

COMMISSION ON POPULATION AND DEVELOPMENT

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WORLD DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS
(E/CN.9/2009/6)

Report of the Secretary-General

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Madame Chairperson, distinguished Delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

I have the honour to introduce the report entitled “World demographic trends” (E/CN.9/2009/6), which summarises the main trends relating to population size, growth, fertility and contraception, mortality, migration and urbanization.

Today, the world population stands at 6.8 billion. It is expected to reach 7 billion in 2012 and surpass 9 billion people by 2050. Most of the additional 2.3 billion people expected by 2050 will be added to the populations of developing countries, which as a whole have 5.6 billion inhabitants in 2009 and are expected to have 7.9 billion in 2050. The population of the 49 least developed countries is expected to grow especially fast, doubling by 2050 to reach 1.7 billion. This doubling of the population is expected even though fertility in the least developed countries is projected to decline markedly, passing from 4.6 children per woman today to 2.5 by mid-century. Without that decline, the population of the least developed countries could reach 2.8 billion in 2050, more than three times as large as today.

In contrast, the population of more developed countries is projected to increase only slightly, from 1.2 billion to 1.3 billion, and it would have declined somewhat were it not for the projected net in-migration, which is projected to average 2.4 million persons annually from 2009 to 2050.

Globally, fertility has declined markedly, passing from 5.0 children per woman in the late 1960s to 2.6 today. Since fertility in more developed countries already averaged 2.4 children per woman in 1965-1970, the global decline resulted mainly from fertility reductions in developing countries, whose average fertility level declined from 6.0 to 2.8 children per woman between the late 1960s and today. Whereas fertility remains high, particularly in the least developed countries, there are over 30 developing countries that are currently experiencing below-replacement fertility in addition to all 53 more developed countries.

The rapid reductions of fertility experienced by many developing countries has gone hand-in-hand with increases in contraceptive use among women who are married or in union. Globally, contraceptive prevalence reached 56 per cent in 1993 and has continued to increase, rising to 63 per cent by 2003. However, contraceptive prevalence remains low in countries with high fertility, most of which are located in sub-Saharan Africa, where contraceptive prevalence averages a low

22 per cent. Although more than 90 per cent of Governments provide today direct or indirect support for family planning programmes, about a quarter of all least developed countries lack policies to lower fertility.

One of the major achievements of humanity over the past century is the reduction of mortality. Better hygiene, improved nutrition and scientifically based medical practices, including antibiotics and vaccines, helped accelerate mortality decline in developing countries, whose life expectancy rose from 41 years in the early 1950s to 65 years today. Nevertheless, there is still a large gap between developing and more developed countries in current life expectancy, 77 years vs. 65 years. And the gap is larger for the group of least developed countries, whose current life expectancy is just 55 years, in large part because many of them are significantly affected by the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

In many countries, some segments of the population, particularly infants and children under the age of 5, continue to experience unacceptably high levels of mortality. Recent projections indicate that most developing countries will not achieve the reductions of child mortality called for by the Millennium Development Goals. For that reason, in 2007, 86 per cent of developing countries considered their level of child mortality as unacceptable.

Maternal mortality remains high in many developing countries and 83 per cent of countries consider their maternal mortality levels unacceptable. In 2005, an estimated 450 women died in developing countries for every 100,000 births, whereas the equivalent figure in more developed countries was a low 11 deaths per 100,000 births and, in the least developed countries, a staggering 870. So far, progress towards achieving the targets set by the Millennium Development Goals regarding maternal mortality has been negligible.

Because of the nearly universal reductions in fertility and mortality, the populations of most countries are ageing. Globally, the number of persons aged 60 or over is expected almost to triple, from 743 million in 2009 to 2 billion in 2050. By that date, the number of older persons will exceed the number of children under the age of 15. Population ageing is more advanced in more developed countries but is occurring at a faster pace in developing countries because of the rapid reductions of the fertility they experienced. The proportion of older persons in developing countries is expected to increase from 9 per cent in 2009 to 20 per cent in 2050, whereas in more developed countries it will increase from 22 per cent to 33 per cent over the same period.

Population ageing poses challenges to the financial sustainability of pension systems that are based on the redistribution of earnings from younger to older generations. In developing countries, an estimated 342 million older persons currently lack adequate incomes, and their number may rise to 1.2 billion in 2050 if the coverage of pension schemes does not expand. Since women constitute the majority of the older population and have lower labour force participation than men, they are particularly likely to be poor in old age.

Population ageing can also bring important benefits, especially during the four to five decades when the proportion of children declines and that of persons of working age increases. Provided that sufficient jobs are created for the increasing labour force, more resources may be used to invest and spur economic growth. Asia, in particular, has benefited from these trends, but is

projected to leave that “window of opportunity” of a low dependency ratio soon. Latin America and the Caribbean, where many countries have still to reap the full benefits of declining dependency ratios, have still until 2025 to benefit from that trend. In sharp contrast, in Africa, where fertility remains high, the dependency ratio, while decreasing, is still higher than in other major areas because of the large proportion of children and adolescents.

Madame Chairperson,

The complex demographic trends documented in the report pose important challenges to Governments, societies, communities and individuals. However, they also open opportunities that can be seized and leveraged by appropriate policies, especially those aimed at improving human capital and promoting job growth. But, to be successful, such policies must be reinforced by strong population policies. To assess the impact of population dynamics, it is therefore very important to monitor developments in the policy arena so as to identify good practices, lessons learned and challenges outstanding. To this end, the Population Division has conducted at regular intervals inquiries among Governments on population policies. We have recently launched the tenth such Inquiry. I would like to take this opportunity to request the distinguished delegates attending this 42nd session that the Population Division is eagerly awaiting the responses of Member States to the tenth Inquiry. The deadline to submit responses is June 2009. You can access the questionnaire in the different official languages and submit your responses by using an interactive web form. I am sure all Governments engaging actively in the work of the Commission have an interest in providing us with the information that permits us to serve you better.

Thank you Madame Chairperson.