



ITALY

TWENTY-FIRST SPECIAL SESSION OF
THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE UNITED NATIONS
FOR THE OVERALL REVIEW AND APPRAISAL OF
THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PROGRAMME OF ACTION OF THE
INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON POPULATION AND DEVELOPMENT

STATEMENT BY

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TO THE UNITED NATIONS

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1. I am taking the floor on behalf of the Italian Minister of Social Solidarity, Ms. Livia Turco, who is unable to participate in this Special Session because she had to attend to urgent parliamentary matters. Allow me to begin by congratulating you on your election as President of the Special Session of the General Assembly of the United Nations.

Italy fully endorses the statement made by the head of the German delegation on behalf of the European Union, and wishes only to add a few short comments in a national capacity.

This session invites us to review the progress made since the Cairo Conference on Population and Development and to lay out strategies of action to be pursued for the next five years. It also represents a significant opportunity to consider the development of populations and people. These strategies must fit into an integrated framework that takes into account the conclusions that emerge from the review and appraisal of the Social Summit held in Copenhagen and of the Fourth Conference on Women held in Beijing, both in 1995.

Within the field of demographic growth and the relationship between population and development, Italy appreciates the overwhelming push given by the Cairo Conference and by the UNFPA and its Executive Director, Dr. Nafis Sadik, to accelerate the process of modernization of developing countries. The population problem has shifted from being a simple demographic matter to one with economic and social dimensions. In Cairo women became central actors in the development process and in the control of population growth. Thanks also to the intensified activity of NGOs, there is a growing awareness of the problems of gender equality and the empowerment of women. Let me recall that the High-level Segment of the upcoming ECOSOC Geneva Session will discuss the advancement and the empowerment of women in the framework of the role of work and employment in poverty eradication.

As demonstrated also in reports to the preparatory committee by various NGOs, the empowerment of women has led to a rapid decrease in fertility and a sharp downturn in demographic growth. Because of this decline, the 1994 United Nations Population Division has had to revise its projections of the world population by the year 2050. In 1994 the estimate was 9.8 billion people. Last year this figure was changed to the significantly lower figure of 8.9 billion. Projections for Africa decreased from 2.1 to 1.7 billion, and for Asia from 5.7 to 5.2 billion. Furthermore, as the Secretary-General's report for this Special Session emphasizes, there has also been encouraging progress in the fields of reproductive health and rights, maternal and child mortality, and the condition of women.

2. As a consequence of the behavior of individuals and couples on the one hand, and of political and Government action on the other, population trends in Italy make it unique in the world. In fact, Italy has the oldest population in the world. In 1998, according to the latest United Nations Population Division estimates and projections, it had the world's highest rate of people aged 60 and over (24 percent) and the lowest rate of youths under the age of 15 (14 percent).

Italian women and couples have one of the lowest fertility rates in the world and in the history of humankind (1.19 children per woman in 1996). The Italian law on the voluntary interruption of pregnancy, introduced in 1978, is not meant as a birth control instrument and is sensitive to women's needs. Since 1975, a wide territorial network of counseling service has been available to provide advice and assistance in the field of reproductive rights and health.

In Italy there is a particularly low rate of teenage maternity (there were 0.7 births per hundred girls between the ages of 15 and 19 in 1995) and of children born out of wedlock (8 percent in 1997). There is also a relatively low rate of marriages that end in divorce (10 percent in 1996). At the same time, thanks to an effective national health-care system and specific legislation, the life expectancy in Italy is among the highest in the world (75.1 years for men and 81.2 for women in 1997); infant mortality is among the lowest (5.5 deaths every 1000 births in 1997); and maternal mortality is close to zero, also because of a law that safeguards maternity.

The immigration population in Italy has rapidly increased, doubling in the 1993-1999 period from 573 thousand to 1.127 thousand, thus making up 2 percent of the total population. In 1997 and 1998 respectively, 124 thousand and 153 thousand immigration permits were granted. Italy is strongly bound to the Schengen Treaty and has accordingly strengthened its measures of immigration control. A number of unauthorized immigrants still manage to enter the country, in part due to the extension of its sea-boundaries. Nevertheless Italy assures free access to public education and health structures to immigrants, including those who are living illegally within its territory.

The problem of temporary asylum stretching -into permanent residency has been exacerbated by recent events in the Balkans. In the past few years new legislation has been enacted, most recently in 1998, to better manage immigration flows, assure immigrants' rights and responsibilities, foster integration and coexistence, and promote a common European immigration policy. Italy actively supports the approval of the United Nations Protocol on trafficking in immigrants.

While Italian women still lag somewhat behind some of their European counterparts in terms of presence in the political arena and of gender-imbalance in the distribution of work, particularly in care-giving, the situation is improving rapidly, especially for younger women, in the areas of education and employment:

- between 1994 and 1998, the number of employed women increased by 301 thousand while the number of employed men decreased by 224 thousand (leading to an increase in the percentage of employed women by from 35.1 to 36.5 per cent of the total workforce; a figure reaching 39.5 percent in the more industrialized regions of the country);
- in 1998, in the 25-30 year-old age group, more women (236 thousand-10.2 percent of all women in the same age group) than men (184 thousand) held university degrees.

3. In response to these unique trends the Italian Governments has set the following priorities, both at the legislative and administrative level :

- promotion of children's rights and opportunities;
- prevention and reduction of hardship and want for individuals and families;

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- strengthening of the status of women, also through the action of the Ministry of Equal Opportunities. An Equal Opportunities Commission has been established in every public institution and major private company. A gender perspective is always present in the collection of basic data and statistical indicators;
- strong support for families (a Conference on this issue was organized in March 1999), through economic assistance to low-income families with three or more minors, higher tax deductions for dependent children, rent assistance for low income families, family leave opportunities for both parents until the child's eighth birthday, more flexibility in maternity leave, more flexible working hours for parents, better coordination of working hours and services also to enrich family life;
- social and health assistance for the elderly (as established in the new National Health Plan);
- revision of welfare and pension plans, also in relation to the aging population;
- medical and psychological assistance for drug users.

4. At the international level, Italy has made a remarkable increase in its contributions to UNFPA, UNIFEM, WHO and UNAIDS in 1999, and has also put the "population and development approach" in the forefront of its human development programs at the local level through UNDP. This commitment is supplemented by bilateral aid programs and contributions to the activities of Italian NGOs in this field. These include integrated programs in various sectors (paying special attention to gender and women's empowerment policies), test projects (which have been particularly successful in setting up integrated counseling services for women and families), and direct action for the protection of women, children and the disabled (particularly in Albania, and this well before the current crisis).

5. Italy feels that the issue of the aging of the population will gain even greater significance in the years to come. The equally important issue of international migrations and development should be addressed in international fora and at the United Nations to analyze the impact of immigration on both developed and developing Countries. We also applaud the UNFPA's attention to the problems of youth. The decades to come will see a rapid growth in this segment of the population in developing countries.

Moreover, the Italian Government is greatly concerned by the tragic spread of HIV/ AIDS, especially in African countries. The United Nations System must find a coordinated response to this epidemic, while donor countries need to provide adequate support for national programs to fight this deadly scourge.

Much remains to be done. Throughout the world, maternal mortality needs to be lowered, reproductive health and rights guaranteed, the status of women strengthened, and adequate assistance for refugees assured. Italy is deeply concerned by all of these questions. But we are confident that the United Nations System will continue its invaluable action, through the rich analyses of world populations conducted by the Population Division and the precious action of the UNFPA in promoting healthier trends in population and development.