

UNITED NATIONS



NATIONS UNIES

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Opening Statement at the 48<sup>th</sup> session of the  
Commission on Population and Development  
New York, 13 April 2015

Madame Chairperson,  
Mr. Wu Hongbo, Under Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs,  
UNFPA Executive Director, Dr. Babatunde Osotimehin,  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

I am honoured to address the Commission on Population and Development at the opening of its forty-eighth session today.

This session of the Commission is of critical importance as it takes place at a time when the world is seeking to create a new, rights-based development framework to eradicate poverty and promote inclusive development that leaves no one behind, while also ensuring environmental sustainability that leaves a healthy planet for future generations.

We have heard much about the three pillars of sustainable development: social, economic and environmental. Today, fittingly in this Commission, we may ask ourselves, where is the population dimension in this discussion? If people are at the centre of sustainable development, and if populations are merely groupings of people, then the population dimension should be at the centre of the narrative about sustainable development.

At the individual level, the population dimension focuses on life's vital events, including birth, death, marriage (or other union formation), and migration. These are events that, literally, define a lifetime or that shape the circumstances of life in fundamental ways.

At the aggregate level, the population dimension draws our attention to the demographic mega-trends, such as population growth, population ageing, urbanization, and migration.

Aggregate trends are a direct result of what is happening at the individual level. Migration flows between countries, for example, result from the myriad decisions by individual migrants to cross a single border.

In short, the population dimension allows us to focus on changes in the size and composition of human populations, as well as the observed levels of fertility, mortality and migration in a population, while also paying attention to the individual choices and circumstances that underlie these aggregate trends.

From a political perspective, there is often a tension about whether governments should seek to influence specific aggregate characteristics of a population, or whether they should work only to enable and empower the individual members of the population to act as they see fit. In Cairo in 1994, the world acknowledged the importance of the population dimension but also cautioned against efforts to manipulate aggregate trends, out of concern that such policies risk violating individual human rights.

As result, much of the recent discourse on population and development has focused on individuals, in particular with regard to their sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights. While the proposed SDGs include a target for universal access to reproductive health, for birth registration, for eliminating child, early and forced marriage and for female genital mutilation, there are no quantitative targets for fertility, population growth, urbanization, or migration.

Some have lamented that population dynamics are being left out of the SDGs. However, since population dynamics refer to changes in the aggregate characteristics of a population, it makes sense to exclude them from the goal-target framework. It would be contrary to the guidance of Cairo if the SDGs would advance universal targets for quantities such as population size, the fertility level, population distribution by age, or the size of migratory flows. Individual countries can and do set targets in some of these areas – for migration in particular – but that is different than the universal framework of the SDGs.

The major exception is in the area of health and longevity, where there is universal agreement about the value of saving lives and reducing disease and disability. Thus, the SDGs will include targets for reducing the levels of child and maternal mortality in all populations, and for reducing the number of deaths due to road traffic accidents, non-communicable diseases, hazardous chemicals and pollution, and so forth.

Even though they may not be visible in the SDGs, major population trends matter significantly, and some will even drive the outcomes of the SDGs. Continued rapid population growth will make it more difficult for some countries to improve health, provide adequate housing, achieve universal education, and provide adequate labour market opportunities over the next 15 years. Similarly, rapid population ageing will challenge the sustainability of social protection systems, in particular old-age pension and health care systems.

In short, it should be reassuring to this Commission that the SDG framework does not dictate aggregate population trends, as this is consistent with the wisdom of Cairo. However, we must also avoid the other extreme.

The lesson of Cairo is not that governments should ignore population trends. Indeed, the ICPD Programme of Action includes a rich analysis of how population trends matter for development.

Rather, the lesson of Cairo is that our collective concerns about current or future population trends should never become a justification for violating the fundamental rights and freedoms of individuals.

Population trends matter for all three pillars of sustainable development. This is the added value brought by the Commission on Population and Development, and it is why the Commission will matter even more as we look forward to the implementation of the post-2015 development agenda.

I hope that, in the coming year, we will be able to reflect on how this Commission, while continuing to focus on its core mandate to assess the implementation of the ICPD Programme of Action, can also contribute to the global thematic monitoring of the sustainable development goals.

In closing, I would like to recognize that my colleagues in the Population Division have been working very hard over the last few weeks and months in preparation for this meeting. I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate them and to thank them for their efforts. They stand ready to assist you throughout this week in any way that would be helpful.

Let me finish by saying that I look forward to this week's deliberations, and to a successful outcome of this Commission.

Thank you, Madame Chairperson.