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**Population and sustainable development, in
particular sustained and inclusive economic growth**

Statement submitted by Priests for Life, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council¹

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

¹ The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

Priests for Life in its submission to the fifty-fifth session of the Commission on Population and Development highlights two particular areas of concern, malnutrition and exposure to environmental risks, under the theme “Population and sustainable development, in particular sustained and inclusive economic growth” as related to chapter III of the Programme of Action.

Priests for Life urges the Commission to address these two risks beginning at the earliest stage of life, in the womb, which impact an individual for her or his entire lifetime.

Chapter III of the Programme of Action states that widespread poverty remains the major challenge to development efforts and is accompanied by a host of impacts including malnutrition and exposure to environmental risks. Similarly, Agenda 21 warns that the health of children is affected more severely than any other population group by malnutrition and adverse environmental factors.

The Programme of Action states that measures need to be taken to strengthen food, nutrition and agricultural policies and programs, and fair-trade relations, with special attention to the creation and strengthening of food security at all levels. The suggested programs for infants and children include prenatal care and nutrition programs.

Priests for Life implores the Commission to address the need for nutrition during the universally recognized critical period of the first 1,000 days of life —from conception to the second birthday – when growth rates and brain development are faster than at any other stage of life. Children in the womb are at the greatest risk of stunted growth and malnutrition which not only negatively results in impaired physical and cognitive development but ultimately negatively impacts the economic health of countries.

Malnutrition in women of child-bearing age affects their and their children’s health, born and unborn. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations warns in *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2021* that the world is not on track to achieve targets for any of the nutrition indicators by 2030 and that the current rate of progress is insufficient especially on reducing child stunting and low birthweight, on preventing anemia in women, and on the negative impacts on the ability of a mother to nurse her child. The report also shows that an additional 60 million people have been affected by hunger since 2014 and there are still about 144 million children under the age of 5 who suffer from stunting.

The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2021 reports that one in seven live births, or 20.5 million (14.6 per cent) babies globally, suffered from low birthweight in 2015. Low birthweight newborns have a higher risk of dying in the first 28 days after birth and those who survive are more likely to suffer from stunted growth and impaired cognitive development leading to increased risk of obesity and adult-onset chronic conditions later in life.

Adequate nutrition during the first 1,000 days of life not only saves the lives of women and children, it reduces stunted growth, wasting, and malnutrition which improves the economies of countries. When women of child-bearing age are well-nourished, they are healthier and better able to provide nourishment for their children in the womb and those they are nursing. They are better able to make nutritious food choices for themselves and their young children; all essential to ensuring healthy physical and cognitive development. When children thrive, they are empowered to become healthy adults who are better equipped to make meaningful contributions to their families, society, and country.

Healthy children are able to attend school and become healthy adults who are equipped with the stamina necessary for productive and sustainable agriculture, receive training in job skills, enjoy improved health and well-being, and are better able to resist illness and disease.

Conversely, stunting from malnutrition puts children at an increased risk of dying from common infections and is associated with poor cognitive development and a potential negative impact on a country's long-term progress. Stunted children become adults who suffer from diabetes, hypertension and cardiovascular disease, conditions that often impede earning capacity and result in lower incomes.

Exposure to environmental risks also negatively impacts the health of women and children, before and after birth, and contribute to maternal and newborn mortality.

Priests for Life is especially concerned with the large number of women and girls around the world who are adversely impacted by exposure to chemicals and hazardous wastes, which lead to developmental disabilities in unborn children and infertility. The report *Women, Chemicals and the SDGs* by the United Nations Environment Programme describes how women and men are impacted differently by chemicals, including endocrine-disrupting chemicals (EDCs), which result in women suffering impacts on their reproductive system and pregnancy outcomes long after exposure and for some, the damage has occurred before they even reach reproductive age.

The World Health Organization raises concerns about the reproductive health impact of ineffective electronic waste management in the report *Children and digital dumpsites: E-waste exposure and child health* (2021) stating that the problem is triggering a crisis of e-waste health risks to millions of children, as well as women of childbearing age. It expresses concern that lead and mercury exposure in the first trimester of pregnancy can lead to neurobehavioral development problems, low birth weight, spontaneous abortion, and birth defects.

Women, Chemicals and the SDGs reports that textile production includes exposure to chemicals causing cancer, endocrine-disrupting chemicals and allergens. Electronics production has been associated with a variety of adverse health outcomes including cancer, reproductive disorders and developmental disability in unborn children while there is an increased risk for spontaneous abortion in the semiconductor and electronics industry among women workers.

Priests for Life also raises concern about risks present in the world's water supply caused by an assortment of chemicals that can impact women's and children's health.

Water supplies can be filled with endocrine-disrupting chemicals which have a long-term impact on unborn children's development and lead to adverse birth outcomes and developmental impacts on the child's central nervous, skeleton, and reproductive systems.

A growing body of research around the world has raised concern about the negative impact of hormones excreted into water supplies worldwide, including estrogen from contraceptives and from animals treated with hormones or naturally occurring, that affect human, animal, and fish reproduction and fertility while creating the need for new water treatment systems.

Antibiotics and other drugs present in the water supply have also been recognized as a growing health problem. According to the *Global Environment Outlook GEO-6 Summary for Policymakers* by the United Nations Environment Programme, there is growing evidence that human illnesses due to antimicrobial-resistant infections may become a major cause of death from infectious diseases

worldwide by 2050. It explains that antimicrobial-resistant bacteria are now found in sources of treated drinking water worldwide stemming from antibiotics entering the water cycle through domestic sewage and industrial wastewater disposal, agriculture, livestock rearing, and aquaculture.

Sustained development depends on a healthy population beginning with access to prenatal nutrition and environmental protection for unborn children and their mothers. A majority of Member States value and protect the future of their country and its children. Countries representing more than 1.6 billion people are united in a joint statement, *Geneva Consensus Declaration on Promoting Women's Health and Strengthening the Family*, that includes a commitment to protect life at all stages, to secure meaningful health development gains for women, and reaffirmed that every human being has the inherent right to life.

The countries are committed to enable women to go safely through pregnancy and childbirth and provide couples with the best chance of having a healthy infant. They recognize that women play a critical role in the family and contribute not only to the welfare of the family but to the development of society. The countries seek to improve and secure the highest attainable standard of health and development gains for women, while opposing access to unrestricted abortion on demand.

Priests for Life urges the Commission to address the dangers of malnutrition and environmental risks. The very future of the human family depends on protection and care of all its members during all stages of the life cycle, beginning in the womb.
