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50th Session of the Commission on Population and Development

3-7 April 2017

General Statement

Statement by H.E. Gillian Bird

Permanent Representative of Australia to the United Nations

Thank you Mr Chair,

I want to start by acknowledging the significant achievements of the Commission on Population and Development as we begin this 50th session. Since 1946, CPD, and its forerunner the Population Commission, have played an active role in discussions between governments on population and development, and in producing updated demographic estimates and projections for all countries.

This year's theme – “changing population structures and sustainable development” – is particularly timely given the challenges and benefits that

human population changes present in delivering the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda.

For Australia's part, our population is growing. To be precise, by one person every 1 minute and 22 seconds. Of course, we need to go beyond the statistics.

Australia's starting point on issues of population, age structures and sustainable development is that human rights are universal, indivisible and interrelated across all populations. All people are entitled to respect, dignity and legal protection regardless of sex, age, disability, sexual orientation or gender identity, race, and cultural or religious identity.

By promoting and implementing these principles, we can help empower all individuals to maximise their contributions to society.

Our work in CPD covers a broad range of issues. I will focus my remarks on the importance of gender equality and women's economic empowerment, as well as the demographic dividend.

One of the key issues raised in the UN Secretary General's 2017 CPD report is that countries should consider adopting policies to support universal access to sexual and reproductive health services.

Australia is committed to the protection and promotion of sexual and reproductive health and rights in our foreign policy and aid program. Access to sexual and reproductive health, particularly family planning, is critical for women's empowerment, improving gender equality, and reducing maternal and child mortality. These services save the lives of women and girls, and help them stay healthy, remain in education and participate in society and the economy.

The need for sexual and reproductive health services for populations in emergencies is particularly acute. Today, more than 128 million people are affected by conflict, displacement, natural disasters and profound vulnerability, and 75 percent of these are women and children.

This is why Australia's humanitarian assistance includes a strong focus on the provision of the protection of women and children. And why Australia strongly believes greater female participation in the economy and in public life results in a more productive society.

To this end, the UNSG's report notes that greater female education can have a substantial downward effect on fertility. And that participation of women in the labour force, parental leave for both mothers and fathers, and affordable child care, helps lessen gender inequalities.

Finally, the SG's report provides useful details on the "demographic dividend" - how growth in working age populations and young people can boost economic growth. However to benefit from the demographic dividend, these segments of the population must be provided with an environment that enables the full realisation of their rights and capabilities.

This requires substantial investments in quality and inclusive education and health, including sustained efforts to ensure that this investment is truly inclusive. Such investments can have a life-long effect resulting in a surge of human capital into society. It is this surge that has the capacity to help us achieve lasting development, the 2030 Sustainable Development goals, and a better future for all.

Thank you.