

**Commission for Social Development
Fifty-third session**

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

“Rethinking and strengthening social development in the contemporary world”

The Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development recognized, “...the significance of social development and human well-being for all and to give to these goals the highest priority both now and into the twenty-first century.”

Priests for Life affirms that the well-being, dignity and worth of all—every human life without exception— is the foundation of policies and programs that liberate countries and, most importantly, people from poverty. All individuals have the potential to make significant contributions to eradicating poverty; no life is expendable.

The family is the very building block of all communities, cultures, and countries and is vested with profound responsibility for childrearing. Women and men, girls and boys, mothers and fathers need to be valued for their contributions to the family and to society, given equal opportunities, and treated without discrimination. Social development needs to protect the family and enable it to function as the core foundation of society.

The family and all its members need to be empowered by authentic social development policies and programs that offer it support especially when it is suffering from economic and social hardship and deprivation. When the family is disrupted and devalued, individual members suffer, voiding the goal of social development to ensure the well-being of individuals. Family members and individuals with disabilities are especially deserving of support and assistance, including with access to health care, nutrition, housing, education, and meaningful employment.

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 — through policies that treat the individual as a problem and not as part of the solution to social development. Programs that target the elimination of children through abortion conflict with the preamble of the Convention on the Rights of the Child which reminds us, "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".

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 urges 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 civil society attempts to change national laws on abortion in countries with laws protecting life from conception.

Failure to respect religious and ethical values also conflicts with General Assembly Res S-24/2 which states in section III: “...Our global drive for social development and the recommendations for action contained in the present document are made in a spirit of consensus and international cooperation, in full conformity with the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations, recognizing that the formulation and implementation of strategies, policies, programmes and actions for social development are the responsibility of each country and should take into account the diverse economic, social and environmental conditions in each country, with full respect for the various religious and ethical values, cultural backgrounds and philosophical convictions of its people, and in conformity with all human rights and fundamental freedoms.”

Cultures throughout the world recognize the critical role of the family in providing for basic needs of its members and provide for its sustainability through social and political means. The family, in turn, ensures the very survival of its culture and country. Successful social development includes strengthening the family through economic and educational empowerment that benefits all men and women. 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.

The failure to value the family and its procreative genius has tragically resulted in critical challenges for many states brought on by shrinking family size and below replacement fertility rates and has resulted in the loss of millions of lives through abortion, individuals whose unique contributions are forever denied to humankind.

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.

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 unprecedented social development challenges due to shrinking populations while population control measures continue to be promoted globally.

The Expert Group Meeting’s summary document “Rethinking and Strengthening Social Development in the Contemporary World: Progress in Advancing Social Development and Lessons Learned” discusses the latest efforts in poverty eradication and states, “Rates of poverty reduction have been much faster in countries with large population sizes such as China and India.”

It continues, “Countries with sharp declines in poverty have also seen sharp increases in employment outside agriculture, particularly in construction, services and manufacturing. To further reduce poverty, it is important for countries to sustain non-agricultural employment growth.” These findings deserve greater attention and application in regions which still suffer from extreme poverty.

As social development measures 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. Priests for Life believes that policies to eradicate poverty must recognize the potential of all individuals to help to solve the problem of poverty and not treat people as the problem.

In conclusion, we highlight point 25 from the Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development in which heads of State and Government 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.”

As the post 2015 agenda and the sustainable development goals reach agreement, it is essential to 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.