
Statement to the Hague Forum 8-12 February 1999

As written

Statement by
Honourable Mr. **Manohar Ramsaran**
Minister of Social and Community Development
Trinidad and Tobago

to the

ICPD+5 Hague Conference
8-12 February 1999

The Netherlands

Mr. President,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Mr. President, let me join with other distinguished speakers to congratulate you on your appointment to this prestigious position and compliment you for the fine job you are doing. On behalf of the Government and People of Trinidad and Tobago, may I take this opportunity to thank UNFPA for inviting us to this Forum and the Government and People of the Netherlands for hosting it. In particular, I wish to thank the Mayor and the people of the Hague for the warmth and hospitality shown to all of us gathered here in this beautiful and historical city. It makes me feel as though I am home in the Caribbean.

Mr. President,

Trinidad and Tobago is a twin island state with an oil-based economy. The unfavourable social and economic climate fostered by the economic recession of the late 1980's, due to the fall in oil prices, created an environment for the examination of the role of population variables in national development. This was prompted by, among other factors, the World Population Conference held in Mexico in 1984 and national sensitivity to the problems of maintaining sustainable development and improving the quality of life of all citizens in the presence of an imbalance between population and natural resources.

In recognition of the linkages between population and development and the need for an integrated approach to development, the Government in 1989 reconstituted the Population Council of Trinidad and Tobago with a clear mandate "to design and implement an explicit population-influencing policy for Trinidad and Tobago".

Following the ICPD in Cairo in 1994, the Draft Population Policy which was developed prior to Cairo was revised to take on board the recommendations coming out of the Cairo Plan of Action. Efforts were made to sensitize government planners from sector ministries to the need to incorporate population into the planning process and continues through links between the Population Council and the Planning Divisions of the various ministries. Procedures are now being adopted which will enable the Population Council to review the Government's Medium Term Plan before it is finalized to ensure that the programmes of sector ministries have given adequate consideration to population in their programmes.

Mr. President,

The current population of Trinidad and Tobago stands at 1.2 million and one of the stated goals of our population policy is to have a population not exceeding 1.5 million by the year 2010. With a rate of population growth of less than one per cent and a total fertility rate just below replacement level, we are well on our way to achieving this goal.

However, teenage pregnancies continues to be high accounting for 14% of all birth in 1996. Obviously, the problems resulting from teenage pregnancies are many including the psychological and physiological impact they have on the young mothers. Caring for these young mothers and their babies places additional stress on their families, often giving rise to conflicts within the families, particularly homelessness among unwed mothers. In addition, teenage pregnancies represent significant losses of human resource as many of these young mothers drop out of school or have to leave these jobs if employed.

The government in response offers technical and financial support to a number of NGOs which conduct programmes and projects for the benefit of children and youth. One such project which directly targets young mother is “choices” funded in part by the Van Leer Foundation. This programme which is aimed at academic and personal development, offers skills training, seeks to improve the life chances of both mother and child, as well as the postponement of subsequent pregnancies among the young mothers.

With a crude death rate of 7.4 per 1000 mid-year population in 1996 and a life expectancy at birth of 70,6 for females and 74.7 for males the overall mortality picture looks encouraging. However, the high incidence of HIV/AIDS particularly among young men aged 25 to 35 years is of great concern to the government. The government has recently given the green light for the protocol for research among HIV-infected persons. 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 targetted for a 50% reduction by the year 2010.

While in the past emigration has been the focus of our attention, the new phenomenon of return migration, with its consequences, both negative and positive, is now receiving the attention of the government. We are now awaiting the results of a recently conducted Survey on Return Migrants which would provide us with, among other things, information this new phenomenon.

Mr. President,

As you are aware, ICPD 1994 has given new challenges in the development process; human development; improved quality of life through poverty eradication, universal access to education, ensuring equity and equality and the empowerment of women, and universal access to high quality reproductive health services. Since Cairo, our government has undertaken a number of initiatives to meet these challenges.

As noted earlier, Trinidad and Tobago has an oil-based economy that remains vulnerable to oil shocks and fluctuations in prices on the international market. The non-oil sector, while growing, has not developed fast enough to cushion the effects of economic decline and high unemployment.

A 1992 Survey of Living Conditions Employing Variable Poverty Line Measures in relation to household size, indicated that 35.9 per cent of households in Trinidad and Tobago fell below the poverty line. Preliminary results from a recently (1997/1998) survey indicates that poverty continues to remain at a high level.

It is estimated that 35 per cent of poor households, the majority of which were female-head households, were constituted of unemployed and elderly persons. Extensive social expenditure continues to take place but economic decline and enforced structural adjustment policies have tended to erode the benefits that have accrued through these expenditures.

The government of Trinidad and Tobago places the eradication of poverty and inequity high on its agenda. In an effort to break the cycle of poverty, 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. A number of innovative strategies incorporating the perspectives and resources of civil society in a partnership with governments have recently been launched by the CMU. One such example is the adoption of a community project which facilitates a direct partnership between corporate citizens and specific poor communities.

Mr. President,

Education is a key variable in sustainable human and social development guaranteeing an improved quality of life for all citizens. While there is full enrollment at the primary school level, only two-thirds of those eligible for enrollment in secondary school can be accommodated. This is of major concern to the government and has prompted re-examination of the entire system. The government is in the process of putting in place the mechanisms that will remove the selection procedures for selecting children for the available secondary school places and assuring that every primary school learner desiring to enter the secondary school system will be accommodated by the year 2000.

A policy on Health and Family Life Education is currently being finalized. 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 the nation.

In the area of Reproductive Health, the Ministry of Health through its Population Programme Unit has recently completed a nationwide training programme for nurses aimed at improving the delivery of improved quality reproductive health care. In addition, a survey was conducted in 1996 to understand the reasons for the high dropout rates among government-run family planning clinics.

Mr. President,

Most countries of the world are now experiencing ageing of their population. Trinidad and Tobago is no exception. The aged, those 60 years and over, were expected to increase by 13.9% between 1990 and 2000 to 120,000 and by 33.7 per cent between 2000 and 2010 to 161,000. This pattern of increase is likely to continue for sometime.

The elderly are often faced with poor nutrition and inadequate housing as well as abuse, neglect and even abandonment by relatives. All of this is compounded by a lack of knowledge on the part of social planners and the public at large on the needs of the elderly hence social services required by this rapidly growing sub-population tend to be restrictive..

Following are some initiatives undertaken by the government to treat with issues related to the elderly:

◆Increases in Old Age Pensions which is granted to all persons 65 years old and over who satisfy income and residential qualifications.

+A National Policy on Older Persons which is currently being developed.

◆Survey on the Living Conditions of Older Persons, which is to be conducted during the first half of 1999.

The establishment of a Ministry of Gender and Youth Affairs is expected to go a long way in addressing the issues related to the empowerment of women. It is worthy to note that a very substantial proportion of senior positions in the public service is occupied by women. In the educational institutions particularly those at the tertiary level, females vastly outnumber males. While this will go a long way in the empowerment of women and improve gender equity/equality, we are also concerned with perceived marginalization of young males.

Legislation has been developed to deal with the problem of financial support by fathers for their children particularly those born in consensual unions. Legislation to deal with violence against women has also been developed. However, there is an urgent need to educate the public in this area.

Mr. President,

The Government of Trinidad and Tobago is committed to the implementation of the ICPD Programme of Action coming out of Cairo. While we have not as yet implemented and accomplished all that was envisaged by the ICPD Programme of Action, we are making every effort to do so. We are mindful of the various constraints, particularly financial, which we face in meeting these goals. Declining external financial assistance and a stagnant economy can impact negative on the initiatives which we have already undertaken as well as those yet to be undertaken. This Forum augurs well for the future and the resolutions agreed to should take us into the 21st century with hope and certainty.

I thank you.
