

Statement to the Commission on Population and Development
Acting as Preparatory Committee for the Special Session
of the General Assembly

As written

GHANA



PERMANENT MISSION OF GHANA
TO THE UNITED NATIONS
19 EAST 47TH STREET
NEW YORK, N.Y. 10017
TEL 212-832-1300 FAX 212-751-6743

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STATEMENT
BY
PROF. GEORGE BENNEH,
CHAIRMAN OF THE NATIONAL POPULATION COUNCIL
AND ALTERNATE LEADER OF THE GHANA DELEGATION
TO THE PREPARATORY COMMITTEE
FOR THE SPECIAL SESSION OF
THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY ON THE REVIEW
AND APPRAISAL OF THE IMPLEMENTATION
OF THE ICPD PROGRAMME OF ACTION
ON
MARCH 26, 1999

Mr. Chairman.

It is my honour and privilege to convey to you warm congratulations on your election as Chairman of this august Preparatory Committee. May I also convey congratulations and best wishes to the Vice-Chairpersons and Rapporteur.

Mr. Chairman,

In Cairo in 1994, Ghana joined the rest of the international community to adopt the historic ICPD Programme of Action. Ghana participated actively in the various review processes leading to the recent Hague Forum on Population and Development and in the Forum itself.

Even before the Cairo Conference, Ghana had revised her Population Policy and had anticipated in many material respects, the goals, principles and strategies recommended by the ICPD. This revision process represented a remarkable and innovative experiment in grassroots participation in policy-formulation which has become the hallmark of good governance in the country for nearly two decades.

The end product, while highlighting issues relating to adolescents, the youth and women, also incorporated emerging issues such as the environment, the aged, persons with disabilities and the threat of HIV/AIDS. It represents, in effect, the collective determination and commitment of the people to the principle that a well-managed population is a fundamental requirement for sustainable development.

Mr. Chairman,

The policy environment was further enhanced by Government's publication in January 1995 of its blue-print for socio-economic transformation of the country, titled VISION 2020: THE FIRST STEP. The document sets out the medium and long-term goals, targets and strategies required to transform Ghana into a middle-income economy by 2020.

We are also addressing the phenomenon of urban growth, with its associated problems, through the enhancement of integrated rural development. Indeed, decentralization of both political power and responsibility for planning as a means of enhancing community involvement in all aspects of the development process is now a critical strategy to ensure that population concerns are fully integrated into district and sub-district level planning as well as programme activities. The objective is to take full account of population variables in planning and policy-making at the district level, where it matters most.

In the meantime, multi-sectoral Regional Population Advisory Committees have been established in all the 10 Regions (i.e. Provinces) as focal points for effective planning, co-ordination, monitoring and evaluation of population programmes. It is our expectation that over time these Committees will take full ownership of the region-specific programmes and feel motivated enough to generate and allocate sufficient resources to them.

In addition, a vastly-improved legal and policy environment has ensured that the necessary laws have been passed and other consequential measures have been taken to promote gender equality, equity and empowerment of women. Female genital mutilation (FGM) has been outlawed. The practice of confining girls in shrines as a punishment for “crimes” committed by members of their families has been criminalized.

In active collaboration with the Parliamentary Caucus on Population and Development, the search continues for such other areas of law and policy as are in need of reform to make them consistent not only with the fundamental law of the land (i.e., the Constitution) but also the Revised National Population Policy and international instruments such as the ICPD Programme of Action and the Beijing Platform for Action.

Indeed, various coalitions established by the National Population Council recently linked up with the Caucus in spearheading and mobilizing the necessary support for the enactment of a comprehensive Children’s Bill one of whose provisions fixes the minimum age for marriage at 18.

Currently, an Affirmative Action Bill is pending before Parliament. This Bill seeks, among other things, to commit Government to 40 per cent women's political representation and appointment to various bodies.

Since reform of the law does not by itself lead automatically to envisaged change in behavior, attitudes and practice, we will engage in constant advocacy and consensus building in order to keep relevant issues on the front-burner. In this respect, we will continue to foster and maintain strategic partnerships and functional linkages with NGOs, youth and women's groups, community and opinion leaders, especially traditional rulers and religious leaders as well as the private sector. The kind of mobilization of national and international opinion which culminated in the ICPD Programme of Action and the Beijing Platform for Action will continue to characterize implementation of our programmes.

We believe however that the institution of universal access to basic education, remains a fundamental condition for effective progress in sustainable human development.

Mr. Chairman,

Since 1994, appropriate policy guidelines have been developed to guide programme implementers in the field of reproductive and sexual health as well as reproductive rights.

These include:-

- Medium-Term Health Strategy, 1996.
National Reproductive Health Policy, Standards and Protocols, 1996
Draft National Adolescent Reproductive Health Policy, 1998
National Community-Based Distribution Strategy, 1996
- National Population, Communication Strategy, as an integral part of the National Communications Policy, 1998.

We have integrated reproductive health into our primary health care and referral systems. Besides, a full range of basic reproductive health services is provided at these levels.

Mr. Chairman,

We fully recognize the right of individuals and couples to plan their families. Consequently, strategies, including information and education, have been designed to generate demand for the fullest possible range of family planning methods. A campaign on the use of long-term family planning methods is being actively waged to convince users of short-term methods to shift to its use. Males-as-Partners programmes are being vigorously promoted within the context of this campaign.

Since available records indicate that the largest proportion of persons affected by HIV/AIDS in Ghana are in the age group of 20-35 years, this group has been targeted for special attention; Measures in this area include counselling, the establishment of Associations of People Living with HIV/AIDS and production and circulation of STD guidelines. Indeed, the status of the national response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic is currently being comprehensively reviewed.

Mr. Chairman,

A comprehensive draft Policy on ageing is in the course of preparation. In the meantime, a programme of free medical care for elderly persons as well as a policy of exemption from payment of basic rates have been introduced.

Ghana is determined to continue to implement the ICPD Programme of Action to the letter and we are committing as much resources as we can allocate for the social sector in this regard.

Like most other developing countries, however, we face serious resource gaps as a result of policies we are having to implement to ensure macro-economic stability and, more significantly, due to unsustainable external debt repayment terms and diminished economic potential arising from problems of market access.

The impact of these is to further constrain our ability to deal with problems encountered in the implementation of the Programme of Action. Those problems include shortage of trained manpower, lack of current demographic data for planning, inequitable distribution of health service staff, inadequate access to clinic services, especially in rural areas, and limited resources to deal with negative socio-cultural beliefs.

The reality of the situation is that without a fundamental improvement in the external environment for trade and debt servicing and re-payments, our efforts in countries like Ghana will not lead to the agreed targets in the Programme of Action, even if our partners did more to meet the agreed ODA targets and their commitments in the Programme of Action.

There is no doubt however that increased levels in ODA will strengthen our capacity to manage and deliver our programmes for population and development.

Next year Ghana expects to conduct a Population and Housing Census to provide a more reliable data base for planning and evaluation of population and related matters.

As a nation, we are committed to undertaking all these range of activities because it serves the best interests of our people and we would do them, even without the Programme of Action.

The Programme of Action however offers a partnership, shared interests and opportunities, which enhance our capacity to achieve our goal of sustainable human development within our limited resources.

It is our hope therefore that this review process would lead to a renewal of our commitments made in Cairo and where circumstances dictate, as indeed is the case in a number of areas, even greater commitment.

Mr. Chairman,

I thank you for your patience and attention.