Remarks by Mr. John Wilmoth, Director, Population Division, UN-DESA

Opening of the United Nations expert group meeting on

"Changing Population Age Structures and Sustainable Development"

New York, 13 October 2016, 9:45 a.m.

Good morning to all of you. I would like to extend a warm welcome to all participants in this expert group meeting, which has been organized by the Population Division of the United Nations' Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

The meeting is intended to contribute to the substantive preparations for the 50th session of the Commission on Population and Development, which will take place from 3 to 7 April next year. By decision of the Member States, the upcoming session of the Commission in 2017 will have as its special theme "Changing population age structures and sustainable development".

Major shifts in the age distribution of the world's population are a global demographic trend of fundamental importance to sustainable development. Changes in population age structure are critically related to development issues as addressed in the Programme of Action of the 1994 Cairo conference and in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in September of last year. The 2030 Agenda includes the Sustainable Development Goals and targets, which span a wide range of social, economic and environmental aspects of development.

In this context, it is helpful to recall that the demographic transition from high to low levels of fertility and mortality results in fundamental changes in the age structure of human populations, which initially become younger and then eventually much older. The initial tendency for populations to become younger is attributable to the reduction of mortality, especially at young ages, which results in a large increase in the number of surviving children and young people. The decline in fertility eventually brings an end to the increasing numbers of children and initiates a long-term process of population ageing, which is characterized by a gradual shift in the population age distribution from younger to older ages.

These fundamental changes in the population age structure are directly related to a number of Goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda, especially in the areas of health, education, gender equality, productive employment and decent work, poverty eradication and social protection, among others. Because of their interaction with the social, economic and environmental aspects of sustainable development, demographic trends — and policy responses to those trends — will affect the ability of countries and of the world to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. Conversely, progress in meeting the Goals and targets in some key sectors, such as education and health, will influence demographic trends, including for fertility, which is the primary driver of changes in the population age distribution.

An important feature of the 2030 Agenda is the pledge by Member States that no one will be left behind. Keeping this pledge will require that governments and other actors give priority to addressing the situations of disadvantaged and vulnerable groups. Some members of society are vulnerable and require protection and assistance by virtue of their age, in particular children, youth and older persons. Adapting the social protection system to fundamental changes in the size of different age groups, in a manner that ensures the financial sustainability of that system over the long term, is one of the major challenges faced by countries as a consequence of the demographic transition.

As you will see in more detail in the presentation that will follow the introductory remarks from myself and Jorge Bravo, the age structure of the world's population has evolved significantly since half a century ago, when more than half of the population consisted of children and youth under the age of 25 years, and when older persons aged 60 years or above represented less than 6 per cent of the global population. By 2030, the time horizon for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, the proportion of children and youth will have fallen from more than half to less than 40 per cent of the world's population, and the share of older persons will have risen from less than 6 to more than 16 per cent of the global total.

In today's world, there is a considerable diversity in levels of fertility and mortality, and therefore in the timing and speed with which the demographic transition is unfolding in different

parts of the world. As a result, the social and economic consequences of changing population age structures also vary greatly across countries and regions. This meeting will consider a range of situations and experiences, including for countries and regions where the demographic transition started only recently and the challenges pertain to a large and growing population of children and youth, as well as for other parts of the world where fertility has been below the replacement level for decades and the gradual ageing of the population presents an entirely different set of challenges.

I look forward to hearing your presentations and the ensuing discussions on the various topics being considered in this meeting. I appreciate the richness that you will bring to these discussions by highlighting the situations and experiences of countries and regions where you have a particular expertise. All of these elements will be taken into consideration when preparing the report of the Secretary-General on changing population age structures and sustainable development, which will inform the discussion of these topics by Member States and other stakeholders during the next session of the Commission on Population and Development in April of 2017.

I hope that you will find the meeting informative and stimulating, and that you will enjoy your stay in New York. On behalf of the United Nations and its Member States, I wish to thank you for your contributions to an informed discussion of changing population age structures and sustainable development.