

# THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

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## ADDRESS TO THE SPECIAL SESSION OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY ON THE FOLLOW-UP TO THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON POPULATION AND DEVELOPMENT

New York, 30 June 1999

Mr. President,  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Cairo Conference, whose fifth anniversary we are marking today; was not an isolated event. It was an integral part of the series of great conferences held by the United Nations during the 1990s.

I'm sure I don't need to remind you of the themes of those conferences: the global environment, human rights, population, social development, women, and human settlements.

Those were distinct topics, but all related to each other, and to one central, overarching aim: development. Development of nations, and development of people.

And all those conferences aimed to reach the aim through an organized, yet voluntary effort. **A** collective effort on a global scale. An effort by sovereign states and civil society working together. An effort guided by a common approach, based on universal values and principles which all could accept.

So Cairo was not just a population conference. It was a conference on population and development. It was part of a process, going back twenty-five years or more, during which we have all learned that every society's hopes of social and economic development are intimately linked to its demography. All States now understand that, if they are to provide adequately for the future health and education of their citizens, they need to incorporate population policies into their development strategy.

Abundant research has shown us that economic growth and development have profound effects on fertility, on the size of families, on the age pyramid, and on patterns of migration. And we hardly need research to tell us that living conditions at the local level – family and village – are reflected in the national standard of living.

In other words, demography and development are constantly interacting. It seems blindingly obvious now, but until Cairo the world did not fully understand it.

Since Cairo, **the world** does understand it – and understands, too, that we have to stabilize the population of this planet. Quite simply, there is a limit to the pressures our global environment can stand. Patterns of consumption are one form of pressure, but another is the sheer size of the world's population – and a third is the way it is distributed around the globe.

That's the global dimension. But there is also an individual dimension. Every human being aspires to health, security and dignity. That is the essence of human rights. And we now realize that sexual and reproductive health is an essential part of those rights.

Don't we all recognize as universal the anguish of the individual who loses wife or mother in childbirth, because proper care is not available? Of the teenager whose options in life are suddenly foreclosed, because she gets pregnant and drops out of school? Of the woman who has to go on having children even though she knows her health is at risk? Or of the refugee who has been raped but is too frightened, or too ashamed, to ask for help?

Better understanding of these issues has brought real change in the daily life of millions of people. They now have wider choices, and can make key decisions about their own lives.

Let me give you some examples of how things have changed since the first population conference, twenty-five years ago:

- Then, women in developing countries had an average of five children each. Today they have fewer than three.
- Then, thirty per cent of couples used family planning. Today, sixty per cent do – and the vast majority of governments now support it.
- Then, one hundred and forty out of every thousand babies born alive would die during childhood. Now, only eighty will.

- Then, average life expectancy was fifty-nine years. Now, sixty-six.
- And, in many countries, fewer women now die in childbirth – though reliable statistics on this are hard to come by, and it is certainly an area where much more needs to be done.

Meanwhile, at the global level, the rate of growth of the world's population has slowed dramatically, from 2 to 1.3 per cent-per year. In another **twenty-five** years it should be down to 0.8.

We are still adding seventy-eight million to our numbers every year, but that figure too should decline, first slowly and then, in the second decade of the century, quite steeply.

All that is good news, for which every nation in the world can take some credit. States have acted on internationally agreed principles and on their own national priorities and values. Most of them have achieved slower, more balanced population growth, not by coercion but by enhancing individual freedom.

We can all be proud that this has been achieved with the help of international consensus and cooperation under United Nations auspices. And we should also acknowledge that it was not done by states alone. **NGOs**, and other parts of civil society, made a big contribution. They spread the word. They lobbied for policy changes. They mobilized people to support national initiatives.

**So** have we done all that the Cairo Conference recommended? No, my friends. There is still much to do:

- In too many countries, girls still do not have the same chance to be educated as boys.

- Too many women still cannot choose when or whether to become pregnant.
- Too many women are victims of sexual violence, especially during conflict.
- Too many women resort to abortions that are not safe. Too many are still subjected to genital mutilation and other harmful traditional practices.
- Too many men remain ignorant of, or indifferent to, their responsibility for their family and its reproductive health.

- Too many people are still exposed to sexually transmitted diseases.
- Far too many countries are being ravaged by the spread of AIDS.
- People in developing countries still die too young – as they do in the former communist countries, in some of which life expectancy has actually declined.
- And so on.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

The stakes could hardly be higher. If only we could implement the Cairo programme in full, we could make a ‘tremendous difference to human rights, to hopes of prosperity, and to the sustainable use of natural **resources**.

We ~~must do it~~ cannot do it without funds.

In Cairo, everyone agreed on the need to mobilize new financial resources – from within developing countries, and also from the international community.

Since then, developing countries have proved their commitment. But they are cruelly limited in what they can achieve without outside help.

Too often – let’s admit it – they are also limited by the effects of conflicts, arms spending, or by inadequate leadership.

But too often, also, they have to give priority to debt servicing, or to draconian budgetary austerity imposed in the name of “structural adjustment”.

In all cases, it is the people who suffer. They are entitled to expect more sympathy, and better treatment, from countries which are more fortunate.

I know, it's easier said than done. Even rich countries contain many poor people, and their governments face many competing claims. But what could be more important than the chance to help the world's people control their numbers through greater prosperity and wider choice?

Ladies and Gentlemen:

We ~~can~~ do it. k s t o Cairo, we know how to do it. Let us all reaffirm the pledges we made in Cairo.

In the next few days, specific proposals will be put before you. They are the fruit of five years' experience, and are based firmly on the principles agreed in the Cairo Programme.

This Special Session give us a unique chance to face up to what **is** undoubtedly one of the great challenges – perhaps the greatest – of the coming century. You are meeting in the right place – the United Nations, the world's only truly global forum. We in the Secretariat, and in UNFPA, are here to help you.

I wish you success in your deliberations. I wish us **all** success in the **next** five years of implementing the Cairo Programme.

Thank you very much.