive health will continue to be an important part of Dutch policy. We spend 4% of our ODA on it each year and that will not change. We count on NGOs as advocates, as lobbyists, as implementing partners and as pioneers for all the reasons I mentioned in my speech.

I hope this conference turns out as useful as it promises to be. Use the opportunity to learn from each other. Above all, decide on the message that you want take with you to the Special Session of the UN General Assembly in New York at the end of June. Last but not least, bring that message home to your governments and make sure you are heard.