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INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

**Expert group meeting on population, food
security, nutrition and sustainable development**

Virtual Meeting, 28-30 October 2020

Good morning. I am John Wilmoth, Director of the Population Division in the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, part of the United Nations Secretariat. Many of you know us as the United Nations Population Division, or UNPD.

I welcome you to this gathering of experts convened as part of the preparations for the 54th session of the Commission on Population and Development in April 2021, which will focus on the theme of “Population, food security, nutrition and sustainable development”.

We have brought you together in this virtual format to seek your advice and assistance in preparing two reports of the Secretary-General on this topic. The reports serve to inform and guide the discussions among delegates during the annual session, including for the negotiations around a resolution on the annual theme.

For those who may not be familiar with us, let me give some background about the Commission and about the Population Division. The Commission on Population and Development, originally the Population Commission, was created by the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations in 1946. The Population Division was established at the same time to serve as Secretariat of the Population Commission. Supported by the Population Division, and in recent decades also by UNFPA, the Commission has served as a forum for discussions on both political and technical aspects of population and development.

Three important events in the history of the Commission were a series of United Nations population conferences held in 1974, 1984 and 1994. The last of these, the International Conference on Population and Development, was held in Cairo in 1994. Soon after the Cairo conference, the Population Commission was renamed the Commission on Population and Development, emphasizing the important linkages between population trends and development processes. Ever since, the Commission’s primary mandate has been to monitor, review and assess the implementation of the Programme of Action adopted by the Cairo conference in 1994. The Commission continues to fulfil this mandate by meeting annually to discuss specific aspects of the link between population and development.

The Cairo Programme of Action offers a comprehensive vision for equitable and prosperous economic and social development. Coming just two years after the 1992 Rio conference on environment and development, it is not surprising that the Programme of Action also gives due attention to issues of environmental sustainability. The document articulates an explicit set of principles, objectives and actions concerning population processes and their interactions with sustainable development. Notably, the Cairo action plan placed individual rights and free choice at the centre of development.

In 2015, the General Assembly adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and a year later, the Economic and Social Council decided that the Commission on Population and Development should contribute to the follow-up of the 2030 Agenda, including through the review of progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals. The Commission engages in such reviews of the 2030 Agenda within its existing mandates derived from the Cairo conference.

As directed by the Commission, the core work programme of the Population Division focuses mostly on the documentation and analysis of major population trends, on policies that can influence those trends, and on the connections between population trends and sustainable development. The work of the Population Division often highlights the four demographic megatrends – population growth, population ageing, urbanization and international migration – as well as the three components of population change – fertility, mortality and migration. And we are closely involved in the monitoring of several SDG targets related to our core areas of our work.

Each year, the Commission chooses a special theme to serve as the focus of its discussions. This year, as mentioned, the theme is “Population, food security, nutrition and sustainable development”. And each year, the Population Division convenes a group of experts to inform us about the latest data and evidence related to the theme and to discuss core theories to guide understanding and propose priority areas of work. This meeting is especially important whenever the Commission selects a theme that lies outside our core areas of expertise, as is the case this year with food security and nutrition.

You may be aware that the Commission was originally set to consider this same theme at its 53rd session in late March and early April of 2020. In fact, several of the experts who are joining us this week took part in a smaller, in-person meeting one year ago that provided inputs to the reports prepared for the previous session. Those reports were released in February 2020, and just a few weeks later the COVID-19 pandemic shut down international travel and all in-person meetings at the United Nations. The formal meetings of the Commission could not be held in 2020, and thus members of the Commission decided to postpone an in-depth consideration of the theme until the upcoming session in April 2021.

Let me briefly describe the two main reports related to the theme of the annual session that are being prepared this year, one by the Population Division and the other by UNFPA. The report prepared by the Population Division provides a broad overview of the topic, highlighting major trends and key challenges — thus, providing the motivation for policy responses but not focusing on actual programmes or interventions. This analysis is complemented by a second report prepared by our partners at UNFPA, which reviews and analyses relevant programmes and

interventions. Each of these reports must adhere to a strict limit of 8500 words. Last year, we saw that we could not address all possible aspects of food security and nutrition in an 8500-word report, or even in two such reports.

Therefore, the report of the Secretary-General prepared last year elaborated only a selected set of topics, discussing food security, nutrition and population health from an individual perspective, taking up issues related to hunger and undernutrition on the one hand, and to obesity and overweight on the other. From an aggregate perspective, last year's report also examined the interaction between growth in population and growth in consumption and the sustainability of global food production; it also included a discussion of how food security and agricultural development are related to population movements and settlement patterns.

This year, we face the challenge of preparing reports that keep the long-term trends in view, while also giving due attention to evolving evidence on the devastating impacts of COVID-19 on livelihoods, food security and nutrition, as documented in a preliminary way in numerous reports and policy briefs published in recent months by the United Nations and others.

The experts that we have invited to this meeting possess a broad range of expertise including in food security, nutrition, health, food systems modeling, data and technology, rural development, employment and gender. We count on you to advise us on how to frame the topic in this second round of reports. It would be helpful, for example, to indicate areas that would benefit from increased emphasis in the new report —mindful of the limited word count — and to help us develop key messages around which to frame the report. The concept note that was shared with all participants offers some guiding questions.

Carrying over the previous theme to 2021 moves the Commission's deliberations on this topic much closer to the preparations for the review of SDG 2, Zero Hunger, in the high-level political forum on sustainable development happening next July, and for the United Nations Food System Summit next fall. The next two presentations will provide some information about these two events.

In closing, let me give a sincere words of thanks to all of the experts joining us today for having accepted our invitation to participate in this virtual meeting. I look forward to hearing your interesting presentations and joining your insightful discussions of these topics.