

**Statement by
Mr. Carlos Santos
Permanent Secretary and Chief Executive Officer,
Ministry of Human Development, Women and Civil
Society
to the
24th Special Session
Entitled World Summit for Social Development and
Beyond: Achieving Social Development for All in a
Globalizing World
at Geneva on June 29,2000.**

Mr. President, Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen.

On behalf of the Government and people of Belize and of our Minister of Human Development, Women and Civil Society, I thank you for the opportunity to address the 24th Special Session of the United Nations General Assembly.

Mr. President, the Government of Belize sees social equity as one of the most critical elements of sustainable development and has, since our meeting in Copenhagen, worked actively towards creating the necessary policies and mechanisms that reflect this new development approach. We are well on our way to instituting a tradition of cooperation and collaboration between and among government agencies, as well as with civil society organizations, to ensure that development benefits people, especially women, children, youth, the elderly, the poor and the disadvantaged. This shows, Mr. President, that social development has been prioritized and that development means not only improvements in the traditional economic indicators, but also in the standard of living and the enhancement of the quality of life of ALL the people.

Mr. President, Belize has taken its commitment seriously and has, over the last five years, focused its attention on the three core issues addressed in the Copenhagen Declaration:

- Poverty reduction
- Expanding productive employment
- Improving social integration

Please allow me to expand on these.

POVERTY REDUCTION

Belize has remained engaged in forwarding the agenda of social development and has developed a National Poverty Elimination Strategy and Action Plan. This Plan spells out in an integrated manner the range of policies and activities to be undertaken to eliminate poverty. The six main components of the plan are:

- Economic growth.
- Investments in human capital.
- Investment in health services and health care delivery.
- Housing, shelter and human settlement.
- Social vulnerability and safety nets.
- Protection and conservation of the environment.

Mr. President, this plan is comprehensive. It focuses on economic empowerment of individuals and communities rather than welfare; it calls for health reform, education reform, land administration reform, social security reform, literacy, and the building of democracy and local governance. I am proud to report that, even while this Plan was being developed, the Government wasted no time in beginning to implement some of these activities.

We are developing our National Health Insurance Scheme to improve access and equity in the health care system. We will soon be launching our literacy campaign. We have passed an act to give more autonomy to local government bodies. We are building homes. We are conserving the environment. We are piloting community co-management schemes. We have passed legislation to protect women from abuse. We have made the reporting of child abuse mandatory. We are revamping the Ministry of Labor to be more responsive to workers' needs and the minimum wage for female-dominated jobs is being revised. And, yes, Mr. President, Belize is blazing the trail in our region in gender mainstreaming.

These are but a few of the things we are doing to eliminate poverty. Other more controversial issues are also being addressed, such as the practice of expelling pregnant students from school and the firing of unwed pregnant teachers.

Furthermore, a National AIDS Commission has been established and tasked with reducing the incidence of HIV/AIDS in Belize.

Three outstanding issues remain:

1. The need to bring macro-economic planning more in line with measures outlined in the National Poverty Elimination Strategy and Action Plan.
2. Understanding and addressing the feminization of poverty.
3. Developing measurable indicators to effectively monitor and evaluate the implementation of the Plan.

The Government of Belize is resolute in its commitment to eradicate poverty and remains convinced that the test of a country's progress is not just whether we add more to the abundance of those who have, but whether we provide enough opportunities to those who have too little.

EXPANDING PRODUCTIVE EMPLOYMENT

This area is one of the top priority areas for the Government of Belize. In its Party Manifesto, it pledged to create fifteen thousand (15,000) new jobs during its term of office (1998-2003). Both the National Strategy for the Elimination of Poverty and the Medium-Term Economic Strategy address this issue quite extensively. Some of the Government of Belize's major programmes include:

- Encouraging self-employment for poor households through access to credit and training for small enterprise development.
- Supporting or developing programmes to increase the capabilities of young men and women for entry into the labour market.
- Implementing a national policy for tourism which emphasizes ecotourism and ensures the participation of small and medium-sized Belizean companies in the sector, including community-based and owned ecotourism facilities.

Our commitment in Copenhagen in relation to the issue of productive employment was to expand the quality and quantity of employment opportunities in Belize. Data collected by the Central Statistical Office (Ministry of Finance) indicates that the unemployment rate is slowly decreasing and in 1999 stood at 12.8% in 1999. When these figures are disaggregated by sex and age, however, those sectors of the population with the highest unemployment rates are: women, young women

and young men. A great deal of work is thus yet to be done in this area if our commitment to reduce unemployment is to be sustained over the medium to long terms.

SOCIAL INTEGRATION

Belize has been relatively successful in its efforts towards immigrant assimilation. Belize, Mr. President, is one of the few countries in the world that boasts a multiplicity of cultures and people living together in peace, tranquility and harmony. This did not just happen, however. Successive governments have put in place the necessary policies, programmes and strategies that have facilitated this process. Just over one year ago, for example, the Government of Belize implemented an Amnesty Programme that sought to legalize all displaced and illegal immigrants. The processing of all applications is about one third of the way and, so far (May 2000), some 5,000 people have been issued permanent residences.

While we can hold our heads high in the international arena that we continue being a haven for our less fortunate brothers and sisters in Central America, we continue in our efforts to assimilate our most recent immigrants from southeast Asia. This is proving to be a more difficult task and will require greater participation from all parties concerned, including the immigrants themselves.

The issue of social integration also includes the strengthening of partnerships between government and civil society, and the promotion of local level governance.

Some of the key elements of Belize's national strategy to strengthen the partnership between government and civil society, and support local government mechanisms include:

- The establishment of systematic training for male and female participants within local level mechanisms for governance.
- The mobilization and empowerment of community organizations to define and act on local, social and economic issues important to them.
- The establishment of a Ministry of Civil Society in January 2000.
- The decision to develop a National Human Development Agenda for Belize

It is noteworthy to mention that the thrust of the majority of the reforms being proposed by a Political Reform Commission, (appointed by the Government of Belize), which recently released its recommendations following nation-wide

consultations, is toward taking power away from ministers and bureaucracies and giving it more directly to the people. This concept, I believe, was ideally captured in our Prime Minister's Millennium Address on January 1, 2000 when he said and, I quote, "what we are talking about here is the empowerment of Civil Society: people organized in nongovernmental bodies that work together with government for the benefit of the people" (end of quote)

The Prime Minister goes on to say that "an issue central to the elimination of poverty is the strengthening of civil society institutions and decision-making processes based on partnerships between central government, NGOs and local organizations such as Town Councils, Village Councils and other social groups"

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Mr. President, while significant gains have been made in the fight against poverty, we are still not where we want to or should be. No country, no leader, no individual should be satisfied while a significant portion of our people goes to bed hungry, cannot find meaningful employment or does not participate equitably in the development process. But the task of eradicating poverty, ensuring social integration and expanding productive employment opportunities requires the cooperation and collaboration of all the stakeholders in our society, including our international development partners. In this respect, Mr. President, Belize expresses its sincerest appreciation and thanks to our United Nations partners who continue providing invaluable support and assistance 'n all our efforts. For this and more we are grateful.

Mr. President, the Government of Belize is firmly committed to the pledges made at the Social Development Summit in 1995, and will continue in its efforts to carry them out. For this however, we will require the full support of all our partners in development.

Unfortunately, Mr. President, like most developing countries in our region, Belize is faced with the effects of globalization. We realize that actions to eliminate poverty must be swift and innovative if we are to prevent the impending crises that globalization can bring upon us. The "invisible hand" that rules global economic policies seems to be the very hand that foments poverty and unrest in countries like ours. When our banana quotas are taken away, it breeds poverty amongst our people; when we cannot protect our farmers or our small businesses, Mr. President, the effect is the opposite of social development; when we are forced to sell our raw materials at prices below production costs and import products at exorbitant prices, we are exacerbating the sorry plight of our people. What we are saying, Mr. President, is that while globalization and trade liberalization continue rearing their ugly heads, it is incumbent on all of us in this gathering and in this

Special Session of the United Nations General Assembly on Social Development
to ensure that these are accompanied by an equally conspicuous human face.

Our people deserve nothing less!

I thank you.