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**Statement by
MS. HANIA ZLOTNIK
DIRECTOR, POPULATION DIVISION
DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS
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Madame Chairperson, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentleman,

Today, as we commemorate the fifteenth anniversary of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), held in Cairo in 1994, it is worth recalling that 20 years earlier the world held the first major intergovernmental conference examining the linkages between population and development, namely, the World Population Conference held in Bucharest in 1974. Both Conferences galvanized action in the area of population that have resulted in major improvements in the wellbeing of people and advances in the path toward sustainability.

In view of such successes, it is time to recognize the benefits that Government commitment and population policy have brought about by enabling people to plan their families and have the number of children they desire.

It is time to applaud the concerted international action that, in the span of just four decades, has supported the rapid reduction of fertility that has occurred in the majority of developing countries, mainly by expanding access to effective methods of contraception.

It is time to raise awareness about the crucial implications of those changes. The slowing growth of the world population, that we now take for granted, is a major achievement. Without the reductions in fertility recorded so far, Asia alone would have today more inhabitants than those living in all developing countries at this moment.

Time and better data have allowed economists to reassess the implications of rapid population growth. In the 1970s, when the populations of most developing countries were growing very fast, population size and growth did not appear to affect economic outcomes significantly. In the 1990s, as diversity in population trends took hold, the beneficial effects of declining fertility became noticeable, especially in countries where slower population growth has gone hand in hand with increasing investment in human capital.

Time has been on the side of the fast achievers, that is, developing countries where the use of family planning methods has expanded rapidly and where the resources saved by slowing the growth in the number of children have been channeled to support economic and human development.

At the same time, ground has been lost by many of the least developed countries where access to modern contraception is limited and fertility remains high. Consequently, those countries continue to experience fast population growth and generally lack the resources necessary to feed, educate and provide health care for their rapidly rising numbers of children.

At a time when the sustainability of life on our planet is again being a focus of concern, the implications of population growth cannot be ignored. Globally, 1.2 billion inhabitants have been added to Earth since the 1994 Conference took place and another 1.1 billion will likely be added over the next 15 years, even if the speed of population growth continues to decline. Furthermore, virtually all that population growth will occur in developing countries and the population of the least developed countries will grow the fastest.

The ICPD Programme of Action recognizes that slowing population growth can buy time to adjust to future population increases. Hence, if the evils of poverty, underdevelopment, unemployment, disease and hunger are to be eliminated, population policies that ensure reproductive health and access to family planning have to be part of the arsenal to combat those evils.

As a wise man remarked, “everywhere is walking distance if you have the time”. In peering into the future we may well ask if we have the time. Even under fairly optimistic assumptions about continued declines in fertility, the population of the developing world is expected to keep on rising and that of the least developed countries will likely double by mid-century. These trends imply that, if the plight of today’s bottom billion is not to characterize that of the bottom two or three billion of the future, efforts must be more than redoubled today to expand education, improve health and generate jobs, as called for by the internationally agreed development goals.

Precious time can be saved by recognizing that there are well tested means of accelerating the achievement of those goals through a number of cost-effective measures, which include: promoting gender equality and the full participation and partnership of women and men in productive and reproductive life; empowering women by enhancing their decision-making capacity in all spheres of life and, especially, in the realm of sexuality and reproduction, and ensuring that women and men alike have the information and access to family planning methods necessary to realize their reproductive goals.

Madame Chairperson,

At a time when uncertainty prevails regarding the world economy, it is more important than ever to buy time, as the Programme of Action suggests, by ensuring that the path to slower population growth is followed. However, buying time costs money and funds to implement the measures just outlined have not kept pace with needs. It is therefore urgent that Governments recommit themselves to the implementation of the Programme of Action and take measures to finance such implementation. It is also essential that measures to ensure reproductive health be an integral part of any strategy to improve global public health.

This is a time for the Commission on Population and Development to demonstrate once more its leadership in population issues that are crucial for the wellbeing of humanity and the sustainability of the planet. The outcomes of this session will undoubtedly provide useful guidance for action and a valuable contribution to other intergovernmental debates, including the Annual Ministerial Review that the Economic and Social Council will conduct next July, which will focus on the implementation of the internationally agreed goals and commitments in regard to global public health.

The Commission has to lay the groundwork to ensure that by 2015 the failures of today are turned into successes, bearing in mind that there is no secret to success: it is the result of commitment, preparation, tenacity and hard work. With scarcely six years to go, there is no time to lose. It would be a real pity if, having achieved so much already, we would run out of time.

Thank you, Madame Chairperson.