

54th Session of the United Nations Commission for Social Development

Priority theme: Rethinking and strengthening social development in the contemporary world

Statement submitted by Priests for Life, a non-governmental organization in Special Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council

The contemporary post 2015 world seeks to place people at the center of sustainable development as declared in Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to “ensure that all human beings can fulfill their potential in dignity and equality and in a healthy environment”.

Pope Francis in his address to the United Nations General Assembly called for respect of all lives and stated, “The common home of all men and women must continue to rise on the foundations of a right understanding of universal fraternity and respect for the sacredness of every human life, of every man and every woman, the poor, the elderly, children, the infirm, the unborn, the unemployed, the abandoned, those considered disposable because they are only considered as part of a statistic.”

Priests for Life concurs that our common home rises on the foundations that understand universal fraternity and respect for the sacredness of every human life and believes that social development policies ought to affirm the well-being, dignity and worth of all—every human life without exception— leading to a contemporary world which recognizes and respects the worth of all lives, from conception to natural death.

Priests for Life believes that all individuals have the potential to make significant contributions to eradicating poverty; no life is expendable no matter how ‘inconvenient’ it may be perceived to be. Respect for life is the foundation of policies that liberate countries and, most importantly, people from poverty.

Integrated policies that promote social inclusion of individuals, not their elimination or isolation, need to be developed and implemented in all areas of social development. The contemporary world we want is one in which every human life is valued for his or her innate worth and no member of the human family is stripped of human dignity, marginalized and treated as a problem, rather than as a potential contributor to social development. This is most compelling for those individuals who are eliminated before birth, those who have a disability, those who suffer from illness or disease, those advanced in age, and those suffering from terminal illness or dementia.

No member of the family ought to be stripped of his or her human dignity and denied his or her most basic right — the right to life — by subjective views that her or his life is ‘inconvenient’ and therefore ‘disposable’.

This is most apparent in the case of abortion as countries, cultures, and religions around the world value new life and seek to protect preborn children and their mothers from the violence of abortion while facing outside pressure to change their laws and policies on abortion.

Population control and reproductive health programs that target the elimination of children through abortion discriminate against children in the womb and conflict with the Convention on the Rights of the Child which reminds us that "the child, by reason of his physical and mental immaturity, needs special safeguards and care, including appropriate legal protection, before as well as after birth".

The failure to value the family and its procreative genius has resulted in below replacement fertility rates creating unprecedented challenges for a growing number of Member States.

Population control strategies have also resulted in skewed birth ratios in a number of countries with male preference where pre-natal sex determination was introduced with the intent that unborn baby girls would be aborted, preventing the lives of future mothers. Today the long term impact of the millions of “missing girls” includes increased violence against women who are kidnapped and sold as brides and young girls who are forced into prostitution and sex trafficking resulting in millions of women and girls who are denied social protection.

The death of preborn girls has also resulted in millions of missing daughters and daughters-in-law who, if allowed to be born, would be the caregivers for elderly members of the family today. Given the shift in the intergenerational balance of the family, aging individuals increasingly need policies that provide for their care and protection from abuse. Without traditional female family caregivers, governments are struggling to find ways to provide for aging populations. A myriad of concerns are growing in regards to elder care, including those surrounding the growing number of care-dependent older adults in institutional care settings who suffer from cognitive impairment, including Alzheimer’s disease.

Low fertility rates in a growing number of countries have resulted in an absence of young workers who can contribute to social security and pension programs and who can replace elderly workers who are forced to work longer because there is no one to replace them. Governments are facing unique social development challenges due to shrinking populations while population control measures continue to be promoted globally.

Twenty years ago, world leaders in the Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development recognized not only that material needs must be met but that spiritual needs are also critical to social development as they stated: “We acknowledge that our societies must respond more effectively to the material and spiritual needs of individuals, their families and the communities in which they live throughout our diverse countries and regions. We must do so not only as a

matter of urgency but also as a matter of sustained and unshakeable commitment through the years ahead.”

Similarly, the Programme of Action of the World Summit for Social Development declared in Chapter I: “Social development is inseparable from the cultural, ecological, economic, political and spiritual environment in which it takes place. It cannot be pursued as a sectoral initiative.”

Priests for Life recommends that future progress in social development be respectful and mindful of the synergies and linkage between social development and spirituality. Far too often, negotiations on social development are impeded by failure to acknowledge and provide for the religious values of individuals and society, or worse, religious beliefs are considered “barriers to progress” as in the case of international non-governmental organizations’ attempts to change national laws on abortion.

Access to abortion on demand, whether in the context of “reproductive health” or “reproductive rights”, or as a component of population control, does not have universal support, is not a universally recognized right, and is opposed and restricted by many countries. Health care should be life-affirming; it should not end the life of one of the patients and potentially injure the other.

Continued progress around the world is needed to empower women in the role of mother with the maternal health care they need during pregnancy and childbirth to ensure that they and their children survive and thrive. The quest for healthy reproduction is universal.

Priests for Life believes that successful social development includes strengthening the family through economic and educational empowerment that benefits all men and women.

Priests for Life believes that the empowerment of women and girls is fundamental to achieving equality and sustainable development and requires continued focus, urgency and leadership to provide women and girls with access to education, economic opportunities, job training, and financial opportunities, including microcredit loans. Progress is needed to further reduce maternal and newborn mortality, reduce the number of women living in poverty, and protect women and girls from violence and abuse including from sex selective abortion, infanticide, and sex trafficking.

In Point 25 of the Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development, heads of State committed themselves to "...a political, economic, ethical and spiritual vision for social development that is based on human dignity, human rights, equality, respect, peace, democracy, mutual responsibility and cooperation, and full respect for the various religious and ethical values and cultural backgrounds of people."

Future progress in social development depends on meeting the needs of individuals who share common bonds of respect for faith and family while living in diverse cultural backgrounds, including those who struggle with changing environmental conditions.

Priests for Life believes that social development policies must incorporate and affirm respect for the "various religious and ethical values and cultural backgrounds of people". Religion and spirituality give meaning and purpose to life, affirm the dignity of each and every human being, and contribute to the well-being of all—the ultimate purpose of social development. As social development policies are advanced, it must be remembered that respect for the dignity of life is the foundation of human rights. Life is not just for the privileged, the perfect and the planned, but extends to all members of the human family, including preborn children.