



**MR. JOHN WILMOTH
DIRECTOR, POPULATION DIVISION
DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS**

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

**United Nations expert group meeting on population,
food security, nutrition and sustainable development**

New York, 16-17 September 2019

Good morning. I am John Wilmoth, Director of the Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, part of the United Nations Secretariat. I welcome you to this gathering of experts convened as part of the preparations for the 53rd session of the Commission on Population and Development in March-April 2020.

At its next session, the Commission on Population and Development will focus on the chosen theme of “Population, food security, nutrition and development”. We have brought you together in this format to seek your advice and assistance in preparing two reports of the Secretary-General on this topic. Those reports serve to inform and to guide the discussions among delegates during the annual session, including for the negotiations around a resolution on the annual theme.

It is interesting to note that the topics of food security and nutrition have not been considered by the Commission on Population and Development for the last 25 years. These topics are also outside the core work programme of the Population Division, which focuses mostly on the documentation and analysis of major population trends and on policies that can influence those trends.

The work of the Population Division often highlights the four demographic megatrends: population growth, population ageing, urbanization and international migration. Another useful organizing framework is the population balancing equation, which highlights the three components of population change: fertility, mortality and migration. That is what we do, but the scope of the Commission on Population and Development is necessarily broader, and thus we reach out, as the Secretariat, to gather expertise from within the UN system and beyond.

Let me now give you some more background about the Commission on Population and Development and about the International Conference on Population and Development that took place in 1994. These provide an essential foundation for our work, but I suspect that they may not be familiar to everyone in the room.

The Commission on Population and Development, originally called the Population Commission, was created by the Economic and Social Council in 1946 and held its first session in early 1947. The Population Division was established at the same time to serve as Secretariat of the Commission. Over the years, guided by the needs and requests of the Commission and its members, the Population Division has produced a variety of studies and reports on global population trends, and it has served as the source of the United Nations estimates and projections of global population trends. Supported by the Population Division, and in recent decades also by UNFPA, the Commission has served as a forum for discussions on both the political and the technical aspects of population change.

Three important events in the history of the Commission are a series of United Nations population conferences held in 1974, 1984 and 1994. Following the last of these, the International Conference on Population and Development, or ICPD, which was held in Cairo in 1994, the Population Commission was renamed the Commission on Population and Development, emphasizing the important linkages between population trends and development processes.

Ever since the Cairo conference, the Commission's primary mandate has been to monitor, review and assess the implementation of the Programme of Action that was adopted in 1994. The Commission continues to fulfil this mandate by meeting annually to discuss specific aspects of the link between population and development, as determined by the annual theme chosen by the Commission typically two years in advance.

The Cairo Programme of Action offers a comprehensive vision for equitable and prosperous economic and social development, with attention also to issues of environmental sustainability. The document articulates an explicit set of principles, objectives and actions concerning population processes and their interactions with sustainable development. Notably, the Cairo action plan placed individual rights and choices at the centre of development.

The Cairo conference was unique among the major UN conferences for its emphasis on sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights. The emphasis on reproductive health and rights was accompanied by an extensive analysis of the interrelationships between population and sustained economic growth, gender, youth, family, education, health, population distribution, urbanization and migration, among other topics.

Of course, the Cairo conference was only one of the major UN conferences of the 1990s, which included, most notably, the Rio conference on sustainable development held in 1992 and the Beijing conference on women in 1995. The various summits and conferences of that era helped to shape the global development agenda for the next two decades.

Then in 2015, the General Assembly adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, a comprehensive and universal development agenda: comprehensive in that it considers the social, economic and environmental aspects of development, and universal in that its agreed goals, known as the Sustainable Development Goals, apply to all countries, not only to developing countries.

In 2016, the Economic and Social Council decided that the Commission on Population and Development should contribute to the follow-up of the 2030 Agenda, including for the review of progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals, within its existing mandate focused on the Cairo conference.

As noted previously, since the Cairo conference in 1994, the Commission on Population and Development has never chosen a theme that is even close to the one adopted for the upcoming session in March-April 2020. Yet food – and the challenge of sustainably feeding a growing human population – has been a classic topic in discussions of population issues for decades and even centuries.

Although the Commission on Population and Development has not chosen to focus on topics of hunger and nutrition in recent years, it has nevertheless touched on these and related topics in its discussions of population and the environment in its session held in 2001, in its consideration of population health, morbidity and mortality in 2010, and in its discussion of population issues in the context of sustainable development in 2015.

In the Cairo Programme of Action, references to food concern only hunger and undernutrition. Our meeting this week, and the eventual report of the Secretary-General, will highlight key changes in the landscape of this discussion since 1994. For example, we know that while hunger and severe food insecurity remain a major challenge in some parts of the world, an emerging challenge concerns other forms of malnutrition, including micronutrient deficiencies, as well as overweight and obesity.

As we all know, the world grows enough food to feed all of the earth's inhabitants: the challenge lies in ensuring that everyone has access to sufficient, nutritious and affordable food. This is one of many issues that we must address in this discussion.

Let me describe the two main reports related to the theme of the annual session that are now being prepared by the Population Division and by UNFPA. The report being prepared by the Population Division will provide a broad overview of the topic, highlighting major trends and key challenges — thus, providing the motivation for policy responses but not focusing on actual programmes or interventions. That analysis will be complemented by a second report prepared by our partners at UNFPA, which will review and discuss relevant evidence-based programmes and interventions.

Each of these reports must adhere to a strict limit of 8500 words. We know that we cannot address every possible aspect of food security and nutrition in an 8500-word report, or even in the two such reports. Thus, we have chosen to highlight four domains of the broader topic. You can see the four domains reflected in the programme for this meeting. Our intention is that the same structure can be used for the two reports as well.

First, we will look at the linkages between population and food security by focusing on two key issues: first, the interaction between the growth in population and consumption and the sustainability of global food production; and second, the interrelationships between food security, agricultural development, population movements and settlement patterns.

Second, we will take look at food security, nutrition and population health from an individual perspective, considering issues related to hunger and undernutrition on the one hand, and to obesity and overweight on the other, highlighting major changes that have taken place since the Cairo conference in 1994.

Gender and life course are recurrent or universal issues in this discussion, and thus they will be mainstreamed throughout.

We in the United Nations Secretariat and in UNFPA are looking to the experts gathered here to advise us on the most important themes to highlight in the discussion by the Commission next year. We are happy to have been able to bring together experts from both research institutes and from the relevant UN entities working in the areas of food security, nutrition, food systems modelling, sustainable agricultural, environmental sustainability including climate change, rural development, nutrition and food policy.

Thank you for accepting the invitation to participate, and I look forward to hearing your interesting presentations and insightful discussions.