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BY

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IRELAND

TO

THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

ON POPULATION AND DEVELOPMENT

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UN INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON POPULATION AND DEVELOPMENT

CAIRO, 5-13 SEPTEMBER 1994

ADDRESS BY IRISH MINISTER FOR HEALTH, BRENDAN HOWLIN TD

INTRODUCTION

Mr Chairman, Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, I am very pleased to have the opportunity to address this most important conference. I would like to congratulate you, Mr Chairman, and the members of your Bureau on your election. I would also like to pay tribute to Dr Sadik, who has contributed so much to the preparation for this Conference, and to our Egyptian hosts for their hospitality and efficiency.

This conference has already achieved one important result: it has focused the attention of opinion makers throughout the world on an issue of vital significance for us all, the dramatic increase in the population of our planet. This is; an issue which concerns all of us, whether we are rich or poor, and whether we live in densely or lightly populated countries. We cannot pretend that it is a trend we can ignore

or that it affects others but not ourselves. The rapid growth in population has far-reaching consequences for the stability of our societies and the well-being of our peoples.

Only when this is recognized and accepted by governments can we begin to put in place policies which will tackle the needs of our peoples and provide them with necessary support and services.

PRINCIPLES

There are several principles which Ireland sees as fundamental to policies in the area of population and which must be enshrined in the final programme of Action. In particular, the formulation and implementation of population policies must be recognized as being the sovereign right of each nation, in conformity with international human rights standards. There can be no question of coercion by third countries or by international agencies; countries must be free to develop and implement policies which respect their own cultural, ethnic and religious considerations. Within countries, population programmes must respect the rights of couples to choose the number and spacing of their children, free of coercion or discrimination. In this, the UN Year of the Family, it is particularly appropriate that we should recognize that the family is the principal building block of society. Finally, the right of women to participate on an equal basis with men in decision-making at all levels, from the individual Finally to national policy, must be recognised as crucial.

HEALTH

The Draft Final Document addresses relationships between demographic trends and the economic, social and health situations in different regions of the world. It is clear that priority must be given to the implementation of multisectoral programmes aimed at improving the health and social status of the population in countries and regions where morbidity and mortality is greatest.

Many of the themes addressed in the Draft Final Document are linked to other similar programmes in the U . N . System arising from the World Summit on Children and the Rio Summit, thus providing an integrated global framework aimed at supporting and sustaining populations. UNICEF in its 1994 Report on "The State of the World's Children highlights the mutually reinforcing effects of poverty, population growth and environmental deterioration.

UNICEF also draws attention to measures required to address these matters. These include

- the control of major childhood diseases;
- a halving of maternal mortality rates; and
- the universal availability of family-planning Information and services.

Maternal and infant morbidity and mortality rates have been reduced considerably in countries where ante and post-natal care and community protection programmes are widely available. This is particularly relevant to Ireland, where 9996 of children are born in maternity

hospitals or maternity units. In addition, childhood vaccination rates are high in Ireland, and UNICEF, in its 1994 Report, ranked Ireland as having the lowest mortality rate for children under 5 years in the world.

FAMILY PLANNING

The universal availability of family-planning information and services is of particular significance in the context of the International Conference on Population and Development. The role of family-planning is reflected in the Draft Final Document as being fundamental towards enabling couples to plan their families and towards reducing maternal morbidity and mortality arising out of complications of pregnancy or the recourse to abortion arising from unwanted pregnancy. Against the background of 5500,000 women who die each year as a consequence of childbirth and pregnancy, many of which deaths result from unsafe abortions and/or the absence of the most basic antenatal, maternity and postnatal care, it is evident that population policies should emphasise the primary importance of family planning information and services.

It is therefore, encouraging to note the emphasis in the Draft Final Document on the central role of family planning in population policy, a role which will go a considerable way towards the empowerment of women and towards achieving greater equity between men and women in relation to reproduction. The availability of comprehensive family planning information and services will enable couples to make choices about the number of their children, thus facilitating a humane and sympathetic approach to the limitation of excessive population growth.

Indeed, we in Ireland have made considerable progress in recent years in

providing easy and ready access to contraception. The provision of comprehensive family planning service and information is an integral part of Ireland's National Health Strategy which is designed to shape the development of our health services over the next few years.

The Draft Final Document links family planning and reproductive health with the empowerment of women. However, these links can only be achieved if women are educated to enable them both to demand and to make choices in relation to family planning. The emphasis placed on this is one of the strengths of the draft document

ABORTION

Another of the strengths of the draft document is the emphasis which it places on the importance of reducing the extent of abortion throughout the world. We should, in our discussions, emphasize that the improvements in health services and family planning services which are central to the document have the potential to bring about a major reduction in the recourse to abortion.

Ireland strongly endorses the inclusion in the final document of clear statements that abortion must in no case be promoted as a method of family planning. It is important that the final text should not be open to the interpretation that this Conference is in any way seeking to promote abortion, or in any way to impose abortion upon countries or individuals.

In Ireland, as in very many other countries, there are deeply held convictions on this matter. Our Confutation provides that the State

acknowledges the right to life of the unborn and, with due regard to the equal right to life of the mother, guarantees in its laws to respect and, as far as practicable, by its laws to defend and vindicate that right. This Constitutional provision has been ruled by our Supreme Court to prohibit abortion except in circumstances where a real and substantial risk to the life of the mother could not be averted by any other means.

It is, therefore, of great importance to Ireland, as it clearly is also to many other countries, that the document would recognize that policy and legislation in relation to the circumstances in which the termination of pregnancy may be permitted is a matter for each country to determine for itself.

DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE

Population policy cannot be considered in isolation from the need to devote sufficient resources to relieving problems of poverty and malnutrition and providing the infrastructures which developing countries require. In this context, we need to address issues of resource distribution and diverse consumption patterns between regions, so as to assist developing countries in improving their economies and their health, educational, social and environmental infrastructures.

As far as Ireland is concerned, I am pleased to inform the Conference that, in the context of an expanding Programme of Development Assistance, we will be increasing the level of financial and technical assistance to enable specific programmes of action to be put in place which will tackle some of the population-related problems of the countries in which we work. We will also increase our contributions to

the United Nations Population Fund.

Education, improved healthcare and a clear recognition of the importance of women's role in society are all essential elements in population policy. The Irish Aid Programme has been particularly strong in the fields of health, including maternal health, and education. Ireland will work closely with our partner countries in the developing world to draw up further projects and programmes which give full recognition to the role and place of women in society. We will assist these countries to achieve overall improvements in the status of women in the societies in which they live

CONCLUSION

Ireland places great importance on the recognition that population policy should not be limited to family planning but should form part of an integrated approach to the fight against poverty and the promotion of sustainable development. By adopting a Final Programme of Action which enshrines such an approach, this Conference can lead to immense benefits for many millions of people in the developing world.

As my colleague, Minister Kanther of Germany, emphasized in his statement on behalf of the European Union, the principles contained in the Draft Final Document can form the basis for action by individual countries to develop effective population policies and to implement them humanely and sympathetically. Ireland has worked constructively with our European Union partners in recent months to develop possible solutions to the difficulties which emerged at the Preparatory Conference in relation to certain aspects of the text of the document. We believe that

it is possible to arrive at a consensus in these areas, and that we should not allow them to overshadow the many vitally important issues upon which we are already at one and which are of such great importance to the future of the people of this planet.

Thank you.

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