

As written

**Statement of H.E. Sangay Ngedup, Minister for Health & Education,
Royal Government of Bhutan, at the Hague Forum, Netherlands, 8 –
12 February, 99**

Mr President, distinguished delegates, ladies & gentlemen,

We are gathered here in the historic city of Hague to once again measure the seriousness of population and development issues. For it is central to our sustainability and, indeed, I daresay to our very survival. To ensure a brighter tomorrow, we must act, and act decisively now to tackle the unfinished business in population and development. I am confident that our shared experiences and collective wisdom will allow us not to leave this forum empty-handed.

Nestled in the lofty Himalayas, Bhutan is breathtakingly beautiful, yet its rugged terrain also makes socioeconomic development a formidable challenge. Centuries of experience have taught us the importance of maintaining the delicate balance and the harmony between man and nature. Realizing the threat that rapid population growth can pose to the sustainability of that harmony, Bhutan has made population planning a national priority.

Since Cairo, Bhutan has fully integrated. population activities into its overall development policy. Within the current development plan, intensified efforts in reproductive health strive to reduce, by 2002, the population growth to 2% or less, and halve the infant and maternal mortality rates. In addition, to provide the impetus for promoting reproductive health in the country, His Majesty the King had issued the Royal Edict on family planning, emphasizing on the quality of life as the end result rather than the mere reduction of numbers.

In the true spirit of social justice and equality, all Bhutanese have equal rights, be it access to health or education services, employment or ownership of property. Further, in reaffirmation of their reproductive rights, Bhutanese have complete freedom to choose the number of children that they want, and are provided free the full range of contraceptives in a 'cafeteria' approach. To enhance the quality and to improve access to care, in addition to established health infrastructure, tremendous efforts are expended to provide essential equipment. and drugs, and on training and human resource development.

The Royal Government is conscious of the rights and the potential of women's full participation in all development process. Bhutanese women face no gender discrimination and have equal rights to inherit or dispose their properties, marry or divorce, seek employment or pursue individual enterprises. There is a determined effort to induct women in the government and other employment sectors and to promote their leadership role. In addition, in recent years, legal mandates have been strengthened to protect women's right and to promote their empowerment. They include such initiatives as increasing the legal age of marriage from 16 to 18 years, enforcing the need for marriage certificates, alimony regulation that requires the father to pay 20% of his income as child support, and a rape law that can send the offender to prison for life.

To encourage the optimal utilization of services and facilities, intensified awareness campaign are regularly carried out, at the highest levels of the government, as well as grassroots organizations such as village health workers, national women's association members, and village development committees. Through the school health programs, reproductive health awareness is promoted through such diverse activities as special

awareness campaigns, distribution of menstrual health booklet, and inclusion of sexually transmitted diseases in their curriculum. Even sex education is now being introduced at the higher secondary level.

Bhutan remains fully committed to the attainment of universal access to primary education by 2015.

Mr President, I am pleased to say that we have now almost 80% primary school enrolment, with girl's enrolment rate of 44%. Further, education is now being taken out of the confines of the formal classrooms to the community at large through our Non Formal Education Program, which primarily targets adult and adolescent women. Through this adult literacy program, it aims to provide functional literacy ability and reproductive health education to the rural women.

While there are many notable successes in Bhutan's pursuit of a better life for its people, it is not without challenges. Specifically within the context of reproductive health, we are still short of doctors that can cope with emergency obstetric needs; we are still grappling to resolve the problem of communications over rough

and difficult terrain, and we are striving to improve the low adult female literacy rate. We are confident that the goals set for ourselves will be achieved as the core of Bhutan's development philosophy is people centered.

Of course, all the successes would not have been possible without the unstinted support of our development partners. In particular, I wish to acknowledge the generous and increasing support of UNFPA for Bhutan's population and development activities. I would also like to commend the dynamic and the far-sighted leadership of Madam Nafis Sadik, who had moved the women's agenda on to the highest level of global considerations. With such leadership, both at the international arena and, within my own country, I remain ever confident that we will fulfill our obligations to our men and women. In addition, having listened to the diverse and purposeful initiatives that are being taken the world over to deal with the population and development issues, we leave with a renewed sense of purpose and a strengthened resolve to put our collective energies to achieve the goals that we had set at Cairo.

Thank You, President.

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