

As written

Speech By
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Committee of the Lao PDR
for
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Excellencies,
Distinguished participants and dear colleagues,

It is a great honour for me to address this important international forum. On behalf of the Government of the Lao PDR, I wish to extend my sincere thanks and gratitude to the Forum's organizers, and particularly to UNFPA, for having invited us and for providing us with optimal facilities, so to give us the opportunity to exchange and to learn from each other's experiences.

Development must be focused on the improved well-being of the people, and as such the population factor is of primary importance for any sustainable development. However, for my country, the Lao PDR, integration of a population policy into our socio-economic development plans was, and to some extent still is, quite something of a challenge! As you know, for the Lao PDR, with its 4.5 million inhabitants for a surface of approximately half of that of a country such as France, the population '*problematique*' is of a particular kind. We have started therefore through education and training to promote awareness on the manifold aspects of this subject. Our efforts to raise awareness and commitment were aimed at all sectors of our society in order to involve them in the implementation of an appropriate population policy.

As we consider people to be our most valuable resource, and the critical factor for the country's development, the Government of Lao PDR, in view and in responding to the ICPD POA and Bali Declaration, has thus consistently given considerable attention to the population and development issues. This commitment can be seen through the various efforts and concomitant population programmes prepared by my Government. These many efforts aimed, in particular, at the improvement of the living conditions of the population by expanding access to economic infrastructure, education, culture and health, and this at all levels of our society and for all its segments. These efforts have had a lasting impact on the promotion of

democracy, self-determination and on the increased participation of the people in order to enable them to play their central role in the development of our country.

In the same context, I would like to stress that the Government of the Lao PDR has set as its over-arching development goal to quit the status of an LDC by the year 2020 and is moving, despite the disastrous consequences of what has been called the 'Asian Crisis', toward this goal with great determination. The vision behind our efforts is to be able to improve decisively and in a sustainable way the material and cultural living conditions of our people leading towards a higher quality of life, with widely available improved educational opportunities and health services. The fine tradition and culture of our nation will be continuously enriched and developed. Basic social welfare benefits will be generalized. Our society will enjoy security and tranquillity, with a strengthened political system and improved governance. By that time - 2020 - our country will also have vastly expanded its international relations and cooperation. As a land-linked '*plaque tournante*' of the Greater Mekong Region, the Lao PDR will be well integrated in the global community, thanks to the ideals which are the foundation of our development, namely: peace, independence, democracy, unity, and prosperity.

In order to create the necessary enabling environment for further implementation of the ICPD Plan of Action - an important milestone for the achievement of our overall development goal - the Lao Government has drafted its first population and development policies. These policies were formulated through a consultative process, involving various government and non-governmental agencies, our mass organizations - such as the Lao Women's Union and the Lao Youth Organization - at the central as well as the provincial levels. In this way, we would ensure the integration of these policies into all our national priority programmes and strategies.

Our Five-Year Social and Economic Plan (1996-2000) has called for the active implementation of the population policies to make the population growth correspond to the requirements of a people-centred socio-economic development with all that this means in terms of improving the knowledge of our multi-ethnic society and hence its ownership of the development process, and of creating, promoting and enhancing the human resources needed to meet the urgent national development needs. This is, indeed, an urgent task for our Government, especially also in view of the various social

problems generated concurrently with economic expansion. Thus, we hope, we will be able to gradually create an advanced and socially just society.

Following the principles of the ICPD-POA endorsed by the General Assembly resolution 49/128, the Lao Government with the support of UNFPA is presently also formulating a comprehensive reproductive health policy. The Lao Government recognizes the importance of this essential issue which is of special importance for women, particularly during their reproductive years.

The promotion and improvement of the quality of health care services is an essential task for any socio-economic development; therefore, for us, good organization and management of the health care system is fundamental to securing broad and continuous progress in Public health.

The adoption of the National Birth Spacing Policy in 1995 was an important step for improved health care for mothers and children. To prevent the growing risk of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, the Lao PDR Government established a National Committee for the control of AIDS.

Gender equity and the empowerment of women are anchored in our Constitution which in its articles 24 and 27 clearly states that Lao citizens of both sexes have equal rights in political, economic, cultural and social fields and family affairs, the freedom of settlement and movement as provided for by the Law. This means for us that our development efforts should be concerned with equity as well as with growth. Women should not be disadvantaged in terms of legal rights, economic opportunity, or access to government services. However, more than anybody else, we know, despite the many achievements we can point to, that still much has to be done to make all of our population and development policies a concrete reality.

In trying to achieve our objectives, we are well aware that our own resources would by far be insufficient. For this reason we are more than grateful for the support given to us by the international donor community. In this respect, I would like to express our sincere thanks especially to UNFPA for its continuous support and advise to the Government of the Lao PDR. UNFPA's support has been channeled through two major sub-programmes, namely :

the Population and development strategies, and
the Reproductive Health programme.

To ensure sustainability of our programmes and effective utilization of the financial and technical assistance, a National Committee for Coordination has been set up, with the Lao PDR's State Planning Committee as the focal point.

Excellencies,
Distinguished participants and dear colleagues,

Let me conclude by saying that it is my firm belief that this Forum will provide us with valuable guidance and experiences for developing and improving our strategies in order to fulfil our targeted goals in line with ICPD POA. It is also my hope that this Forum will be able to develop an 'Agenda for action' for the coming years.

The Lao PDR is looking forward to the outcome of this important forum with keen interest. I wish the Forum to become a great success.

Thank you very much!