

Statement to The Hague Forum, 8-12 February 1999

As written:

The Hague Forum on Population and Development

8-12 February 1999

Statement by the Italian delegation

Let me first join other delegations in thanking UNFPA for having organized this Forum and the Government of the Netherlands for hosting it. It represents a precious opportunity to prepare the special session of the United Nations General Assembly.

Italy shares entirely the statement already made by Germany, on behalf of the European Union. I would like to raise some specific issues related to Italy's own situation, which in the field of population dynamics poses challenges requiring forefront strategies.

The population-related trends in the '90 have fully confirmed the previous ones and show that Italy is a country with a very low fertility and nuptiality rates, with low morbidity rates and a significant level of immigration. For over 5 years, Italian fertility rates have been at very low levels, under 1.3 children per woman. This rate is much lower than in the other more populous countries of the European Union and considerably lower than the fertility needed to ensure zero population growth. With a mean age of about 30 years at the first birth Italy occupies one of the top positions among countries with late fertility. There is full, widespread awareness of the intensive and rapid aging of the Italian population, which has become the world's oldest, because it has the highest percentage of over-60s and, at the same time, the lowest percentage of young people under 15.

The central Government and some local authorities have shown concern for this situation. Attention has been called on the heavy economic burdens laid on couples who have a child or who will have one more. The Government is working on a reform of the welfare system thereby acknowledging the importance of family relationships and the responsibility of parents, and is considering modalities to provide resources, means and services to help families in raising children and taking care of the elderly. The severe and rapid aging process is affecting all the spheres of cultural, psychological, social, and economic life and is of paramount importance in the long term sustainable reform of the pension system.

There is no concern for the subject of reproduction-related health, because in Italy mortality related to pregnancy, labor, and puerperium is very low, and data on voluntary abortions show a decreasing trend. An extensive network of public counseling facilities ensures that the population, and especially women, receives the necessary information regarding reproduction-related health. The positive experience of counseling facilities is at the base of similar interventions of Italian development cooperation and NGOs activities

Migration flows are a feature of present international reality. Over recent years, the number of foreigners living permanently also in Italy has risen and the Government is developing policies granting to them access to educational and health services. The Government is fighting against illegal immigration, and especially against immigrant traffickers. Italy is part of the Shengen Agreement and fully implements its provisions. It is a heavy burden because the geography and the political events of recent years make our borders among the most vulnerable of the entire European Union.

The Government is undoubtedly engaged in achieving a full balance in employment and living opportunities for men and women. It should be stressed that since 1996 the Italian Government has appointed a Minister for equal opportunities.

In regard to development cooperation, growing attention is being given to women's empowerment, gender and population issues, including international migration and protection of the environment, and to meet reproductive rights and health needs. Our financial support has therefore increased for programs and projects that cover these issues. I am pleased to inform you that in 1999, Italy will increase by four times its contributions to UNFPA, UNIFEM and to other gender and population programs of UN agencies, so that about 10 million US\$ are going to be contributed to those activities. This is in addition to our participation in the EU budget and to our bilateral cooperation programs.

In our development cooperation Italy has been following a dual approach. The first one is an integrated approach to reproductive health for the creation of health counseling centers that offer at the local level a wide range of services for the entire life cycle. The second one is a multisectorial approach, through which economic, educational, and health support will be provided to women. The latter approach is being currently implemented in Central America with UNFPA. Italian Government collaboration with NGOs working in the field of population and development has also been strengthened. Projects in the area of Female Genital Mutilation and violence against women have been financed. Italy is also giving greater attention to reproductive rights and health needs of women in emergency situations and in refugee camps.

In conclusion, Mister (M.me) President, let me observe that in a 1996 report on donors' performance in the area of contributions to population issues, Italy got a 'F'. We are confident that in the next report our country will get a higher mark. This is not only due to our strong national political commitment, but also a result of common efforts we all agreed to in Cairo.