



PERMANENT MISSION OF THE  
REPUBLIC OF LATVIA  
TO THE UNITED NATIONS

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S T A T E M E N T

By H.E. Jānis Priedkalns  
Permanent Representative of the Republic of Latvia  
at the Twenty-first special session of the General Assembly  
on the overall review and appraisal  
of the implementation of the Programme of Action  
of the International Conference on Population and Development

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Latvia took an active part in the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo in 1994 and in the subsequent global review process. In December 1998 a conference was held in Latvia to assess the implementation of the ICPD Programme of Action. The conference was attended by state officials, national experts, and representatives of non-governmental organisations. Trends in economic development, the demographic situation, reproductive health and rights, gender equality, and education were discussed. The conclusions of this conference contributed to the production of a report which gave an excellent overall view of Latvia's follow-up to Cairo and proposed further actions and initiatives.

Latvia attaches great importance to the implementation of the objectives of the Programme of Action of the ICPD, which aims to promote the physical and mental health and well-being of people around the world. We would also like to underscore the importance of the interrelationship between the Cairo ICPD Programme of Action and the programmes of other UN Conferences and summits.

Latvia's birth rate has been steadily declining. The natural increase last year was minus 6.4 per 1000 population. Latvia's fertility rate of 1.1 is one of the lowest in Europe. To deal with these demographic challenges, the Cabinet of Ministers -in the spirit of the ICPD Programme of Action - set up a Demographic Committee in 1994. In 1998 a national programme entitled "Latvia's Population," which provides for a

333 EAST 50 STREET, NEW YORK, NY 10022 USA  
TEL: (212) 838-8877 FAX: (212) 838-8920

systematic approach to compiling information on the entire social protection system, was prepared. The programme analyzes and assesses activities in this field, and defines those problems which remain to be solved. However, Latvia still lacks resources to fully implement the activities it has foreseen.

A major achievement was the setting up of the National Health Promotion Center to meet the goals of the ICPD Programme of Action, with the emphasis on reproductive health. Several project groups are collaborating with international organisations in this field. Many social organisations and NGOs are involved in promoting a healthy lifestyle and have become active at the local government and district level.

The National Human Rights Office of Latvia is also involved in addressing the needs of the country's vulnerable groups, such as children and youth, the elderly, and persons with disabilities.

Since Cairo reasonable progress has been achieved in the field of reproductive health. We should like to emphasize the fruitful cooperation between the Government, NGOs, and international organisations, which has resulted in increased public awareness about modern methods of family planning. The number of users of effective contraception has doubled. The number of induced abortions has decreased by 1/3 over the last five years.

The positive trends and still existent gaps in the field of reproductive and sexual health are evident in the results of the survey "Attitudes Towards Reproductive Health in Latvia," carried out as part of a joint project of the Ministry of Welfare and UNFPA with the close collaboration of several NGOs.

The mass media have played a substantial role in promoting public awareness about general, sexual, and reproductive health issues.

Families have been affected by the sweeping changes in society since the re-establishment of Latvia's independence less than ten years ago. As more and more women enter the workforce, especially at top levels, traditional family roles change. More responsibility for the upbringing of children has to be assumed by men. This, perhaps, is the best way to fend off role-stereotyping – as children see a more balanced pattern in the relations within the family.

A number of events to promote public awareness about gender equality issues have taken place in Latvia in the last years. The most important was the Nordic-Baltic conference in the city of Valmiera in 1997 entitled "Women and Men in Dialogue," and the international seminar on The Promotion of the Status of Women in Riga this year, initiated by two outstanding female politicians – Tarja Halonen and Madeleine Albright. These conferences gave considerable impetus for further work both for governmental institutions and non-governmental organisations.

At the government level, adequately addressing gender equality issues is fundamental to the completeness of Latvia's integration into the network of European institutions and for the implementation of the decisions of Cairo and other UN Conferences.

On the eve of the new millennium, Latvia would like to reiterate the importance of promoting family values and strong, healthy families as the backbone of strong, healthy societies. The family unit remains an integral factor in the development of physically and mentally sound human beings.

The Latvian Government continues to design its national programmes to reach the goals of the ICPD Programme of Action. We hope that five years from now we will be ready to analyze the results of implementing our strategies and see a tangible outcome for the Programme of Action. Here we would like to thank our partners – UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF, the World Health Organisation, the International Labour Organisation, the World Bank, the International Planned Parenthood Federation, and other international organisations, as well as numerous partner countries, for their perception of the problems typical of our region and for their unfailing support. The European Union has been instrumental in helping Latvia reform its legislation to bring Latvia closer to EU Membership and has been providing invaluable assistance in many other fields directly and indirectly related to population and development.

We look forward to our partners' cherished advice and support in the relevant fields of discussion. We endorse the Statement of the European Union as a forward-looking document, which promotes the issues of health and well being, and, the rights of people everywhere. Like many other countries around the world, Latvia is also hoping for a forward-looking outcome at the 21<sup>st</sup> UNGASS. Although much remains to be done within our own borders, we hope that by working together our common goals for a healthier world population will become a reality.