

Statement of Srinivas Tata, representing UNESCAP under agenda item 4 of the 48<sup>th</sup> session of  
the Commission on Population and Development

Madame Chair,

Excellencies,

Distinguished delegates,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to provide you with the key highlights of the population trends in the Asia-Pacific region, and the steps that should be taken to manage the demographic transition that is currently underway.

In 2014, the total population of the Asia-Pacific region stood at 4.4 billion, which is 60 per cent of the world's population. The region hosts the two most populous countries in the world: China with 1.4 billion people and India with 1.25 billion people. Overall population growth in the region has slowed down considerably with a growth rate of 0.96 per cent per annum.

Different countries in the region are in different stages of the demographic transition. Some countries in North and East Asia, such as Japan, moved to aged societies decades ago. Other countries, such as the Republic of Korea, Singapore and Thailand have been able to harness the demographic dividend in the past, but are now moving to aged societies with a decreasing working-age population. Countries, such as China and Viet Nam, are still in the phase with a large working-age population, but this window of opportunity may close soon due to rapid fertility declines. A large number of countries, mainly in the South Asia subregion of ESCAP are still in the phase with an increasing working population. The opportunity and challenge for these countries will be to translate this into a demographic dividend by ensuring an educated and healthy working age population and creating jobs for people entering the labour force.

Many countries in the region now have fertility rates below replacement level, sometimes combined with high out-migration rates, which have led to shrinking populations in some cases. In some countries, low fertility levels are compensated by high in-migration. Other countries in the same situation are seeking to increase fertility through family policies. If fertility and migration levels remain at the current level, more countries will experience shrinking populations by 2030.

Population ageing in the region is rapid, and to repeat an often used cliché “the region is ageing faster than it is getting rich”. Older persons comprised 11.4 per cent of the region's population in 2013 and are expected to reach about one fifth of the population by 2050. In some subregions this proportion would exceed 30 per cent of the population. As a result of the region's rapid

ageing, the old-age support ratio, which is the number of persons aged 15 to 64 years per person aged 65 or older, has decreased in the region from 12.1 in 1980 to 9.1 in 2013 and is expected to decrease further to around 5 by 2050. Low old-age support ratios are expected to have several economic and social implications, such as negative impact on pension schemes when a shrinking working population has to finance the pensions of an increasing number of older persons.

The policy options to address the impact of the demographic transition include the following:

1. **Include population issues in development planning:** It is essential that population dynamics are taken into account in the formulation of development policies. The potential for a demographic dividend remains strong in many countries in the region, but requires that appropriate measures are put in place.
2. **Strengthen data collection and analysis:** Good quality data on population and development, collected regularly and in a timely manner, is the foundation for effective development planning. More attention needs to be paid to this aspect.
3. **Adopt policies to harness the demographic dividend:** The demographic dividend will not materialize automatically in countries having a large working age population unless accompanied with adequate youth policies, such as policies promoting employment for young people. This includes education policies which emphasize school completion and adapt curricula to the needs of the labour markets. Promoting youth employment, through economic policies such as promoting entrepreneurship and economic development in rural areas will be vital to harness the demographic dividend.
4. **Prepare better for ageing societies and shrinking populations:** Countries have to be prepared for ageing societies through establishing adequate social security systems and strengthening health systems. It is essential to look at older persons as resources and not a burden. Their contributions could be enhanced by taking measures to keep them healthier and structuring economies to take maximum benefit from their knowledge and skills, including by increasing the technology and knowledge components of production.
5. **Reproductive health remains an unfinished agenda in many countries:** Fertility is still high in several countries of the region, often resulting from unmet need for family planning. In those cases, there is a need to improve access to family planning. In this context, empowering women and expanding women's education is crucial.