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General Debate 3 (a): Actions for the further implementation of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development at the global, regional and national levels

3 (b) Special theme of the fiftieth session² of the Commission based on the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and the key actions for its further implementation

Statement submitted by World Youth Alliance, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council³

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

¹ [E/CN.9/2017/1](#).

² Changing population age structures and sustainable development.

³ The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

The World Youth Alliance is a global coalition of young people promoting the dignity of the human person in policy and culture, and building solidarity between young people of developing and developed countries.

Every human being has human dignity. Therefore, as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states, we should “act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood” (Art. 1). It is the intrinsic worth of the human person that provides the basis on which to found policies and laws that create conditions under which human beings can flourish. A person-centred approach means respecting every human being and working together in solidarity to ensure that every human being is included in our efforts to achieve sustainable development.

Each society has its own demographic structure with specific implications for development within that society. Population growth or decline, and its effect on the economic and social dynamics of individual countries, is an important theme in the discussion on international development. Questions about the effects of population growth or decline and whether and what policies should be put into place in response to it need to be answered in light of the reality of the dignity of the human person, if we are to correctly identify resources and direct them to programs that most benefit people in need.

Much discussion about demographic structures at the United Nations revolves around the “demographic dividend”. The demographic dividend is often framed as a benefit due to a rapid decrease in fertility rates such that workers significantly outnumber dependents. However, as many developed countries have experienced, a high number of workers relative to dependents is temporary. The better health often credited as leading to lower fertility also leads to greater longevity, and therefore an ageing population. Some developed countries have adopted pro-natal policies to be able to support more dependent older persons. Japan is examining family policies to help working mothers, Singapore pays a larger baby bonus for the third child, and Italy started a social media campaign to promote childbearing. These efforts indicate that the demographic dividend can become a demographic deficit, and that governments should exercise caution in adopting fertility reduction policies.

The promotion of lower fertility rates as a component of health care not only ignores potential long-term economic effects but also can violate the right of each family to make their own decisions about family size. There have been numerous instances where a policy to achieve an “ideal” population structure has led to coercive practices, including measures that range from limiting social support programmes to small families to forced abortions and sterilizations. Coercive population control policies violate human dignity and must be rejected. Authentic development cannot occur where human beings are viewed as simply problems to be managed.

Development that is person-centred and grounded in human dignity focuses on empowering people. Policies based on human dignity recognize each person’s ability to contribute to, not just benefit from, development. Human creativity and hard work have driven innovation, improving living conditions for countless people. Policies grounded in human dignity prioritize basic health care (Goal 3), education

and vocational training (Goal 4), and good governance and infrastructure (Goal 16) that will give people access to various forms of capital. Policies that treat persons as part of a problem to be solved rather than participants in development ultimately detract from these essential efforts.

Good health care and quality education are key to achieving sustainable development in light of changes in population age structures. They empower individuals, rather than governments, to make informed choices about their families. Good health requires not only medical care, but also clean water, sanitation, good nutrition, psychological wellbeing and the education necessary to comprehend medical advice and make informed decisions.

Human dignity must be at the foundation of health care. People need to be able to understand their bodies and their options in order to exercise informed consent. They should not be denied health care based on considerations such as race, class, or disability status. And all treatments and services must respect the values and dignity of all human beings. World Youth Alliance encourages Member States not to impose as health-care products and procedures that fail to respect patients' consciences or which violate human dignity. Practices such as abortion violate the dignity of mother and child and should not be promoted as a way to eradicate poverty.

Quality education must be available to all on an equal basis and should flow from an authentic understanding of the person, and foster respect for self and others in solidarity. The primary responsibility of education rests on the parents and it is the obligation of the State to support them in this role.

World Youth Alliance has developed a curriculum that can help promote respect, responsible behaviour, and equality. The Human Dignity Curriculum (HDC) teaches children about human dignity: that every human being has it, and should therefore be respected. It also teaches children that, regardless of their circumstances, they have the potential to be excellent, to develop their gifts, and to use these gifts for the common good. The HDC is culturally sensitive and encourages parental involvement.

Young people who understand human dignity are not only prepared to make responsible personal decisions, but to contribute to their communities and to treat others with respect in their families, peer groups, and communities, including in their personal relationships. They will be prepared to contribute to sustainable development and poverty eradication, not just for themselves, but for others.

Individuals, society, governments, and institutions need to work in solidarity to foster the conditions such as freedom, peace, and security that lead to development. It is not the density or composition of a population that determines the degree of development, but how a population uses its creativity to overcome obstacles to development, including a lack of natural resources.

The natural environment is a source of both physical sustenance and immeasurable beauty to be cared for with wisdom and temperance. Meeting the basic needs of human beings for shelter, energy, water, sanitation and food in a timely manner is crucial to preventing and reversing much of the environmental degradation we see today; any environmental crisis is connected to a human crisis. Human creativity is the driver behind policies that will sustain the environment for

future generations. New ideas about how to channel energy and develop “green” ways of doing business are produced by human beings, the very objects of sustainable development.

Recognizing that irresponsible actions can lead to environmental degradation, it is important to foster responsible stewardship in every society. Each human being is called to recognize his or her personal responsibility, which originates in the intrinsic value and inherent dignity of each human person. Responsible stewardship is the personal commitment to care for both earth and neighbour. Responsible stewardship begins in the family and extends to both local and global communities. It is important to empower people to be good stewards of the shared home in order to bring about sustainable development.

In order to empower people, it is important to ensure that they have access to various forms of capital. This is reflected in Goal 16, which highlights the importance of just societies and accountable institutions. Societies which are just and whose institutions are accountable are the ones that ensure every person has access on an equal basis to the fundamental forms of capital, and therefore can participate in development efforts. This is essential to eradicating poverty and ensuring sustainable development for all.

Michael Fairbanks, an adviser to President Paul Kagame of Rwanda, has identified seven forms of capital that people need access to in order to live a good life. These are: natural endowments such as location, subsoil assets, forests, beaches, and climate; the financial resources of a nation, such as savings and international reserves; humanly made capital, such as buildings, bridges, roads, and telecommunications assets; institutional capital, such as legal protections of tangible and intangible property, efficient government departments, and firms that maximize value to shareholders and compensate and train workers; knowledge resources, such as international patents, and university and think tank capacities; human capital, which represents skills, insights and capabilities; and culture capital, which means not only the explicit articulations of culture like music, language, and ritualistic tradition, but also attitudes and values that are linked to innovation. By ensuring that everyone has access to these forms of capital, we ensure sustainable development, regardless of changes in population age structures.

Development efforts should recognize the different challenges various population age structures have, without viewing human beings as the problem. Human beings are the earth’s greatest source of potential solutions for authentic development. Their unlimited creative capacities, a reflection of their inherent dignity, enable persons to harness the knowledge and skills which drive authentic development. When people ensure that every human has his/her fundamental needs met, society will equip them to be creative problem-solvers, bring about development, and address the needs of their communities’ and countries’ unique demographic situations.
