

## **Beijing Forum**

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Via Zoom

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Good morning, ladies and gentlemen.

Thank you for inviting me to participate in this distinguished Forum.

As announced on the 11<sup>th</sup> of July when we shared the latest round of United Nations estimates and projections of world population, earlier this week, on the 15<sup>th</sup> of November, the world reached the milestone of 8 billion inhabitants.

The unprecedented growth of the global population is the result of two parallel trends: on the one hand, the gradual increase in average human longevity due to widespread advances in public health, nutrition, personal hygiene and medicine, and on the other hand, the persistence of high levels of fertility in many countries.

Over the past two weeks, world leaders have been meeting in Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt, marking the 30th anniversary of the adoption of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. Given the climate crisis that the world is facing, the 8 billion milestone is a moment to look beyond our sheer numbers and to reflect on the impact of our growing human family on the planet.

At the same time, this is a moment to ask ourselves how we can lift up all 8 billion people, ensuring that they enjoy a good quality of life and empowering the most marginalized among them.

Ladies and gentlemen,

There is no doubt that both unsustainable patterns of consumption and production and the rapid growth of the human population have contributed to environmental degradation, climate change, deforestation and loss of biodiversity.

Yet, the relationship between population growth and sustainable development is often misunderstood.

Certainly, rapid population growth poses challenges to economic and social progress, as it makes eradicating poverty, combatting hunger and malnutrition, and increasing the coverage of health and education systems more difficult.

At the same time – and this is perhaps less evident – achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, especially those related to health, education and gender equality, will contribute towards slowing the growth of the world's population. Expanded opportunities for education and employment contribute to a decline of fertility by changing incentives and intentions around marriage and childbearing and by promoting individual autonomy and decision making, especially for women and girls.

Access to reproductive health care and fulfillment of reproductive rights ensure that women and couples are able to make decisions, freely and responsibly, about the number of children that they will have and about the timing of their births. All around the world, we have observed that when education and decent work are widely available, including for women, and when people have access to reliable methods of contraception and abortion where it is legal, the fertility rate tends to come down over time. In these situations, further action by Governments is unnecessary, because in modern economies where education matters greatly for success, people perceive the benefits of smaller families and act on their own to lower fertility.

But will the ongoing slowdown in global population growth solve the existential problems that the world is facing, in particular the climate crisis? The answer is a resounding “No”.

While it is true that slower population growth, if maintained over several decades, will help to mitigate environmental degradation, too often population growth is conflated with environmental problems, including the increased concentration of CO<sub>2</sub> and other greenhouse gases in the atmosphere and the resulting changes in Earth's climate. This perspective ignores the fact that countries with the highest levels of consumption and emissions today are those where population growth is slow or even negative.

Meanwhile, the majority of the world's growth is concentrated, and in the coming years will increasingly be concentrated, in the world's poorest countries. These countries, which have significantly lower emissions rates, are likely to suffer disproportionately from the effects of climate change, in part because they lack the resources needed to adapt to these changes and to mitigate their impacts.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In order to usher in a world in which all 8 billion people can thrive, we need a rapid decoupling of economic activity from the current over-reliance on fossil-fuel energy, as well as greater efficiency in the use of such resources. Wealthier countries and the international community should help to ensure that poorer countries receive the necessary assistance, both technical and financial, so that their economies can grow using technologies that will minimize future greenhouse gas emissions.

More broadly, we need to redouble our efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030, through policies and programmes that make our world more inclusive, more equitable and more sustainable.

While some countries face the challenges of high fertility and rapid population growth, others are now facing another set of issues related to low fertility, rapid population ageing and potentially population decline. China, a country that was very successful in lowering its birth rate and slowing the growth of its population, is now experiencing very low levels of fertility.

Recently, China's population began to decline in size, and we expect that this trend will continue. In 2050, the UN projections anticipate a Chinese population that is almost

eight per cent smaller than in 2022. In response to such forecasts, the Government has ended the one-child policy and is now encouraging people to have a second or a third birth.

Whether we are talking about populations with high levels of fertility and rapid growth, or about populations with low levels of fertility and negative growth, or anything in between, the broad policy prescription is the same. Governments should help people to make informed decisions about their own fertility and make sure they have access to sexual and reproductive health-care services, including for family planning.

Especially in low-fertility contexts, Governments should help their citizens to find a balance between their lives as parents, spouses and family members and their lives as productive workers in a global economy. Achieving work-life balance in our modern world continues to be challenging in all countries. Supportive policies such as subsidized childcare, parental leave and flexible working arrangements are important. Another important element is equality between men and women, both in the public and in the private spheres of life.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Population trends are very important and shape our world in critical ways. We should avoid alarmism about population trends, and at the same time we should work to moderate the extremes. Humans are incredibly adaptable. We can live in a larger or a smaller world, if needed. Sometimes, what matters most is the speed of change. Yet even if we can slow the speed of change, we know that change is inevitable, and thus we must also find ways of adapting.

Thank you again for the invitation to speak in this Forum. It is an honour, and I hope that my remarks will help to launch a successful event over these next two days.

