

Final version



ADDRESS

BY

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LANDLOCKED DEVELOPING COUNTRIES AND
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GUEST OF HONOUR

AT

THE 27TH ANNUAL GLOBAL MEDIA AWARDS

OF

THE POPULATION INSTITUTE

**US CAPITOL BUILDING
WASHINGTON D.C., 6 DECEMBER 2006**

President of the Population Institute, Larry Smith

President Emeritus, Werner Fornos

Chair of the Panel of Judges, Rahul Singh,

I am deeply honoured to be invited to join you this evening for the 27th Annual Global Media Awards of the Population Institute (PI). My first presence at the Populations Institute's Global Media Awards was two decades ago in 1986 when I joined my esteemed friends Rafael Salas and Werner Fornos in Barcelona to present the Awards. My admiration for these prestigious Awards continues to remain very high as these have encouraged wider and in-depth global media coverage of population and development issues that are vital for the survival of our planet. My warmest congratulations to the winners of this year's Awards and special thanks to the Population Institute and its new President Lawrence Smith for this impressive ceremony honouring those who dedicate their time, energy and effort to put the spotlight on the world's population challenges.

Right from its birth, the Population Institute recognised the role and importance of the media in bringing about positive change in individuals, communities, countries and at the international level. During more than a quarter century of PI's existence, the media has become an even more potent tool for change, reaching ever wider audiences, quite often in real time. But the media is as good as the message it communicates. With growing competition for target groups, there is always the risk that important, if not necessarily sensational, development issues will be sidelined. Initiatives such as the Global Media Awards encourage the media and the individual contributors to keep the important development messages alive and thriving. The Population Institute must, therefore, be commended for its continued effort in supporting that endeavour.

Population and development issues remain at the centre of national priorities in a large number of countries. Their interconnectedness with other major global concerns is clearly recognized. As my dear colleague and friend, UNFPA Executive Director Thoraya Obaid has very appropriately articulated, "Growing populations that are unable to meet their basic needs can easily become unstable. Population pressures and poverty are also related to involuntary movements of people. Such movements, often facilitated by famine, resource

scarcity, environmental degradation or conflict, cannot always be contained in national boundaries and can threaten global security”.

Twelve years have passed since the landmark International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo, which adopted a well-articulated Programme of Action to address the world’s population challenges in a comprehensive way. A lot of water has flown under the bridge since then, but the challenges posed to our individual and societal well-being by the various population issues are not any less. If anything, those have become more difficult, whether one is talking about the unsustainable levels of population growth, the break-neck speed of urbanisation, the raging and ravaging spread of HIV/AIDS, the widespread environmental degradation, the complex migration dynamics or the severe malnutrition and extensive food insecurity. We tend to forget that there are millions of children, women and men already suffering – if not dying – from the effects of these challenges. These are not only problems of the future; they are also today’s problems.

Like the other development challenges, population problems and their negative consequences tend to afflict the poorest countries, particularly the least developed among them, to a greater degree than the rest of the world. The world’s 50 Least Developed Countries (LDCs), 34 of them in sub-Saharan Africa, have the highest rates of population growth rate; the highest fertility rates; the highest proportion of a dependant population and the highest prevalence of HIV/AIDS, yet they have the poorest quality and quantity of health services. No wonder, they also have the highest levels of extreme poverty – covering nearly half their population of 760 million, and the lowest life expectancy – 50 years compared to 65 for the other developing countries and 75 for the developed world.

Although these countries are the richest in the world in terms of the number of young people, with 42% of their population being under the age of 15, these children have the worst quality of life under the sun. As UNICEF reported recently, a child born in a Least Developed Country is 26 times more likely to die before celebrating their fifth birthday than a child born in an industrialized country.

Whereas they account for 12 percent of the world's population, the 50 LDCs will absorb a quarter of the world's increase in population between now and 2015, the final year for the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). During the next 40 years, the LDCs population is projected to grow at a much faster rate than that of the rest of the world. In general, fertility rates have been declining in developing countries, but in 13 of them – all LDCs except for one – the high fertility rates show no sign of tapering off. One of the major reasons these negative trends is the lack of family planning services. The policy implication of this is the need for increased reproductive health services and empowerment of women that would help reduce the high fertility rates, maternal and child mortality and, ultimately, the very high population growth rates. Reducing the number of unwanted births would also help reduce poverty, but obviously, this would not be enough by itself. Stimulating economic growth, creating jobs and increasing the incomes of the poor are just as vital and are mutually reinforcing.

We need to particularly bear in mind that more than 1.7 billion women worldwide are in their reproductive and productive years, between the ages of 15 and 49. Targeted investments in their education, reproductive health, economic opportunity and political rights can spur growth and sustainable development for generations to come.

Of course, the depressing scenario in the Least Developed Countries does not mean that all the efforts both before and after Cairo have been in vain. The Cairo + 5 review process of 1999, which I had the privilege of chairing, noted a number of significant achievement in the goals of the Cairo Programme of Action, including education for all and access to contraceptives. The Least Developed Countries may not have benefited from many of these achievements to the same extent, but there is no doubt that awareness of the scale of the population problem and the resolve to deal with it has increased significantly. Indeed, 80 percent of the LDCs consider their fertility rates to be too high today, compared to only 30 percent in the 1970s. The recognition of the problem and the political will to deal with it are certainly there, what remains lacking are the means.

The overriding aim of both the Millennium Development Goals and the International Conference on Population and Development Programme of Action is to improve human

welfare and promote sustainable development. This common aim has led to considerable compatibility and coherence between the goals and objectives of the Cairo Programme and the MDGs and their associated targets. Indeed, some goals are almost identical in the two documents as, for instance, those pertaining to child mortality, maternal health and access to education. For some goals, the measures recommended in ICPD provide a more comprehensive, explicit and detailed set of guidelines than those implied by the MDGs, as in the case of the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women. In addition, considerable synergies exist between the actions called for in the Cairo Programme to achieve certain objectives and the attainment of mutually reinforcing MDGs, including the reduction of poverty or the improvement of educational attainment and health.

Moreover, reaching the overall goals and objectives set by ICPD or included in the MDGs does not ensure that improvements are shared equitably by all segments of the population. To ensure equity, implementation of the measures recommended has to take account of existing inequalities so that special attention is given to the more vulnerable and underserved population groups and countries of the world.

If international cooperation can deliver the support needed, we can start to see gains in the LDCs that we have seen in many developing countries. This is crucial for the MDGs to be reached in these countries. As I have said many times before, without achieving the MDGs in the fifty LDCs, those goals will not be achieved in the world as a whole.

I believe that in addition to the reasons of solidarity, it is in the interest of the developed and the more well-off developing countries to support the poorest in tackling population challenges. The manifestations of population problems affect us all in one way or another, regardless of the countries in which we live. Moreover, as the Cairo Programme of Action has noted, population issues are complex and need to be approached holistically. International cooperation, involving both governmental and non-governmental development actors, is therefore important in addressing not only the population issue, but all the other development challenges. South-South cooperation is, of course, an important component of this multi-sectoral and multi-dimensional international cooperation.

Before ending, I would like to pay a special tribute to the role being played by civil society to keep the population and development issues high on the global agenda. Because of its proximity to the people, civil society is particularly well placed to play a major role in addressing population challenges. The multiplicity, diversity and relative independence of action also allow civil society organisations to tackle the difficult issues which public officials and other development actors may avoid. This unique strength of civil society needs to be recognised and harnessed to move the population agenda ahead.

Let me conclude by reiterating that all these years of my involvement with population and development issues tell me that leadership, empowerment of women and engagement of the young people are key to our success.

We can all, in our own humble ways, make a contribution. If there is one thing our Award winners here today have demonstrated through their dedication to the cause of raising awareness of the population challenge, it is that we do not always have to look to the grand schemes to make a difference. Those are, of course, important, but so are our own small, persistent and determined contributions.
