

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The United Nations Population Division, with the support of the MacArthur Foundation, convened the Expert Group Meeting on Completing the Fertility Transition, at United Nations Headquarters in New York, from 11-14 March 2002. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss guidelines for fertility change proposed by the Division for use in intermediate-fertility countries, defined as countries with total fertility between 2.1 and 5 children per woman in 1995-2000. The Population Division uses fertility guidelines to prepare the official United Nations population projections for every country and region in the world. Until recently, the guidelines stipulated that fertility in intermediate-fertility countries would not fall below replacement level by 2050. This has become less and less tenable as fertility in more and more countries, developing as well as developed, has fallen to and remained at levels well below replacement.

The proposed guidelines stipulate that fertility in the intermediate-fertility countries will decline to 1.85 children per woman by 2050, rather than the 2.1 children per woman in the current guidelines. This is a momentous change, both because of the large population of the intermediate-fertility countries (43 per cent of world population in 2000), and because of the many implications of sustained below-replacement fertility. The four-day meeting was attended by over 40 population experts representing all regions of the world. Thirty background and country papers were presented, including a keynote address by Mr. Jack Caldwell, Professor at Australian National University.

After considerable discussion, the experts generally endorsed the revised guidelines for the projection of fertility in intermediate-fertility countries. As stated by Mr. Caldwell, “there no longer seem to be any barriers to most countries reaching replacement level and subsequently falling below that level”. The experts stressed, however, that because of the moderately high levels of fertility in these countries, and also because of the population momentum resulting from nearly a century of rapid population growth, world population is expected to add another 3 billion persons over the next 50 years. The experts recommended that when projecting the level of fertility, the pace of decline be reduced as lower levels are reached. It was also suggested that projected fertility levels be checked for consistency with the implied changes in the proximate determinants of fertility, especially with respect to likely increases in contraceptive prevalence.

This report provides a summary record of the meeting, including the agenda, organization of work, list of participants, list of documents, and summaries of the 30 papers presented and of the discussions that occurred during the meeting. This report, and the background and country papers presented at the meeting, are available online at the Population Division’s website, www.unpopulation.org.

Comments and suggestions on the meeting and this report are welcome and may be addressed to Mr. Joseph Chamie, Director, Population Division, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations Secretariat, New York, N.Y., 10017, fax number 1-212-963-2147.