



IRELAND

ADDRESS

BY

MR BRIAN COWEN T.D.

MINISTER FOR HEALTH AND CHILDREN

IRELAND

TO

The Special Session of the General Assembly for the Review and Appraisal
of the Implementation of the Programme of Action of the International
Conference on Population and Development
at
United Nations Headquarters

30 June, 1999

Check against delivery

PERMANENT MISSION OF IRELAND TO THE UNITED NATIONS
885 SECOND AVENUE, NEW YORK, NY 10017 TELEPHONE 212 421-6934 FAX 212 752-4726

Mr Chairman, Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

I am very pleased to have the opportunity to address this Special Session. I would like to add my congratulations to you, **Mr** Chairman, and the members of your Bureau on your election. I would also like to pay tribute to Dr Sadik, who contributed so much to the Cairo Programme of Action and to the five-year review process.

This Special Session is the conclusion of that process, a process that has focused attention on what we in the international community have achieved in population and development since Cairo. It also allows us, indeed forces us, to take stock of the challenges still remaining.

I know that the preparation of the report of the Secretary General for this Assembly has been a long and difficult process. I know that many members had to make hard compromises and I pay tribute to all involved and congratulate you on the spirit of goodwill which made this report possible.

At the outset I would like to share with you some of the pertinent changes which have taken place in Ireland in recent years. The major change relates to the sharp decline in the Irish birth rate which indicates that couples in Ireland are controlling their fertility to a much greater extent. The birth rate fell from 2 1.8 births per 1000 in 1980 to 1 3.5 in 1998. In 1995 the fertility rate was 1.84 which is below the population replacement level of 2.1. The Irish fertility rate has been below replacement level since 199 1.

Since Cairo in 1994, policy on family planning has been reviewed and new programmes developed and implemented. Each of the eight statutory regional health authorities is required to ensure that an equitable, accessible and comprehensive family planning service is available in its

area. Persons in the lower socio- economic groups are entitled to family planning services free of charge from their family doctor. Non- Governmental organisations play an important role in the provision of reproductive health services and work closely with the statutory authorities in doing so. Other developments which have taken place include the preparation of a specific plan on women's health which is being implemented at present and the establishment of a Women's Health Council on a statutory basis. In addition plans to introduce organised breast and cervical screening programmes on a phased basis are at an advanced stage of planning. Screening for breast cancer will commence later this year and for cervical cancer early next year.

In relation to adolescent health a schools-based relationships and sexuality education programme has been developed. This is a comprehensive programme which realistically addresses adolescent sexual and reproductive health issues.

The issue of HIV/AIDS continues to be a priority for the Irish Government. Our strategy consists of four main components - prevention including risk reduction and education, care of persons infected with HIV/AIDS, HIV/AIDS surveillance and anti-discrimination.

The Cairo Programme of Action and the review process have emphasised the importance of reducing the extent of abortion throughout the world. Improved health education, access to family planning services and contraception are essential in order to bring that about. Ireland strongly endorses the principles enshrined in the Cairo programme of action and in the review process that abortion must not be promoted as a method of family planning.

It is, therefore, of great importance to Ireland, as it clearly is also to many other countries, that the document recognises that policy and legislation in relation to the circumstances in which the

termination of pregnancy may be permitted if at all is a matter for each country to determine for itself

Cairo was one of the great UN Conferences of the past decade. It set specific goals and targets for the entire international community in addressing levels of unacceptable inequality and injustice in our world. These goals are inter-related and reflect the vision set out in the United Nations Charter.

Ireland is strongly of the view that the role of the United Nations is indispensable in the achievement of the agreed international development goals and affirms its full commitment to the UN role in international development cooperation.

Equitable access to basic health services, including reproductive health services, is an issue fundamental to social development. Much progress has been made in improving the health of people in the developing countries. The availability of vaccines and the development of cheap and effective treatments for common infectious diseases have resulted in substantial improvements in childhood survival rates. Both bilateral donors and multilateral agencies - the UNFPA in particular - have ensured that improved health and family planning services are now available to many in the developing world.

Formidable challenges remain however. Many infectious diseases have become resurgent, new diseases - particularly HIV/AIDS - have emerged, and maternal mortality remains at unacceptably high levels in many countries. While population growth rates have fallen, and fallen steeply in many countries there are very high fertility rates in many of the poorest countries.

The Irish Aid programme, with its strong emphasis on poverty alleviation and focus on basic needs, has given priority to the health sector. 15% of the Irish Aid budget within our priority countries in sub-Saharan Africa is spent on the health sector, including an important reproductive health component in many of our projects.

The approach enshrined in the Cairo Programme of Action offers better health care and an improved quality of life for many millions. The support of the entire international community is crucial to ensuring that the agreement reached at Cairo five years ago represents more than just good intentions. The commitments made at Cairo cannot be fulfilled without an adequate and assured level of funding for population activities.

Ireland's overseas development assistance has enjoyed several years of sustained growth and will continue to do so. The Irish Government is fully committed to the UN target to 0.7% of GNP for ODA. Our spending on health care, including reproductive health care, will continue to remain a high priority for the Irish Aid programme.

Ireland's strong support for the leading role of the UN Population Fund is underlined by our steadily increasing voluntary contributions to that organisation, as well as through our membership of the **UNFPA's** Executive Board.

In addition to our regular contribution to the work of the UNFPA last year, Ireland was pleased to make an additional voluntary contribution specifically earmarked for the Cairo review process. This is an acknowledgement of Ireland's support for the international consensus on population issues.

In conclusion I wish to confirm the Irish Government's commitment to the ongoing implementation of the programme of action which will enable us to cope with the challenge which is confronting the global community in the approaching century.