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Full integration of population dynamics into rights-based sustainable development with equality: key to the Cairo Programme of Action beyond 2014

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STATEMENT BY ALICIA BÁRCENA, EXECUTIVE SECRETARY OF THE ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN (ECLAC), AT THE OPENING MEETING OF THE FIRST SESSION OF THE REGIONAL CONFERENCE ON POPULATION AND DEVELOPMENT IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN MONTEVIDEO

Your Excellency, José Mujica, President of the Eastern Republic of Uruguay,

Your Excellency, Luis Almagro, Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Eastern Republic of Uruguay,

Babatunde Osotimehin, Executive Director of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA),

Enrique Iglesias, Secretary-General of the Ibero-American Secretariat (SEGIB), and a dear friend of mine,

Distinguished ministers,

Delegations from the member countries of our region,

Representatives of civil society organizations,

Colleagues of the United Nations system,

Friends, especially our women friends,

For me, there are no two ways about it: this meeting bears responsibility for consolidating the rights of women. The Cairo process and the Beijing process, which came next, were instrumental in launching, developing and securing the rights and freedoms of women worldwide. I shall start by reiterating the commitment set forth in the Brasilia Consensus, that is, that we must, and I repeat must, *“guarantee the conditions and resources for the protection and exercise of women’s sexual and reproductive rights throughout the lifecycle and across population groups, free of all forms of discrimination, based on the integrated approach promoted in the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development.”*

President Mujica,

I wish to thank you sincerely for your hospitality in hosting this meeting. But, first and foremost, I should like to commend you, your Government and the women of Uruguay for the example you have set for Latin America and the Caribbean in these matters. I have no doubt that, with the leadership of Uruguay, this Conference will be a resounding success and will give rise to a Latin American and Caribbean consensus which will serve as a guide for us over the coming years and as the regional input for the review of the Cairo Programme of Action beyond 2014 and the post-2015 development agenda.

I should like to express the most cordial greetings to Babatunde Osotimehin, Executive Director of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and to Marcela Suazo, the Regional Director of the Fund. UNFPA is our sister organization and we share with it this regional and global challenge. Together, we seek to push forward the agenda for equality and rights in the region, but we also would like to ensure that the voice of Latin America and the Caribbean is heard loud and clear in New York.

I am serenely optimistic: the very composition of the delegations attests to the importance of this Conference: among us today are representatives of ministries of planning, representatives of machineries for women, leaders of indigenous and Afro-descendent peoples, statistical authorities and a host of stakeholders whose coordination and cooperation are crucial for reaffirming the commitments adopted in Cairo and for forging new agreements to consolidate existing achievements and step up progress towards pending objectives.

I should like to acknowledge especially the delegation of Ecuador and through it to convey our appreciation to President Rafael Correa, since it was his country that hosted the last session of the ECLAC Ad Hoc Committee on Population and Development, which was the first intergovernmental body to agree to its becoming a Regional Conference, a decision subsequently endorsed by member States at the thirty-fourth session of the Commission, held in August 2012 in El Salvador.

Ecuador and Uruguay are emblematic and attest to the fact that this Conference's agenda can indeed be implemented. These two countries are proof of the region's efforts to push forward the agenda for equality, inclusion and social protection, but above all of its capacity to address the demand for neglected rights, such as reproductive rights and the right to exercise sexual options without discrimination.

As we are all aware, Uruguay has just adopted a law decriminalizing abortion, thereby making a further step towards protecting the life of women, bringing termination of pregnancy within the domain of the health services rather than that of the justice system. We salute our host country for recently adopting this legislation which, in keeping with international agreements, is designed to dejudicialize the issue of women's reproductive health. Similarly, in Ecuador, as in some other countries, rights and equality in respect of sexual diversity are enshrined in the Constitution. We also welcome the advances in social protection policies, which now deal innovatively and comprehensively with families' care needs for girls and boys, older persons and persons with disabilities, and which are mindful of the rights of care recipients and caregivers alike. Advances in care issues and the systematic approach to these policies fall under the population and development agenda.

Dear friends,

The organization of this session today is the outcome of a long process of integration of the rights approach in the development process. The past decade has brought a wealth of experiences and, as indicated in the reports prepared for this meeting, we can claim to have gathered here under better conditions than in the decade of the 1990s. Unlike the situation 20 years ago, we now have the opportunity and must strive to speak with a single voice, blending the voices of all social groups that have made the International Conference on Population and Development and the Regional Programme of Action part of their agenda—a voice of our own in the global chorus of voices.

Two working documents are being presented at this meeting.

The first is a review of the implementation of the Cairo Programme of Action with emphasis on the period 2009-2013.

This forcefully underscores recognition of the specific features of our region—which are very different from those of other regions in the world. One of these features is the strength of existing social movements, the existence of democratic Governments and the capacity demonstrated in the region to cope with the challenges arising from the crisis that unfolded in 2008. The State now plays a more prominent role than 20 years ago and this suggests that this session of the Conference can indeed have a positive outcome.

Latin America continues to show a very mixed picture in terms of productivity, territorial development, cultural diversity and complexity, and also as regards social, gender and ethnic inequalities—which breed racism and racial discrimination—, institutional weakness, the relative abundance of natural resources, in a context of rapid demographic transition, but, above all, the persistence of overlapping inequalities, which leave women, indigenous peoples, Afro-descendent populations and rural dwellers at a disadvantage, and exposed to exclusion and discrimination.

In the past 20 years, the demographic transition spread and accelerated more rapidly than predicted; as a result, practically all the countries in the region benefited from the demographic dividend. This dividend affords the region a unique opportunity to build an architecture of well-being that responds better to the new realities. In this context, it is crucial to strengthen the State's social role to ensure, above all, equal opportunities and equal outcomes for girls and boys, adolescents and young people, and, second, to guarantee for present and future citizens social protection which gives them a decent old age and makes them resilient to the new social risks associated with life in society.

There has been progress in reducing infant mortality, which has fallen from 42 deaths per 1,000 live births to 16 deaths per 1,000 live births. The prevalence of HIV/AIDS has stabilized, even though adolescents and young persons, and even adults, do not know enough about the disease and how to prevent it. One clear indicator of the challenges that remain outstanding is the unacceptable persistence of deep inequalities affecting women in Latin America and the Caribbean throughout their lives. Since women account for half of the population, there are challenges that cannot be ignored and the Cairo Programme of Action has helped emphasize that women are not a minority. Among those inequalities, the figures on maternal mortality show the population's lack of access to health services, particularly the provision of care by trained professionals during childbirth, especially among the poorest sectors of the population and those furthest from health centres.

In the case of adolescent pregnancy, very young girls are at a disadvantage in terms of access to and use of sexual and reproductive health services. The stubbornly high rates of pregnancy among poor adolescent girls, to the extent that they are associated with high dropout rates and difficulties in finding a suitable job, are an obstacle to development and help to perpetuate the cycle of poverty; moreover, they expose girls and young women to a higher risk of physical or sexual violence at the hands of their partner. This type of violence is twice if not three times as high among women who had their first child by the age of 17 than among those who became mothers for the first time after the age of 25.

Progress has been made towards gender parity in education, but this has not been reflected in equal pay. In terms of paid work, the number of women with incomes of their own has been rising with women's entry into the labour market. Today some 50% of women have incomes of their own but there remain vast numbers of women in the region who have no source of income. These represent 34%, compared with 13% in the case of men.

The increasing entry of women in the labour market has meant a rise in the total number of hours that they work. Despite the differences between countries, in all cases, women's responsibilities as paid workers are added to those they fulfil in the home or as caregivers, which are unpaid. On the other hand, men dedicate most of their time to their paid job and only a fraction of their time to unpaid work and this maintains the sexual division of labour.

As regards women aged 65 years and over, 27% in urban areas and 30% in rural areas have no income of their own, which compounds the high percentage of women who receive no contributory pension after the age of 65, at a time when the life expectancy of women is on the rise. States need to respond in an integrated manner to a problem that can have serious future repercussions, namely the increasing vulnerability and poverty to which persons, especially women, are prone as they advance in age.

Among indigenous women aged 15 years and over, illiteracy rates can be as much as four times as high as for non-indigenous women; this is a major obstacle to their finding a better position in the labour market. As a result, most indigenous women are wage-earners, especially in service sectors, with some exceptions, such as Ecuador and Peru, where in most cases they are own-account workers.

The issues today are completely different from those of a few decades ago and include high poverty rates among children (observed in all countries for which information was available for the period 1990 to 2008); high rates of unemployment among youth and the significant variation in the demand for new skills and competencies in the labour market, depending on the social stratum, ethnic or racial origin and gender; ageing of the population and the emergence of new requirements for care and rising demands on the State due to lack of contributory social insurance.

ECLAC advocates structural change for equality and urges countries to overcome the challenges associated with enclave industries and the trend towards reprimarization of regional exports, which often affect indigenous territories; the large numbers of Latin Americans who continue to live abroad but who do not always have access to all the benefits of development in the destination countries; and, clearly, urbanization —as a process that is practically consolidated, as evidenced by the fact that almost 80% of the regional population now live in cities— with all the benefits and difficulties linked to the high growth rates and the intensity of that growth.

Ours is an agenda for equality, a citizenship agenda, an agenda for deepening democracy, an agenda for rights for men and women in their capacity as citizens.

We need criteria for equality in order to take advantage of the demographic dividend, in particular to ensure that policies help to establish a positive balance with a human rights perspective, before the change in the age structure of the population starts to place pressure on our treasury.

The second document that we place at the disposal of government representatives is entitled "Proposed regional agenda on population and development for Latin America and the Caribbean beyond 2014". This report, prepared by the secretariat with support from the United Nations Population Fund, is undoubtedly the most important one that will be discussed in the work of the Conference over the next three days.

This document contains different proposals, based on the lessons learned and the assessment of the gaps in implementation of the Cairo Programme of Action in Latin America and the Caribbean.

One of the most innovative contributions to this proposed agenda is that it is a people's agenda and gives visibility to once-excluded sectors which have set themselves up as important groups for State action: a people-centred agenda for equality, which takes into account people, girls and boys, adolescents and youth, women and men, older persons as well as indigenous, Afro-descendent and migrant persons. Thus the link between this proposed regional agenda on population and development and other initiatives under way within ECLAC —such as the Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean— is crucial.

At the same time, the document places emphasis on another of the major lessons to be drawn from the implementation of the Cairo Programme of Action in Latin America and the Caribbean: the strengthening of the national framework for monitoring and assessing the fulfilment of international agreements.

At the heart of the proposed agenda is the effort to eliminate inequality and to promote respect for human rights. As we are all aware, the Cairo Programme of Action made a significant contribution to the international community and helped to shed light on how sexual and reproductive health ties in with human rights; however, other population and development issues have emerged —particularly those arising from the combined impact of globalization, population growth, the development model and economic crisis— in respect of which no similar efforts have been made to systematize a global perspective for rights-based public policies.

Overcoming this imbalance will be critical for the implementation of the Cairo Programme of Action beyond 2014, and for the broader post-2015 development programme.

At the same time, the whole array of population issues, which must be addressed within Latin America and the Caribbean using a rights-based approach, has to be understood in terms of the inequality dating back centuries and affecting vast segments of the population.

As a corollary, in defining a regional agenda on population and development for Latin America and the Caribbean beyond 2014, the need to respond to this persistent demand for a rights-based approach poses huge challenges in a world that has changed drastically since the early 1990s.

First, the fundamental purpose of a population and development agenda beyond 2014 must be tied in with a human rights perspective in which recognition and development of individuals, their capacities and the generation of opportunities for their full development without any form of discrimination are vital.

Second, steps must be taken to strengthen the role of the State and endow it with the capacity to provide strategic management from a long-term perspective in order to enable it to intervene in planning national development. One of the roles of the State is without any doubt to safeguard rights; hence it must continue to implement the commitments adopted at the International Conference on Population and Development beyond 2014 in terms of legal and political reforms, implementation of such policies, management systems and follow-up.

Third, the definition of a regional agenda is unquestionably linked to inclusion and the region must set its sights on the pursuit of universalist and solidarity-based goals, in line with the development proposal advocated by ECLAC.

The document presented by ECLAC identifies a set of priority issues, including the justification for a regional agenda on population and development and the key messages and actions that should be incorporated in such an instrument.

These priority issues are as follows: Rights, needs and demands of children, adolescents and young people; ageing, social protection and socioeconomic challenges; gender equality; gaps in universal access to sexual and reproductive health services; international migration and the protection of the rights of all migrant persons; territorial inequality, spatial mobility and environmental vulnerability; indigenous peoples, pluriculturalism and rights; and Afro-descendants: rights and combating racism and racial discrimination.

Furthermore, the proposed agenda warns us how important it is to proclaim and defend the successes in the implementation of the Cairo Programme of Action. At this conference, delegations will have the opportunity to chart a course for pursuing the commitments adopted in Cairo beyond 2014. This, will undoubtedly be a more demanding panorama for Governments, but one that is inescapable and moreover, inseparable from the quest for more egalitarian and cohesive societies.

The Regional Conference on Population and Development is called upon to make a vital contribution in the future. This first session and its agreements will lay the foundations for its work in the years to come; to this end, the commitment of Governments is indispensable.

Another point I would like to make in this speech is the significance of the role played by civil society and other non-governmental actors, and their important contributions to the International Conference on Population and Development, its follow-up and the implementation of its Programme of Action.

This morning, I had the pleasure of spending some time with young people, who are this country's current and future actors. The strength of their convictions and their commitment to building a rights agenda came across very clearly. International Youth Day was an important day here in Montevideo. I repeat: we must invest in our young people.

I would also like to extend my thanks once again to the Government of the Eastern Republic of Uruguay and highlight the innovative role it has played in various population and development matters. This includes setting up dedicated institutions that are involved in overall medium- and long-term planning; boosting social protection through equality-driven mechanisms; branching out into gender- and generational-based care; fighting for tolerance and against racism and discrimination; fulfilling sexual and reproductive rights; and providing universal access to sexual and reproductive health.

As technical secretariat of the Conference, ECLAC will make available to governments all the tools needed to facilitate their concerted action on population and development issues, and to promote cooperation —both South-South and with other regions of the world.

ECLAC will also make available to this Conference its extensive knowledge of the region, its technical capacity, the experience it has accumulated and its data sources —which include population estimates and projections and its bank of census microdata, the only one of its kind in the world.

I would also like to draw attention to the United Nations Population Fund as a strategic ally and as a partner on this journey. Its valuable and ever-present support has been key in the past. And it will no doubt continue to be so in the future, because we are united by a profound commitment to the Cairo Programme of Action and to sustainable development with equality in the region.

My friends, we have been given a huge responsibility. Why is this so important?

The poet from Montevideo has the answer: it's so that people can "live happily, without even having permission."

So let our work begin, since "in the street arm in arm we are many more than two".

Thank you very much.