



**Statement by
MS. HANIA ZLOTNIK
DIRECTOR, POPULATION DIVISION
DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS
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Mr. Chairman, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentleman,

Demographers reckon that the world population first reached a billion in the early nineteenth century. It took more than a century to add another billion but since then additional billions have been added at ever shorter intervals: the last two in merely 12 years each. As we await the attainment of the 7th billion later this year, it is worth asking what comes next.

To answer that question, let us recall that the speed of population growth rose markedly during the first part of the twentieth century as mortality declined. By the late 1960s, the world population was growing at the fastest pace ever: 2 per cent per year. At that rate, the 8th billion would have been reached in 2009. The fact that we are reaching the 7th billion only this year reflects the slowdown of population growth since 1970.

Indeed, the speed of population growth has dropped to 1.2 per cent per year, 40 per cent lower than at the peak. Declining fertility is responsible for that slowdown.

Fertility has declined fastest among the group of developing countries that excludes the least developed countries, passing from 5.8 children per woman in the early 1960s to 2.5 children per woman today, a reduction of nearly 60 per cent.

Fertility declined more slowly among the least developed countries, dropping by just 35 per cent to 4.4 children per woman.

Unexpectedly, the low fertility of developed countries also dropped and has remained below the level required to ensure the replacement of generations since the late 1970s. Currently, fertility in developed countries averages a low 1.6 children per woman.

Today, out of the nearly 7 billion people on Earth, 42 per cent live in countries with below-replacement fertility, 41 per cent in countries with intermediate fertility and 17 per cent in those with high fertility.

Mr. Chairman,

Demographers are generally a pretty optimistic lot. We believe that “that which is not sustainable will not be sustained” and fertility that is well above replacement level is not sustainable if we wish to have populations whose health is improving and longevity is rising. Our projections of future population change incorporate that optimistic view.

Thus, the most quoted variant of those projections, the medium variant, assumes declining mortality in all populations and a continued reduction of fertility in the populations that still have fertility above replacement level. The medium variant also incorporates another crucial assumption: that all populations will reach and maintain below-replacement fertility during a good part of this century. Under those assumptions, the world population reaches 8 billion in 2025 and 9 billion in 2045 but does not go above 10 billion during this century.

Because there is no certainty that the medium variant will be realized, we produce other variants that illustrate the sensitivity of projection results to small changes in fertility. The high variant, which sets fertility half a child above that in the medium variant, yields a world population that continues to add billions every 12 to 15 years and reaches 14 billion in 2100.

Given that the actual future path of fertility may well fall within the range of variation encompassed by the medium and high variants, sustained increases in the world population over this century are still well within the realm of possibility.

Mr. Chairman,

Those scenarios of future population growth have particular relevance for the theme of this session. The evidence shows that reductions in fertility have accelerated economic growth and reduced poverty. Furthermore, fertility reductions have been achieved through improvements in reproductive health, child health, education and the empowerment of women. In country after country, parents have decided to have fewer children in order to provide them with better opportunities.

The extraordinary fertility decline achieved so far can perhaps be best characterized by Hoffer’s insightful observation: “when people are free to do as they please, they usually imitate each other”, especially if they expect benefits from such imitation. In all societies, fertility reductions have started among those who are better-off and, in due course, their example has been followed by the middle classes and eventually by those with lower socio-economic status.

The fact that both within countries and among countries, high fertility remains concentrated in low-income groups is indicative of their continued marginalization. Lack of resources and limited access to information reduce the options of the poor, including with regard to the exercise of their reproductive rights. It is a matter of urgency to ensure that those barriers disappear.

In developing countries, Governments wishing to accelerate development have much to gain by investing in reproductive health. Such investments would not only contribute to improve the lives of millions but are also likely to result in beneficial demographic trends which, by moderating the growth of the population and especially of the number of children, would permit higher investments in human capital.

If during the next two decades developing countries achieve the reductions of fertility projected in the medium variant, their number of children under age 15 will increase by just 30 million. In contrast, if fertility decline is slower, as in the high variant, the number of children will increase by 360 million, making it more difficult to provide the vaccinations, schooling and jobs that those children will need.

Mr. Chairman,

Demographers are optimists because we know that over the past 50 years the world population has increased more rapidly than ever before, yet standards of living have improved and, remarkably, the majority of people in the world have been acting responsibly and limiting their family size in the expectation that their children will live better than themselves. In considering the future, we constantly ask ourselves if that future will resemble the past or if all the lessons learned so far will be for naught.

If ensuring the wellbeing of future generations is a major goal of sustainable development, continuing the reduction of population growth is essential to ensure sustainability. Much has been achieved in that regard but the battle is only half won. Paraphrasing the words of Abraham Lincoln: the struggle of today is not altogether for today—it is also for a better long-term future.

Fortunately, winning the struggle requires that we do good by doing right. Enabling all people to decide freely and responsibly the number and spacing of their children and to have the information and means to do so is the task to pursue. We know how to do it, we just need to focus and strengthen our efforts where they are still needed. In that respect, this Commission has a key role to play by galvanizing action to accelerate the achievement of the internationally agreed goals related to sexual and reproductive health.

To conclude, Mr. Chairman, permit me to welcome the Executive Director of UNFPA, Dr. Babatunde Osotimehin, and congratulate him on his appointment. We, at the Population Division, look forward to continuing the fruitful collaboration between our institutions.

Thank you.