

European Population forum Geneva 12-14th January 2004
Panel: Childbearing and Parenting in Low Fertility Countries:
Enabling Choices

Statement by **Dr James Calleja** former Deputy director International Institute on Ageing UN-Malta and Administrative Director of the Malta College of Arts Science and Technology.

We are living times of contrasting speeds - affluency increases speed beyond one's imagination; poverty and underdevelopment reduces speed to the level of death! Figures speak for themselves. Madame Obaid did not mince words in saying that everyday 1,450 women die from complications of pregnancy and childbirth. Other statistics from poor countries are equally disturbing.

Notwithstanding the significant progress registered since Cairo 1994 and in an age when man-made machines are sending pictures from Mars, entire populations are struggling to survive. Others in affluent societies are also matching their energies with constant change and unpredictability.

In my view, population and development are issues that largely depend upon leadership be it political religious, economic, global or local. In this context, I strongly feel that it is extremely important that the deliberations of this Forum reach as many leadership sectors as possible. When we seriously think that experts' advice reaches the corridors of power, it is often a wrong assumption. Excluding committed and converted politicians to the needs of vulnerable groups and economic and social growth, such foras may bear very little results if the dissemination of results does not filter through political awareness at the highest level.

A second point I wish to make is that education on sexuality, childbearing, parenting rights and reproductive health has, truly enough found itself on a number of curricula and programmes of studies in primary and secondary schools. However when we assume that the substantive elements of such education are being taught, as they should be, we might again fall into a wrong assumption. My point is that the training of trainers and educators on the issues addressed in this Forum is paramount to the success of policy and action. The quality of the training of trainers can help make a significant contribution towards ensuring that the language and methods used in educating girls and boys, young women and men reaches the rural people – those in dire need for culture change and development. Equally it must reach those in need of such education in developed countries. Designing and implementing European programmes for trainers is a valuable way forward.

This ties to my third point namely that it is wrong to assume that generally speaking governments have unfailing commitments towards their own population. Experience has shown that the sector

that bears the weight of wrong decision-making is always the one who is most vulnerable. Poor populations are often the victims of their own governments particularly in so-called healthy democracies where the people at the top change as a result of elections. The point is that governments, like birds of prey, come and go – populations remain and grow in size and so do their problems and their conditions. Tapping the private sector and donors as well as establishing private-public joint ventures or partnerships on issues related to population and development closes the gap between the prophets (researchers) and the brokers (politicians). Investing in the private sector to meet the challenges posed by young and old populations might produce better dividends. On the other hand advocacy, in the corridors of power, should also be intensified preferably with the help of the private sector and voluntary organizations.

My final point concerns the desirable process by which such issues can find more prepared recipients. I believe that lifelong learning and vocational training are the keys to reducing excessive speeds of low fertility countries and of increasing development of poor populations! Community development and empowerment through education could result in healthier populations and sustainable development. Higher Education institution particularly Universities and Colleges have often been at the centre of avoidance in helping develop the policies needed to get adequate food into the mouths of every child or medicine to the village woman giving birth or work to the unemployed or shelter to the homeless and sick. We need to decide how lifelong learning can and should be restructured in order to meet the needs of six billion learners. Lifelong education for all must be our new target so that the process of eradicating poverty intolerance, violence, illiteracy, hunger, environmental degradation and disease will have a more solid and long-term foundation.

In addressing leadership, trainers, private-public partnerships and lifelong learning we stand a better chance of meeting again here or elsewhere in a few years time and in taking stock of progress achieved we would have the privilege of listening to a village woman perhaps from India or from any other developing country as one of the key note speakers.

Enabling such choice would be a major accomplishment for all of us.

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