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EuroNGO's 2008 Annual Conference

The Interface between Population, the Environment and Poverty Alleviation

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[Welcome and greetings]

I am very pleased to be able to Join M. Châtaigner in opening the 2008 annual EuroNGO's meeting. This year's focus on the interface between population, the environment and poverty alleviation is very topical.

Never before has the world's attention been so acutely focused on the changing global economy and the environment. Over the last couple of years we have seen a growing sense of urgency over the environment and climate change. Even more recently global attention has become occupied with the world crises in food, fuel and financing. Amid all of this attention, the media spotlight on global population has snapped back on in a way we haven't seen in some decades. It dimmed when concerns about "overpopulation" last went out of fashion, but those concerns may now be getting a new lease of life.

In the face of environmental crisis and the food and fuel shortages, governments have to be seen to be doing something, and policy makers are scrambling to respond. Does this mean we need to forget about the Cairo consensus for the sake of environmental sustainability? Does this mean we need to choose between free and informed decisions in family planning and reproductive health on the one hand, and saving the planet on the other? Are these two positions in contradiction of one another? Of course not. It would be short-sighted to look at all of these problems only in terms of population growth or population size. The problems are much bigger than that, and much more complex.

While some people fear that the size of the population is the problem, the real problem is not people. The real issue is poor management of demographic dynamics through economic and social policies that leave people behind.

That is the main point I want to make in opening this meeting. And it's the point we need to be repeating outside this room so that *we* frame the public debate, not those who would seek simplistic solutions based on population size. Population growth may be a factor in these crises, but it is not the main factor. These crises are largely caused by consumption patterns. They are largely caused by trade distortions. They are largely caused by bad economic and social policies.

We need policies that are just and equitable and put people at the centre. And this requires taking into account demographic trends and dynamics that include the rates of population growth, fertility and mortality, and the age and spatial distribution of the population, including migration and urbanization. And basic to all this, is the right of individuals to make choices about their lives and their right to reproductive health.

Our aim should be to ensure that the public debate focuses on *all* of those factors, so that the Cairo consensus remains at the heart of population policies. The Cairo Programme of Action was a groundbreaking document in creating a rights-based approach to family planning, population and sustainable development. It is still the right tool for the job.

When we made that paradigm shift at Cairo, concerns about the environment were already part of the equation. It was already well known that there is a nexus linking population and the environment, and it was taken into account. The very second sentence of the preamble recognizes, for example, and here I'm quoting, a "growing recognition of global population, development and environmental interdependence".

The second paragraph of the preamble goes further and states that future generations will depend for their survival on resources that are being depleted. It goes on to highlight global climate change, "largely driven by unsustainable patterns of production and consumption", as a threat to future generations.

Does this sound familiar? Does it sound pressing? Does it sound contemporary? Absolutely, but it was written nearly 15 years ago. We concluded back then that, even in the face of climate change predictions, a rights-based approach to population policies was correct. That conclusion hasn't changed.

There are two points in that paragraph that I want to highlight - the first now, and the second I will come back to in a moment. The first point highlights what *has* changed between 1994 and now. The paragraph says that climate change poses a threat to future generations. In 1994, we assumed that climate change was a future threat. But in 2008, it is clear that climate change is happening faster than we thought, and it is a threat not just to *future* generations, but also to the *present* generation. It is little wonder there is a new found sense of urgency.

Even so, back in 1994 substantive commitments were made in the Programme of Action to address the nexus between population and the environment. There is a chapter that deals with population and the environment. One of its recommendations is to call on governments to integrate their population, economic, environment and social policies.

But what the Cairo Programme of Action did not do, was tell us how to do so. The ICPD may have recognized that there was a link between population and the environment, but it didn't tell us what that link is. The issue doesn't seem to have been pressing for as long agricultural techniques and technology resulted in greater yields.

Now that the link between population and the environment is suddenly back on the agenda, our response must be to frame the debate in the Cairo consensus.

If we don't, others will frame the debate for us, and we may well see pre-Cairo attitudes begin to resurface. There are people who, as a response to climate change and food shortages, will look at population only through the lens of those crises. Some may assume that a document that was agreed to nearly 15 years ago is not well equipped to deal with the pressing environmental issues of our times. They might argue that a new consensus is needed.

Our challenge is to influence the debate so that public discourse becomes sophisticated enough to avoid a revival of pre-Cairo attitudes, where it was assumed that unchecked population growth will lead to crisis. I've already said that the nexus between population and the environment is

much more complex than that, and there are many factors to take into account. Let's explore that point in a little more detail.

First of all, environmental strain and climate change are two different things and we need to distinguish between them. The two are not the same because environmental degradation is often localized or a problem at national level. Localized environmental degradation can be aggravated by rapid population growth, and in turn can also adversely impact on populations within countries. The problems are serious to be sure – erosion, degraded soils, polluted air and contaminated water, which can lead to migration, overcrowding, under-nutrition, disease and hazardous living conditions.

In many cases it is not the size of population per se, that leads to these problems. It is its rapid growth, which exceeds both economic development and the development of infrastructure. The challenge is managing the rate of growth of population.

But while these problems are serious, they are relatively easy to observe and measure and the links between rapid population growth and environmental degradation can be identified.

The links between population growth and climate change, on the other hand, are neither direct nor linear. The source of greenhouse gas emissions has historically been mostly from developed countries with stable populations. Middle income countries are beginning to add to their share of emissions but, again, they do not have the fastest growing populations. Most countries with high rates of population growth are relatively poor and contribute relatively little to emissions.

And that is precisely the second point I want to highlight from the paragraph I quoted earlier from the preamble of the ICPD Programme of Action. It recognized that global climate change was, and again I quote, “largely driven by unsustainable patterns of production and consumption”. Governments already acknowledged, back in 1994, that climate change is caused by unsustainable consumption more than it is by population growth.

There are two conclusions to take from this. Firstly, if we frame the debate in this way, we start to get into really complicated territory. But we would be focusing the debate on the issues that really will address climate change. In focusing on consumption levels, not population levels, the debate will need to encompass energy policies, trade policies, economic policies and agricultural policies, to name but a few. The answers policy makers are looking for will also need to include the development of new technologies – not just in terms of clean energies, but in terms of agricultural efficiency and sustainability. And perhaps most difficult of all, the debate needs to begin to reshape aspirations, values and attitudes towards consumption.

Much of those issues will be beyond our core expertise. But we must also affirm our role in the overall solution. While I have been stressing that population growth is not the main culprit in today's environmental crises, it very clearly is an element in the overall equation. Let's not forget that there are still around 200 million women who have an unmet need for effective and voluntary family planning. This unmet need directly hinders development and keeps families in poverty. If the promises made at Cairo were kept, we would find that through the exercise of free choice, the populations that are growing the fastest would inevitably stabilize.

The second conclusion is that we need to look also at the consequences of climate change and environmental degradation, not just the causes. We need to figure out what we're going to do when the impacts of climate change hit us, because they will hit us.

In this respect I have more questions than answers. How will changing age structures, for example, affect the outcomes of these crises? How will population dynamics, such as urbanization, migration, household structure and spatial distribution, increase or decrease vulnerabilities to climate change? We need to use demographics to find ways of adapting to climate change, how to best protect populations from its effects, to assist governments to plan ahead.

Again, the issue here is not only population growth, and again, we must avoid simplistic approaches. We need to focus on the characteristics of different populations. That will require us not to look at global population size, but to look at national populations, and even populations within countries. Policy makers will need to assess where vulnerabilities are, such as on coast lines, and river deltas.

They will also need to assess who is most vulnerable, such as single-female headed households, large households, HIV/AIDS-impacted households, net food buyers, small farmers, the elderly, and so on. The prevalence of these households in national populations in part defines how countries will be affected by climate change. These populations will be among the most vulnerable to increases in food prices, poverty and pollution related health problems.

Again, at the core of this approach is the ICPD, because by reducing vulnerabilities to climate change we would be focusing on people's livelihoods, and the quality of life of individuals and families. A rights-based approach for individuals would lead to national-level adaptation, in much the same way that a rights based approach for family planning leads on to population stabilization.

Distinguished guests,

I know I have posed more questions this morning than I have suggested answers. We still have some way to go before we meet the challenges I have outlined, and we don't have a great deal of time to do so.

The key point I want to leave with you, is that we have to be proactive in framing the debate, because if we don't, others will. We have to establish the facts, we have to get the facts right, and we have to get the facts heard. We need to emphasize that while population growth may exacerbate the environmental and food crises, the causes are so much more complex. This should not be a debate that focuses on population growth. It's a debate that should focus on consumption levels. It needs to focus on technology. It needs to focus on trade, economic and agricultural policies. It needs to focus on values and aspirations. And it also needs to emphasize that free and responsible decision making and reproductive rights remain at the heart of sustainable development.

I hope the discussions today will delve into these issues in much greater detail and I look forward to the generation of ideas and the product of the debate.

Thank you.