

## Statement to The Hague Forum, 8-12 February 1999

As written:

### STATEMENT COOK ISLANDS

The Cook Islands has developed a policy, and national strategy with the intention of full participation by all, in particular by women in population development programmes.

Government has adopted a developmental strategy, which **recognises** the contribution of all sectors of the society including the private sector, non-governmental organisations and traditional leaders in the overall national building process.

A significant outcome of this is the formulation of the Cook Islands Policy on Women in 1995, with outlines of programmes of action.

It is also noted that the Cook Islands have acceded to the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) which was adopted in 1979 in New York. Some countries ratified the Convention in 1985 including New Zealand and the Cook Islands.

In June 1997, the Cook Islands acceded to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Subsequently, a committee was established to make recommendations to government towards the final report to be submitted to the International CRC Committee 1999.

A Healthy Islands Committee was formed three years ago for the purpose of co-ordination on programmes on health and health related developments.

### **Gender, Equality and Empowerment of Women**

A number of policy measures have been taken addressing these issues. This includes – the linkage of core ministries/departments and non-government organisations.

For example, Healthy Islands Committee Child Welfare Association, Women's Organisation, Punanga Tauturu (Women's Counselling Service) and family Welfare Association.

Certain significant changes have taken place in relation to the legislation or as provided in the laws of the Cook Islands. Some of the positive measures include the creation of a public awareness programme of the laws and conventions on gender issues and equality.

- Non molestation order;
- Matrimonial Property Act;
- Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women;
- Convention on the Rights of the Child.

A review process is in place to consider and amend where appropriate legislation, which discriminate or disadvantages women.

Other major measures are the training of Justices of the Peace and law enforcement officers. This includes not only being aware of legal provisions, but also being sensitive in the process of dealing with women in violent relationships of one form or another.

In the area of training and education in general, the policy of equal opportunity is **practised**. Similarly, the “good employer policy” within government promotes gender equality.

The gender integration will be reinforced by the programme gender management system that will further reduce the discrimination between men and women.

A key future action is to consolidate the ongoing activity in particular:

- public awareness of gender disparities in society and these are to be addressed;
- sensitise decision makers within government and NGOs on the importance of mainstreaming gender management system in their programmes;
- Strengthen monitoring and advocacy skills. Publicise results of monitoring and encourage institutions to be more gender responsible.

## **Reproductive Rights and Reproductive Health Care**

Institutional changes have been in place at the national level to affirm the recognition of the reproductive rights of women to freely decide on the number and spacing of children. However, clients are made aware of the disadvantages of too many children and of motherhood at an early age.

Universal access to reproductive health care services and family planning and continuing effort is made to eliminate any barrier. Government has addressed the issues relating to adolescent health through community training services and information.

Health policies reflect comprehensive reproductive health programmes. Training in midwifery and other related upskilling will ensure the reproductive health care providers are able to meet the required needs.

A survey on women was conducted in 1993 and similar study in 1996<sup>197</sup> demonstrated where significant changes were made and where programme need to be focused to address issues that is important. A comprehensive survey on reproductive health is in progress and the result of this will provide guidance in the achievements of the ICPD – POA.

## **Strengthening the Partnership with Civil Society**

There are ongoing activities by both government and organisations established by the communities, which are complementary towards programme of actions in population and development.

As mentioned earlier, the formation of the Health islands Committee with representatives of both government agencies and civil organisations is recognition of the strength that can be derived from such partnership. It is intended at this stage to strengthen this body with the view of taking on other development programmes, which have bearing on the population.

A National Development Council was established which makes recommendations directly to cabinet on matters relating to

economic and financial. Even though this body does not address reproductive health issues specifically, its role may change as the reform process achieves its immediate goal.

One of the significant examples of strengthening partnership, is the recent agreement the Rotary Club, Richmond Foundation (an international organisation) and government through the Ministry of Health for programme for a Day Care facility for the mentally sick and the elderly.

The continuing awareness and training programme where the Women's Counselling Centre plays the lead role in issues of violence of various forms with discriminations, has the support of **government**. This, however, need to be consolidated so that the programme can be sustained.

There is the need here, for men to be actively involved as they can play a significant part by working with women, who actively contribute in addressing violence society.

There is a plan to be implemented to strengthen gender management through awareness programmes, which will sensitise sectors of society at large. This is anticipated to overcome some of the misunderstanding by both men and women, as population issues involves everyone whether its reproductive matters, sexual health, violence against women or children or discrimination of one reason or another.

This programme has the support of the Commonwealth Secretariat.

With the local input and support by both Regional Institutions and International Agencies, I am confident we can achieve the ICPD programme of action at country level, regional and globally.