

Statement submitted by Priests for Life, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

Priests for Life welcomes the Commission on Population and Development's theme for the 50th session—"Changing Population Age Structures and Sustainable Development"— and views population ageing as evidence of the world's success in its primary responsibility to save lives and improve health and well-being.

Historic longevity in the world today demonstrates the critical role of development in providing access to life-saving medical advances, health care for prevention and treatment of illness and disease, clean water and sanitation, nutritious food, education, economic opportunities and improved economic well-being so individuals can live longer and healthier lives.

Ageing by the numbers

As the Sustainable Development Goals are pursued, continued attention is needed to ensure that the needs of the oldest among us are met and that this group is not "left behind". According to the report, *World Population Ageing 2015*, by the Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, by 2030 the number of people in the world aged 60 years or over is projected to grow by 56 per cent, from 901 million to 1.4 billion, and by 2050, the global population of older persons is projected to more than double its size in 2015, reaching nearly 2.1 billion.

As longevity continues to increase, the *World Population Ageing* report states that the number of people aged 80 years or over, the "oldest-old" persons, is growing faster than the number of older persons overall. It is projected that in 2050 those aged 80 and over will number 434 million, more than triple the number since 2015, when there were 125 million people over age 80.

As the number of those over 60 years of age continues to increase, the number of children being born continues to decrease. The *World Population Ageing* report states that by 2030, the total number of older persons living around the world is projected to exceed the number of children aged 0-9 years alive in the world by 1.4 billion versus 1.3 billion. The trend is expected to continue and by 2050 there will be 2.1 billion people aged 60 years or over to 2.0 billion adolescents and youth aged 10-24 years.

Ensuring that older individuals are treated with dignity in all aspects of their lives ranging from the workplace to residential care facilities, while respecting their innate right to life, is a necessary and important challenge for Governments and society.

Respecting Dignity and Right to Life of Older Persons

The Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing and the Political Declaration, adopted at the Second World Assembly on Ageing in 2002, reminds us of the key challenge of "building a society for all ages" that does not discriminate based on age. One of the key concerns expressed was "to enhance the recognition of the dignity of older persons and to eliminate all forms of neglect, abuse and violence".

According to the Madrid International Plan of Action, its aim "is to ensure that persons everywhere are able to age with security and dignity and to continue to participate in their societies as citizens with full rights."

Priests for Life shares these concerns and is alarmed at the growing pressure for euthanasia and assisted suicide evidenced in select countries. Priests for Life believes that all human beings are deserving of human dignity and have an inherent right to life, regardless of age, condition of dependency or disability, or stage of development. This is especially true of those who are most advanced in years and dependent on others for their survival. As the number of the "oldest-old" increases, along with the cost of care, attempts to hasten death by denial of medical treatment, withdrawal of nutrition and hydration, or direct acts of euthanasia must be opposed.

The rights of older persons, especially their right to life and to the highest attainable standard of health, must be respected and upheld. The Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing presented an inclusive commitment that "Older persons should be treated fairly and with dignity, regardless of disability or other status, and should be valued independently of their economic contribution" and sought to "Take account of the needs of older persons and respect the right to live in dignity at all stages of life."

The right to life is the first human right, existing from the moment of conception to natural death, for all human beings, with no exceptions based on arbitrary determinations of utility and wantedness, indifference or misguided mercy. Euthanasia and assisted suicide conflict with the right to life and violate an individual's human dignity, as do all forms of neglect, abuse and violence against older adults, including in institutional care settings.

Role of the family

The Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing recognized the all important reciprocal relationship between an individual and his or her family stating, "At the family and community level, intergenerational ties can be valuable for everyone. Despite geographic mobility and other pressures of contemporary life that can keep people apart, the great majority of people in all cultures maintain close relations with their families throughout their lives. These relationships work in both directions, with older persons often providing significant contributions both financially and, crucially, in the education and care of grandchildren and other kin. All sectors of society, including Governments, should aim to strengthen those ties."

The family, in diminishing numbers and capacity, not only provides its aged family member with life's necessities but helps to prevent social isolation and feelings of loneliness. It is the family that best provides support when an older family member experiences mental challenges but the family increasingly needs assistance. The rise of dementia, including Alzheimer's disease, is presenting Governments and families with growing challenges to enable impacted loved ones to live at home for as long as possible while being treated "with respect and gratitude, dignity and sensitivity", as stated in Madrid International Plan of Action.

The essential role of faith and religious beliefs among ageing populations are also affirmed in the Madrid International Plan of Action which states, "The implementation of the International Plan of Action on Ageing, 2002 also requires, inter alia, a political, economic, ethical and spiritual vision for social development of older persons 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."

Reduced fertility and abortion

Recognition of the demographic reality of ageing populations and below replacement birth rates has resulted in an emergence of new policies to limit access to abortion in a number of countries while a majority of Member States protect preborn children and their mothers from the violence of abortion by restricting access to abortion according to the 2014 report "Abortion laws and other reproductive rights policies and data around the world" by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat.

Priests for Life believes that the denial of a human being's right to life and human dignity violates fundamental human rights and that all human beings have potential to make significant contributions to development. No life is expendable.

Access to abortion does not have consensus or universal support, is not a universally recognized human right and should not be advanced or promoted under the Sustainable Development Goals. The sovereign laws of United Nations Member States vary in regards to recognition of the inherent dignity and worth of all human beings ranging from constitutional protection of life from the moment of conception to allowing abortion on demand until the moment of birth.

As the 2030 Agenda progresses, the "world we want" ought to be one in which every human life is valued for their innate worth and no member of the family is stripped of their human dignity and denied their most basic right —the right to life —by subjective views that his or

her life has no value or is "inconvenient" and therefore is "disposable". This includes the view that proposes an individual is either "too old", "too sick" or "not old enough" to have his or her right to life respected and protected.

Sustainable development policies need to affirm the well-being, dignity and worth of all — every human life without exception from conception to natural death—leading to a post 2030 world in which "no one was left behind".