

As written

STATEMENT FOR THE HAGUE FORUM
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BY MR. CHRIS UGOKWE, CHAIRMAN
AFRICAN POPULATION COMMISSION

Your Excellencies,
Honourable guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

As Chairman of the African Population Commission, I am honoured and privileged to address this important Forum on ICPD+5 on behalf of H.E. Dr. Salim Ahmed Salim, Secretary-General of the Organization of the African Unity (OAU) who is unavoidably absent.

I wish to express my thanks to UNFPA for organizing and convening such an important Forum and for assisting African countries in general and the OAU in particular in the field of population and development.

Allow me also to express my appreciation to the Government of the Netherlands for the hospitality and for the excellent facilities put at the disposal of this Forum.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

At present, Africa is facing very serious crisis. Many African countries are afflicted by series of political, economic and social malaise, which include low level of development, persistent economic stagnation, natural disasters, high level of poverty, political instability and civil wars. The population factor is at

the centre of these political and economic malaise. It affects and is in turn affected by both the political and socio-economic problems of Africa.

In the area of population and development, African countries are faced with a number of challenges. The high population growth, coupled with unstable political, social and economic climate as well as widespread poverty, put some strain on the socio-economic situation of African countries and contribute to the degradation of the environment. Life expectancy in the region is very low compared to other regions of the world and whatever gains made, are being wiped out by the high death rate prevailing in many African countries particularly due to the high prevalence of HIV/AIDS. Besides, other reproductive health situations are very poor with high risk of maternal, infant and child deaths; high fertility rate and very low contraceptive prevalence rate; widespread existence of harmful practices such as child marriages, child births, female genital mutilation, sexual and other domestic violence, etc. Furthermore, millions of Africans have become refugees or are displaced from their homes.

Faced with these difficult situations, African governments are making radical changes in handling population issues. African countries have made great efforts in implementing the various recommendations of the Dakar/Ngor Declaration, which was issued during the meeting of African governments in preparation for the world population conference at Cairo, and the ICPD PoA.

Since the Dakar/Ngor Declaration and the ICPD PoA, many African countries have undertaken a broad range of actions and have revised their population and development policies, made changes in their institutional infrastructures, and focus their attention on reproductive and sexual health and rights and gender issues. Many African countries recognize that population issues can be addressed only by combating poverty, involving local communities, improving maternal and child health and raising the status of women.

Consequently, significant improvements were made and several African countries have shown progress in integrating family planning with other reproductive health services; establishing institutional mechanisms to address gender and women's issues; involving concerned individuals and groups in the formulation and implementation of policies; recognizing the need to expand "male involvement" in population activities; enhancing IEC and Advocacy, which play important roles in fertility declines and resource allocation, in changing laws and policies, in influencing the initiation of adolescent reproductive health programmes and youth centres, in bringing about the reduction in female genital mutilation, etc.

The Follow-up Committee Report on the Assessment of the DND and the ICPD PoA, written during the Meeting held in September, 1998, revealed many constraints including the fact that many policies do not have well-defined strategies. In planning, one can have a very good policy without necessarily having a good strategy for implementation. Strategies usually answer different questions, such as: How can the policies adopted be effectively implemented?

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Understanding the different challenges that African countries are facing and addressing, still remains very critical. How will Africa face the 21st millennium in providing health services when there are reported cases of increase in mortality levels in some countries? How will governments ensure education for all when it is difficult for many parents to afford to pay for education, How can African countries eradicate poverty in the face of rising unemployment and in a situation where millions of Africans suffer from malnutrition and are unable to have a minimum level of income and the basic necessities of life? How can Africa satisfy the socio-economic needs of its people when its debt burden is very high and economic globalization is becoming the preferred pathway to growth? How can Africa be able to realize sustainable development and make progress in the area of population and development when crisis after crisis and conflicts are emerging everyday.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The population and development strategy in a country can be likened to a coach drawn by two horses, one standing for the population policy and the other, for the development process. Both horses form a coupling and should consequently move forward at the same rhythm if a harmonized development is to be achieved, without any serious jerks. If one of the two horses is whipped so that it goes faster and, at the same time, keeps the bridle close to the other to make it slow down, the coupling walk-sidely and in a short time, falls apart, the two horses suffer, the wheels slip off, the force of one stumbles against the slow

pace of the other, and the cart will fall into a ditch and will throw the driver (population and development process) over board.

Therefore, African countries should correct their way of implementing population and development policies in an integrated and harmonized manner so as to avoid the dislocation of the coupling.

Both African countries themselves as well as the international community need to give considerable attention to these grave situations and enable Africa to attain a take-off and achieve sustainable development. In the field of population and development, African countries have to allocate more resources and exert more efforts to realize the implementation of the DND and the ICPD PoA. Furthermore, integrated approach to population, environment, agriculture and technological application need to be enhanced.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

On its part, the OAU in collaboration with other members of the Joint Secretariat, ECA and ADB, and with the assistance of UNFPA, has played important roles in promoting the full implementation of the DND and the ICPD PoA. The major activities of the OAU consist of advocacy, and Information Education and Communication (IEC) interventions in the population and development field and generating political support and providing assistance to the OAU Council of Ministers and the Assembly of Heads of State and Government in their resolutions, declarations, treaties and plans of action, concerning population and development activities.

The OAU, in collaboration with the ECA and the ADB has also established the African Population Commission (APC), whose major objective is to assist Member States to adopt relevant and sustainable population policies. The APC has done a lot in the area of advocacy and had taken population issues to the highest decision-making bodies of the OAU by presenting policy proposals to the Council of Ministers and the OAU Summit at which a number of decisions and declarations were adopted. In the future, the APC is expected to do more to assist, coordinate and monitor population activities in the Region. But, the APC needs support both at the Regional and international levels to realize its objectives.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

With the coming into force of the Treaty establishing the African Economic Community in May 1994, population and development factors were given an important place. The Treaty stipulates that there should be protocols on a number of population and development matters, and the OAU has taken some initial steps towards this end, though a lot remains to be done.

Further, the OAU, working closely with the UNFPA and the international community, supplementing the efforts of African countries, will continue to play even more important role in the area of population and development by strengthening and expanding its activities to promote the full implementation of the DND and the ICPD PoA. There is, therefore, a need to focus on the Regional Economic Communities, and sensitize them about the importance of establishing population coordination units within their structures and work programmes.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am certain that this Forum will have the desired impact and enable all parties, which are actively participating in the population field, to come up with renewed commitments to enhance population and development activities. In this connection, we appeal to all international organizations and agencies to assist Africa in its endeavour to realize the recommendations of the DND and the ICPD PoA.

Thank you.
