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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 Catholic Family and Human Rights Institute, Inc., 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

Catholic Family and Human Rights Institute, Inc.

The demographic makeup of societies all over the world has been changing for a generation due to unprecedented fertility decline, longer life expectancies, and more people crossing international boundaries. This is having consequences for development, social cohesion, and international security. While the Commission on Population and Development has recognized the significance of demographic shifts, United Nations policy and programming still has to do more to address some of these issues. By addressing mismatches between policy and the evidence, the Commission has an opportunity to help developing countries to seize their demographic advantages.

The Center for Family & Human Rights (C-Fam) has identified three main policy-strategy mismatches.

1. Seize, don't squander, Africa's demographic advantage

Large family sizes in the developing world are supporting the global economy. The United Nations must help countries capitalize upon the advantage, not suppress or eliminate it.

The world's economies are reaching a critical milestone, according to the United Nations Population Division: for the first time since 1950, their combined working-age population will decline, and by 2050 it will shrink by 5 per cent. There is now ample evidence to suggest that these changes will accelerate in the future. Notably, the ranks of workers will fall in key emerging markets, such as China and the Russian Federation, while the share of these countries' population over 65 years of age will increase.

Demographic decline and ageing in the developed world is reverberating in the developing world, limiting the ability of developing countries to use manufacturing as way to increase economic growth. Like other countries, India's "premature deindustrialization" and high unemployment is in part a result of the fact that as developed countries age, the demand for what factories make, from cars to furniture, is levelling off with little prospect of returning.

It is understandable that politicians such as those in Japan emphasize the "opportunities" of societal ageing like enhanced worker productivity and longevity. But international policy-makers are short-sighted when they embrace this view as a way of justifying continued depopulation policies in the developing world. At the international level, policymakers have a duty to help these countries seize the advantages afforded by their growing workforces rather than perpetuating the unproven notion that they must suppress the size of their families and workforces in order to spur economic growth.

The truth is that even in highly developed economies, societal ageing is a burden on the weakest and most vulnerable. Japan's experience is instructive. One in five of Japan's elderly are still employed, double the average for developed countries. Relative good health means Japan spends just 10 per cent of its economy on health care compared to 17 per cent in the United States of America. Yet even

though Japan's social safety net is broad, one in four Japanese seniors lives below the poverty line, 40 per cent more than in the overall population. By contrast, by 2050 countries in Africa will have a worker cohort of 1.3 billion people with an average age of just 28 years. Economists have found that Africa will provide the world's workforce. Yet Europe, in need of that labour, is paying African governments to take back their citizens now living in Europe as undocumented migrants. Many Europeans emphasize smaller family sizes in Africa to reduce the flow of these migrants. A responsible policy would be to invest in these African societies to harness the workforce. African countries lag behind East Asia in creating jobs and infrastructure, like schools and roads. In Nigeria, where the United Nation promotes fertility reduction, just 9 per cent of Nigerian adults are fully employed.

2. Seize, don't squander, the power of women to transform societies

By aligning the needs and desires of women, the United Nations can help women and societies avoid the pitfalls of the second demographic transition.

There is evidence that there are over two hundred million women with an "unmet need" for family planning, a figure that is often equated with lack of access. However, less than a tenth of these women cite lack of access as the reason they do not use contraceptives. In the Sustainable Development Goals, the relevant target under the health goal is to "universal access to sexual and reproductive health-care services, including for family planning". Knowledge of family planning is nearly universal, and existing demand for it is approaching saturation. Yet family planning proponents continue to falsely equate non-use with lack of access, or access with use, despite the fact that many women described as having a "need" or "demand" for contraceptives have no desire or intent to use them.

As a result, there are policy projections that estimate the demographic or health impact of meeting the entire "unmet need" for family planning, based on the assumption that this can be done for the cost of delivering supplies. There are estimates of newborn "deaths averted," sometimes called "lives saved," by averting those children's entire lives through contraception. The goal of making pregnancy and infancy safe around the world remains unfinished, and it will not be achieved merely by making pregnancy rarer.

If the goal is to ensure access to family planning, one should find a better way to measure access from the point of view of women themselves, not of family planning advocacy groups. And when mothers and newborns are still dying of preventable causes, one must prioritize giving them access to the care they both need and demand.

3. Seize, don't squander the future of our children

For decades, scholars have attempted to demonstrate that unintended pregnancies lead to poor outcomes in the lives of children. While it is true that family structure, income, location, and other factors can impact children's lives and have long-term effects, the effects of pregnancy intentions at the time of conception are either small or undetectable when other factors are controlled for. In the most recent edition of the World Bank's Disease Control Priorities, it states that there is insufficient data to prove that children born from unintended pregnancies "are disadvantaged in health and schooling" compared with children born from intended pregnancies.

As part of its mission statement, the United Nations Population Fund expresses its commitment to ensuring that “every pregnancy is wanted”. Decades of effort and funding have gone toward meeting this goal by way of ensuring that every unintended pregnancy is prevented — and even that every unwanted pregnancy is aborted. Even so, unintended pregnancies make up close to half of all pregnancies worldwide, and many of those pregnancies result in live births. Fortunately, most of them are accepted and loved by their parents. In fact, researchers frequently point out that after their child’s birth, parents will deny ever having not wanted to become pregnant. Some see that as a problem, and speculate that the scale of unwanted pregnancy is even higher than we realize. But it can also be seen as a sign of human resilience and generosity. Even where legal and freely available, abortion and contraception have not eliminated unintended pregnancies. But if the goal is to ensure every pregnancy is wanted, another approach is needed.

Women have legitimate reasons for wishing to avoid pregnancy, such as poverty, instability, and overwork. Decisions made at the local, national, and international level can help to create a world where even a woman who finds herself unexpectedly pregnant and in a crisis can find the resources and help she needs to envision a hopeful future for both herself and her child. It is up to us to send the message that every woman and child not only have rights, but are wanted.

Many couples in traditional countries tend to want larger families, and shrinking populations can have a destabilizing effect on societies. The facts demonstrate that there needs to be a fundamental change in the mind-set and policies in the field of population at the international level. The Commission has an opportunity to change the conversation and help countries seize their demographic advantages to spur national growth and prosperity as well as international economic health and stability.
