

UNITED NATIONS – NATIONS UNIES

MRS. Rebeca GRYNSPAN

UNCTAD SECRETARY-GENERAL

**REMARKS AT THE 55TH SESSION OF THE COMMISSION ON
POPULATION AND DEVELOPMENT**

25 of APRIL 2022

Chair, Excellencies, Distinguished delegates,

- It is my pleasure to address the 55th session of the **Commission on Population and Development**.
 - I wish this 55th session would have come at a better time for the world. But it hasn't.
 - As we highlighted in our report to the Global Crisis Response Group, set up by Secretary General Guterres in response to the war in Ukraine, and to the Steering Committee group chaired by the DSG Amina Mohamed, the developing world is at the brink of a perfect storm of debt, food, and energy crises.
 - Given elevated levels of socioeconomic stress following the COVID-19 crisis and the unremitting cost of climate change, global exposure to this crisis is counted in the billions of people living in over a hundred countries.

- The first brief of the Global Crisis Response Group shows that 107 economies are severely exposed to at least one of the three global channels of transmission that characterize this crisis – rising food prices, rising energy prices, and tightening financial conditions. 1.7 billion people live in these countries, of which more than 500 million are already poor, and 215 million are undernourished.
- As a result, a systemic debt crisis is unfolding as we speak, inflation is at multi-decades high, and instances of civil unrest are brewing in all corners of the world.
- In the midst of all this, our progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals has been severely hampered in the past few years and we have witnessed with alarm growing poverty levels and greater inequalities.
- When the 2030 Agenda was approved, we at UNCTAD calculated the investment gap for developing countries to meet their SDGs at 2,5 trillion dollars. The pandemic widened this gap to 4,3 trillion dollars. The war in Ukraine is expected to widen this gap further. Now, an ever-widening gap is not a gap. It is an abyss.

Your excellencies:

- This year's session special theme, "Population and sustainable development, in particular sustained and inclusive economic growth", is very relevant to the times we live.

- Population composition has obvious implications for the environment and climate change, but these implications are not straightforward. We know that population growth is a good predictor of rising energy use and CO2 emissions -- but we also know that per capita income is an even better predictor for that. As a recent UNDESA brief states: “the countries that have been contributing the most to unsustainable patterns of production and consumption are generally those where income per capita is high and the population is growing slowly if at all, not those where income per capita is low and the population is growing rapidly.”
- Populations themselves are history’s greatest agents of change. Today we have perhaps the greatest number of empowered women in all of history, as well as the most diverse and most informed youth we have ever had. They are also the ones suffering the most from the crisis. This all will matter for the environment and climate change to get out of the crisis and for many other decisive societal issues beyond that. It may well be the case that women and the coming generations – with their ideas, their efforts, and their example – will break the correlation between population and pollution many now take for granted. It is therefore a mistake to make linear assumptions about this issue. Instead, what we must do is to further empower women and youths, to listen to them more, to understand that the solution is a population that is more responsible, more inclusive, and more committed.

- Furthermore, in many countries of the world the issue is not one of rapidly growing populations, but one of rapidly declining fertility rates.
- My own region, Latin America, will go from having the greatest demographic dividend in its history as our millennials and zoomers enter the workforce, to having the most inverted population pyramid once they retire. Put differently, in the span of two generations, our population will invert as fast as it has exploded. It is unclear how we will deal with that, how our fragile and patchy pension systems will cope with that, what this will mean for our politics and our culture.
- Population decline has therefore as big an implication as population growth for sustainable development. But how well we deal with these facts will depend on our capacity to sympathize with the reality of the billions of individuals involved.

Excellencies,

- To talk about population is to talk about the great sweeping tides of history. It is to talk a conversation that conjures an unimaginably large number of human lives.
- Global population in my own lifetime has tripled, from around 2,7 billion in the 1950s to almost 8 billion people today. And three billion more are expected to join the global family before the end of the century

- So my question is this.
- When we think about the world today, how many of these 8 billion people do we really think about? Do we know where they live? Do we know what they care about most in life?
- Do we know whether they are in low-income or middle-income countries? Whether their children are going to school, whether they have access to water, energy or if they had internet access during the COVID lockdowns?
- After all these years at the United Nations, I have learnt that truly global policies require truly global sympathies. Earlier, for example, I mentioned that 1,7 billion people in the world live in countries severely exposed to the war in Ukraine, with rising food and energy prices, and worsening financial conditions.
- 1,7 billion people is almost one fifth of all of humanity.
- When we think about global policy decisions today, do we think about what happens to this fifth of humanity if oil reaches 150 dollars a barrel? If the FAO food price index keep breaking historical record highs each month? If a domino effect of debt defaults starts plaguing the world?

- I don't know if all global policy makers are really thinking about these questions – we at the Crisis Response Group are definitively trying. But what I do know is that no policy solution will be correct unless it is coherent with the larger sympathies of mankind, unless it can imagine how the world looks today in Addis Ababa, in Bridgetown, in Lima or in Karachi.
- We need a new sustainable development paradigm that really integrates the perspective of the developing world. Unless we do that, negotiations among countries at the COP will never conclude. Not for a lack of good ideas, but for a lack of sympathy.
- So, let's always try to think of the person, the family, which our global policy decisions will affect. What this means is that we should always transform billions into ones, because one can never put oneself in the shoes of the multitude, but on the shoes of the person. I think that's the wisdom behind the ancient philosophy that says "whoever saves one life, saves the world entire".
- That is a wisdom for us all. I thank you.