

STATEMENT BY DR. SHASHI THAROOR, MINISTER OF STATE FOR EXTERNAL AFFAIRS,  
DURING THE COMMEMORATION OF THE FIFTEENTH ANNIVERSARY OF THE  
INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON POPULATION & DEVELOPMENT AT THE 64<sup>TH</sup>  
SESSION OF THE UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY ON OCTOBER 12, 2009



Mr. President, Sir

As I am speaking for the first time in the UN General Assembly as the representative of India, please allow me to congratulate you on your election as the President of the General Assembly.

I am honoured and privileged to participate in today's open debate to commemorate the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the International Conference on Population and

Development, which was a major international initiative on an issue of critical importance for India.

Mr. President, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates,

The International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) held in Cairo in 1994 was a landmark Conference. Overcoming deep divisions among member states, it succeeded in forging an unprecedented global consensus and integrated the diverse range of population, development and human rights issues into a blueprint for 20 years of action, popularly known as the Cairo consensus.

The Programme of Action addressed the complex interrelationships amongst population, economic growth and sustainable development, as well as population distribution, gender equality and empowerment of women, urbanization, migration, data collection and analysis.

For the first time, the population and development issues were dealt with in a holistic manner and individual human beings were placed at the very heart of the development process. There was a substantive effort to clarify the concept of reproductive rights and the programme also emphasized the centrality of reproductive health. It also acknowledged the central role of women and young people in the development process.

In my own country, this led to a shift in the Government's approach towards population stabilization from being target based to one based on making informed and voluntary choices.

The Cairo Consensus provided much of the groundwork for the Millennium Development Goals, which have now become the benchmark indicators for socio-economic development.

Mr. President,

I would like to pay tribute today to two women leaders of the UN system who have also been friends and close colleagues of mine: Dr. Nafir Sadik of Pakistan, the Secretary General of the Cairo Conference and a long-serving and effective leader of UNFPA, and Dr. Thoraya Obaid of Saudi Arabia, Dr. Sadik's dynamic and dedicated successor. Their work in promoting the rights of women remains indispensable to the future of our planet. India is bound to applaud and support their efforts.

Today's event offers us an invaluable opportunity to comprehensively review the progress made so far and analyse the challenges that lie ahead. The statements of the Secretary General and the President of the General Assembly have underscored the critical importance of realising the vision set out 15 years ago.

A review would indicate that the global achievements have been mixed at best. There have been slippages internationally as well as in many countries, including my own. It is a matter of regret that globally, we are still far from realizing the goal of universal primary education, infant and child mortality and maternal mortality rates continue to remain high and access to universal reproductive health is still distant in many parts of the world.

Nevertheless, it is my firm belief that these goals are still achievable. Resolute political will and concerted global action are needed to realise these goals. The benchmarks set by the ICPD Conference continue to highlight the onerous task ahead for all of us.

Mr. President,

India has been making a steady progress towards realizing the vision of the ICPD and attainment of the Millennium Development Goals. Despite the global economic slowdown, the Government of India has accorded very high priority to the education and health sectors, and has enhanced allocation by 19% to the social sector during the current financial year.

The National Rural Health Mission (NRHM), launched in 2005, is one of the biggest interventions of its kind in the health sector in the world. The NRHM seeks to significantly upgrade effective healthcare throughout India covering over 600 million people. It aims to improve access of rural people, especially poor women and children, to equitable, affordable, accountable and effective primary healthcare.

The Reproductive and Child Health Programme is one of the main components of the NRHM, and includes the ambitious programme of Janani Surakhksa Yojana (JSY), a safe motherhood intervention to promote institutional delivery with specific focus on poor pregnant women. So far, this programme has benefited more than 10 million women and has emerged as a major successful intervention in reducing maternal and infant mortality. As Dr. Obaid reminded us, no woman should die giving life. In statistical terms, India's Infant Mortality Rate is 55 per 1000 live births. Maternal Mortality Ratio has declined from 301 in the period 2001-03 to 254 in the period 2004-06. These are areas that require major attention on our part and our Government is seized of the problem. As regards the incidence of HIV/AIDS, it remains under 1% and is showing signs of reaching a plateau.

India's Family Planning Programme is one of the oldest in the world. It is based on the voluntary and informed choice and consent of citizens in availing of reproductive health care services. The programme aims at achieving population stabilization by addressing unmet needs through decentralized planning and programme

implementation. At primary health care institutions, there has been an integration of the HIV/AIDS programme with reproductive health care.

India's Eleventh Plan recognizes that the "Development of Children is at the Centre of the Plan." This abiding policy commitment to an integrated approach to enhancing young child survival, growth, development and early learning is being translated into action through the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) Universalization with Quality Initiative. ICDS is today the world's largest early child development programme reaching out to over 78 million young children and pregnant and lactating mothers. There is added emphasis on convergence of services under various schemes and programmes including health, early childhood education and safe drinking water, so as to achieve the desired impact.

India has also embarked on ambitious programmes for human resource development. The Sarva Siksha Abhiyan (Education for All Campaign) launched in the year 2000, is a major national intervention towards achieving universal primary education and allowing us to reap the benefits of a demographic dividend from a young population.

This year the Government of India has brought into force the Right to Education Act. This Act aims to guarantee to each child, up-to the age of fourteen, the right to education. The Government has also launched a Female Literacy Mission this year with the aim of reducing female illiteracy by half, in the next three years.

Gender equity and empowerment have been guiding principles in the development policies of the Government of India. India's planning process is fully committed to enabling women to be equal partners in development. Gender budgeting has been introduced across all the sectors.

We have also moved on empowering women in the area of governance and decision making. The 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments introduced the provision for one-third reservation of seats for women in local self government institutions in India. We now have the distinction of having the largest number of women representatives in local government in the world and some three million of them hold elected office

Mr. President,

In these difficult times when the world is still grappling with the adverse effects of an unprecedented global economic and financial crisis, developing countries, where the crisis did not originate, have been the most affected. This threatens to undermine and even reverse the gains made so far in their arduous journey of development. Therefore, the need for donors to honour their pledges and the international community

to keep up the stimulus and other efforts to spur the economies of developing countries cannot be overemphasized.

The Government of India remains firmly committed to realizing the vision set out in Cairo 15 years ago and to fulfilling the MDGs by 2015. While we shall certainly do all that we can domestically and within our capacities with our partners in the South, it is imperative that the international community meet its commitments in the global partnership that is critical for a better quality of life for all of us on our shared planet.

Thank you.

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