



Intervention of H.E. Archbishop Bernardito Auza  
Apostolic Nuncio and Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations

Fiftieth Session of the Commission on Population and Development  
Agenda Item 3(b): **Changing population age structures  
and sustainable development**  
New York, 3 April 2017

Madam Chair,

As outlined by the Secretary General's recent report entitled **Changing population age structures and sustainable development** (E/CN.9/2017/2), the world continues to experience significant shifts in the distribution of population by age, and is transitioning from more youthful, growing populations associated with high levels of fertility and low mortality, to populations with a proportionally larger share of older people, linked to much lower levels of fertility and to longevity, with marked consequences on the level of consumption and the pace of economic growth. While these demographic changes present a new set of challenges and opportunities, nonetheless sustainable development, poverty eradication, and the defense of the dignity of the human person must remain central to our collective response.

For decades, talk of an impending population bomb has led certain governments to adopt policies that encourage population control measures, some of them draconian, as the easiest response to the fear of resource scarcity and underdevelopment. While noting the complexity of the issues involved, my delegation would like to emphasize the need to take into account the differing regional and even country specific situations. For example, the populations of some countries will continue to increase in the short term; others are stabilizing around zero growth; and still others have started to experience spiraling demographic decline, with the attendant challenges of providing adequate social protections and care for the elderly, as well as meaningful employment for youth in the face of stagnant economic growth due to population aging and decline.

Madam Chair,

While it is true that an unequal distribution of the population and of resources creates obstacles to development and a sustainable use of the environment, it must also be recognized that demographic growth is fully compatible with shared prosperity. Resources are sufficient, but they are often inefficiently used and improperly distributed. The developed world, with high levels of consumption and low levels of poverty, is often responsible for the imbalances in trade, the inequitable distribution of resources and environmental degradation. Corruption, protracted conflicts and other man-made disasters, especially in the developing world, do far more to perpetuate injustice and entrench poverty than a healthy, growing population. With regard to these root causes, which have a bearing on the problem of sustainable development, the best responses are solidarity, peace and security. This presupposes, however, a dramatic change in the policies of both developed and developing nations, especially in terms of investment in time, resources, and policies.

Madam Chair,

The demographic transition happened in the developed world before it had access to modern methods of contraception. It occurred with economic and technological advancement, as well as investments in education, infrastructure and institutions. It is well known that economic growth corresponds with lower fertility rates and, when accompanied by investment in education and health, increases productivity and the wellbeing of societies. While responsible parenthood and sexual behavior are always moral imperatives, the coercive regulation of fertility, especially under the guise of empowerment and rights, undermines individual freedom and responsibility. Respect for life from the moment of conception to natural death, even in the face of the great challenge of birth, must always inform policies, especially when it comes to international aid, which should be made available according to the real priorities of the receiving nation, and not by an imposed will of the donor.

This respect for life must also guide the policies governments put in place to ensure that they benefit from “demographic dividends”. Investment is best spent not only in education and health-care, but in adequate housing and sanitation, and in access to clean water, particularly in the developing world. These investments better address the root causes of conflict, resource scarcity, and over-urbanization. These are the investments that will empower our youth.

This right to life must also lead us to keep the elderly, the disabled and the most vulnerable at the forefront of our development policies. Not only must they be enabled by society to attain full inclusion and participation in all aspects of life, but their inherent value must not be reduced merely to a question of what they can produce or how physically able they are. Leaving no-one behind also means recognizing that the value of every person is greater than his or her economic contribution and that our burdens are meant to be shared. We must begin from a more sustainable, human-centered approach to development, rooted in solidarity and genuine responsibility for the needs of all, especially of the most vulnerable.

Thank you, Madam Chair.