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**Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development
and the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly:
priority theme: rethinking and strengthening social development
in the contemporary world**

Statement submitted by Priests for Life, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

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.



Statement

At the World Summit for Social Development, States gathered to recognize the significance of social development and human well-being for all and to give these goals the highest priority both now and into the twenty-first century.

Priests for Life affirms that the well-being, dignity and worth of all, of every human life without exception, is the foundation of policies and programmes that liberate countries and, most importantly, people from poverty. All individuals have the potential to make significant contributions to eradicating poverty; no life is expendable.

The family is the very building block of all communities, cultures and countries and is vested with profound responsibility for child-rearing. Women and men, girls and boys, mothers and fathers need to be valued for their contributions to the family and to society, given equal opportunities and treated without discrimination. Social development policies need to protect the family and enable it to function as the foundation of society.

The family and all its members need to be empowered by social development policies and programmes that offer support, especially during times of economic and social hardship and deprivation. When the family is disrupted and devalued, its individual members suffer, making the goal of social development to ensure the well-being of individuals devoid of meaning. Family members and individuals with disabilities are especially deserving of support and assistance, including through access to health care, nutrition, housing, education and meaningful employment.

No family member ought to be stripped of his or her human dignity and denied his or her most basic right, the right to life, through policies that treat the individual as a problem and not as part of the solution to social development. Programmes that target the elimination of children through abortion are in conflict with the preamble of the Convention on the Rights of the Child which reminds us that “the child, by reason of his physical and mental immaturity, needs special safeguards and care, including appropriate legal protection, before as well as after birth”.

Twenty years ago, the world leaders who gathered in Copenhagen for the World Summit on Social Development recognized that needs both material and spiritual were critical for social development. In the Copenhagen Declaration, they stated: “We acknowledge that our societies must respond more effectively to the material and spiritual needs of individuals, their families and the communities in which they live throughout our diverse countries and regions. We must do so not only as a matter of urgency but also as a matter of sustained and unshakeable commitment through the years ahead.”

Similarly, in the Programme of Action of the World Summit for Social Development it is declared: “Social development is inseparable from the cultural, ecological, economic, political and spiritual environment in which it takes place. It cannot be pursued as a sectoral initiative.”

Priests for Life urges that, in making progress in social development, respect and attention be paid to the synergies and linkage between social development and spirituality. Far too often, negotiations on social development are impeded by the failure to acknowledge and provide for the religious values of individuals and society or, worse, religious beliefs are considered as barriers to progress, as when

civil society attempts to change national laws on abortion in countries with laws protecting life from conception.

Failure to respect religious and ethical values also conflicts with General Assembly resolution S-24/2, in which the Assembly stated:

Our global drive for social development and the recommendations for action contained in the present document are made in a spirit of consensus and international cooperation, in full conformity with the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations, recognizing that the formulation and implementation of strategies, policies, programmes and actions for social development are the responsibility of each country and should take into account the diverse economic, social and environmental conditions in each country, with full respect for the various religious and ethical values, cultural backgrounds and philosophical convictions of its people, and in conformity with all human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Cultures throughout the world recognize the critical role of the family in providing for the basic needs of its members and provide for its sustainability through social and political means. The family, in turn, ensures the very survival of culture and country. To be successful, social development policies must include measures aimed at strengthening the family through the economic and educational empowerment of all men and women. To achieve progress in social development, efforts must be made to meet the needs of individuals who share common bonds of respect for faith and family while living in diverse cultural backgrounds, including those who struggle with changing environmental conditions.

The failure to value the family and its procreative genius has tragically resulted in critical challenges for many States brought on by shrinking families and below-replacement fertility rates. It has also resulted in the loss of millions of lives through abortion, lives of individuals whose unique contributions are forever denied to humankind.

Population control strategies have also resulted in skewed birth ratios in a number of countries. A preference for males and the introduction of prenatal sex determination practices has led to unborn baby girls being aborted and, consequently, a reduced number of future mothers. Today, the long-term impact of the millions of “missing girls” includes increased violence against women who are kidnapped and sold as brides and young girls who are forced into prostitution and trafficking for the purpose of sex.

The deaths of preborn girls has also resulted in the absence of millions of daughters and daughters-in-law who, had they been allowed to be born, would be the caregivers for elderly family members today. Given the shift in the intergenerational balance of the family, ageing individuals increasingly need policies that provide for their care and protection from abuse. Without traditional female family caregivers, Governments are struggling to find ways to provide for ageing populations. The issue of caring for the elderly is beset by myriad concerns, including with regard to the growing number of older adults in institutional care settings who suffer from various types of cognitive impairment, including Alzheimer’s disease.

Low fertility rates in a growing number of countries have resulted in an absence of young workers who can contribute to social security and pension

programmes and who can replace elderly workers who are forced to work longer because there is no one to replace them. Although Governments are facing unprecedented social development challenges owing to shrinking populations, population control measures continue to be promoted globally.

At the expert group meeting entitled “Rethinking and strengthening social development in the contemporary world: progress in advancing social development and lessons learned, held in New York on 17 and 18 July 2014, the latest efforts in poverty eradication were discussed. Also at the meeting, it was noted that rates of poverty reduction have been much faster in countries with large population sizes such as China and India.

It was also noted that countries with sharp declines in poverty had seen sharp increases in employment outside agriculture, particularly in construction, services and manufacturing, and that, to further reduce poverty, it was important for countries to sustain non-agricultural employment growth. Those findings deserve greater attention and application in regions that still suffer from extreme poverty.

As social development measures are proposed, it must be remembered that respect for the dignity of life is the foundation of human rights. The right to life is not just for the privileged, the perfect and the planned, but it extends to all members of the human family, including preborn children. Priests for Life believes that policies to eradicate poverty must recognize the potential of all individuals to help to solve the problem of poverty and not treat people as the problem.

In conclusion, we highlight that, in the Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development, Heads of State and Government committed themselves to “a political, economic, ethical and spiritual vision for social development that is based on human dignity, human rights, equality, respect, peace, democracy, mutual responsibility and cooperation, and full respect for the various religious and ethical values and cultural backgrounds of people”.

As agreement is reached on the post-2015 agenda and the sustainable development goals, it is essential to incorporate and affirm respect for the various religious and ethical values and cultural backgrounds of people. Religion and spirituality give meaning and purpose to life, affirm the dignity of each and every human being, and contribute to the well-being of all, which is the ultimate purpose of social development.
