

UNITED NATIONS



NATIONS UNIES

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

Opening Statement at the 50th session of the
Commission on Population and Development
New York, 3 April 2017

Madame Chairperson,
Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Over the past 70 years, the focus of the debate in this Commission has shifted in response to changes in the demographic situation and in policy priorities. In the early days, there was much concern about high fertility and rapid growth of the world's population. Later, reproductive health became a dominant theme. Other topics, including population health, urbanization and international migration, have attracted considerable attention as well.

Today, we live in a world where some countries must meet the challenge of a young and growing population, while others are facing the consequences of an ageing population that is growing slowly if at all. In this context, the Commission chose to examine the very important topic of changing population age structures.

Ten years ago, the Commission addressed a similar topic. Then as now, a key message was that the changes in the age distribution of human populations now being observed throughout the world are an outcome of success. Our success in improving health and reducing mortality contributed, initially, to the increased survival of children and led to a swelling of the population at younger ages. Somewhat later, our success in enabling women and men to control the number and timing of any children they may

wish to have contributed to a decline in the birth rate and a temporary concentration of the population in the working age range. More recently, our continued success in reducing death rates, including among older persons and for deaths due to heart disease, cancer and other causes previously considered intractable, has contributed to the further ageing of the world's population.

Between 2015 and 2050, the population aged 65 or older in Europe will increase from 23 to 28 per cent. In North America, the corresponding percentage will rise from 18 to 23 per cent. By 2050, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Oceania will all have more than 18 per cent of their populations at ages 65 and above.

Today, many countries are already implementing policies to adapt to these changing demographic circumstances. In ageing societies, social protection mechanisms, pension systems and health care programmes are being adjusted and strengthened. Women's participation in the workforce is being supported more than ever before, and some countries are slowly pushing up the age of retirement. At the same time, there is an increasing recognition that international migration can help to rejuvenate populations and slow the pace of population ageing.

Meanwhile, due to a relatively slow decline in rates of fertility, many parts of Africa will retain a young population for decades to come. Nevertheless, as the birth rate continues to fall thanks in part to continuing investments in sexual and reproductive health, there will be an opportunity for a "demographic dividend". As the relatively large youth cohorts of today enter the labour force of tomorrow, they will be responsible, on average, for a smaller number of children requiring their support, while the size of the older population will still be relatively small. If this future population of workers is empowered by having access to health care, education and opportunities for employment, countries will be in a good position to reap the full benefit of the favourable demographic situation caused by the temporary bulge in the age distribution as it passes through the working ages.

Dear delegates,

While the focus of the deliberations in this Commission may have shifted, what has remained constant during the past 70 years has been the Population Division's data-driven support to the Commission's work. Since the early days of this Commission, the rigorous documentation and analysis of population trends have informed the work of the Commission. Today, the importance of objective, impartial evidence to support fact-based discussion and debate is widely recognized.

Producing demographic estimates lies at the core of the work of the Population Division. Five global datasets produced by the Division provide a useful overview of this aspect of our work:

- 1) The *World Population Prospects*, which provides data on population size and structure and on the three components of population change — fertility, mortality, and international migration — including estimates from 1950 to 2015 and projections to 2100;
- 2) The *World Urbanization Prospects*, which produces estimates and projections of the percentage of the urban population and the size of major cities;
- 3) The *World Population Policies*, which covers government policies on population trends, on sexual and reproductive health, and on migration and spatial distribution;
- 4) Estimates of family planning indicators, documenting levels of contraceptive use and of the unmet need for contraception; and
- 5) Estimates of the number of international migrants, documenting the size of the foreign-born population in each country, classified by country of origin.

These five flagship data products provide time series of data across a variety of population indicators for up to around 230 populations, corresponding to countries and other areas of the world. Where appropriate, these data series are disaggregated by age and sex.

These five global datasets constitute the building blocks of our work programme, which also includes various analytical reports, online databases, wall charts, data booklets and infographics. The Division's leading publications rank consistently among the most consulted among all of DESA's publications, according to download statistics gathered by the Department.

A second pillar of the Division's work is the support provided to intergovernmental processes on population and related issues within the Economic and Social Council and the General Assembly. Our support to the General Assembly for its discussions on international migration has expanded considerably in recent years and will remain significant as the international community prepares a global compact for safe, orderly and regular migration between now and late 2018.

Third, the Division is seeking to expand its work in capacity development. Current projects include training workshops on demographic methods for population estimation and projection, on the collection and use of data on international migration, and on survey methods to gather data about older persons in countries of Africa. Building national capacities can contribute to improved demographic data and increased knowledge and understanding of population trends around the world. The Division's ability to expand the support provided to countries on these topics will depend, however, on the availability of resources.

In conducting our work, the Population Division collaborates with our sister divisions of DESA, with other entities of the United Nations system, in particular UNFPA, and with civil society. Throughout its seven decades of existence, the Population Division has maintained strong ties with a network of researchers throughout the world, including through our active participation in the meetings of specialized professional associations. We maintain our engagement with academia also through the organization of expert group meetings, which are a critical means of incorporating the latest scientific findings into all aspects of our work.

Members of the Commission,

As always, we count on you for guidance and support. To this end, we have prepared a brief survey, which you will find in front of you this morning. The survey seeks to gauge your familiarity with, and your use of, our data products, published reports and other outputs and services. We would appreciate if you could kindly complete the survey and return it to a staff member of the Population Division, who can be identified by their colourful lapel buttons.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development promotes the rights, health and well-being of all people at all ages. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development makes a similar commitment with its pledge that no one will be left behind. Your deliberations this week will provide guidance to governments facing the challenges and opportunities presented by changing population age structures, while working to ensure a world of sustainable development for all.

I look forward to this week's deliberations, and I wish you a very successful 50th session and 70th anniversary of the Commission.

Thank you, Madame Chairperson.