



Closing remarks by Mr. John Wilmoth, Director of Population Division

22 July 2021, 1:45pm, EST

Thank you, Tim.

Let me begin by expressing our gratitude to the experts who have shared with us their knowledge and insights on the various topics that we have reviewed over the past two days. Your observations will be extremely helpful to us as we draft the report of the Secretary-General in preparation for the upcoming session of the Commission on Population and Development, taking place next April. Both the session and the report will focus on the theme of “Population and sustainable development, in particular sustained and inclusive growth”.

As you know, we have heard recently about various population “doomsday” scenarios in the popular press and discussion. Some people are very concerned about the continuing growth of the human population, while others lament the rapid ageing of populations and, in more extreme cases, population decline. These discussions are often rather one-sided and lean towards extreme policy responses. In this context, it has been refreshing to hear clear and balanced messages on these topics from all of you, emphasizing the urgency of the challenges that we face, but at the same time pointing towards feasible ways of moving forward towards sustained and inclusive growth.

In closing, I want to reflect on some common themes that we have heard throughout this meeting.

1. **Focus on a long-run perspective.** Planning for and achieving sustainability – whether fiscal, economic, demographic or environmental – requires a long-run perspective. In this context, I want to point out that it is possible to anticipate population change well in advance, much more so than for other social, economic or environmental trends. This is true because demographic events like birth and death are highly structured and constrained by age, which correlates perfectly with time.
2. **Importance of flexibility.** One clear message was the importance of flexibility in the face of demographic change. This often involves overcoming the rigidity of institutions. For example, flexibility in working arrangements is an important component of inclusive growth – helping parents as well as older workers to maintain active participation in labor markets. The same is true for flexibility in the choice of a normal retirement age. For these and other examples, it seems clear that we must overcome rigidities not only in our institutions, but also in our ideas: a key example concerns the meaning of “old age”.
3. **Need to invest in better data and measurement.** Ensuring that “no one is left behind” is a central premise of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the associated Sustainable Development Goals. Inclusion demands visibility. Therefore, identifying groups at risk of being left behind requires data that are disaggregated by various characteristics (including income, sex, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability, geographic location and other characteristics relevant in

national context). Such data allow us to look beyond population averages to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences of individuals and social groups. For this reason, our department, UN DESA, as well as UNFPA and other UN agencies, has been developing methods and providing training to Member States on the collection and use of data that are disaggregated, minimally, by age and sex, which is an essential first step in this direction.

For me, one of the most stunning statistics presented over the past two days concerns the fact that half of all work has gone unmeasured in national economic statistics. This needs to change if such work – which is performed largely by women and mostly without pay – is to be recognized and valued in any real sense.

4. **Twin goals of sustainability and inclusiveness.** As Nicole reminded us in her introductory remarks, the objectives of sustainability and inclusiveness are intertwined. We cannot have one without the other. Beyond serving as overarching guides for policy formulation, these dual criteria are critical elements for the evaluation of specific policy interventions. A good example is the proposal to raise gradually the normal retirement age to maintain the fiscal solvency of social protection systems – this absolutely needs to happen, but it could be done in a differentiated manner, taking into account differences in longevity trends between social groups.

And with those final observations, I wish to thank you once again for your participation in this meeting. In the UN Secretariat, we are obligated to reach out to relevant experts to gather the latest information and perspectives on topics of global importance, so that the discussions of such topics by Member States are well informed and that policy formulation is evidence-based.

Normally, at the end of one of these meetings, I would wish everyone safe travels back home. Obviously, that is not our current situation. But allow me to close by looking forward to future meetings held in person, when we can have real coffee breaks, shake hands and exchange not only ideas but also business cards. I hope that scenario will become possible in the near future.