The Population Division of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs is organizing an expert meeting on the impact of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic on fertility, which will be held virtually on 10 and 11 May 2021. The meeting is convened in response to resolution E/CN.9/2021/L.5, adopted by the Commission on Population and Development at its fifty-fourth session in April 2021, which requests the Secretary-General to continue his substantive work on population and development.

The Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs provides the international community with timely and accessible population data and analysis of demographic trends and development outcomes for all countries and areas of the world. To this end, the Division undertakes regular studies of population size and characteristics and of the three components of population change (fertility, mortality and migration). The deliberations of this meeting are expected to inform the work of the Division on fertility estimates for 2020 and 2021 as well as short-term fertility projections in preparation for the forthcoming release of World Population Prospects 2022.

Background
Since early 2020, the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has produced a heavy global death toll and caused great economic disruptions, with major impacts on people’s health and livelihoods. However, there is light at the end of the tunnel with vaccines gradually being rolled out, but its effects on human life could be long-lasting. From a demographic perspective, COVID-19 affects all three components of population change. By the end of April 2021, nearly 150 million cases and 3.1 million COVID-19 death had been reported worldwide. Because of global restrictions on mobility, the number of international migrants (persons living in a country other than where they were born) was estimated to be 2 million less than expected by mid-2020. The pandemic’s impact on fertility has also attracted attention and is potentially more consequential in the long run than its impacts on mortality or migration. The COVID-19 pandemic has hit countries across the world at different times and with a range of intensities and durations. The effects on fertility are likely to differ as a function of the severity and duration of the epidemic, the country’s socio-economic level and its policy responses. While some countries may experience a baby bust during the pandemic and perhaps a fertility rebound thereafter, other countries may see a short-term increase in fertility from unintended pregnancies due to disruptions in access to family planning services. These disruptions in access to family planning services could pose challenges especially in sub-Saharan Africa and in Latin America and the Caribbean.
Understanding the impact of COVID-19 on fertility is critical when making projections of future population levels and trends. For example, in the case of high- and upper-middle-income countries with generally low levels of fertility, a further fertility decline would accelerate the pace of population ageing and could lead also to population decline. In low- and lower-middle-income countries with intermediate or high levels of fertility, an interruption of fertility decline would result in faster population growth, at least in the short term.

Objectives
The objectives of the meeting are: (a) to review experiences from past public health and economic crises and identify mechanisms through which the COVID-19 pandemic may affect fertility in various parts of the world; (b) to assess recent data on marriage and union formation, fertility preferences, use of family planning, and reported numbers of births from selected countries with a view to assessing the possible impact of the pandemic on fertility in different world regions; and (c) provide recommendations to develop assumptions on the impact of the pandemic on fertility levels and trends at the global, regional and subregional levels in the short to medium term in support of the official United Nations population estimates and projections (twenty-seventh edition of the World Population Prospects) that is currently being revised and updated by the Division.

Findings of the meeting will be published in a summary report later in 2021 and will also inform other publications and data sets produced by the Population Division.

Sessions
This event is being organized as an online meeting of two half-day sessions on 10 and 11 May 2021 (New York time). Each session will be organized as a series of interactive panel discussions around selected themes including historical experiences, analytical approaches, fertility levels and trends in low-, intermediate- and high-fertility countries. The last panel discussion will focus on recommendations for fertility projections in the short and medium terms in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participating panellists are invited to provide a summary of their presentations in advance of the meeting and to respond to a short survey on the pandemic’s expected impacts on fertility levels and trends.

Questions for discussion
Experts are expected to discuss and provide insights on the following questions:

1. What lessons can we learn from past public health and economic crises concerning the potential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on fertility levels and trends in the short and medium terms? Compared to these historical experiences, is the effect of COVID-19 on fertility likely to be of similar or different magnitude and duration, and why?
2. What are the likely trajectories of fertility in the short and medium terms in selected countries, drawing on the latest information and early births statistics? Are they different in low-, intermediate- and high-fertility countries?
3. What are plausible scenarios for fertility projections in the short and medium terms for countries with low, intermediate and high levels of fertility, and what regional and sub-regional patterns or differences should be expected?