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Statement by

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Youth and Family Affairs

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Mr. President,  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me, first of all, to fully align myself with the statement held this morning by Germany, on behalf of the European Union.

One of the goals of the Cairo Conference five years ago was to slow down the dynamics of population growth. This year will certainly see the global population mark cross the six billion threshold, but the median versions of the United Nations project that this growth should come to a stop at the 10 billion mark by the end of the 21st century.

While developing countries will experience a distinct abatement in their population growth, the population of industrialized countries will stagnate. In Europe, the population is expected to decline by 10-14 percent up to the year 2050.

Austria's population development more or less reflects that of other EU Member States. Its most outstanding feature is the steady growth in the number of older people. As a result, the age structure of our country is changing and the ratio of over-60-year-olds to under-15-year-olds will shift from 1 :1 today, to 3: 1 in 2030.

A family policy geared towards the future must focus on improving the conditions that allow families to decide in favour of having children. We need to create an environment that enables couples to realize their desire to have children. In Austria, parents want to have more children than the number actually born. Austrian couples – like those in other industrialized countries – wish for two children, while the actual birth rate in Austria is 1.34.

Austria has taken a multitude of measures in the past years to improve the social and economic conditions of families, further increasing the already high level of family benefits. Financial transfers such as the family allowance, and non-cash benefits such as free textbooks and free transport for school children amount to de-facto benefits of 3.400 Euros per family, per year. The report on the implementation of the 1994 ICPD Programme of Action in Austria which contains further details is distributed to you at this time.

Benefits and policies for Austrian families are already substantial, and have been further advanced in recent years through a family tax reform which eliminates discrimination against families with children vis-a-vis singles and childless couples. In addition to these achievements, a central responsibility of a future-oriented family policy must be to develop measures, in tandem with the business community, which help to reconcile family life and employment. The Federal Ministry of Environment, Youth and Family Affairs has introduced a "Family and Employment Audit" which assists enterprises in implementing family-friendly, but nevertheless economically efficient company policies.

A central concern of Austrian family policy in the coming years will be to encourage measures to reconcile employment and family life. The Austrian system of parental leave allows young families to realize their wish to have children. It allows mothers and fathers to stay home with the child for up to two years in the certainty that they will not lose their job when they go back to work, and that they will receive financial benefits during their parental leave. The provision of child-care facilities is another important family-policy concern in Austria, in order to ensure that especially women will be able to make use of their job opportunities.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

A concrete goal of great importance is the fight against maternal, infant and child mortality. Globally, infant and child mortality rates were reduced by a third, in Austria a reduction of even two thirds was achieved. Austria therefore ranks among the top ten countries world-wide which account for the lowest child mortality rates. Similarly, Austria has an extremely low maternal mortality rate of only four to six incidents among all deliveries per year.

A major instrument to achieve this success is the so-called "mother-child passport", a preventive health care programme - free of charge - covering pregnancy from the early stage and continue until the child turns four. The purpose of the passport is to diagnose high-risk pregnancies, to protect the mother and her unborn child, and to identify childhood diseases or disabilities as early as possible.

Even though notable achievements could be made in combating infant mortality world-wide, pregnancy and childbirth still constitute an alarmingly high risk to the life of women in developing countries.

Key activities in implementing the Cairo Programme of Action therefore have to be initiatives against maternal mortality. Sexual and reproductive health education, particularly for girls, should start already at school age, and should be universally available. Reproductive medical care and services should be fully focused on the importance of hygiene and assisted delivery by trained midwives. One outcome of this Special Session should be the increased emphasis on health care projects relating to contraception, pregnancy and birth within the scope of development aid.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In Austria preventive approaches in sexual and reproductive health have been found to have very positive effects with regard to avoiding unwanted pregnancies and protection against HIV/AIDS. Counseling services for adolescents are of critical importance in this regard. These services must focus on the use of condoms and other contraceptives, and even more so on

responsible sexual behavior and respect for the partner's rights and health, a message that needs to be spread particularly among young men.

In this manner, it has been possible to curtail the spread of the HIV/AIDS virus in Austria – like in most other EU Member States. In the past years, Austria recorded a marked reduction of HIV/AIDS rates. The incidence of HIV/AIDS infections has declined rapidly by almost two thirds since 1993 to a world-wide low of 1,1 cases per 100.000 inhabitants.

But we have to look at the full picture: each year six million people are newly infected by HIV/AIDS. We are painfully aware, of the impact of HIV/AIDS on the social and economic development of many developing countries, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, capable of reversing development gains of the last decades. From our experience, we are convinced that any future prevention strategy against HIV/AIDS must award priority to education, particularly of adolescents, about the threat of HIV/AIDS, and must motivate them to use condoms.

This will require new approaches to reach out to adolescents. In spearheading best practices two Austrian pilot projects have been found to be highly successful: "First Love", run in a hospital, offers young people counseling and information on contraception, protection against HIV/AIDS and STDs, targeted specifically to their age-group, as well as affordable contraceptives, all of it confidentially and with strict respect of their privacy. A second low-threshold service is offered via Internet and e-mail. It provides anonymous counseling and information with regard to all issues of contraception, family planning and relationship problems.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Austria is concerned about the increase in the practice of trafficking in migrants, in particular women and children subjected to violence, forced labour or sexual exploitation. We are just recently experiencing a surge in these crimes following the refugee crisis in the Balkans. The international community should develop clear penalties for trafficking, backed by effective procedures and laws to prevent such crimes. In this context I want to highlight to the ongoing work of the United Nations Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice.

Every year, 70 to 80 million women get pregnant against their will, 600,000 women die of the consequences of pregnancy and childbirth, and 80.000 women die as a result of unsafe abortions - facts which demonstrate the need for action at the global level. Such challenges surpass the solving capacities of states, they require the joint efforts of the international community, developing and industrialized countries alike. Austria thus recognizes the need to raise the funds available for population and development programmes. In this regard, we will review the current level and use of funds to implement the objectives of the Cairo Programme of Action with a view to increasing the emphasis on bilateral projects to promote sexual and reproductive health.

Projects, in cooperation with African and Pacific countries, are envisaged to concentrate on supporting women throughout pregnancy and childbirth, and on school and extra-curricular sexual education of adolescents. Austria therefore supports the goal in the key future actions of increasing the funds for reproductive health care programmes for adolescents.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In conclusion, let me point to the link between population, development and sustainability. The fight against poverty is important to check population dynamics, but also to sustain the ecological balance of our planet. The conferences of Rio and Cairo launched us on the road to meeting these crucial challenges. After five years, we are able to highlight many important processes which have been initiated. Empowering women has proven to be an important and successful step in the right direction and is leading us to an emerging human right: the right of each individual to determine when and how many children they want to have. Also in this context, it is important to bring the ongoing discussion on the key future actions to a successful completion. Austria is prepared to make its contribution to ensure that this concept will come to its full fruition.

Thank you.