

Reproductive Health Issues

As members of the international community, we have a shared responsibility to face certain realities and find the courage to act. These realities include:

- tragically high rates of maternal death, much of it resulting from unsafe abortion;
- the continued and alarming spread of AIDS;
- teenage pregnancy, with the added health risk it carries for mother and child; and
- high infant mortality rates.

These are drastic problems that require urgent action.

We are left with serious challenges, especially in the area of reproductive health and reproductive rights. The Canadian view, which finds its expression in the Program of Action, is that reproductive health is a basic human right. This is already stated implicitly in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and other UN instruments to which most of us are signatories. We also agree that coercion and arbitrary demographic targets have no place in today's world. Not only are they a flagrant violation of human rights, they are not sustainable.

We share the Program's view that development alone will not be enough to curb population. It must go hand-in-hand with the recognition and support of the rights of women, particularly those rights that are linked to health and family planning. The protection of maternal and child health — which lies at the core of what we are discussing here — is not just an issue for developing countries. Recently, for example, my government launched a prenatal nutrition program to help poor women give birth to healthier babies. This is an area where we all have to work harder.

So, too, we must work to ensure that men and women have access to a broad range of voluntary and culturally sensitive family planning services. On this point, let me be clear: Canada does not promote abortion as a method of family planning. Recognizing that this remains a particularly sensitive issue, we would support language in the Program of Action that allows states to regulate or not — as they see fit — services related to abortion. It would not be correct, however, to interpret our support as an attempt to create an international right to abortion.

The hard truth is that thousands of women die annually from unsafe abortion. Thousands more of our children will perish for