

Statement to The Hague Forum, 8-12 February 1999

As written:

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Intervention

by Ms **Eveline Herfkens**, Minister for **Development** Cooperation of the Kingdom of the Netherlands

at the UNFPA/International Forum for the Review and Appraisal of the Implementation of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD)

on 8 February 1999, at 00.15 p.m. in the Congress Centre

Distinguished Executive Director of UNFA Dr Nafis Sadik, distinguished Deputy Secretary general Mrs Louise Frechette, distinguished delegates and guests, ladies and gentlemen.

First of all I would like to welcome you all to the city of The Hague and to this Forum. As you may know, Amsterdam is our capital, but The Hague is the seat of our government. In 1989 Amsterdam hosted the International Forum on Population in the Twenty-First Century, organized by UNFPA. This Forum provided major inputs for the ICPD in Cairo. Now, ten years later, I hope the The Hague Forum will make a similar contribution to a meaningful and inspiring first review of the ICPD.

We are here to review our experiences, to learn lessons from these experiences and to identify actions to guide us in our future policy. For the sake of time, I will not discuss in detail our experiences as a bilateral and multilateral donor in the area of population and development. You may read about that in a brochure we produced for this conference. Its title is 'Dutch policy and practice in reproductive health' and it is available outside this conference room.

I would like to highlight a number of issues which could guide us in this review

First of all, I would like to restate my full support for the

ICPD Programme of Action. The major success of the ICPD was the recognition that if you worry about population, you should shift your concern to people. Figures show that ICPD was right. In countries where people and especially women have been able to gain control over their lives, by receiving education, by improving their social and economic status and by gaining more access to reproductive health services, population growth has declined.

Second: my full support for the ICPD Programme of Action includes the commitment to fulfill its financial targets. As you may know, in 1996 the Netherlands Parliament carried a motion to allocate 4% of ODA to reproductive health. This target was met the next year. Unfortunately, we are one of the few countries who do their share. As the UNFPA report for this Forum shows, most donor countries as well as developing countries are dragging their feet when it comes to financing the ICPD Programme of Action. I therefore would like to call on governments to rethink their position and give the implementation of the ICPD the priority it deserves.

My next point concerns the substance of our reproductive health agenda. Here, I do not envisage major policy changes over the next few years. The life-cycle approach allows us to tackle issues on a multi-sectoral basis. Good nutrition at all stages of life for a healthy pregnancy and birth and a healthy baby is crucial. A decent education for girls for at least seven years is equally important. Within the health sector, we will continue to focus on the unfinished agenda of mother and child care, with special emphasis on safe motherhood including breastfeeding. Family planning remains an important priority. HIV/AIDS and sexually-transmitted diseases will continue to be high on our agenda.

I believe that particular attention is needed for young people, unsafe abortion and displaced persons. Youth constitute more than half of the world's population by now. Young people are entitled to good and reliable information and to user-friendly, integrated services and they should be part

of decision making on these issues. **Too** many women are still dying as a result of unsafe abortions. At the Cairo conference we urged that this problem be tackled. So far little has been done, even though the subject is now being addressed in a host of policy documents. The time has come to take action. I believe that there are sufficient options that do not involve interfering with the internal affairs of other countries. And then there is the question of displaced persons and refugees. For too long, now, their need for good reproductive health care facilities has been ignored, although it would not take much to improve their situation. We plan to tackle this issue in the near future.

The denial of reproductive and sexual rights is crucial to all the issues I have just mentioned. Gender inequality prevents women from exercising their rights. Helping women to achieve autonomy is one of the main aims of Dutch development policy. Translating these rather abstract concepts into reality is high on my agenda.

A few words on the role of multilateral cooperation. I am a great believer in multilateral cooperation, but this does not mean that we will provide aid uncritically and unconditionally. In the field of reproductive health, for instance, I am keen to see effective partnership and harmonisation between UNFPA, UNICEF and the WHO. The main thing is to ensure that harmonisation and division of responsibilities are established at country level. The UN Development Assistance Framework offers scope for this. The Coordinating Committee on Health, which met for the first time in mid-1998, can help the three member organisations to harmonise their policies.

Partnership with the World Bank forms an integral part of our policy. Here too, we will raise our voice in the Board to help shape its policies.

I should just like to say a brief word about working with NGOs. NGOs and civil society play a crucial role in realising the aims of Cairo. As I said at the opening of the NGO Forum

on Saturday, we need NGO's in many ways: as advocates, as lobbyists, and as implementing partners, especially in new or controversial areas. Our policy allows us sufficient leeway to work with NGOs, while recognising each other's role and position.

To summarise, we will go on putting our heart and soul into making the Cairo Plan of Action a reality. A lot of progress has been made, but the Plan of Action has by no means been translated fully into practice. We will have to pull out all the stops in order to put the agenda drawn up in 1994 into operation. Let us not introduce too many new elements or start a new debate, but let us carry on with something that we know works, and that we are good at doing.

I wish us all a good and fruitful meeting.