



TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

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STATEMENT

by

Honourable Mr. Manohar Ramsaran

**Minister of Social and Community Development
Trinidad and Tobago**

to the

**Twenty-first Session of the General Assembly
on the Five-Year Review and Appraisal
of the Implementation of the Programme of
Action of the International Conference on
Population and Development (ICPD + 5)**

Thursday, July 1, 1999
NEW YORK

Mr. President, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I feel honoured to be here with you today to participate in the Twenty-first Special Session of the General Assembly devoted to the overall review and appraisal of the Implementation of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD + 5).

With humanity standing at a defining moment in history, on the eve of a new millennium, I applaud the foresight of the Cairo Forum with its Twenty Year Programme of Action to promote sustainable *human* cent-red development and a stile world *population*. Let me assure you, Mr. President, that my country, Trinidad andTobago is committed to this type of development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

The concept of development has been at the core of scholarly debate for several decades. The International Population Conference (IPC) held in Mexico in 1984 however, drew attention to the linkage between population and development. This, together with growing global awareness of the interdependence of social, economic and environmental concerns, set the platform for the historic ICPD forum in Cairo, Egypt in 1994.

The economy of the twinislandstate ofTrinidadandTobago has traditionally been oil-based. Oil windfalls between 1973 and 1982 brought rises in income, expansion of jobs in the public sector, investments in physical infrastructure and improvements in living conditions. The investment expenditures during these boom years however were heavily dependent on the flow of oil reserves and in sectors that were not sustainable.

Our economy experienced a sharp contraction during the 1980s as international oil prices declined. This together with the effects of structural adjustments and a lack of sustainable growth in pertinent areas gave rise to a deterioration in the social sector. This scenario, Mr. President, created an environment for greater examination of the role of population variables in national development. With insight gained from the IPC in Mexico in 1984 and the recognition of the imperative for a integrated approach to development, the Government in 1989 reconstituted the Population Council of Trinidad and Tobago. The mandate of the Council was “to design and implement *an explicit population-influencing* policy for Trinidad and Tobago”. A Draft Policy was in fact developed and subsequently revised following the Programme of Action emanating from the ICPD in Cairo in 1994, culminating in 1996 with the adoption of the National Population Policy for Trinidad andTobago. The Population Council is also responsible for monitoring socio-demographic trends. In this context mechanisms have been put in place to introduce a structured system of reporting on and monitoring of these trends. This will include the development and maintenance of a database of social indicators.

The Government in an effort to create an enabling environment for further implementation of the ICPD Programme of Action, continues to have as one of its key activities the establishment and strengthening of inter-ministerial systems and mechanisms. Thus, links between the Population Council and the planning divisions of the various Ministries are used to sensitise government planners from social sector Ministries to the need to incorporate and integrate population issues into the planning process. Furthermore, procedures are being adopted to enable the Population Council to review the Government Medium Term Policy Framework before it is finalised, to ensure that sector Ministries have given adequate consideration to population issues in their programmes. This Medium Term Policy Framework outlines the macroeconomic management policies and sectoral programmes to be pursued by the Government over a three-year period.

Mr. President, in terms of commitments with respect to ensuring equity and equality and the empowerment of women, Trinidad and Tobago is a signatory to the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). In a deliberate move to ensure the empowerment of women, a Ministry of Culture and Gender Affairs has been established. Additionally, women's participation in the political process is encouraged by our political parties. In our upcoming local government elections seventy-five (75) women out of about two hundred and fifty (250) candidates are expected to face the electorate. This is a significant figure for our small nation.

During 1991-1995, the position of Speaker of the House of Representatives, the fourth highest Office after the President was held by a woman and some key Ministerial positions are currently held by women. Further, a very substantial proportion of senior positions in the public service is occupied by women. It is worthy of note that women continue to not only out number but out perform their male counterparts in educational institutions particularly those at the tertiary level. Whilst noting the encouraging positive status of women, my government is also concerned with the perceived marginalisation of males and young males in particular, as evidenced by their high drop-out rate in the education system. We applaud the efforts of such Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) as Men Against Violence Against Women (MAVAW) that offer training programmes such as gender sensitive home management to encourage male responsibility and participation in social and family roles and to prevent domestic violence. The Family Planning Association of Trinidad and Tobago (FPATT) has also established the first male health clinic in the region, which focuses on male participation in sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights. Some of the services provided by this organization include prostate examination, vasectomies, family planning counselling and referrals for STDs/HIV cases.

In addition, the Government in its intolerance for all forms of violence against women and children have developed and amended several pieces of legislation including the Draft Sexual Act Bill, the Sexual Offences Bill, and the Earning Act. The latter Act deals with the provision of financial support by delinquent fathers. Government is currently involved in amending the Domestic Violence Act to ensure more effective monitoring and implementation of the Act. These are some of our efforts to support the empowerment of women. My Government recognises however, Mr. President, that further work in the area of decreasing the high rate of female unemployment is required if our efforts toward their empowerment are to improve.

Though there is activity in the area of educating children in gender awareness as a crucial step to eliminating discrimination against women, there needs to be a more aggressive educational thrust. Government is hoping to form more partnerships with NGOs to accomplish this goal.

While Trinidad and Tobago explicitly recognises and assures the reproductive rights of our citizenry, abortion is still legally restricted. Terminations are however permitted under certain circumstances. I am pleased to report that there is universal access to reproductive health care and that we have integrated family planning, pre- and post-natal care, breast feeding and treatment for sexually transmitted diseases (STD's) into primary health care settings. Government has also taken action to address the maternal mortality rate which increased from 54.2 in 1990 to 76 in 1994, by training midwives in basic obstetric care, especially in rural areas to improve women's health and safe motherhood. The impact is reflected in a reduced rate in 1995 to 67.5. Further, we have mandated training for health care providers and primary care centres to include screening for prostate cancer.

With regard to ongoing training of health care providers, the Ministry of Health, through its Population Programme Unit has recently completed a nation-wide training programme for nurses aimed at improving the delivery of quality reproductive health care. We are also actively encouraging partnerships with NGOs to increase access to a wide range of reproductive services.

Mr. President, the current population of Trinidad and Tobago is approximately 1.2 million and we are well poised to achieve one of the stated goals of our population policy of having a population not exceeding 1.5 million by the year 2010. This is so given the fact that the rate of population growth is less than one percent, and the total fertility rate is just below replacement level. The rate has been declining over the past three decades reaching 1.7 in 1996. In spite of this, significant pressure is being placed to provide social services for the poor and unemployed particularly in the areas of health and education. Government's continued challenge is to improve and expand these services while seeking to foster revenue-generating sustainable development projects. Additionally, infant and maternal mortality rates which stood at 16.2 per 1000 live births and 67.5 per 100,000 population respectively in 1995 are targeted for a 50% reduction by the year 2010. Further, with a crude death rate of 7.4 per 1000 mid year population in 1996 declining to 7.35 in 1997, and a life expectancy of 74.7 for females and 70.6 for males, the overall mortality picture remains encouraging.

The prevalence of HIV/AIDS, particularly among teenaged girls, is however of grave concern to the Government. Partnerships with NGOs in preventative measures such as AIDS awareness programmes specifically targeting youth, continues to be pursued and the private sector is being increasingly incorporated into AIDS and advocacy committees. Additionally, Government is focussing on the care and treatment of persons who are HIV positive or who have full blown AIDS, including pregnant women. We are also collaborating closely with NGOs to assist those children who are born with AIDS and have given the green light for the protocol for research among HIV-infected persons. Government recognises that high mortality and morbidity rates can have deleterious consequences on the human resource element for sustainable development, both socially and economically, within this generation and the next.

Despite the total fertility rate being just below replacement level, teenage pregnancy continues to be another area of concern, accounting for 14 percent of all births in 1996. This has often resulted from and is also a contributor to, dysfunctional families, homelessness among unwed mothers, school dropouts, higher levels of female unemployment and other forms of social malaise. This situation has a negative impact on our human resources and will affect inter- and intra-generational development over time. Plans are on stream to reintegrate teenaged mothers back into the education system as we recognize that education is a key variable in improving the life chances and quality of life of this vulnerable population and their young dependents. A Policy on Health and Family Life Education is currently being developed and is expected to be presented to Government shortly. The Policy envisages the development of a comprehensive, age-sensitive curriculum for Health and Family Life Education, which will be taught by trained educators in all primary and secondary schools across Trinidad and Tobago, This is expected to equip the youth with many life skills which perhaps would not be cultivated through a traditional academic approach to education.

The Government also offers technical and financial support to several NGOs which conduct programs and projects for the benefit of children and youth. **'Choices'**, a program partly funded by the Van Leer Foundation, targets young mothers in academic and personal development, It offers skills training and seeks to postpone subsequent pregnancies among the young mothers. A novel move has been made to establish a partnership between the University of the West Indies (UWI) and the Family Planning Association of Trinidad and Tobago (FPATT) to train teachers in Family Life Education with particular emphasis on adolescent reproductive health.

Mr. President, we recognize however that more preventative health and family life education and counseling programmes relevant to the needs of our youth are required to abate the spate of adolescent pregnancy so that the youth of our nation can make positive, responsible choices about sexual activity and be productive, contributing members of society. The media also has an important role to play in their choice of programming and advertisements in this regard. Financial constraints remain a major hindrance to the expansion of such services.

Mr. President, as you may have deduced thus far, Trinidad and Tobago is committed to 'strengthening partnerships with civil society and building new ones. This commitment will be enhanced from additional external financial and technical support if sustainability is to be achieved.

Currently we are working on a data base of NGOs to increase partnerships towards achieving the goals and policies of population and development. It is noteworthy that the Draft Action Plan for Implementation of the National Population Policy was finalized with the input of NGOs, the Family Planning Association featured prominently in this. We have also been experimenting with a novel collaborative project entitled **"Adopt a Community"** which facilitates a direct partnership between corporate citizens and specific poor communities. This is one of our innovative strategies toward incorporating the perspectives and resources of civil society. A total of fifteen (1.5) communities have been adopted since the inception of this project in May 1998.

Recognizing too that full implementation of the ICPD Plan of Action is constrained by lack of public awareness and restricted financial and human resources, concerted efforts are being made by my government to utilize the media, parliamentarians, religious groups, community leaders,

women, youth and other parties involved in population and development activities to sensitise the public.

Mr. President, as you are aware, ICPD 1994 presented new challenges in many areas of human development including improved quality of life through eradication of poverty and universal access to education. As noted earlier, the economy of Trinidad and Tobago has traditionally been oil based but the Government has developed strategies for economic diversification for sustained growth.

Despite this, recent and ongoing developments in emerging economies, demonstrate the vulnerability of these economies to international shocks, as well as the interdependence of the world's economies. A hint of instability in any of the major financial markets has the potential to destabilize the financial centres worldwide.

The financial world was jolted by the 1994 Mexican crisis, and more recently by the Asian crisis and the contagion effect. As you may be aware, the Russian crisis has also threatened the emerging financial markets and that country's major investment partners. These crises have in fact, affected investor confidence worldwide and consequently impacted on the stock market. This demonstrates that not even the strongest economy is insulated from these developments.

Thus, financial flows that might have been available to developing economies such as ours, have been diverted elsewhere. One consequence of the diversion of funds, Mr. President, is that the cost of borrowing for developing countries like ours increases as international interest rates react to these crises. These have influenced the extent and impact of our programmes in the social sector.

A 1995 World Bank Report noted that the poor comprised approximately 21% of the population of Trinidad and Tobago. Preliminary results from a recently conducted survey (1997/1998) indicates that poverty continues to remain at a high level. The majority of poor households are female headed with vulnerable groups such as the elderly and young being affected.

The Government of Trinidad and Tobago has placed the eradication of poverty and inequity high on its agenda. In fact one of the stated goals of our Population Policy is to reduce the number of persons living below the poverty line by at least 20 percentage points by the year 2010. In an effort to break the cycle of poverty, the social safety net has been extended. Recent provisions include the Disability Grant and the National Minimum Wage Legislation. Additionally, the Social Welfare Programmes of my Ministry, the Ministry of Social and Community Development, are increasingly being oriented towards social rehabilitation.

A Ministerial Council on Social Development with its Secretariat, the Change Management Unit for Poverty Eradication and Equity Building (CMU/PEEB) has been established with a mandate to promote the adoption of a multi-sectoral, integrated and participatory approach to poverty eradication. The "Adopt a Community" project previously mentioned, is one strategy incorporating the perspectives and resources of civil society and private sector in a partnership with government.

In the area of education, Government has sought to improve the quality of education, training and human resource development by upgrading primary, secondary and tertiary education and technical/vocational training.

We still face considerable constraints however. While there is full enrollment at the primary school level, only two-thirds of those eligible for enrollment in secondary school can be accommodated. The Government is in the process of putting in place the mechanisms that will amend the present selection procedures for allocating children to the available secondary school places and assuring that every primary school leaver desiring to enter the secondary school system will be accommodated by the year 2000, Further, we have plans of enhancing the technological capacity of schools by placing computers in every school.

This is part of our **Revolution in Education**. This revolution is aimed at developing the country's human resource (particularly youth) by ensuring that the education system is relevant and geared to equip students with the requisite knowledge, skills and abilities for sustained, successful living in the 21st century. Though we have entered into partnerships with NGOs to accomplish some of these obligations, the availability of financial and technical expertise is still an important element.

Mr. President with respect to migration, my country has, in the past focused attention on emigration particularly the 'brain drain' effect. However, the new phenomenon of return migration, with its positive and negative consequences, and the processes involved in reintegration into mainstream society is now receiving Government's attention. We are awaiting the results of a recently conducted survey on Return Migrants which should inform our policies in this area. The impact of internal migration is also receiving attention, since almost 70% of the population of Trinidad and Tobago live in urban areas. This density of population poses problems for the environment, as well as existing infrastructure and employment. Education, training and skills levels of the migrant workers make them unqualified for jobs which are available in urban areas.

My government has recognised these negative impacts and has committed itself to promoting measures which ensure a greater balance in the distribution of population, adequate infrastructure for the development of communities and the optimum use of land for agricultural and industrial purposes, while protecting the country's natural resources.

One strategy adopted by the Government is to develop rural areas in order to stem the rural-urban flow. For example, industrial estates have been established outside the capital which serve to create jobs for individuals in these rural communities.

The impact of internal migration is further heightened when individuals and families, in an effort to provide shelter and eke out a living, squat indiscriminately in and around urban centres. In Trinidad and Tobago we have introduced the Squatter Regularisation Act (1998) which gives tenure of state lands to squatters. Under this programme, regularised persons are presented with a deed of ownership for the particular parcel of land and infrastructure is developed for the area. These initiatives seek to minimise the damage to the environment usually caused by squatting.

On the issue of ageing populations, like most countries of the world, Trinidad and Tobago is experiencing similar trends. The aged, those 60 years and over are expected to increase by 13.9% between 1990 and 2000 to 120,000 and by 33.7 percent between 2000 and 2010 to 161,000. The elderly as we are aware are often faced with poor nutrition, inadequate housing, as well as neglect and even abandonment by relatives. A lack of knowledge and understanding on the part of care givers and the public at large of the physical, emotional, social and intellectual needs of the elderly together with inappropriate attitudes and stereotypes concerning the aged have affected the quality and quantity of services available for this growing population.

Government has undertaken several initiatives to treat issues related to the elderly, such as:

- ***Increases in Old Age Pension which is granted to all persons 65 years old and over who satisfy income and residential qualifications;***
- ***Survey on the Living Conditions of Older Persons, which is being conducted during this year;***
- ***The establishment of a Senior Citizens' Bureau which is a skills bank of older persons in society.***

In commemoration of the International Year of Older Persons in 1999, the time is opportune for new thinking, re-organization of roles and relationships in families, and within neighbourhoods, agencies and nations with respect to the elderly, The Government of Trinidad and Tobago is committed to doing our part to achieving this in concert with social partners, both local and abroad. To this end, we have constituted a National Coordinating Committee to plan and implement activities to mark the Year.

Mr. President, the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago remains dedicated to the implementation of the ICPD Program of Action emanating from Cairo, While we have not as yet implemented and accomplished all that was envisaged, partly due to, financial, technical and manpower constraints, we are endeavouring to do so. We are also dedicated to securing the future of Trinidad and Tobago in a globalizing economy and are resolved to engender in the population a deeply held commitment to the ethos of sustainable development. This is imperative if development in the social, economic and environmental sectors is to be sustained and to be culturally relevant as we enter the twenty-first century.

When we commemorate World Population Day on July 11, 1999, let us use this forum of the fifth anniversary of the ICPD to remind ourselves that **POPULATION AND DEVELOPMENT IS NOT ABOUT COUNTING PEOPLE, IT IS ABOUT MAKING PEOPLE COUNT.**

I thank you.